

DAS LIEBESVERBOT

Richard Wagner

The following synopsis, virtually a prose sketch, is by Richard Wagner, from his autobiography *Mein Leben*.

An unnamed king of Sicily leaves his country, as I suggest, for a journey to Naples, and hands over to the appointed Regent - whom I simply call Friedrich, with the view of making him appear as German as possible - full authority to exercise the royal power in order to effect a complete reform in the social habits of his capital, which had provoked the indignation of the Council. At the opening of the play we see the servants of the public authority busily employed either in shutting up or in pulling down the houses of popular amusement in a suburb of Palermo, and in carrying off the inmates, including hosts and servants, as prisoners. The populace oppose this first step, and much scuffling ensues. In the thickest of the throng the chief of the sbirri, Brighella (basso-buffo), after a preliminary roll of drums for silence, reads out the Regent's proclamation, by which these actions are declared to be directed towards establishing a higher moral tone in the manners and customs of the people. A general outburst of scorn and a mocking chorus meets this announcement. Luzio, a young nobleman and juvenile scapegrace (tenor), seems inclined to thrust himself forward as leader of the mob, and at once finds an occasion for playing a more active part in the cause of the oppressed people on discovering his friend Claudio (also a tenor) being led away to prison. From him he learns that, in pursuance of some musty old law unearthed by Friedrich, he is to suffer the penalty of death for a certain love escapade in which he is involved. His sweetheart, union with whom had been prevented by the enmity of their parents, has borne him a child. Friedrich's puritanical zeal joins cause with the parents' hatred; he fears the worst, and sees his only hope for mercy if his sister Isabella, by her entreaties, can melt the Regent's hard heart. Claudio implores his friend at once to seek out Isabella in the convent of the Sisters of St. Elizabeth, which she has recently entered as novice. There, among the quiet walls of the convent, we first meet this sister, in confidential intercourse with her friend Marianne, also a novice. Marianne reveals to her friend, from whom she has long been parted, the unhappy fate which has brought her to the place. Under vows of eternal fidelity she had been persuaded to a secret liaison with a man of high rank. But finally, when in extreme need she found herself not only forsaken, but threatened by her betrayer, she discovered him to be the mightiest man in the state, none other than the King's Regent himself. Isabella's indignation finds vent in impassioned words, and is only pacified by her determination to forsake a world in which so vile a crime can go unpunished.

When now Luzio brings her tidings of her own brother's fate, Isabella's disgust at her brother's misconduct is turned at once to scorn for the villainy of the hypocritical Regent, who presumes so cruelly to punish the comparatively venial offence of her brother, which, at least, was not stained by treachery. Her violent outburst imprudently reveals her to Luzio in a seductive aspect; smitten with sudden love, he urges her to quit the convent for ever and to accept his hand. She contrives to check his boldness, but resolves at once to avail herself of his escort to the Regent's court of justice.

Here the trial scene is prepared, and I introduce it by a burlesque hearing of several persons charged by the sbirro captain with offences against morality. The earnestness of the situation becomes more marked when the gloomy form of Friedrich strides through the intruding and unruly crowd, commanding silence, and he himself undertakes the hearing of Claudio's case in the sternest manner possible. The implacable judge is already on the point of pronouncing sentence when Isabella enters, and requests, before them all, a private interview with the Regent. In this interview she behaves with noble moderation towards the dreaded yet despised man before her, and appeals at first only to his mildness and mercy. His interruptions merely serve to stimulate her ardour: she speaks of her brother's offence in melting accents, and implores forgiveness for so human and by no means unpardonable a crime. Seeing the effect of her moving appeal, she continues with increasing ardour to plead with the judge's hard and unresponsive heart, which can certainly not have remained untouched by sentiments such as those which had actuated her brother, and she calls upon the his memory of these to support her desperate plea for pity. At last the ice of his heart is broken. Friedrich, deeply stirred by Isabella's beauty, can no longer contain himself, and promises to grant her petition at the price of her own love. Scarcely has she become aware of the unexpected effect of her words when, filled with indignation at such incredible villainy, she cries to the people through doors and windows to come in, that she may unmask the hypocrite before the world. The crowd is already rushing tumultuously into the judgement hall when, by a few significant hints, Friedrich, with frantic energy, succeeds in making Isabella realise the impossibility of her plan. He would simply deny her charge, boldly pretend that his offer was merely made to test her, and would doubtless be readily believed so soon as it became only a question of rebutting a charge of lightly making love to her. Isabella, ashamed and confounded, recognises the madness of her first step, and gnashes her teeth in silent despair. While then Friedrich once more announces his stern resolve to the people, and pronounces sentence on the prisoner, it suddenly occurs to Isabella, spurred by the painful recollection of Marianne's fate, that what she has failed to procure by open means she might possibly obtain by craft. This thought suffices to dispel her sorrow, and to fill her with utmost gaiety. Turning to her sorrowing brother, her agitated friends, and the perplexed crowd, she assures them all that she is ready to provide them with the most amusing of adventures. She declares that the carnival festivities, which the Regent has just strictly forbidden, are to be celebrated this year with unusual licence; for this dreaded ruler only pretends to be so cruel, in order the more pleasantly to astonish them by himself taking a merry part in all that he has just forbidden. They all believe that she has gone mad, and Friedrich in particular reproves her incomprehensible folly with passionate severity. But a few words on her part suffice to transport the Regent himself with ecstasy; for in a whisper she promises to grant his desire, and that on the following night she shall send him such a message as shall ensure his happiness. And so ends the first act in a whirl of excitement.

We learn the nature of the heroine's hastily formed plan at the beginning of the second act, in which she visits her brother in his cell, with the object of discovering whether he is worthy of rescue. She reveals Friedrich's shameful proposal to him, and asks if he would wish to save his life at the price of his sister's dishonour. Then follow Claudio's

fury and fervent declaration of his readiness to die; whereupon, bidding farewell to his sister, at least for this life, he makes her the bearer of the most tender messages to the dear girl whom he leaves behind. After this, sinking into a softer mood, the unhappy man declines from a state of melancholy to one of weakness. Isabella, who had already determined to inform him of his rescue, hesitates in dismay when she sees him fall in this way from the heights of noble enthusiasm to a muttered confession of a love of life still as strong as ever, and even to a stammering query as to whether the suggested price of his salvation is altogether impossible. Disgusted, she springs to her feet, thrusts the unworthy man from her, and declares that to the shame of his death he has further added her most hearty contempt. After having handed him over again to his gaoler, her mood once more changes swiftly to one of wanton gaiety. True, she resolves to punish the waverer by leaving him for a time in uncertainty as to his fate; but stands firm by her resolve to rid the world of the abominable seducer who dared to dictate laws to his fellow-men. She tells Marianne that she must take her place at the nocturnal rendezvous, at which Friedrich so treacherously expected to meet her (Isabella), and sends Friedrich an invitation to this meeting. In order to entangle the latter even more deeply in ruin, she stipulates that he must come disguised and masked, and fixes the rendezvous in one of those pleasure resorts which he has just suppressed. To the madcap Luzio, whom she also desires to punish for his saucy suggestion to a novice, she relates the story of Friedrich's proposal, and her pretended intention of complying, from sheer necessity, with his desires. This she does in a fashion so incomprehensively light-hearted that the otherwise frivolous man, first dumb with amazement, ultimately yields to a fit of desperate rage. He swears that, even if the noble maiden herself can endure such shame, he will himself strive by every means in his power to avert it, and would prefer to set all Palermo on fire and in tumult rather than allow such a thing to happen. And, indeed, he arranges things in such a manner that on the appointed evening all his friends and acquaintances assemble at the end of the Corso, as though for the opening of the prohibited carnival procession. At nightfall, as things are beginning to grow wild and merry, Luzio appears, and sings an extravagant carnival song, with the refrain:

Who joins us not in frolic jest
Shall have a dagger in his breast;

by which means he seeks to stir the crowd to bloody revolt. When a band of sbirri approaches, under Brighella's leadership, to scatter the gay throng, the mutinous project seems on the point of being accomplished. But for the present Luzio prefers to yield, and to disperse his followers, as he must first of all win the real leader of their enterprise: for here was the spot which Isabella had mischievously revealed to him as the place of her pretended meeting with the Regent. For the latter Luzio therefore lies in wait. Recognising him in an elaborate disguise, he blocks his way, and as Friedrich violently breaks loose, is on the point of following him with shouts and drawn sword, when, on a sign from Isabella, who is hidden among some bushes, he is himself stopped and led away. Isabella then advances, rejoicing in the thought of having restored the betrayed Marianne to her faithless spouse. Believing that she holds in her hand the promised pardon for her brother, she is just on the point of abandoning all

thought of further vengeance when, breaking the seal, to her intense horror she recognizes by the light of a torch that the paper contains but a still more severe order of execution, which, owing to her desire not to disclose to her brother the fact of his pardon, a mere chance had now delivered into her hand, through the agency of the bribed gaoler (jailer). After a hard fight with the tempestuous passion of love, and recognizing his helplessness against this enemy of his peace, Friedrich has in fact already resolved to face his ruin, even though as a criminal, yet still as a man of honour. An hour on Isabella's breast, and then - his own death by the same law whose implacable severity shall also claim Claudio's life. Isabella, perceiving in this conduct only a further proof of the hypocrite's villainy, breaks out once more into a tempest of agonised despair. Upon her cry for immediate revolt against the scoundrelly tyrant, the people collect together and form a motley and passionate crowd. Luzio, who also returns, counsels the people with stinging bitterness to pay no heed to the woman's fury; he points out that she is only tricking them, as she has already tricked him - for he still believes in her shameless infidelity. Fresh confusion; increased despair of Isabella; suddenly from the background comes the burlesque cry of Brighella for help, who, himself suffering from the pangs of jealousy, has by mistake arrested the masked Regent, and thus led to the latter's discovery. Friedrich is recognised, and Marianne, trembling on his breast, is also unmasked. Amazement, indignation! Cries of joy burst forth all round; the needful explanations are quickly given, and Friedrich sullenly demands to be set before the judgement-seat of the returning King. Claudio, released from prison by the jubilant populace, informs him that the sentence of death for crimes of love is not intended for all times; messengers arrive to announce the unexpected arrival in harbour of the King; it is resolved to march in full masked procession to meet the beloved Prince, and joyously to pay him homage, all being convinced that he will heartily rejoice to see how ill the gloomy puritanism of Germany is suited to his hot-blooded Sicily.

Of him it is said:

Your merry festals please him more
Than gloomy laws or legal lore.

Friedrich, with his freshly affianced wife, Marianne, must lead the procession, followed by Luzio and the novice, who is forever lost to the convent.