

The Passing Show.

WILLA CATHER.

Some excitement prevailed in the town when it was announced that Melba and Campanari and Salignac would appear in opera at the Carnegie hall. The Carnegie is a sumptuous enough place, but the stage is merely a concert stage, and the drop curtain, scenery, wings and stage settings had to be improvised on the spur of the moment, and they certainly were queer enough. But all the theatres were engaged and it was the Carnegie or nothing. The drop curtain was a wonderful affair. The ceiling of the hall is high and vaulted so the curtain had to be swung from the dome by ropes. When it ascended it wobbled sideways quite as rapidly as it wobbled upward, and it required the most tender and prolonged wooing on the part of the stage manager to induce it to descend at all. The ropes with which it was hung were concealed with laurel garlands, and as the curtain was coming down the laurel leaves literally rained down upon the singers, who were grouped smiling at the front of the proscenium. The stage settings were even more amusing. The opera was Rossini's "Barber of Seville," but you would never have known it had anything to do with Spain by glancing at the stage. Bartolo's home was furnished like a modern flat, and he sat down in a revolving desk chair to be shaved. Of course all these things gave a hopelessly amateurish, parlor-theatrical effect to the whole performance and I was unable to take anything or anybody very seriously.

As in *Il Trovatore* the Barber of Seville begins with a reneade, "Ecco l'idente in Cielo," the most beautiful aria in the opera. And M. Salignac sang it well, though he has an inclination toward inopportune falsetto. He is such a very conventional tenor, that Salignac. There is not one of the charming old grand opera mannerisms which he lacks; the stilted walk, the florid gestures, the elaborate attitudes, he has them all.

Of course the feature of dominant interest was the appearance of Mme. Melba in opera buffa. Her reception was really very funny. Her appearance on the balcony in the first act was cut because of the exceedingly unstable nature of the balcony. The balcony in the Chicago Auditorium fell down with Melba several years ago and almost precipitated her into Romeo's arms, so it behooves her to beware of them. She did not appear until the fifth scene, where you remember she enters alone to begin the famous chamber solo, dear unto the hearts of all coloratura sopranos. Well, it seems that the audience had not read the librettos carefully enough, for when she stepped upon the stage not a sound of applause or recognition was heard. She was made up like a Calve brunette which disguised her effectually, and I fancy most people thought she was only a maid who had come in to dust the furniture and incidentally to throw a little light upon her mistress' love affairs. Many a time and oft have I heard Melba, but I never before saw her get a reception like that. It must have been an experience for her, must have reminded her of the days that are long forgot, when they used to give her the "chilly hand" out in Sidney, Australia, before the era of Paris and Marchesi and tri-

umph and all the rest of it. Of course as soon as she began singing the familiar "Un Voca Poco Fa" the audience realized that she must be the lady whose name figured in large type at the top of the programme, and did its Christian duty. The papers next morning apologized by saying that "the great diva entered so quietly that she was not at first recognized." Pray did they expect the "great diva" to enter uttering war-whoops or turning handsprings?

But to return to "Un Voca." What a song it is, that brilliant, showy, glittering melody, with its wonderful opportunities for vocal display, its entire lack of any emotional quality deeper than the prima donna's delight in her own powers. And it was sung as just one voice in all this world can sing it. One upon another they came, each sweeter than the last, those round, full, unclouded tones, those notes of silver, shaken from her throat as lightly as the water drops from a sea gull's wing when it flies sunward in the golden dawn. O, the flawless perfection of her method, the magnificent certainty of her execution! One could travel the earth over without finding another organ of such exquisite mechanism; it is a thing apart and unique. Perhaps were one even to search among the celestial choirs one would not find such another. Nature so seldom exerts herself to do her best.

To hear Melba as Rosina is not altogether satisfactory. It does not sufficiently test all the wonderful resources of that voice, does not call out all those transcendent miracles of tone that delight, dazzle, exalt, and finally exhaust one. Yet in some respects the part is better adapted to her than almost any other. She can do in a light semi-comedy part what she never does in a heavy one—satisfy. Her imitations of Calve are painfully perceptible, yet she does, after a manner, act the part, and it is the only one I ever saw her act. As Juliette, as Desdemona, as Valentine, as Marguerite, it was always the same experience; always that perfect, soulless voice, always that futile colorless stage emotion which does not even deceive the singer herself, always the bitter disappointment of seeing her catch at the stars and miss them, and always the recurring question as to "what shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose, etc." It is the old story; she has the voice for grand opera and the temperament for opera buffa, one of God's sublime misfits.

It is no wonder that when her old teacher out in Melbourne went over to Paris to hear her in one of her great triumphs, he bowed his head and said, "Ah, my poor child, if I could but have given you a soul!" How strange that one who has so much should yet lack that thing holier than all, that thing which alone gives art a right to be.

After the tumultuous applause which followed her solo in the lesson scene—it was Massenet's "La Sevellina," by the way—she sat down at the piano that was on the stage quite informally and sang that tender little "Romance" of Tosti's, playing her own accompaniment. She was ill that night, and desperately tired, and as she played the interlude she seemed for a moment to forget that the audience was before her and that she was Mme. Melba; she drew a long, tired sigh and

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closed her eyes. It was the most beautiful, the most unconscious, the most effective thing I ever saw her do on the stage. Ah, if she would but sometimes let the heart go out with that all-conquering voice, if she would but sometimes be a woman! It lasted but a moment. The applause recalled her to herself and to her limitations; she came down to the footlights, the gracious, smiling "diva," satisfied with herself and the world, one of the saddest anomalies of our time.

What revolution in thought and art lie between the music of Rossini and Mascagni. Rossini with his brilliant, florid manner, his substitution of court etiquette for passion and gallantry for intensity. Melba and Rossini, there is something fitting and deeply suggestive in the combination!

The one man of that performance who kept within the picture, whose talent and temperament are well mated, who was always and wholly an artist, was Signor Campanari as Figaro. I have heard him sing the celebrated buffo air, "Largo Al Factotum," in concert, but in concert he is but the shadow of himself. He sang it magnificently, the sparkling, effervescent comedy of it seemed alive. What a joyous, self-important Figaro, doctor, barber, hair-dresser, watch-maker, general factotum of Seville. Only a Rossini reared in the pernicious atmosphere of grand opera could have found anything attractive in the moony, attitudinizing tenor with such a lusty fellow as that Figaro about. He literally carried that opera through on his sturdy shoulders.

A few months ago a second volume of verse by Yone Noguchi made its appearance. For sometime this young

Japanese has been living in a cabin on the mountain-side out in Joaquin Miller's country, "where the flowers are like trees, and the trees touch with heaven," and this is the second volume of poetry he has sent into the world from his solitude. While Noguchi is by no means a great poet in the large, complicated modern sense of the word, he has more true inspiration, more melody from within than many a greater man. He is one of the fervid singers, who sang when poetry was a passion merely, not an art. There is a long stretch of time between such verses as are written in the Occident today and such simple, spontaneous, unstudied songs as Yone Noguchi's. These verses are so naive, so fragile, so entirely the children of an hour and a mood, like the songs of the unknown Hebrew poet who wrote the so-called books of Solomon. They are conspicuously Oriental. The hurrying of the clouds toward the western horizon, he describes as

"A glorious troop
Of the unsuffering souls of gods
Marching on with battle-sound
Against the unknown Castle of Hell."

Could anything be more suggestive of a simple, joyous indulgence of the imagination, such as we find in Japanese carving or painting? We have over-elaborated everything in the west; we have made whist so difficult that few of us can play it, wine so good that few of us can afford to drink it, poetry so difficult that few of us can read it. We must make a science even of recreation and kill all the joy of it. But here is a poet who has not tried to be profound. He sings because the sun shines, because the roses bloom, because there is love and laughter in the world. He has the full measure of oriental melancholy, and that warm languor of the spirit found in lands of perpetual high noon. "Come," says the young poet, "buy my tears, for I have sucked them from the breasts of Truth."

PITTSBURG, PA.