

'And his father?' I inquired.

'Killed at the front,' was the reply.

I rose to go, but I could not get the boy out of my mind. What a world! What intolerable suffering! Was there no way out? Then the ever-recurring phrase of the French and Belgian sol-

diers came to me. When I had shuddered at ghastly wounds, at death, at innumerable white crosses on a bloody battlefield, invariably, in dry, cynical, hopeless tones, the soldier would make the one comment, —

'C'est la guerre; que voulez-vous?'

## FIRELIGHT

BY WILFRID WILSON GIBSON

AGAINST the curtained casement wind and sleet  
Rattle and thresh, while snug by our own fire,  
In dear companionship that naught may tire,  
We sit — you listening, sewing in your seat,  
Half-dreaming in the glow of light and heat,  
I reading some old tale of love's desire  
That swept on gold wings to disaster dire,  
Then rose re-orient from black defeat.

I close the book, and louder yet the storm  
Threshes without. Your busy hands are still;  
And on your face and hair the light is warm,  
As we sit gazing on the coals' red gleam  
In a gold glow of happiness, and dream  
Diviner dreams the years shall yet fulfill.

VOL. 117 — NO. 4

# THE OPERA

BY THOMAS WHITNEY SURETTE

## I

THE form of drama with music which we loosely call 'opera' is such a curious mixture of many elements — some of them closely related, others nearly irreconcilable — that it is almost impossible to arrive at any definite idea of its artistic value. A great picture or piece of sculpture, a great book or a great symphony represents a perfectly clear evolution of a well-defined art. You do not question the artistic validity of *Pendennis* or of a portrait by Romney; they have their roots in the earlier works of great writers and painters and they tend toward those which follow. The arts they represent grew by a slow process of evolution, absorbing everything that was useful to them and rejecting everything useless, until they finally became consistent and self-contained. The development of opera, on the other hand, has been a continual compromise — with the whims of princes, with the even more wayward whims of singers, and with social conventions.

Its increasing costliness (due sometimes to the composer's grandiloquence and sometimes to the demands of the public) has necessitated producing it in huge opera houses entirely unsuited to it; and, being a mixed art, it has been subject to two different influences which have not by any means always been in agreement. Its life-line has been crossed over and over again by daring innovators who, forgetting the past, have sought to force it away from nature and to make it an expression

of excessive individualism. Methods which would find oblivion quickly enough in any pure form of art have been carried out in opera, and have been supported by an uncritical public pleased by a gorgeous spectacle or entertained by fine singing. All the other art-forms progress step by step; opera leaps first forward, then backward; it becomes too reasonable, only to become immediately afterward entirely unreasonable; it passes from objectivity to subjectivity and back again, or employs both at the same time; it turns a man into a woman, or a woman into a man; it thinks nothing of being presented in two languages at once; it turns colloquial Bret Harte into Italian without the slightest realization of having become, in the process, essentially comic: in short, there seems no limit to the havoc it can play with geography, science, language, costume, drama, music, human nature itself.

Any attempt, therefore, to deal here with the development of opera as a whole would be an impossible undertaking. We should become at once involved in a glossary of singers (now only names, then in effect constituting the opera itself), an unsnarling of impossible plots, an excursion into religion, into the ballet, into mythology, demonology, pseudo-philosophy, mysticism, and Heaven knows what else. We should see our first flock of canary birds, — released simply to make us gape, — and we should hear a forest bird tell the hero (through the medium of a singer off the stage) the way to a