

# THE PERSONAL SIDE OF RICHARD WAGNER

By *Houston Stewart Chamberlain*

[Author of "The Biography of Richard Wagner"]

It was the desire of the editors of *The Ladies' Home Journal* that Frau Wagner should write a series of articles relating to her husband and his works. After considering the proposition she, however, concluded that such articles would better come from another pen, and upon her recommendation Mr. Chamberlain was commissioned to write them. Few men, perhaps none now living, knew Richard Wagner so closely, or understood him so well, as did Mr. Chamberlain. He was the composer's lifelong friend, and what he has written here has been done

## WITH THE APPROVAL AND ASSISTANCE OF FRAU WAGNER

With Portraits and Illustrations furnished by Mr. Chamberlain from Private Sources

**P**ERSONS animated by the laudable desire of arranging their daily lives in accordance with those of celebrated men have often felt not a little perplexed by the great variety of habits to which the biographies of such bear witness. Napoleon used to rise at four every morning; Kant, the greatest thinker who ever lived, at five minutes to five (the five minutes being sufficient for the entire process of ablution and dressing!). Goethe was awakened at six; Schiller an hour or two later. Hoffmann, the German novelist, thought noon a convenient hour for reëntering the battle of life, while some of the wits of all time, such as Swift, Sheridan and Rabelais, frequently did not get up at all, as they had discovered bed to be quite the best and most propitious hot-house for fertile imagination.

roast meat on before an open fire, a thing quite unknown at that time in Continental Europe, and even now but rarely found. At the same time, though he relished good food, he ate moderately. In his letters he often blames his German friends for paying so little attention to food, exercise, and hygiene in general. In a passage so drastic that I cannot venture to translate it into English he goes so far as to declare that bad food and its consequences rank among the chief causes of the corruption of society. But the attention paid by him to things of this sort is not that of an epicure, but partly that of a man of refined tastes, partly that of a person in delicate health.

Wagner's passionate affection for his bathtub was notable. At one period of his life he so nearly killed himself



FRAU WAGNER—WIDOW OF RICHARD WAGNER  
(From a Sketch by Franz Lenbach)



WAGNER IN HIS 27TH YEAR  
(His First Portrait—Painted in Paris, in 1840, by Ernst Kietz)

satin like some Oriental despot, and surrounded by extravagant luxury. This has been said so often, it has been so constantly repeated during the last thirty years, that it is difficult to eradicate the falsehood from people's minds. The simple fact is that Wagner was always clad in silk from head to foot, not, however, from any sybaritic propensities, but simply because his delicate and irritable skin could endure no other kind of underclothing. For this reason, and while still very poor, he was led to adopt garments which we should not consider extraordinary, but which his fellow-countrymen thought the height of extravagance.

Later, when his means permitted, he went a step further. The touching of cotton or wool always gave him a shock similar to the "putting one's teeth on edge," and so he used frequently, when at home and alone, to wear a silk dressing-gown, or to put on a large, easy, silk morning coat and trousers, somewhat similar in style to those generally worn in the East. If this were a vice, surely it was one of the most harmless of vices. And as for the extravagant luxury of Wagner's abodes, on which German newspapers used to descant, hundreds of the guests who have been received in Wahnfried, the hospitable home of his last years, can attest that, although this house now contains the presents of Kings and Princes, there is nothing in it, as far as mere luxury and comfort are concerned, to exceed what may be found in every American or English country house.

**W**HAT gave Wagner's successive homes their characteristic feature was not luxury, but something of a very different nature. He was essentially a domestic man. Fate forced him to stand battling against the world during the whole course of a long life. He had to battle for bread; he had to battle for his dramatic works, for each one of them; he had to battle up to the hour of death for his great idea of disinterested, non-mercantile dramatic performances (Bayreuth). What gave him patience and energy and ever-renewed hope was his love of home. No man in this century was more vilified and insulted than Richard Wagner; all the mean, all the vulgar and grasping, and the whole vast army of mediocrities were his born and sworn enemies. But he had a fortress to which he could retire to recruit his strength. That fortress was his home. Wagner could not live without the love and companionship of a noble-hearted woman.

No poet ever lived who exalted woman as Wagner does in almost every one of his dramas. The purity of a spotless female soul was for him one of the great powers of Nature. What



RICHARD WAGNER IN HIS 69TH YEAR  
(His Last Portrait—Enlarged from an Amateur Photograph taken in July, 1882)



RICHARD WAGNER'S MOTHER  
(From a Portrait Painted by Her Second Husband, Ludwig Geyer)

In the habits of Richard Wagner there was nothing extreme, nor any iron rule imposed by will on refractory Nature. His health was too delicate to admit of such rules, and his character far too impetuous either to need a spur or to brook restraint. In youth his frame, though almost femininely fragile in appearance, was equal to every sort of fatigue and overwork. We never hear of his being ill; and indeed, later also, and up to the very end, no great illness, no organic disease threw a shadow over his life. But the bitter privations of his first sojourn in Paris, which extended from 1839 to 1842, acted on the organs of digestion, causing disturbances which no medical treatment could ever after remove, and which were not wholly foreign to the final catastrophe of 1883.

**U**NDER these circumstances the only complaint to which he had been constitutionally disposed since childhood—erysipelas—took permanent hold on him. In the single winter of 1855-56 he had twelve successive relapses. This was while he was composing "The Ring of the Nibelung"; and he was never free from that malady for any length of time, one of the last attacks occurring while he was finishing his last work, "Parsifal," shortly before his death.

This one fact may suffice to show that Wagner was obliged to be moderate in all his habits. He was extremely

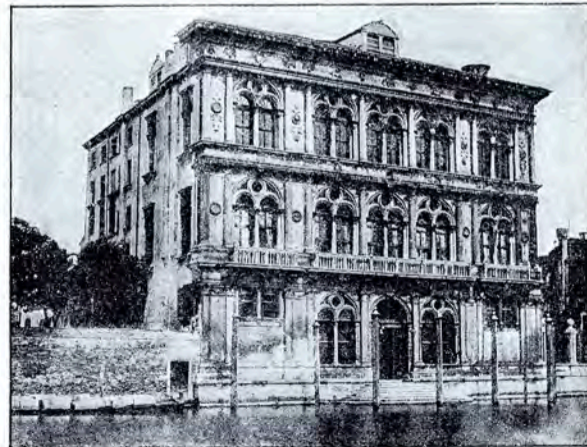


HIS FIRST WIFE, WILHELMINA

by his inordinate use of cold water that the doctor had to interfere. And this naturally leads us on to one of the most characteristic features of the man—his excessive neatness. In dress Wagner may occasionally, to our severe Anglo-Saxon taste, have seemed a trifle too elegant; at any rate, his attire always showed the taste of an artist, each article of clothing harmonizing with the rest, everything fitting to perfection and being light and well made.

**H**IS attention to dress went so far that he instinctively imagined bad dress must be a sign of bad health. A friend of mine, a painter, who had already once or twice met Wagner, was calling upon him again after some lapse of time. The moment he entered the room Wagner jumped up and ran toward him, exclaiming in a tone of sincere distress: "Oh, my poor, dear friend, I didn't know you were ill; what is the matter with you?" Great was the laughter when it turned out that there was nothing the matter with my friend except that he had on a coat perpetrated by some abominable Court tailor. But there is one error concerning Wagner's dress which I must do what lies in my power to rectify. Wagner is alleged to have been a perfect sybarite, clad in silk and

particular about food, and was very proud of possessing—even during the years of exile in Zurich, which began in 1849 and ended in 1859, when his means were sorely reduced—a real spit to



HOUSE IN WHICH RICHARD WAGNER DIED  
ON FEBRUARY 13, 1883  
(Palazzo Vendramin in Venice)

God's angel could not accomplish—the rescue of "The Flying Dutchman" out of Satan's clutches—"Senta," the virgin, achieves by the sacrifice of her life. "Elizabeth" dies in order to kneel at God's very throne and there



HOUSE IN LEIPZIG IN WHICH WAGNER WAS BORN

pray for "Tannhäuser," whom the Pope himself had not dared to absolve from eternal perdition. "Brünnhilde" is, there can be little doubt, the sublimest female character that was ever put on the stage. And what the poet dreamed of, the man sought for in real life.

#### THE COMPOSER'S TWO MARRIAGES

WAGNER married young—too young, the world said, as he had nothing but his genius to live upon. Not too young, say I, as he could never have achieved what he did achieve, in spite of misery and persecution, without that stronghold of home, without that environment of delicacy, of moral peace and contentment, of outer comfort and inner sweetness which is the presence of woman. Often Ernst Kietz, the well-known painter, one of Wagner's earliest friends, described to me how, even in the years of his almost absolute destitution in Paris, Wagner's home always looked cheery and comfortable. Home was his sanctuary.

Wagner's first wife was a beautiful woman. Unfortunately she gave him no children, which somewhat marred their happiness, for he adored children, and she, remaining childless, was thrown back on the sole companionship of a man whom she fondly loved, but whose genius remained veiled to her. This first wife, Wilhelmina, died in 1866, after almost thirty years of married life. Soon after her death Wagner married the younger daughter of his great friend, Franz Liszt, and to them were born a daughter and a son. The last years of his life were consequently the happiest, in spite of all the bitter disappointments they were so rich in. His second wife was a woman of unquestionable genius, a most able and untiring ally in the pursuit of his lofty artistic schemes, destined besides to continue after his death what he had only been able to initiate, and in his house and garden rang the merry laughter of children. This—yes, this, indeed—was the "luxury" he had been ambitious for his whole life long.

Wagner was a "home" man; he was also a man ardent in the great battle of man against men. One cannot but admire the intrepidity of a young composer still quite unknown, aged twenty-five, possessing nothing in this world beyond a wife and a Newfoundland dog, starting off from Riga to Paris, determined to take the grand opera by storm. And thus he remained through life. At sixty years of age he laid the foundation stone of the Bayreuth "Festival Theatre" with not a penny in his pocket or any reasonable prospect of obtaining sufficient aid from others. This shows great energy of character. And if we consider that Wagner, although frequently baffled, and even defeated for a time, won his battle along the whole line, I think we are justified in affirming that he was an eminently practical man—that he knew what he wanted, and that, in spite of all difficulties, he got it.

#### WAGNER WAS NOT A BUSINESS MAN

BUT Wagner was not what we should call a business man. For this a considerable store of healthy egoism is requisite, and Wagner possessed none at all. I know no single act of his whole life which could be interpreted as a wish to do himself a good turn, to amass riches, or to seek honorary distinctions. These latter, which, toward the close of his life, poured in from all quarters, he always stubbornly refused. Medals and titles were sent back to the donors by return of post. And as for money, Wagner's standpoint was delightfully simple. In a letter written when about forty years of age Wagner says, "Yes, I admit that I do require some little comfort and luxury. I cannot pour out my heart blood in works of art while a bare table stands staring at me and poverty is the familiar spirit of my home. But it is the world's duty to give men of my stamp what they require, and to give it without grudging." This was a poet's way of looking at the matter, and no wonder that Wagner was involved in pecuniary difficulties his whole life long.

If Wagner had been born half a century later his position would have been more tolerable. Dramatic authors and composers now always get a percentage of every performance in all theatres, and these rights are secured by international treaties for every country of Europe. This was not formerly the case. In the first place, the Royal Theatre at Dresden (where Wagner's early works were first given) never paid him anything at all, as one of the regulations of this opera house is that when it performs works whose authors are officials belonging to the Royal Theatre, they get no remuneration whatever. Soon—it was in the fifties—Wagner's works began to spread through Germany; one town after another put "The Flying Dutchman," "Rienzi," "Tannhäuser" and "Lohengrin" on its theatre's program. But at that epoch theatres in Germany gave no percentage whatever. The only obligation the law imposed on them was to buy the score. The price of the score was fixed in each special case between the theatre and the author, and varied according to the population of the town and the success expected. Once the score was bought, the theatre had no further obligation toward the author. Wagner usually got from forty to eighty dollars for a score, and rarely one hundred and twenty dollars. What Wagner got—once for all—for "Rienzi," "The Flying Dutchman," "Tannhäuser" and "Lohengrin" amounted, therefore, all told, to something like fifty to one hundred dollars from each theatre which put these works on the stage.

#### "LOHENGRIN" SOLD FOR EIGHTY DOLLARS

THE first contract in which a percentage is stipulated is that with the Royal Theatre in Berlin, in 1855, for "Tannhäuser." It will be readily understood that many theatres made millions in this way with works they had paid one hundred dollars for. Later, the law and the usages having altered, and Wagner having achieved world-wide renown, he was, of course, able to exact a percentage everywhere—eight to ten per cent. being the usual sum. But the difficulty was to get the theatres which had bought his older works years before to pay percentage on them. This was accomplished by withholding the newer works from them till they agreed to pay the usual percentage on the former ones. But it was not till very near the close of his life that the trusty and devoted business friends whom Wagner had found in Bayreuth, and to whom he had in a large measure given over the care of his interests, had managed to bring all these matters into good working order. From that moment the property became very remunerative.

Another source of income ought to have been the sale of the scores to the publishers, several of whom have made fortunes with them. But the fact that Wagner was

always in want of money put him in a disadvantageous position. "Tristan," for example, was sold for eight hundred dollars, and "Lohengrin" for eighty dollars. Then again it was not till 1872 that the law extended the privilege of property from ten years to thirty years after the author's death. Wagner's works were then all out or sold except "Parsifal." His publishers, not he, pocketed the enormous increase of profit these extra twenty years of privilege conferred. And yet Wagner would have died a wealthy man, so great was the popularity of his works, had he not spent all he possessed, and much more, on Bayreuth. To understand this, one must begin by understanding that to say that Wagner was not a good man of business is merely to look at the question from the outside; if we go deeper we shall find, instead of this negative proposition, an affirmative one. Wagner refused to admit any business consideration in matters concerning art. According to him, venality, be it ever so apparently harmless and legitimate, is the death of real art, the essence of which, or rather the moral atmosphere of which, should always be absolute disinterestedness. This Wagner not only preached but practiced.

#### WHERE ART IS FOLLOWED FOR ART'S SAKE

FROM his fortieth year on, Wagner never ceased striving to create what he called "festival performances." One of the features of these was indeed to be the greatest possible perfection of execution; but the other was always that no single person should ever gain a penny by them, neither the author nor his artistic collaborators; in short, that the whole should be done for the sake of art only, and not for any pecuniary benefit. Wagner had always hoped for assistance; he found but little, and that little was insufficient. Bayreuth was practically built by him alone; the King of Bavaria allowed the money to be advanced to Wagner out of his private purse, but it was repaid out of the percentages that were due on the performances at Munich.

What is far too little known is that Bayreuth, from its foundation to the present day, has absolutely and wholly remained outside of all speculation and money-making. Not one penny is earned by or at Bayreuth, nor has any ever been earned there. A fund of fifty thousand dollars, amassed in the course of several years by the "Wagner Association" (after the enormous deficit of the first festival performances, in 1876, had been covered out of Wagner's pocket), has ever since the year 1882, when the second performances took place, formed the financial basis of the undertaking. Whenever a festival leaves a surplus this surplus goes to increase the fund; when it ends with a deficit, which is more often the case, the fund stands good for it. Numerous private gifts have served to replenish this fund from time to time. Those immediately concerned get no remuneration whatever; their labor is a labor of love. Even the business management, which is excessively laborious, as each new festival entails as much work as the setting up of a new theatre, is done gratuitously. The great master's most devoted friend, Herr Adolf von Gross, banker in Bayreuth, has for more than twenty years given his days and his nights to this task.

#### HE REFUSES ONE MILLION READY MONEY

THIS is the spirit in which Bayreuth was founded, and in which it continues to be administered. No wonder that Wagner did not amass a fortune! While he was struggling against insurmountable financial difficulties during the construction of his theatre, in 1874, a company which had been started for creating festivals on a large scale in Berlin offered Wagner one million ready money if he would give up his Bayreuth undertaking and come and lead theirs. He refused point blank, as he was consecrating his last years, not to earning money, but to serving the loftiest artistic and moral aspirations of civilized man. It is impossible to lay too much stress upon this feature of Wagner's character and personality. The immense and ever-growing influence which he is commencing to exercise throughout the world is due in no small part to the unselfishness of his aims. No commercial theatrical enterprise, even if it unite all the stars of Europe and America in a single cluster, will ever attain the perfection of Bayreuth, where money is no matter and where the love of art alone rules.

Wagner habitually worked the whole morning—that is to say, from about eight o'clock till one o'clock in the afternoon, the usual dinner hour in Germany. Not infrequently, however, when very deep in musical composition, or in some one of his writings, he did not join the family for dinner, but had food brought to his study, where he went on working without interruption till three or four o'clock. In the afternoon he took a long walk, always accompanied by his dog and mostly by some friend or acquaintance, for he was extremely sociable.

#### WAGNER'S METHOD OF WORK AND HIS LITERARY TASTES

WHEN not deep in meditation, or roused to anger by stupidity or impertinence, Wagner may well be said to have been boisterously gay. This was, so to say, his normal state when in society, which accounts for his being so much beloved by children and by animals; hence, also, he never could endure the society of pedants and seekers for notoriety. The men he preferred were those full of fun and repartee; the ready wit of a peasant entertained him more than the learned sayings of a savant. He walked very fast, scrambled up mountains like a chamois, and was particularly fond of long excursions on foot. Being very small in stature, and wiry, he preserved his extraordinary agility up to the very end. As a youth he was renowned for gymnastic feats, and at sixty years of age he used still to climb tall poplar trees, and to frighten his family by all sorts of daring antics. Even within a year of his death he would occasionally, when in high glee, astound his sedate German friends by suddenly standing on his head or by playing leap-frog over the armchairs of his drawing-room.

After the walk the rest of the day was chiefly devoted to reading. Wagner was an omnivorous reader. He would brook nothing that was not first-rate, an exclusiveness of taste which shut out much of the modern literature from his library. He abhorred such writers as Heine, whose genius is so often marred by frivolity, indecency and blasphemy. But subject to these limitations his range of knowledge and of interests was marvelous. With the exception of natural science, mathematics and jurisprudence, nothing seems to have remained alien to him—a fact to which those who have spent an hour or two studying the library at Wahnfried can easily bear witness.

#### DEATH CLAIMED WAGNER WHILE HE WAS AT WORK

AFTER supper Wagner always read aloud to his family and friends; I believe there was scarcely ever an exception to this rule. He never spent an evening outside his home, for he hated conventional society, and he abhorred our modern theatre, which he had spent his whole life combatting. His style of reading was most dramatic and striking. Shakespeare was his favorite author, especially Shakespeare's comedies, but from Æschylus down to Goethe no dramatic poet of merit escaped attention. Or, again, he would choose some thrilling chapter of history, for he was particularly fond of works of this class and had a special predilection for the French historians. Thus the day closed in the atmosphere of home and family, and in the society of one or other of those great master minds whose equal Wagner was.

Nothing was changed in this mode of life down to the day of his death. Two days before he died he had commenced an article on "Woman in Human Life," in which he intended to go deeper into one of the problems only incidentally touched upon in the great work of his last years, "Religion and Art." In the first few pages he declares that one of the chief causes of social degeneration is marriage without love; marriage for the sake of money, titles or interest, and he then enters into a consideration about polygamy, which answers a state of Nature, and monogamy, "the divine institution through which man rises above Nature." It was while writing this article on woman and marriage—so deeply in harmony with his whole life—that sudden death put an end to his noble and laborious career, at noon, on the thirteenth of February, 1883.

Editor's Note—In the next (November) Journal will appear Mr. Chamberlain's second and concluding article on the great composer. It will tell "How Richard Wagner Wrote His Great Operas," showing, at close range, Wagner's methods of work, and how the scenes and actions of his operas would be reflected in his handwriting. Mr. Chamberlain interestingly discloses that Wagner carried the story of "The Ring of the Nibelung" in his mind for twenty-eight years before writing the opera, and that twenty-two years elapsed between the first sketch of "The Master-Singers" and its completion. He also tells of Wagner's wonderfully rapid work, by which he was enabled to write "Rheingold" in two months; "The Walkure" in five months, and "Tristan and Isolde" in twenty-one months. The curious fact will also be told that Wagner, did not hear his opera "Lohengrin" presented until fourteen years after its completion.



#### STUDYING THE PIANO ABROAD

By Mrs. Hamilton Mott



VIENNA and Berlin are considered by competent authorities to be the two foreign cities in which the advanced piano student may secure the best instruction and musical opportunities. The balance is in favor of Vienna, as Herr Leschetitzky and his instructors are at the present time awarded the first honors for capability, thoroughness, conscientious work and success, as evidenced by his pupils, Paderewski, Slivinski, Esspoff, Bloomfield, Jaisler and others. The cost per lesson under Leschetitzky's sub-teachers (who have been with him for from ten to fifteen years) is two dollars. Pupils studying with any of these instructors for more than a year have the privilege of attending the weekly meeting of Leschetitzky's class at his home. The Conservatory teachers in Vienna are excellent. In Berlin the cost of tuition in the piano department of the Hochschule is seventy-five dollars for the school year. This includes instruction in theory, history of music, ensemble playing, two solo lessons a week, with opportunities—for competent pupils—of playing with orchestra accompaniment.

AT THE Hochschule in Berlin there are two examinations, one in September and one at Easter. As there are but few vacancies each term and a great number of applicants the admissions are made upon the grounds of preparation and merit, the pupil who is the best prepared and the most deserving (in talent, energy, etc.) being given admittance. The examination for admission requires applicants to play a selection which will exhibit their capability. Applicants are also examined in theory and as to their sense of pitch.

With Leschetitzky and his sub-teachers examinations may occur at any time. Such examination consists in the playing of at least two well-studied compositions, one of technical difficulties, and one to demand less of the technique and more of the musical temperament and treatment. Also the playing of one or two rapid scales for perhaps two minutes by each hand without ceasing, as a test of endurance and action of muscles. Then the sight reading of an average composition, and lastly a test of the musical ear. When a pupil purposes to study under Leschetitzky himself she must be examined by him. Otherwise the examination is given by the sub-teacher with whom she is to study. The examinations for the Conservatory are much the same. In Berlin should a pupil fail of admission she should study with the best teacher of the Hochschule privately until the instructor considers her capable to again apply for admission. In Vienna she should act under the advice given her by the instructor who examines her. This advice, it is quite probable, will be to the effect that she continue her preparatory work with some competent teacher.

AS TO the cost of living in Vienna, if the pupil will apply to the United States Consulate, furnished rooms will be recommended costing from eight to ten dollars per month. If board is taken in same house the cost is eighteen and twenty dollars per month. If taken elsewhere it reaches to twenty-four dollars for the same period. In Berlin the cost of living and of instruction is less. Lessons in theory of music, as in the technical instruction, are given in the language of the country. The Paris Conservatoire, the Wiener Conservatorium and the Berlin Hochschule are probably the greatest conservatories of music in Europe. Before American girls go abroad to study they should be convinced of what they can do, of the amount of their preparation, and of what they intend to do. America holds piano teachers only a little less great than the greatest, and has abundant opportunities for the pianist, and but few girls require the Old World's opportunities.