

THE GILBERTIAN IDEA.

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THE genius of W. S. Gilbert is a thing apart; his place in English letters unique. In his art as a librettist he has no predecessors. He has had many imitators, but no successors. As soon as he found himself, he came at once into his own; he saw, and conquered, and now after the lapse of some forty years his place in popular esteem and in the more eclectic world of letters is firmly established. The recent revivals in London of the earlier Savoy operas, 'Savoy' being a convenient if not strictly accurate term to cover the series from *Trial by Jury* to *Utopia Limited*, have stimulated curiosity as to their literary evolution, especially in regard to the almost mysterious transformation of Gilbert from a writer of burlesque after H. J. Byron, and a more or less conventional playwright at first strongly under the influence of Robertson, into a librettist of extraordinary skill, working on purely original lines. The mental processes which gave birth and expression to his real genius — the satiric genius of *Topsy-turvydom*—are revealed, however, in the pages of a note-book—sole survivor, it is to be feared, of many—kindly placed at the disposition of the writer. Gilbert made away with his papers ruthlessly. He kept neither unfinished nor completed manuscripts. The final copy was usually bestowed on the *prima donna* or other artist whose interpretation of his characters happened to commend itself; the rest, with all notes, were committed to the flames. And, with this one exception, he left to our knowledge no literary remains other than correspondence with friends and collaborators. The exception is illuminating. Sandwiched between sketches and rough copies of several successful comedies are a number of 'Ideas' for a projected play, or musical play to be entitled *Topsy-turvydom*, which 'Ideas' embody practically the whole scheme of wit and wisdom afterwards expounded in the Savoy operas.

Gilbert has told me that *The Yeomen of the Guard* was his favourite, and that technically he considered it his best. He also said that Phoebe's song, 'Were I Thy Bride,' was written to demonstrate that the English language properly treated was as tuneful as the then fashionable Italian and German. The suppression of the sibilant, here and generally, denotes the master craftsman. For melody, perhaps, he had an indifferent ear; but he had a dominant sense of rhythm, and the true artist's joy of bending his verses to a thousand metres and conceits. Granted his serious lyrics are conceived in mockery, still, their appeal is to the heart, a quality rare in his work, which partakes far more of the faery, the freakish, the Gay-like *quod est absurdum*, or in other words the serious treatment and logical development of ridiculous premises. But in our many discussions of the subject I never heard him mention Gay, whose *Beggar's Opera*, by the way, was written as a skit on the Italian opera absurdities of his day, just as Sullivan's music of the Savoy operas is often a parody—more beautiful than the originals—of the Italian composers. Yet, I have no doubt he was familiar with Gay's method, for he was a close student of dramatic composition, and could recite from his wonderful memory whole pages of long-forgotten plays, extravaganzas and burlesques.

The fairy had developed early in him, the perverse fairy of the 'Bab Ballads,' themselves the wellsprings of so many of the operas — Gilbert's own creation, Gilbert himself. Even as long as he was under the spell of Robertson, writing plays in orthodox form, the fairy peeps out in the words and actions of his characters. Indeed with some half a dozen exceptions in the long line of his original plays, Gilbert seems incapable of portraying a real

woman. Mrs. Van den Burgh in *Charity* is the nearest approach he ever made on his own account. Phœbe in *The Yeomen of the Guard*, Clarice in *Comedy and Tragedy*, have human hearts, and there is in the gallery of irresponsible, impossible ‘Bab’ femininity, the unexpectedly human *Only a Dancing Girl*. The rest are fairies *pur sang*, as often as not, with a strong dash of the minx in them.

This peculiar quality of Gilbert’s genius was reflected in the man himself. He was at once the least emotional and artistically the most sensitive of men. I once asked him if he had written any love poems, and if so whether such poems were in existence. Gilbert assured me that he never had, even in his literary youth and added with a chuckle, ‘Every line I ever wrote in verse was to order, and well paid for at that! In nearly all his other than *Broken Hearts* and *The Wicked World*, in the whole of the Savoy opera as defined above, the male interest predominates. When at last he went to the other extreme, and in his final opera, *Fallen Fairies*, eliminated the male chorus altogether, the experiment was a failure for stage purposes.

His fairy plays proper introduced London to an entirely new form of dramatic entertainment, and it says much for the taste of the ’seventies that both *The Wicked World*—forty years later to reappear in lyric form as *Fallen Fairies*—and *Broken Hearts* were successful as well from the financial as from the artistic point of view. Incidentally, they show that Gilbert was as facile a writer of blank as of lyric verse. He is at his best in this respect in *Pygmalion and Galatea*, a play developed on a classic theme, it is true, but justly claimed by him as original. For Gilbert held, Shakespeare-like, that inspiration drawn from history, or the creatures of others’ imagining, is no bar to the claim of originality; that a play is none the less entitled to be regarded as original if based on the ideas of classic or even modern authors. He writes in one of his prefaces:

‘The Story upon which *The Palace of Truth* is founded is probably as old as the *Arabian Nights*. *The Princess* (mother so to speak of the opera, *Princess Ida*) is a respectful parody (later described as a perversion) of Mr. Tennyson’s exquisite poem.

‘It has been generally held, I believe, that if a dramatist uses the mere outline of an existing story for dramatic purposes he is at liberty to describe his play as “original.”’

Gilbert was a great admirer of Dickens. He once told me that he never went away from home without one or other of the novels, and that being a poor sleeper he had the whole of them within hand-reach of his bed. Probably, not a little of the clever fooling of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern owes its inception to Mr. Wopsle and his transpontine interpretation of *Hamlet* — ever a favourite butt of Gilbert’s wit, and more elaborately pursued in *The Mountebanks*. He had himself dramatised *Great Expectations*, but according to his own judgment ‘with no success worth mentioning.’ He tells an amusing story, however, of the ways of the censorship at the date of its production. The custom of the then Licensor of Plays was to delete irreverent words and insert inoffensive substitutes. From the line addressed to Pip by the returned convict, ‘Here you are, in chambers fit for a Lord,’ the word ‘Lord’ was struck out, and ‘Heaven,’ in pencil, put in its place!

Again, in the *Tale of Two Cities*, Mr. Stryver’s self-examination of himself before an imaginary Court on the subject of his offer of marriage to Lucie Manette foreshadows unmistakably the remarkable performance of the Lord Chancellor in *Iolanthe*, who wishes to wed Phyllis, his ward in Chancery:

‘Argued with the jury on substantial worldly grounds — the only grounds ever worth

taking into account — it was a plain case, and had not a weak spot in it. He called himself for the plaintiff, there was no getting over his evidence, the counsel for the defendant threw up his brief, and the jury did not even turn to consider. After trying it, Stryver, C.J., was satisfied that no plainer case could be.’

The Lord Chancellor had failed to convince himself in the first instance:

‘I deeply grieve to say that in declining to entertain my last application, I presumed to address myself in terms which render it impossible for me ever to apply to myself again. It was a most painful scene — my Lord — most painful!’

but presently, encouraged by the rival peers for the hand of this ‘dainty rogue in porcelain,’ he returns with the joyful news:

‘Victory! Victory! Success has crowned my efforts, and I may consider myself engaged to Phyllis. ... Eventually, after a severe struggle with myself I reluctantly, most reluctantly, consented’ to the application.

It may be a literary coincidence; if so, the coincidence is sufficiently striking. But Gilbert, where such ideas were not absolutely spontaneous, and original in a stricter sense than he himself acknowledged, usually derived the motives of the libretti from his own earlier works. *The Mikado* indisputably sprang Minerva-like armed *cap-à-pie* from his brain; no suggestion of a ‘pre Gilbertian,’ much less of a foreign, progenitor is to be found in its sparkling lines. In the other Savoy operas there is generally something of an echo of the ‘Bab Ballads,’ or possibly of those farcical comedies contemporaneous with the older productions of the series. *Engaged* is pure farce and fun. Cheviot Hill of the many fiancées, and Belvawney (a Dickens name), his friend and rival, are surely prototypes of the greater Bunthorne and Grosvenor of *Patience*.

‘Suppose — I won’t go so far as to say I will do it — but suppose for one moment I were to curse you? (*Grosvenor quails.*) Ah! Very well, take care.’

sounds very like the threat of Cheviot Hill when he demands of Maggie Macfarlane the whereabouts of her mercenary lover Angus.

‘CHEVIOT. Give me his address that I may go and curse him.’

MAGGIE. (*Kneels to Hill*) Oh, sir, kind sir, have mercy on him, and do not — do not curse him, or I shall die.’

and Maggie is but a Lowland Ellen McJones Aberdeen. So Grosvenor kneels to Bunthorne to avert ‘a nephew’s curse,’ and Belinda Treherne is reincarnated in Phyllis of *Iolanthe*, *Patience* herself, and half a dozen other Gilbertian misses:

‘MISS T. I am glad, sir, that you are pleased with my modesty. It has often been admired.’

The satire is all fun and good fooling. Sometimes, it is true, and most notably in the lyrics, a shadow passes over the sunny landscape. Yet never so much as a shower of April rain follows with the fleeting cloud. The solemn funeral bell tolls ‘Bim-a-boom,’ but no one is or will be beheaded, and the next moment the joy bells are ringing, and — ‘Brightly dawns our-wedding day,’ ‘Fairest days are sun and shade,’ carol Angelina’s bridesmaids, but for the most part it is all sunshine; clean, fresh wit, with nothing of the suggestiveness which too often disfigured the jejune libretti of an earlier school. For this is Gilbert’s greatest achievement — that it can be written of his Muse, and written truly, as of his bright and

beautiful English girl:

‘Her soul is sweet as the ocean air,
For prudery knows no haven there.’

And further, can it be said of any other librettist of this or any other epoch that we read his works in the armchair with as much enjoyment and amusement as we listen to his lines and lyrics on the stage? They are not ‘the rinsings of a comic mind,’ in the pungent words of his criticism of a jealous rival. He was, indeed, a hard and fastidious worker. The libretti and dialogue were polished and repolished, and he invariably wrote more verses than the opera required that the composer might exercise a choice. For he realised, as so few writers of verse appear to do, that the lyrics suitable for music are seldom those poems classic in form with stanzas of uniform metre. The perfect libretto demands variety of rhythm and metre, and he knew it. Like the Wandering Minstrel of *The Mikado*:

‘My catalogue is long,
Through every passion ranging,
And to your humours changing
I tune my supple song!’

The ‘books’ were original in every sense. The scheme of their topsy-turvydom is carefully outlined in the note-book to which allusion has already been made. The topsy-turvy ‘Ideas,’ can be dated with some accuracy. They follow immediately a complete uncorrected MS. of *Charity*, produced in 1875; but *Topsy-turvydom*, the actual play, or opera-to-be (for the *Spirit of Parliament* is down to describe the kingdom of Topsy-turvydom ‘in patter song’), goes no further, alas, than the scenario of Act I, Scene 1. In the eight pages of ‘Ideas,’ however, the Gilbertian system is revealed, and it is interesting to note that *Trial by Jury*, which may be said to have inaugurated the topsy-turvy era, appeared in the same year as *Charity*. The ‘Ideas’ are too copious for transliteration in full, but enough of them may be quoted to indicate the inner workings of Gilbert’s mind at this, the transition period of his art.

‘Poverty is honoured —wealth despised. Ignorance is honoured — learning despised.

Children are born learned, gradually forget everything until, as old men, they are utterly ignorant. Women are bold, men bashful. Vice is rewarded. Virtue punished. Judges administer injustice. Dishonesty is rewarded. Cowards are honoured, brave men elbowed aside. Therefore the most ignorant, the most vicious, the most lazy man is made Ruler. Women hate their husbands. [a truly Gilbertian inversion]. ... Thieves are employed to arrest honest men.

‘How can this idea be best exploited? The scene may be laid in the Barbarous Islands in the Kingdom of Topsy-turvydom.’

The play (or opera) was evidently intended as a gentle satire on British self-complacency, and British institutions, which later found expression in less incisive form in *Utopia Limited, or the Flowers of Progress*. The House of Commons was to be singled out for target of Gilbert’s wit, just as in *Iolanthe* it was to be the House of Lords. The central figure of the play is John Swivel, Esq., M.P., who has just been returned for his Borough:

‘He is enthusiastic at the good he proposes to effect. He is a member of the most enlightened assembly in the world, a perfect epitome of the opinion and wishes of the Nation.’

In the sketch for Scene 1, the Spirit of Parliament appears to him in his library, 'is delighted to hear that one member at least is actuated by independent motives,' and, when Swivel protests that his sole motive is to benefit his Country, and asks how that may best be done, the Spirit suggests a visit to the land 'where everything is conducted on precisely opposite political and social principles.' Swivel readily assents, and asks if he may take his wife:

'SPIRIT. Certainly. I should tell you that in that country you will have to walk on the ceiling with your head towards the floor.

SWIVEL. Oh! — Then I don't think I'll take my wife.'

He asks for further information about the place — 'Spirit, in patter song, describes Topsy-turvydom. Scene changes. Scene 2. Topsy-turvydom. Everything topsy-turvy.' Here the MS. ends abruptly, and it is necessary to revert to the 'Ideas' to discover what sort of people the Topsy-turvyites might be — their manners and customs. Gilbert tells us. In a projected Court scene:

'The Prime Minister — a most popular man — enters with top and hoop. He is received with hoots and groans, this being the topsy-turvy method of expressing applause. M.P. enquires why he is hooted in this way. Mentor explains that it is because he is so popular. He was raised to his present office because he is so unfit for it. Why raise him to an office for which he is obviously unfitted? Why? because this is topsy-turvydom. "Well," says M.P., "I never heard anything like it before." "No," says Mentor, "you wouldn't be likely to — in England."

M.P. must go through certain adventures involving an encounter with such typical Topsy-turvyites as will best help the satire. So he gets involved in a breach of promise action, having taken a great fancy to a pretty woman, while alleged to be engaged "to another ugly one to whom he takes a great dislike." The father of the ugly one (the Prime Minister) says he has noticed that M.P. has taken a great dislike to his daughter. ... M.P. admits it. "You don't admire her at all." M.P. says, "Not at all." "Then I am authorised to say that she has taken just such a detestation to you." M.P. is wholly indifferent. "Then take her and be unhappy! Eh! You hate her. She hates you. Marry and be wretched It is the law of the land. Never!"

Action for breach follows. 'M.P. is found to be sane, and is sentenced to be detained during the Royal displeasure.' M.P. appeals to Parliament, and asks where it is sitting. Mentor replies, 'Oh, all over the place.'

'SWIVEL. What do you mean?

MENTOR. What I say. Some are shooting — some fishing — some abroad — some yachting. You can appeal to them if you like.

SWIVEL. But don't they ever meet?

MENTOR. Well — now and then when there's no more fishing, or shooting, or yachting. How can a country require any laws during the fishing, shooting, and yachting season?

SWIVEL. (*turns round to his Mentor*). I thought this was Topsy-turvydom. Why, I don't see much difference between this place and my own happy country.'

The idea is worked out with some elaboration at the end of Utopia Limited, where Utopia has been so effectively reconstructed and remodelled after English institutions — so 'swamped by dull Prosperity' — that the islanders demand that the reformers, the Flowers of Progress

Be sent about their business, and affairs

Restored to their original complexion.’

Zara, the King’s daughter, prompted by Sir Bailey Barre, declares that the most essential element of all — Government by Party — has been forgotten.

‘No political measures will endure, because one party will assuredly undo all the other party has done, and while grouse is to be shot, and foxes worried to death, the legislative action of the country will be at a standstill. Then there will be sickness in plenty, endless lawsuits, crowded jails, interminable confusion in the Army and Navy, and, in short, general and unexampled prosperity.

Utopia is delighted, and Gilbert, who was no politician, and once refused to vote for a candidate because his features on the canvassing card did not please him, certainly spoke his mind fearlessly yet though in Topsy-turvydom. He himself could not endure take life even in sport.

As a foil to the ignorant, childish, popular Premier of Topsy-turvydom:

‘There must be a Court Fool — a particularly clever philosopher — whom all despise. He is described as a very melancholy case. He was born without any knowledge at all, and he has gone on gradually improving himself until he has become the best-informed and most intellectual man in the kingdom.’

When Swivel eventually decides to return home, the jester

‘proposes to accompany him, for he has been told that learning is highly honoured there. M.P. tells him, on second thoughts he don’t know that he will be any better off in England.’

Space precludes further quotation; but it may be regretted that the scheme was not carried to its logical-illogical conclusion, and the intended work completed. When these ‘Ideas’ were evolved Gilbert had yet to make good his claim as *the* librettist of first rank — a rank which once attained he was to maintain unchallenged for the rest of his life, and thereafter.

There is hardly one, however, of the ‘Ideas’ which was not destined to be used and expanded in his intellectual kingdom of topsy-turvydom; and, it may be, he himself felt they were better distributed over a number of libretti than concentrated in one brilliant masterpiece.

A discussion of the genesis of the Gilbertian Idea would hardly be complete without some acknowledgment of Gilbert’s hereditary debt to his father, William Gilbert. It would be pressing his claim far to suggest that W. S. Gilbert owed more than the smallest part of his artistic equipment to his parent. In temperament the two men had much in common; they often surveyed the literary horizon eye to eye. The son could illustrate the father’s work — *King George’s Middy*, and *The Magic Mirror* — with perfect sympathy; just as later the father of Mr. Rudyard Kipling embellished his son’s word-pictures of India in a spirit wonderfully in accord with that of ‘Kim.’ The Gilberts were both artists, both of original minds and of kindred sensibility. But, whereas the father followed more or less the old conventional ways, the son struck out into paths of his own finding and adventure, cheered though not directed by the warm encouragement of the elder.

The times were ripe for his satire of our insular complacency; the social atmosphere

was congenial to his wit; though at least we had some excuse for self-satisfaction in the easy-going 'seventies' and early 'eighties' when 'Britain really ruled the waves' with a phantom fleet, when autumn sessions were few and far between, and income-tax was 2d. in the pound. The savage methods of a previous generation of ink-slingers were out of date; the gods appeared little inclined to make of our pleasant national vices instruments to plague us. John Bull's blissful outlook of superiority offered Gilbert just the objective he required for his gentlemanly arrows. 'His foe was folly, and his weapon wit.' He derided pretence, and made enemies only of the pretentious who, to change the metaphor, fitted such fools-caps as he fashioned upon their own precious heads. He presented society with the picture of a logical topsy-turvy world in contrast to its own illogically ordered system, and the medium employed appealed to it. Like the Athenians of the golden age, when an Aristophanes arrives to hold our foibles and follies up to ridicule, we are ready to applaud and laugh with the satirist, though we ourselves compose the material of his satire.

Gilbert invented this new medium for the exposition of his philosophy. The world laughed at itself as it laughed with him, and will continue to do so, as long as the Savoy operas remain to charm our ears and captivate our senses.