"SHAKUNTALA"

By JOHN CORBIN.

THE paradox of the classics! To most and perhaps all of us, to name a classic is to cause an instinctive revulsion, as if at something difficult, dry, and forbidding. And to most of us—to all who preserve the open mind of childhood and the willingness to find pleasure where pleasure is—actual contact with a classic brings native and spontaneous delight, as irresistible as the warmth of the sun, the eternal majesty of the stars. Possibly our early training has stepped on the toes of a still earlier facility in appreciation. The rigors of education have delivered us into the power of a false etymology, so that we associate the classics with the classroom and the early tyrannies of the pedagogic ruler.

If there should be another Flood,
For refuge hither fly!
For though the rest of the world were wet
This book would still be dry.

In the little white schoolhouse, far up on Ragged Hill, where these lines were first encountered, they seemed the acme of wit and of satire. And they seemed equally apt whether copied into Wentworth's Algebra or into the Rolfe edition of "Hamlet."

The "Shakuntala" of Kalidasa is undoubtedly a classic. But Goethe (who was among the first to recognize the fact when Sir William Jones brought the play to light in 1789 with his translation from the Sanskrit) has given us the least repulsive of all definitions of a classic—a work of art which, after the lapse of a hundred years, remains alive and pleasurable to mankind. Alive and pleasurable! That "Shakuntala" assuredly is, though it was written in far-off India not less than fifteen hundred, and possibly two thousand, years ago—for it is variously dated in almost every century from the era of Julius Caesar to that of the fall of the Roman Empire. And it is not only alive, but perennially youthful; for it is another paradox of the classics that the oldest of them are forever the youngest of all.

Shakuntala is as young as Juliet, as young as Nausicaa. And her portrait is far more exquisitely detailed, if not more complete. It is more intimate than the portrait of any heroine of the most modern theatre. We see her first with two girl companions in their daily task of watering the trees and vines before her hermit guardian's cell. She is, if you please, a little animal, as all young things should be. Earth and water are her friends, and the trees her daily confidantes. Her heart, if as yet she has a heart, is given wholly to another young animal, a spotted fawn. Yet she is not a stranger to the thought of love—far from it. Her companions, like the maids of Shakespeare, "laugh alone"; and when they rally her with the suggestion of marriage her thoughts are seen to be innocent but by no means ignorant. Her beauty is ripe as it is sweet; and Kalidasa has the art to make it, as Bernard Berenson would say, tactile to us. No creature ever snuggled closer to the imagination than this little Hindu beastie of the jungle.

Then the young King comes upon her while hunting in the forest. At the first sight they love. The hermit guardian is absent from his cell, and Shakuntala's light-tongued, prurient girl friends leave them alone. But the passion of Shakuntala and the young King, like all great passion, is reverent, controlled. She sickens, as if from a fever of love; but she does not yield, nor does the King urge her until the words of a Gandhavra marriage are spoken. At the first coming of love the child animal is no more. Shakuntala is a woman grown.

The idyll gives way to plot—romantic drama. An angry god casts a spell on the young King's memory, so that when Shakuntala comes to his court, in order that their child may be born under fitting auspices, he repudiates her as an impostor. She returns to the jungle. Eventually his memory is restored, and he sets out in search of her. In portraying Shakuntala's humiliation and grief, and the King's remorse and longing, the hand of Kalidasa is firm as always; his touch sympathetic and sure. As the play develops it is humanly true in every moment. The dénouement brings a scene as vivid as the idyl with which the play opened. The King is, as he thinks, childless; and on his return to the hermit's cell, he finds there a boy of 6, taming a tiger cub to obedience. It is his son—Bharata, the All-tamer, eponymous hero of the Sanskrit epic, Mahabharata. The wilding vigor of the heroic child, and his father's joy in recognizing him, give color to an episode of the utmost humor and beauty, and strike a mood of joy which is consummated in the King's reunion with Shakuntala.

Nothing is more striking in the art of Kalidasa than the manner in which he achieves salient character without ugliness, reality without prosaic realism. As he found his story in the Mahabharata, his hero's lapse of memory was not due to the interposition of any god. It was all too mundane and human. The royal huntsman loved and rode away. But there is a difference between epic and drama, between a deed as sung in verse and as represented in action. And so Kalidasa invented the supernal interposition, to save the face of his hero. As regards minor personages, however, reality pays full tribute, in the form of character and humor. No less than Shakespeare, Kalidasa knew the ways of maidens when they laugh alone. And—like Shakespeare again—he was not too prone to beautify the character of his hero. Before Juliet, Romeo loved Rosaline; and, though modern producers suppress the fact in deference to a pale and pretty-pretty romanticism, it gives character and humor even to the balcony scene. This Hindu hero was not unprovided with wives. Shakuntala shows from the first a jealous regard for them; and the King in his palace is haunted by the notes of their grief at his desertion. But though heard from, and even heard behind the scenes, they do not appear. Reality is not permitted to strike a note of ugliness, or even of irrelevant character.

It is, of course, possible that a greater dramatist might have kept more closely to the original story, preferring a drama of regeneration to youthful romance. Be that as it may, the art of Kalidasa is certainly not of the very greatest. His spirit inclines to sweetness rather than to strength, to pathos rather than to tragedy, to a gracious dignity rather than to austere nobility. He is more nearly akin to Praxitiles than to Pheidias, to the minor Elizabethans than to Shakespeare. But he is the master always, and his play is today more alive and pleasurable, after fifteen centuries or more, than a romance of yesterday—or tomorrow!

Of Kalidasa's quality as poet and thinker I can speak only under correction. I read Sanskrit in translation, finding—as Oliver Herford once put it—that it loses so much in the original. But in his love of external nature, and in his power of vividly portraying it, I should guess that he is unexcelled, even by the English poets. Many of his stanzas almost miraculously survive translation. The song which is sung off stage by the abandoned Queen needs only the touch of poetic style to make it a little masterpiece. Monier-Williams renders it:

How often hither didst thou rove,
Sweet bee, to kiss the mango's cheek;
Oh! leave not then thy early love,
The lily's honeyed lip to seek.

Professor Ryder's version, I think, touches the chord of tender pathos more truly:

You who kissed the mango-flower,
Honey-loving bee,
Gave her all your passion's power,
Ah, so tenderly—
How can you be tempted so
By the lily, pet?
Fresher honey's sweet, I know;
But—can you forget?

The following lines are spoken by the King when his former love for Shakuntala is subconsciously struggling to regain a seat in his clouded memory—when he is "yearning for some loved one long forgotten":

Not seldom in our happy hours of ease,
When thought is still, the sight of some fair form,
Or mournful fall of music breathing low,
Will stir strange fancies, thrilling all the soul
With a mysterious sadness, and a sense
Of vague yet earnest longing. Can it be
That the dim memory of events long past,
Of friendships formed in other states of being,
Flits like a passing shadow o'er the spirit?

(Monier-Williams.)

In India the workings of the subconscious mind have been a familiar phenomenon for untold centuries; but it is only in quite recent years that the emotional and psychologic mood which is here given voice could have been understood in the Occident. There is also a clear hint of ideas which Wordsworth elaborated so beautifully, though scarcely made more credible, in his "Intimations of Immortality."

With all Kalidasa's sympathy for the outdoor world, he had arrived at a conception of nature which is more austere, and probably truer, than that of the English poets, and which has only of late begun to dawn upon our scientists. Nature is not made for man, any more than man is made for nature. Wordsworth to the contrary notwithstanding, she frequently "betrays" the heart that unwarrantably trusts in her. Ryder says: "Kalidasa understood in the fifth century what Europe did not learn until the nineteenth, and even now comprehends only imperfectly: that man reaches his full stature only as he realizes the dignity and worth of life that is not human. That Kalidasa seized this truth is a magnificent tribute to his intellectual power. Poetical fluency is not rare; intellectual grasp is not very uncommon; but the combination has not been found perhaps more than a dozen times since the world began. Because he possessed this harmonious combination, Kalidasa ranks not with Anacreon and Horace and Shelley, but with Sophocles, Virgil, Milton."

The production by Frank Conroy, which is on at the Greenwich Village Theatre for a series of Tuesday and Friday matinées, has many beauties of fabric and of color, but goes wrong in matters that are perhaps more essential. Instead of the neutral hangings which, as it appears from the text, surrounded the stage of Kalidasa, Livingston Platt has provided localities pictorially realized. It is seldom that the dramaturgy of a master is modified without penalty. The play opens with a scene in which the King and his charioteer are coursing furiously through the jungle in pursuit of a deer. If seen against a neutral background, there would probably be a distinct illusion of speed. But Mr. Platt has given us a "decorative" backing of painted trees seen against a blue sky, in the most modern manner of Gordon Craig and Reinhardt—the immobile outlines of which negative the illusion of speed and reduce the scene to absurdity. The passage ensues in which the young girls water their vines and shrubs. Kalidasa doubtless provided actual plants, as Shakespeare would have done. But Mr. Platt's setting is quite obviously a decorative convention—to water the supposed roots of which is obviously preposterous. And so again illusion is destroyed.

Much cutting of the text is unavoidable; and, on the whole, it has been judiciously done. But not always. Of the petty and characteristic scene in which the King encounters and recognizes his all-taming son, no vestige is left. Tiger cubs are doubtless rare in these parts, and of quite inadequate training as actors. But even though this incident were cut, much of value would remain. For the cutting of the final scene in which the King is reunited with our heroine, the mother of his son and heir, there is no possible excuse. Instead of a deliciously human and quite dramatic finale we have only a tableau of the trio standing aloft on one of Mr. Platt's decorative stage clouds.

It is even more unfortunate that the chief shortcomings in acting should occur in the principal parts. As portrayed by Kalidasa, the King is, it is true, sentimental and languorous; but it is equally true that he is a right royal monarch and huntsman. Mr. Macaulay has many moments that are sensitive and picturesque; but the total effect is of painting the lily. Beatrice Prentice seems intent upon making Shakuntala a quaintly exotic Hindu maiden of constrained attitudes rather than upon making her a primordially impassioned young thing alive and pleasurable to folk of all ages and climes. Well, she succeeds.

Blanche Bates, Completely Transformed as the Madame De Montespan of Philip Moeller's "Moliere," Gives One of the Most Brilliant Performances of Her Career.

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