

On the Watchtower.

By JOSEPHUS.

Have you seen Victor Chenkin? I think I saw you there. Wasn't it a treat? Isn't he marvellous? I think he is really wonderful, don't you?

I must apologise to the musical critic for such unscientific criticism, but I wish to assure him that it is not my intention to usurp his office (I did not even get a complimentary ticket); nor do I wish to assume the role of my friend Diogenes Teufelsdröckh previously alluded to in these columns, who, as a "professor allerlei Wissenschaften," could speak authoritatively on every subject. I merely want to register the impressions of an ordinary mortal who, deeply stirred but suffering from exhaustion in the matter of superlatives which, like oaths, are really very limited in number, scope, and variety, is driven to the extremity of relating his own emotions in the hope that they may have some sort of relevance to the objective source which evoked them.

To me Chenkin was in the first place the prototype of Jewish spiritual restlessness—of that spirituality which in its eternal flow and infinite windings and sinuosities cannot be imprisoned in a definite form. Chenkin, although a master of enunciation and the possessor of a fine voice, can neither express himself fully in the congealed and stereotyped form of language nor even in the mathematically measured cadences of music which, although capable of reproducing every emotion, labours under a load of scientific discipline and is subject to the laws of time and space, of rhythm and harmony and the limitations of an art with definite forms. Chenkin's soul travels with the velocity of light; one becomes physically exhausted in trying to follow the quick succession of his expressions, the infinite variety of his moods, the unspeakable wealth of his gestures. This wealth and variety of his art cannot be reduced to the poverty of the word, for words are after all nothing but milestones on the long walk of life, or they might be compared to stones which are placed at intervals across a stream in order to enable us to pass it. That stream again is life, infinite in expression and variety. Music, too, is, as has been shown, inadequate for a full expression, for, operating as it does, with well-defined intervals, progressing laboriously in tones and semitones it cannot keep pace with that will-of-the-wisp which seems to dwell in the mind and heart of this remarkable artist.

And so Chenkin's message is transferred to his flashing eyes and overflows like an electric stream to all his limbs, taking shape and form again at the tips of his fingers, which speak a language all their own. Chenkin's subtly beautiful hands possess an eloquence rare even amongst Jews. These

organs, in the infinite variety of their revolutions, in the endless patterns which they design, and the wealth of figures which they describe in the air, are the most marvellous instruments of human expression, and while the movement of the hand as a whole expresses the wider sweeps of thought and emotion, the delicate play of the fingers reproduces the subtler intricacies, the peculiar turns and twists of the mind of a truly peculiar people.

Without his gesticulations and play of feature Chenkin's art is nothing, for reams of words and orchestral scores cannot bridge the gulf between the Ukrainian *pogromshchik* and the gentle *Chassid* that "zaidener yunger man" whose sweet lyrical gentleness inspired the art of Peretz. One cannot describe in words the difference between the way in which these two men get drunk; the tipsiness of the *Ukrainian* and that of the *Chassid*, there are worlds which separate these similar states, this identical act of two men who may have lived together for centuries yet who are as wide apart as the antipodes. It was perhaps in his interpretation of the *Chassid*, especially in his assumption of that mask of sweet and elegiac gentleness that Chenkin reached the climax of his art, that was even a more consummate triumph of artistry than the portrayal of the crafty, tippling and repellent *Ukrainian*.

Much has been said of Jewish gesticulation. Much has been said that is deprecatory and derisive. The twist of the Jew's finger, the shrewd wink of his eye, the meaningful shrug of his shoulder have been the object of contempt and mockery, yet on regarding Chenkin one seems to feel that the most eloquent instrument of expression is not the human tongue but the eye, and the hand comes a good second. For sheer economy in expression the finger or rather the thumb in the subtle potency of its turns and twists is unsurpassable. It expresses a world of meaning, the whole soul of a people, an infinity of national psychology. And in following these eloquent hands in their expressive gyration one comes to the conclusion that the gesticulation of the Jew is only partly due to his poverty in formal linguistic expression; fundamentally it is the natural expression of an extraordinarily nimble mind progressing at such a pace and renewing itself every moment with such vitality that it cannot submit to the plodding precision of formal words. What is the use of words with their eternal constancy of meaning to a being whose tempestuous flow of life changes with every beat of the heart, whose brain continually forges new thoughts, and whose heart is a constant kaleidoscope of emotions? Chenkin's art seems to prove that life is never

the same for two successive moments, that the human soul is like a lambent flame ever flashing forth new tongues of fire.

Then Chenkin appealed to me as an experiment in assimilation. I hate to adorn a tale with a moral, but I must confess that on looking at Chenkin's marvellous impersonations I could not but ask myself to what extent a Jew really could enter into the skin of a Frenchman, or an Italian, or a Russian, and feel natural and comfortable in that skin. To what extent was the Jew with enlightened ideas really a genuine internationalist and to what extent merely an ape. It seems fairly obvious that the Jew would not feel comfortable in the skin of an *Ukrainian*, but I doubt whether he would even feel at home in the skin of the civilised Frenchman. I am afraid that no Jew, were he even a professor of French, could enter fully into the true spirit of Pierre Jean de Beranger. Wherein lies the greatness of Beranger? What is there in this rather commonplace author of folk songs which thus inflames the heart of the Frenchman? Is it possible that the glory of this rather vulgar poet should for a time even have eclipsed the fame of Victor Hugo? These questions cannot be answered by the literary critic; they form part of the problem of nationalism.

The Jew is no great respecter of art and perhaps to many a Jew in the Zionist Hall Chenkin was merely a jester or *Purimspieler*. To such a one the artist might reply: "You see what a consummate art and what a tremendous power of concentration it requires to be, for ten minutes, a Russian or an Englishman or a Frenchman or an Italian, but you who attempt to play that false role all your life, you are merely a clown and a fool. I am at least an artist, you merely an ape."

I am told Chenkin is looking forward with pleasure to his departure from South Africa.

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