

A TALK WITH MR. SULLIVAN

THE COMPOSER OF "PINAFORE" AT HIS HOME.

HIS REMARKABLY SUCCESSFUL CAREER AND HIS PLANS FOR THE FUTURE—THE ANTICIPATED VISIT TO NEW-YORK WITH GILBERT—THEIR NEW PIECE.

LONDON, July 18.—Some dozen years ago I met a pleasant, genial young man, who was introduced to me as the coming English musical composer. It was at a London club, and the stranger informed me that his first work of any great importance would be produced at the Worcester Festival. I had business in the ancient city at that time, the Summer of 1868. At the grand civic breakfast, which opened the musical meeting, I sat beside my London friend and saw him conduct his first oratorio, "The Prodigal Son," a work full of that gift of melody and splendid orchestration which has since been developed in so many directions, and which has placed Dr. Sullivan in the first rank of English composers. Since that happy and hopeful time I have watched this musician's career with interest and with admiration. Knowing something of his great capacity, his earnestness, and the struggle which honest art encounters and must overcome to be successful in these days, I am the better enabled to bear testimony to the industry and the private and public worth of a composer whose music at this moment is delighting the people of all English-speaking countries. His contemplated visit to New-York, and the interest which we all feel in the career of celebrities—their persons, manners, habits, and characters—induced me to ask Dr. Sullivan to let me pay him, not only a friendly visit, but one of a professional character—not exactly to interview him, but to chat with him, having regard to the publication of a personal sketch. He consented, and Tuesday last found me ringing his bell at No. 9 Albert Mansions, Victoria-street. Ushered into an outer room, I was asked to be good enough to wait for my host while he concluded an interview with a foreigner who had called unexpectedly. The room was not unfamiliar to me, but I looked round it with a view to this letter. It was a large square room on the ground floor of the splendid series of chambers which may be said to have introduced the now popular flats of London. The walls were partly covered with a very miscellaneous collection of pictures, chiefly photographs and engravings. There was a fine portrait of Beethoven, another of the Prince of Wales, with the autograph "Albert Edward." There was a series of pictures of Paris, some of them illustrative of the troublous days of the Commune. There were shelves filled with books in many departments of literature, including dissertations upon music, historical works, poems, and novels. If Mr. Sullivan is to be judged by his library, he is a man of wide and varied reading, and his literary recreation is not confined to English works, but embraces the miscellaneous studies of France and Germany. There were two tables in the room, each covered with papers, letters, pamphlets, writing materials, and other indications of work and business. On the shelves and mantel-piece were a few articles of bric-à-brac, some old china, a bust or two of celebrities, and on the floor a guitar and a musical box. One end of the room was partly cut off by one of those delightful screens which are now so common in English houses, made up of mounted pictorial scraps. You could see at once that the apartment was that of a bachelor, and a bachelor of artistic taste.

Presently the young composer, who is a Doctor by the honorary action of Cambridge University, came to welcome me from the adjoining room. A man of medium height, broad-shouldered, well-built, Dr. Sullivan at once impresses you with his power. He is decidedly handsome. The expression of his face is sympathetic; it has a touch of Orientalism, is dark, and the features are mobile. Black, wavy hair is brushed away from a compact, intellectual forehead. The eyes are dark, the nose sensitive, the jaw and chin indicating firmness and strength of character. Like many Englishmen, Dr. Sullivan wears side whiskers and a moustache; unlike many Englishmen, he is a man with whom you are at home at once. Frank, easy, and unaffected in his manners, he is the sort of person whom America is sure to like the moment it sets eyes on him. He was born in London on the 13th of May, 1842. His first systematic instruction in music was commenced at the Chapel Royal under the Rev. Thomas Helmore, and at the age of 14 he was still a chorister when he gained the Mendelssohn scholarship, founded at the Royal Academy of Music by Jenny Lind. He studied harmony under Mr. Sterndale Bennett, who was afterward knighted, and under Mr. Goss, who received similar honors at the hands of her Majesty. When he left the Academy he went to Leipzig, where he remained three years at the Conservatorium. In 1861, he came back to England the author of that new music to Shakespeare's "Tempest," which first gained him recognition among musicians. His next work was the cantata "Kenilworth," which was produced with distinguished success at the Birmingham Festival in 1864. His compositions from this time followed each other with remarkable rapidity, each work strengthening his reputation; namely, the "Symphony in E," played at the Crystal Palace in 1865; his overture, "In Memoriam," one of the attractions of the Norwich Festival in 1866; his "Marmion" music at the Philharmonic in 1867; his oratorio of "The Prodigal Son," the principal original work in the programme of the Worcester Festival in 1868; his "Overture di Ballo," at the Birmingham Festival of 1870; "On Shore and Sea," at the International Exhibition of 1871; the festival Te Deum, to commemorate the recovery of the Prince of Wales, produced at the Crystal Palace in 1872, and his oratorio, "The Light of the World," which was the chief attraction of the famous Birmingham Festival of 1873. There is hardly any branch of musical composition which Dr. Sullivan has not touched, though, from a monetary point of view, the encouragement to write classical music is not very great in England. Mr. Sullivan probably received as much for one of his popular songs as he obtained for his oratorios, each of which cost him a year's hard work. Among his most successful ballads of a sentimental character are "Once Again," "Looking Back," "Will He Come?" "Sweethearts," "Let Me Dream Again," and "The Lost Chord." Some of these have sold as many as 50,000 copies, and the waltz founded upon "Sweethearts" has by this time possibly reached a sale of 100,000. But it seems probable that the success which gives a man comfortable quarters and a carriage and pair is destined to come out of Dr. Sullivan's dramatic compositions in collaboration with his friend Mr. W. S. Gilbert. These are: "Trial by Jury," produced at the Royal Lyceum in 1875; "The Zoo" in the same year; "The Sorcerer" at the Opera Comique in 1877, and the "Pinafore" in 1878. It is notable in regard to the latter work that its widest success, from an artistic point of view, has been obtained in the United States.

Dr. Sullivan conducted me into his private room, similar in the size, more comfortable in furniture than the one I had just left. On the walls were more miscellaneous pictures, including the Duke and Duchess of Edinburgh adorned with their autographs, a photograph of Long's exquisite study of "An Ancient Custom," a sketch of Jerusalem, and on the mantel-shelf innumerable cards of invitation to at homes, dinners, and receptions. There were lounges and easy chairs here and there, a grand piano, candle lamps, and a portion of the score of the new opera which is to be produced in New-York.

"I am glad you came to-day," said Dr. Sullivan, stirring the fire which was blazing on the hearth, although the day was the middle of the English Summer, "because to-morrow I am going away to rest for three months. I have struggled against the necessity of it, but my doctor, Sir Henry Thompson, and others, insist upon it. I have been suffering from a troublesome complaint of the kidneys, and am advised that unless I take care I may have to lay up altogether. It is rather a serious business for me just now. It compels me to give up my annual engagement in connection with the Covent Garden concerts, and to put aside a great deal of very important business. I shall, however, be able, I hope, to occupy myself all the time with the new piece."

In regard to his visit to the United States, he said: "I have only one fear, and that is the kindness of my friends, for I have many on the other side of the Atlantic, and I should like to join them heartily in anything they may do to make the time pleasant and agreeable. But, as you know, I am, though a good deal before the public, rather a quiet man. The only prominent chair I care to sit in is the one I occupy when I am conducting; but I have to great a sense of the kindredness of our friends in New-York not to reciprocate in every way their sympathy and good-fellowship. I hope we shall sail early in October, though until Mr. D'Oyley Carte returns to London our arrangements will not be quite complete."

"There is a good deal of gossip about the new piece. It has been said that the idea is a

sort of dramatized 'Bab Ballad,' in which six burglars and six policemen help you to characteristic choruses."

"Ah, that," said Sullivan, handing me a cigar, "was an idea we had for a short piece; but we have introduced it into the latter part of the new opera, which will be in two acts, like the 'Pinafore.' The notion chiefly develops a bit of burlesque of Italian opera. It is a mere incident. An old gentleman returns home in the evening with his six daughters from a party. Nice bit of soft music takes them off for the night. Then a big orchestral crash, which introduces six burglars. They commence their knavish operations in a mysterious chorus, lights down. Presently the old gentleman thinks he hears some one stirring; comes on; of course, sees nobody, though the burglars are actively at work. The noise is only the sighing of the wind, or the gentle evening breeze. The old gentleman and the burglars perform a bit of concerted music, and in due course the six ladies enter. The six burglars are struck with their beauty, forget their villainous purposes, and make love. Chorus of burglars and old gentleman's daughters, whose announcement that they are 'wards in Chancery' creates great consternation among the bandit lovers. Then there is the policemen's rescue and other humorous conceits of Gilbert, which I hope and believe will be as funny as anything in the 'Pinafore' or 'The Sorcerer.'"

Sullivan laughed heartily as he suggested to me the points of this episode, suiting the action to the word, the word to the action; and we fell into a general conversation about Gilbert's work.

"We get on together admirably," said the Doctor. "His ideas are as suggestive for music as they are quaint and laughable. His numbers never fail; they are never a foot too short or too long, and they always give me musical ideas. When first we commenced this kind of thing we did not expect to make the success we have achieved. 'Trial by Jury,' for instance. After we had rehearsed it until the people were dead perfect, and the title-piece went as smoothly as possible, it seemed to fall flat on both our intelligences."

"You knew too much about it possibly; and after all there is a great deal of drudgery in rehearsing, which becomes wearisome and must often put you out of conceit with your best ideas."

"I expect that is so, for on the first night, the public coming in fresh to it, the piece went, as you know, with immense éclat. But our greatest surprise is the success of 'Pinafore' in America. It seemed to us that the subject was rather local than general. On the first night, I remember, Gilbert's opinion was that it would answer our purpose; it would run for a few months, by which time we should have to prepare something to succeed it. There is one thing, I fancy, in favor of these pieces—let us call them eccentric operas—they are in a new and original vein, and I also hope that the fact of their being harmless on moral grounds, untainted by *double entendre*, works which may be performed before any audience, has also something to do with their popularity."

"Some people think that you should dedicate your talents to grand opera."

"Yes. Those people know nothing of the difficulties which that opinion suggests. There is no grand operatic theatre open to the English composer. Gilbert and myself, I think I may say it without vanity, could accomplish something worthy in that direction; but we are not prepared to work on speculation. The musical field for English composers is quite limited. I am very fond of dramatic composition, and think I succeed best in that line; but I have no other opportunity except that which is offered by theatres which can produce such works as those I have already done. I believe I am the only English composer who lives by composing. It is true, I conduct, but that is only incidental to my professional occupation. You would hardly believe how many persons of real capacity as composers find it utterly impossible to make bread and cheese. I have been peculiarly fortunate. It is true, I have worked hard all my life, but I have made money and valuable friends. It is not only necessary in art that you should be a master of your profession, but that you should have favorable opportunities of exercising it. I have been lucky in this respect, and am always anxious to acknowledge it and to make some return for my good fortune by doing what I can to help those who are struggling upward. My correspondence every day is no inconsiderable business. I receive 30 or 40 letters every morning. I am obliged to employ a shorthand writer to assist me in answering them. The majority of them are from persons seeking advice or appointments, wanting chances to sing or play, and soliciting my professional aid. I do as much as I can for them, not simply from ordinary feelings of humanity, but, as I say, out of gratitude for my own success."

"I am glad you have spoken of this, because it enables me to mention your intimacy with some members of the royal family."

"Yes. My particular friend is the Duke of Edinburgh. He has always been most kind, and I am sorry some of his newspaper critics do not know him as well as I do; if they did, they would understand that what they often consider a haughty and reticent manner is the result of an innate modesty of character and unostentatious good-nature. This peculiar lamp you see on the piano came to me a year or two ago from the Duke, sent all the way from Russia. He was looking over a store in St. Petersburg, saw it, and it occurred to him, having seen me scoring an oratorio by candle-light, that this would be useful; and when you think how many claims Princes have upon their time and attention, you will understand I appreciate this little remembrance of me so far away. The sympathy which the English royal family has for art and for artists is quite a prominent characteristic. There is nothing more charming than their manner and treatment of you when they come to know you. Once introduced to them, they never forget you. For instance, if the Prince of Wales were to come in now and I presented you to him and you did not meet him again for several years, he would know you at once, he would remember where he met you, and show you that he did so by possibly asking you if you had lately seen me. This is a faculty which the English royal family cultivate, and which, supplementing their natural kindness, makes them so popular among people who know them. It is not long since the Queen asked me to do some little trifle for her in the way of my profession. It was a very small matter, which I should do for you or for any friend without expecting any acknowledgment; yet I got from the Queen a charming autograph letter about it. A few days ago I said to the Duke of Edinburgh I should like, before I went to America, to complete my set of portraits of the royal family with one of the Queen, but I supposed it was probably out of the question to ask for it. He said he would see about it when an opportunity offered. By the next post I receive this letter."

He handed me a large envelope which contained a photograph of the Queen, bearing her own autograph, and a very charming letter from the Duke of Edinburgh, who said that the moment he had mentioned the subject to her Majesty, she had taken from a cabinet this picture and written her name upon it and requested him to forward it.

"And now, good-bye," I said, in due course, "and thank you very much for being so good as to let me take up so much of your valuable time."

"Not at all," he said; "I am very glad to have had this pleasant chat before I go away to try to get well. Present me to your American friends after your own sense of good taste."

"I shall only strive to depict you as you are. *Bon voyage*, and a happy and quick return!"