

# SYNOPSIS of *PARSIFAL*

*A Festival Play for the Dedication of the Stage in three acts*

## **Act I**

It is daybreak in a shady forest near Monsalvat, the castle of the Grail. Amfortas, the ruler of the kingdom of the Grail is soon to take his bath in the lake. The knight Gurnemanz and two young squires awake to prepare for the king's arrival. We learn from knights accompanying the king that he can find no relief from a wound in his side that refuses to heal. Kundry, a wild-eyed, demon-like woman bursts into the clearing bringing exotic remedies for the ailing Amfortas. When the king is carried in on his litter he is in agony and despair. He concludes bitterly that his only hope is 'an Innocent Fool made wise through compassion', whose coming has been foretold. He thinks he knows him already, he says – his name is Death! He thanks Kundry for her gift and her loyalty.

After the king and his retinue have moved to the lake, Gurnemanz rebukes the squires for their uncharitable behaviour towards Kundry. She has become a servant of the Grail Knights, he says, perhaps to atone for some guilt in a former life. He goes on to explain how the wound of Amfortas had been inflicted by the sorcerer Klingsor with the Holy Spear, the same spear that had been used to wound the body of Christ after his crucifixion. Klingsor had seized the spear from its guardian, Amfortas, when he had succumbed to the wiles of a beautiful woman. The spear and the Grail had been entrusted originally to Titurel, Amfortas' father, who had assembled a company of the purest knights to guard them. Klingsor, himself a knight, had been excluded from this company because of his sinful ways. In desperation, he had castrated himself. Rejected a second time, he now lures knights to their destruction in his garden of bliss, peopled with desirable maidens. His goal is the capture of the Grail itself. Amfortas, in agony and contrition, had prayed fervently before the Grail for a sign of deliverance. Heaven answered his prayer with the words: *'Enlightened through compassion, the Innocent Fool. Wait for him, the chosen one.'*

Gurnemanz's narration is interrupted by cries from the direction of the lake, and a swan flutters to the ground with an arrow in its breast. It has been shot by the thoughtless youth Parsifal who is dragged before Gurnemanz to account for his action. The boy is so moved by the knight's criticism that he breaks his bow and flings away his arrows. He is unable to say much about his origins, and Gurnemanz declares him to be the dullest person he has ever met – save Kundry. Parsifal tells of his upbringing in the forest with his widowed mother Herzleide, and his brief encounter with a glittering band of knights who had laughed at him and rode away. He had wandered alone, suffering numerous hardships and dangers. At this point, Kundry interjects to tell him abruptly that his mother is now dead. Parsifal is shocked by this news, attacks Kundry and has to be restrained. He nearly faints and, in a gesture of compassion, Kundry fetches water for him from a spring.

The king and his retinue return to the castle. Gurnemanz offers to lead Parsifal to the Grail which, he says, will give him food and drink if he is pure. Gurnemanz has begun to suspect that Parsifal might be the chosen one, the pure fool for whom Amfortas is waiting. The old knight and the foolish boy begin to pass mysteriously from the forest

through a rocky wall and finally into the mighty hall of the Grail, although they hardly seem to be moving at all. In the mystical realm of the Grail, 'time becomes space'.

In the hall of the Grail, Parsifal witnesses strange things – the pleading of the ancient Titirel for the Grail to be unveiled in order to prolong his life, the unbearable suffering of Amfortas when it is at last uncovered, and the sharing of a 'meal of love' of bread and wine by the knights. Parsifal stands stiffly, his only display of emotion being an involuntary gesture in response to the agony of Amfortas. He ignores an invitation to join in the meal. Gurnemanz concludes that he has been mistaken about the boy, and gives up in despair. He calls him a fool and a goose, pushes him outside and slams the door behind him. Softly, a voice intones the mystical words that had been given to Amfortas: 'Enlightened through compassion, the Innocent Fool'; and softly, other voices reply: 'Blessed in faith'.

## **Act II**

In Klingsor's magic castle, the sorcerer sits surrounded by his instruments of magic and necromancy. He summons the enslaved Kundry to do his bidding, luring knights to their destruction. He refers to her former incarnations as the biblical Herodias and the Norse Gundryggia. She longs for sleep, death and peace but is told that 'only he that defies you will set you free'. In a mirror, his window on the world, Klingsor sees the naïve youth Parsifal approaching. Kundry is instructed to work her wiles on him. Parsifal overcomes Klingsor's warriors who block his way, and a reluctant Kundry prepares to do the magician's will.

The magician and his tower sink rapidly from sight and, in their place rises a magic garden. Lovely, flower-like maidens rush in from all directions and throw themselves at Parsifal, inviting him to play with them. Then Kundry's voice is heard, calling Parsifal by his name – a name he has not heard since his mother used it 'in a dream' long ago. The Flower Maidens disappear and Kundry is seen in a new, alluring form, lying on a couch of flowers. The seduction of Parsifal begins.

Kundry tells him gently that she has always known him, and she describes the death of his mother, who waited in vain for his return. Parsifal is overcome with remorse and Kundry offers to set things right through love. She gives him 'the last greeting of a mother's blessing' and presses her lips to his. There is a long pause, and then Parsifal suddenly realises the significance of Amfortas' wound. He tears himself violently away, struggling to master his feelings. He imagines that he hears the voice of the Saviour from the sanctuary of the Grail, asking to be rescued from the guilt-stained hands of Amfortas.

The temptress tries again. She reveals the reason for her own misery and endless wandering – the fact that, in another life, she had laughed at the Saviour when he was suffering on the cross. His compassionate glance had fallen on her, and now she searches for him again from world to world.

When Parsifal continues to rebuff Kundry, she rushes away, cursing him and calling for help to prevent his escape. Klingsor appears on the battlements with the Holy Spear. He hurls it at Parsifal, but the weapon remains suspended over the youth's head. Parsifal grasps it and swings it in the sign of the cross. The castle collapses as if through an earthquake, and the garden rapidly shrivels to a desert.

### **Act III**

Some years have passed. It is Good Friday and a pleasant Spring morning in a flowery meadow at the forest's edge. Gurnemanz emerges from a simple hut. He has grown old and is dressed more like a hermit than a knight. He looks for the source of a strange groaning that he has heard, and finally discovers Kundry lying on the ground amidst the bushes. Kundry now is neither the wild, distracted creature of Act One, nor the voluptuous siren of Act Two, but displays yet another aspect of her complex character – that of a Magdalen-like penitent. She demurely arranges her hair and clothing and goes about her menial tasks with scarcely a word for the remainder of the Act.

A stranger approaches wearing black armour with closed visor, carrying a spear. He sits wearily on a grassy mound and removes his helmet. Gurnemanz chastises him for being armed on such a holy day, but then recognises him as the boy who killed the swan; the fool whom he had driven away in anger. He also identifies the Sacred Spear and rejoices that he has lived to witness the day of its return.

Parsifal remembers Gurnemanz, and tells him of his trials and perilous battles, throughout which he has kept the spear undefiled. Amfortas, he learns, now longs only for death, for he can bear his suffering no more. The king refuses to perform the holy office and uncover the Grail. Consequently, the knights are in a pitiful state and leaderless. Many have taken to living in the forest like Gurnemanz. Titurel, deprived of the life-giving support of the Grail, has died – a man like all men.

Parsifal laments his own foolishness and his failure to do anything to prevent the misery that has befallen the knights. Moved by compassion and a realisation that the youth is indeed the one for whom they have been waiting, Gurnemanz and Kundry help him to a spring, where Kundry bathes his feet. Gurnemanz scoops up some water and sprinkles it on Parsifal's head. Kundry pours oil on his feet and dries them with her hair, and the old knight pours the rest of the oil on his head, anointing him as the new Grail King.

Parsifal's first duty is to baptise the kneeling Kundry. He then remarks on the beauty of the meadow, contrasting it with Klingsor's rank garden. Gurnemanz tells him that he is experiencing the magic of Good Friday. By the Saviour's loving sacrifice, humanity had been redeemed and, like a new Garden of Eden, nature too had regained its innocence.

In the distance is heard the sombre pealing of bells, and Gurnemanz leads Parsifal and Kundry through the forest, retracing his steps through the rocky walls and into the hall of the Grail. A procession of knights enters bearing the coffin with Titurel's body, and another procession from the opposite direction bears Amfortas on his litter. They confront each other in the centre of the hall, at the covered shrine of the Grail. This time, the air is rent with the agony of a community utterly without hope. Titurel's coffin is opened, and at the sight of his corpse all break into a sudden wailing. The knights demand that now, for the last time, Amfortas perform his duty and uncover the Grail. He defies them, courting death and tearing open his bandages, imploring the knights to end his torment by plunging their swords into his body.

Unobserved, Parsifal has been watching these dramatic events. Now he steps into the midst of the knights, stretches out the Holy Spear and touches Amfortas' side with its tip. The wound miraculously closes and Amfortas is healed and purified. Parsifal holds the spear aloft and the shrine is opened. He kneels before the Grail in prayer and it glows brightly as a white dove swoops down and hovers over Parsifal's head. Amfortas and

Gurnemanz kneel in homage to their new king who, through compassion for the sufferings of others, has reclaimed for the community the blessings of the Grail. Slowly, Kundry sinks lifeless to the ground, freed at last from the curse of eternal wandering. Parsifal offers the blessing of the Grail to the worshipping knights and, high in the dome, voices proclaim a final, heavenly benediction: 'Redemption to the Redeemer!'

**Synopsis by Peter Bassett**