

Parsifal's Seduction



LAURENCE DREYFUS

Parsifal's Seduction

a novel

with artworks by Alexander Polzin

wolke

LIED DES HYPERION

Ihr wandelt droben in Licht
Auf weichem Boden, selige Genien!
Glänzende Götterlüfte
Rühren euch leicht,
Wie die Finger der Künstlerin
Heilige Saiten.

Schicksallos, wie der schlafende
Säugling, atmen die Himmlischen;
Keusch bewahrt
In bescheidener Knospe,
Blühet ewig
Ihnen der Geist,
Und die seligen Augen
Blicken in stiller
Ewiger Klarheit.

Doch uns ist gegeben,
Auf keiner Stätte zu ruhn,
Es schwinden, es fallen
Die leidenden Menschen
Blindlings von einer
Stunde zur andern,
Wie Wasser von Klippe
Zu Klippe geworfen,
Jahr lang ins Ungewisse hinab.

Friedrich Hölderlin, 1799

SONG OF HYPERION

You walk in the light above
on easy ground, you blessed genii!
Shimmering breezes of Heaven
touch you as lightly
as the artist's fingers
touch holy strings.

Fateless as the sleeping babe
breathe those of heaven born.
Preserved chaste,
forever in
modest bud
their spirits bloom,
their blissful eyes
gaze eternally
in clarity.

We have no footing anywhere,
dwindling, falling,
suffering blind
from one hour
to the next
like water dashed
from crag to crag,
year in and out,
downwards to nothingness.

Friedrich Hölderlin, 1799
(trans. L. Dreyfus)

Riedberg nr Partenkirchen, 15th March 1899

My dear Anna,

How I've managed to let more than two years pass without replying to you is beyond even my own muddled comprehension. Please know how happy it made me to have your congratulations and good wishes. It's true that I was unwell for a spell, and yes, after the wedding, we spent a long holiday at Mary's villino in Florence, but any excuse offered will strike you – rightly! – as lame. Still, as we're such old friends, I know you'll find it in your heart of hearts to forgive me.

Better yet: I've a nefarious plan to reunite us.

You know Alfred Grüner, editor of the Berliner Wochenblatt? He wants to commission an article about me, a sketch of my working life – you know the sort of thing. If I refuse, something will appear that contains the most blatant misrepresentations. I'm inclined to say yes, providing he hires a suitable author.

The problem is that Grüner wants Kalbeck from Vienna to write the piece, and I just won't have him. You're aware – though Grüner isn't – how much Kalbeck detests Bayreuth. As it is, he's been bothering me about Brahms, and I wouldn't put it past him to write something compromising.

Herr Grüner will consent if I propose you, Anna, to write the essay. That means, dear friend, you must come to Partenkirchen. What do you

say to the 26th? You'd do me a great service. We can have a cosy week in the mountains and be well looked after by Mary and our faithful Stillers. I'm permitted only a glass of red wine at lunch, but we'll surely find an excuse to exceed this restriction. There are two easy chairs in the library where we can mull over old times. Or we can walk a bit in the hills – there's a path just opposite the gate. The fresh air will do you good.

I await your reply which, barring an unforeseen circumstance, must be in the affirmative! In the meantime

As ever, your loyal

Hermann

PS Your essay on WAGNER AND IBSEN was masterful. Even the Bayreuth crowd thought so. Now you must ensure that WAGNER AND LEVI doesn't form the comic sequel!

MARCH 1899

DAY I

It was a relief to find the women's compartment empty. In no mood for chat, Anna Ettlinger wanted to collect her thoughts. The porter struggled with her oversized case, and glancing at the undersized coin handed him, muttered a grudging *danke schön* and slammed the door shut, his suspicions confirmed about single women travelling on their own. Removing her hat, Anna smoothed out her travel frock and lay her purse on the rough velvet seat beside her. An odour of fetid flowers emanated from the worn upholstery which had absorbed the oily secretions of its perfumed female travellers. The stench sickened her. Whatever is the allure of artfully sweetened fragrances? Harking to a rebellious impulse which came naturally, she prised the stiff collar from her neck. A vile contrivance of unreasonable repression, the starched cotton had strangled her for years and chafed her sensitive skin. Only last week she read that the fashion magazines had finally consigned these appendages to the rubbish heap, and not a moment too soon. But old habits die hard, even abhorrent ones. She decided then and there to jettison her entire collection.

It was the last leg of the journey, and before boarding the train, even from within the cavernous hull of the Munich terminus, there was a scent of evergreen in the air, a waft of alpine breeze that would soon be stinging her nostrils. Anna stood up and gazed into the small mirror above the seat oppo-

site and took stock. Her features were none too pleasing. Her hair had lost its youthful silkiness, and wrinkles encased her eyes which had once triggered soulful admiration. Hermann would flatter her extravagantly when she arrived at the station, but with the advancing years such gestures conveyed no more than a nostalgic bow to the past.

Anna had left Carlsruhe seized by a burning compulsion to hurry to Partenkirchen. Ordinarily, she would have broken her journey at Munich and spent a day or two with her sister Emilie, a leading choral director and teacher of voice. But since receiving Grüner's telegramme, Anna thought of little else but the time she would devote to Hermann. She even took pains to conceal her travel plans from Emilie, though there was no need for subterfuge.

A shrill whistle pierced the hall, and Anna tipped her watch upward, noting the punctual departure of the Royal Bavarian Railway. The carriage screeched and jolted as the train left the station, and a wave of unstoppable momentum overwhelmed her. In little over an hour she'd be squeezed by Hermann's warm embrace, unobjectionable as they were well past the age of dangerous attractions. She ought to punish him in some small way, considering how he had ignored her letter congratulating him on his marriage. Perhaps he would no longer flirt with her now that he had a wife.

Anna fingered the gold pendant hanging round her neck and put it to her ear. She could still hear her father's playful words on her twenty-first birthday as he presented her with this elegant Patek. He loved to mock her arrogance and her argumentative nature, his words causing her sisters no end of glee. Her mother insisted that immeasurable affection lay behind his teasing expressions, that he loved her best of all his five girls, but Anna always worried that he was right, that her pride would be her undoing.

Hermann shared many of her father's qualities, especially when it came to merciless criticism of Anna. Indeed, Veit Ettlinger, a municipal luminary

in Carlsruhe and patron of the arts, had considered Hermann more than suitable material for a son-in-law. From the time decades before when he helped secure Hermann's appointment as music director, he took Hermann under his wing and conversed with him on a dizzying range of philosophical debates about which they both held similar views. Cultivated artists like Hermann were rare birds, and Anna never missed an opportunity to see him, though their meetings became less frequent once he moved to Munich. Yet through no one's fault, their correspondence dwindled to the occasional missive until an occasional letter at Christmas began to suffice.

A confirmed bachelor, Hermann had given her scant warning before despatching an engraved card announcing his imminent marriage to Mary Fiedler, née Meyer, a shock that sent Anna to her bed for two full days. She knew her reaction was ridiculous. Hermann's fiancée, daughter of the late Julius Meyer, Director of the Berlin Gallery of Art, had been widowed after her husband, the esteemed historian of art, fell from a window in their Munich apartment under suspicious circumstances. There had never been an investigation, but most assumed the author of *The Origins of the Artistic Act* had leapt to his death from the second storey, driven to desperation by his heartless wife. Mary Fiedler, a good ten years younger than Anna, was meant to be a handsome woman and moved in elevated circles, but her spotty reputation was another matter. Emilie had encountered her at concerts and exhibitions and was none too impressed. From mutual acquaintances, Emilie heard that Mary calmed her nerves with regular doses of morphine. It wasn't a pretty picture.

And that was the woman Hermann chose to marry.

Anna might have overlooked the rumours, but the power wielded by such women was insidious. Mary's poisonous influence surely induced him to leave Munich, for it made no sense that, even at the age of fifty-eight, Hermann should be banished from the swirl of urban life in which he had always thrived.

Though the new Frau Levi was a woman of means, Emilie considered her no more than a bored widow who showered Hermann with gifts, pampered him with expensive holidays, and wallowed in the reflected glory of a famous musician. Hermann was a fool to have entered into a union deprived of a spiritual bond.

Not that Anna had ever been in love with Hermann.

They were far too clever to have let a romantic attachment harm their playful banter. Anna was also far too bold to attract a man like him. Besides, she now had an essay to write, and that was the purpose of her visit. She didn't intend to cloud her judgement with sentimentality. Over these last years the luminaries of German music had died one by one, and Hermann could tell remarkable tales about each of them. It was up to Anna to preserve the precious legacy of Brahms, Bruckner, and Clara Schumann, a bequest to future generations who would cherish her care. With a bit of luck, she could take the piece in the *Wochenblatt* and expand it into a small monograph later on.

Anna was not someone who exaggerated her abilities.

Neither a critic nor a scholar, her talents lay rather in conveying to the general public the insights supplied by modern music and literature. All the same, she felt uniquely equipped for this particular task, she who possessed such a native understanding of music and brought literary texts to life in her essays. Nor did it do any harm that Hermann had introduced her personally to a great many figures in the German Pantheon about whom she could comment with some authority, even if her writing fell short of the summit of perfection.

Mutual friends reported that Hermann neglected to look after himself and that his health had been failing for some time. It seemed that, after years of overwork, Hermann began to suffer a chronic disturbance of his circulation. The result was a painful swelling in his joints, a condition which even a course of hydrotherapy hadn't eased. She thought back on their last meeting in

Munich. It had been four years ago. Even then he'd aged, though his eyes still sparkled with the same wicked mischief that endeared him to her.

He was also a man to whom women were attracted.

Already as a youth, Hermann Levi was said to resemble a biblical hero, and his friends joked about his sleek oriental features in which one could see the wisdom of the East. But if it was wisdom they discerned, it had been acquired through suffering, and Anna knew of matters which, out of a sense of propriety, she would never commit to paper. Even the briefest reminder of such episodes was far from pleasant, though she herself faced life's trials without flinching.

The train left the outskirts of the city and approached the gentle countryside near Lake Starnberg, beyond which stretched the snow-capped mountains glistening like a wet canvass. Even more striking than the initial glimpse of the Rhine from a headland, the first sighting of the Bavarian Alps evoked all the primeval majesty native to the southern German character.

Hermann, too, worshipped at the shrine of Germania, although certain obstacles had had to be overcome before his initiation into the party of the elect.

To begin with, there was his name.

The very idea of a man called Hermann Levi gnawed at many Gentiles and made them wish to sneer. The gall of these Jews, they'd grumble, to yoke the psalm-singing Levite to the Germanic chieftain who routed the Roman legions! It was a curious linkage by any reckoning, the valiant Hermann of the Teutoburg Forest enshrined within the Temple at Jerusalem.

Hermann's brother Wilhelm had swapped the name Levi for Lindeck even before embracing the Roman Catholic faith. Such acts of accommodation occurred every day and weren't in the least remarkable. Hermann, by contrast, prized in his heritage the hard-necked obstinacy rare in someone who'd

attained such worldly eminence. It was natural that such an outlook came more easily now than a few generations ago. Then one hid in the shadows and prayed for deliverance. One assumed the worst and rejoiced at expressions of tolerance. Now, the floodgates were open, and emancipation secure. Never before had Jewry been so unfettered, so confident, and so at home, at least in Germany. Honours and recognition abounded everywhere. As for the anti-Semites, one just put up with them. Their hatred was otiose, but decent Germans ensured they never got the upper hand.

Outside the window, isolated sunbeams darted between the tall spruce, and patches of blue sky competed with dark clouds. Anna stood up and forced the window open. *Keiner ging, doch einer kam* was Siegmund's ecstatic cry as the door to his sister's hut flew open. Exhaling sweet fragrances, Spring banishes the winter storms with its balmy breezes. No one left, though one arrived. Relishing the din of the train on the track, she welcomed the clatter and smoke. Even a blast of wind on her face refreshed her. So all-consuming were her reveries that she failed to notice that the train conductor had entered her compartment.

'Ticket please!' barked out a voice aspiring to military bearing, his cadence clipped.

To this sort of man, punctual departures and orderly passengers signalled the height of national achievement. He punched her ticket with aplomb and then fixed his gaze on the open window.

'Permit me to close it, Fräulein!'

'I'd rather you wouldn't,' she said.

Puzzled, he bowed stiffly before leaving the compartment but found it hard to accept that a woman had barred him from the exercise of one of his most urgent tasks. It always amused her how a nation so addicted to the pursuit of fresh air could be cast into a state of terror by an open carriage window. She

knew of no occasion on which she had fallen ill from a draft. Either she was impervious to a near-mortal hazard or a flaw in her character prevented her from accepting common sense. The belief in the self-evident truth of their views surely explained why Germans are so often misunderstood by foreigners.

Other nations, too, had their fill of contradictions. The French had exported emancipation East of the Rhine and were now mired in their persecution of the hapless Captain Dreyfus. Better for an innocent Jew to suffer than the honour of the army to be besmirched. Zola, despite his admirable efforts, had fled to England to escape legal action. Not that Anna was a great partisan of the French, but it beggared belief that an educated officer from a respectable family could sell secrets to a foreign intelligence service. Germany, thank God, had been spared such a scandal.

The German nation, to the contrary, boasted the likes of Hermann and together with him all the Jewish professors, judges, and physicians showered with honours. It was a kind of special blessing, in fact, that the most inspired interpreter of Richard Wagner bore the name of Levi. Here was the musician who'd conducted the first performance of Wagner's *Parsifal* to universal applause, and who – despite his Jewish roots – penetrated the inner circle of Bayreuth. For all the admirable qualities of his colleagues – Mottl, Richter, Nikisch, Seidl, even Richard Strauss – no German alive rendered the classics more vividly than Hermann Levi.

Of all human talents, musical genius must be the highest. Years ago Anna had devised a simple measure of its quality. If a performance made her heart race and her breath quicken, she knew she'd encountered greatness. Such had been her reaction to Hermann's music-making from the day he'd arrived in Karlsruhe. She'd fallen under his spell at that very first rehearsal of the Choral Society, despite the absurdly oversized baton which dwarfed him as he brandished it to marshal his forces.

Anna had sung herself hoarse in his Matthew Passion, forever stamped in her memory, its electric atmosphere charged with lamentation and grief. His quivering baton spoke of fervent pleading, which then turned to daemonic rage at the hair-raising call, 'Let him be crucified!' – *Laß ihn kreuzigen!* His Ninth Symphony was equally titanic. Crouched low for the mysterious opening, he danced through the Puck-like scherzo before rousing the chorus to Dionysian jubilations in the Ode to Joy. The successes of Don Juan and Figaro's Wedding, sung to Hermann's own witty German translations, were likewise feats of wizardry. Attuned to the composer's inner ear, Hermann delivered the audience directly into the hotbed of Mozart's heady Romanticism.

But it was Parsifal that was his most enduring achievement.

That triumph ensured his place in Elysium. Thanks to the composer's blessing at Bayreuth, Hermann wrested from his artists the definitive interpretation of Wagner's profound drama of atonement. Though invisible to the audience from within the womb of the mystical abyss, his rendition of the Third Act Prelude alone, with its wrenching and forlorn roving, was reason enough to make a pilgrimage to the theatre on the hill. Anna had already signalled the earth-shattering importance of this work in a well-received review from '82.

The train conductor barged in once more. Stepping carefully around her, he took hold of the window handles and sealed the compartment.

'The draft, Fräulein,' he said, satisfied to have subdued a wilful female.

He'd been determined to close the window no matter what her wish. Anna had no choice but to submit to his overweening regard for her health.

'Station stop Garmisch in twelve minutes. I'll see to your case.'

It wasn't yet time to slip on her coat. She'd feel too warm, and her face would flush.

The train climbed higher into the hills, winding its way past patches of encrusted snow. Impulsively, she jumped up to reopen the window, stuck her

head out and cried aloud. Freed. She was freed from the burdens of city life, from the obligations to her sisters, and from the care of the working women whom she taught. Indulging herself in the opportunity which now presented itself, she intended to cherish every moment.