

# The Seven Fears of Sarah Bernhardt

*She Has Banished Them One by One, from the Fear of Being Buried Alive to the Fear That She Would Die Rich, Only to Be Vanquished Herself by Her Last and Greatest Fear, Namely That She Would Grow Old on the Stage.*



This is the picture my son likes best.



**"I love to stand upon the rocks and be answered only by the seagulls."**

**P**OSITIVELY my last season—positively my last," so says Sarah Bernhardt, the oldest and the youngest, the homeliest, and at the same time the most beautiful actress on the French stage. "But please say that I shall play again in English before I say good-by. Yes, and in German, French, and Chinese. I now play in three languages and I shall soon play in four."

"Say that I am retiring while at the height of my career. I retire because I am afraid I shall grow old."

Afraid she will grow old. And she is only in the 60s! That is the real reason of the retirement of Sarah Bernhardt. She is afraid she may at some time—some far distant time—grow old!

Peasants of Belle Isle call her Our Lady of Fears and Superstitions.

In thus yielding to her fear Sarah Bernhardt falls a victim to the fears which have agitated her all her life. "She is," said a French writer of long ago, "a woman of many fears."

One by one she has banished and retired them, vanquishing some and temporarily routing others, only to be at last consumed and vanquished by this, the worst fear of all!

### Dreams That Haunt Sarah.

The seven fears of Sarah Bernhardt have been so severe as to amount almost to tragedies. They are these, as related by one who has been close to her:

- The fear of being buried alive.
- The fear that she would become thin again.
- The fear that her son would cease to love her.
- The fear that she would die rich, for she has always thought it a sin to have too much money and she has religiously squandered her money on this account.
- The fear that she would lose her fascinating and almost uncanny beauty.
- The fear that Victorien Sardou would think some other actress as great as she.
- The fear that she would grow old on the stage.

One by one Sarah has routed these only to be now routed by the last but worst of all fears, the fear that has been the greatest bugaboo to her.

She is afraid of growing old on the stage. And, so, while at the height of her career, while in the early sixties, "instead of waiting to be an old woman," as she herself puts it, "I shall retire while I am young."

### The Greatest of Her Ambitions.

But before she retires Sarah has decided to do these last and final things, to again quote the friend who is nearest to her:

- "To wear the most daring gown on the French stage.
- "To drive through the Bois once again with the hood of her carriage filled with violets.
- "To return to Constantinople to play before the sultan.
- "To bring Queen Alexandra, that haughty but beautiful sovereign, to her feet.
- "To play in Chinese before the dowager empress. 'You can do it,' said the sultan to her in Constantinople a few weeks ago.
- "To see her own playhouse making money.
- "And, finally, to play an ingenu part in order to show the public on her farewell night that she is just exactly as young as she was thirty years ago and even more babyish in manner."

"When I have done these things," says Sarah, "I shall retire to Belle Isle happy. There I shall live the rest of my days."

### Plans for Her Last Years.

These are the things she longs to do the last twenty years of her life. Her friends tell it in a whispered confidence. To quote Sarah's words:

- "I long to go barefoot on the rocks of Belle Isle watching the dashing sea the livelong day.
- "I long to live the wild free out of door life to which I was born and back to which I shall revert at the first opportunity.
- "I long to eat the food of the fields and the fish of the



"I am tired," I look into the future with fear and trembling.



Thinking over a new part



She overcame her fear of premature burial by sleeping in a coffin.

sea. I long to fill my stomach with wild berries and the fruits that ripen in the sun.

"I long to be far from the world and to know nothing and hear less of the sights of the streets and the noises of the town.

"I long to gather my grandchildren around me and, like Niobe, to shed tears for those that are not!

"I long to throw off my clothing and live the life of a fisherwoman who knows nothing of the trammels of fashion nor the canons of art.

"I long to stand upon the rocks and cry aloud and be answered only by the sea gulls.

"I long to play my tragedies beneath the skies upon the drifting sands to an orchestra of beating waves rather than

been a happy woman. She has been haunted by her fears.

The first of her fears—namely, that she would get too thin, was the dread one of her early life. She was emaciated as a skeleton, and for years and years she could not bare her neck upon the stage. Even now all her gowns are made high in the throat and are cut low in the back. "The back of a woman is beautiful. The front is not," she said shortly to one of her stage people who questioned her upon this peculiarity.

The fear that she would be buried alive haunted her day and night for years. Finally some one suggested that she try sleeping in her coffin. "It may rid you of this awful nightmare thought of being buried alive."

So Sarah bought her coffin and for weeks she amused herself fitting it up. She lined it with costly laces and satin and she spent a small fortune decorating it on the outside. When she had tired of her toy she would climb inside and rest. Here she would lie with roses and palms around her and here she would take a nap. Many nights she slept there all night and, describing it, she said: "I never slept so soundly in my life."

### Dread of Losing Son's Love.

After awhile the fear of premature burial left her and she was quite happy for a few weeks. Then came another fear. It was the fear that her son Maurice would cease to love her.

"He is grown up and he is clever and he is prosperous. But he is still my baby," she sobbed to a friend. "Suppose he should cease to adore me. I should not care to live."

In vain Maurice reasoned and her friends reassured her. It was a nightmare. Luckily Maurice bestowed him of a series of fencing lessons. With the foil in hand mother and son fenced and the fears of Sarah Bernhardt drifted away.

Then came the fear of having too much money. She was paid large sums and her money began to accumulate. "But I must not keep it," she said. And so she began to spend it. She bought a little place, Belle Isle by the sea. She bought a theater in Paris. She purchased a town house and expensive clothing. And the money drifted away. When it was all gone and she was in debt she said: "Je suis content."

### Jealous of Sardou's Admiration.

Her jealousy of Sardou was a matter for all who entered the theater to note. At rehearsals it was apparent and she would drive the other women from the stage while she rehearsed with the great author alone. If others were necessary to the scene they were brought in. But she was at her happiest when alone with Sardou. "It is not that she likes him for himself," said a member of the profession, "but it is for her art. As soon as he admires another she will know that there is another as great as she."

"I watch him and I tremble. I am full of fears," once said Sarah.

Then came the last and greatest fear of all. The fear that she would grow old on the stage. This is a fear which a great many have had but few have been routed as utterly by it as Sarah.

"I cannot bear to think," she said, "that I shall some day go on the stage a ghastly figure of my former self."

"The poor old actress with her voice half gone, her figure bent and shrunken, her beauty faded, and her powers diminished, appearing as a mere ghost of her former self is pitiable in the extreme. I should die if I were to go on the stage like that."

"Sarah remembers the last days of Jenny Lind Goldschmidt," said some one. "She heard that glorious voice when there were only three whole notes left."

"I should die," said Sarah, "if after one of my greatest scenes the audience should murmur only murmurs of pity instead of the bravos of admiration. I should die if no one wept with Camille. I should perish if no one pined poor Frou Frou. I should not live if in the audience of L'Aiglon I saw not one sympathetic glance. Pathetic, dreadful, are words that I could not bear to hear."

"And, so, I am going to retire. Retire while in the flush of my triumph, while in the height of my career. Listen," she said, and in her flute-like voice she read this paragraph from a French paper translating it rapidly into English:

"The beautiful Sarah swayed her audience last night with more than dramatic fervor. It was real life. Never has she been so magnificent. The playwright himself said, 'Truly, she is grand.'"

upon the unsympathetic boards to tintinnabulating music and to applause which I must work to win.

"And I long—O, I long—to die happy. I cannot bear to die in sorrow.

"I long to go out of the world rich in all things save money—to go out with all my faculties with me!"

### Says She Will Retire in 1905.

With these longings in her heart and with her hopes and aspirations nearly all fulfilled, Sarah Bernhardt retires from the stage. She has set 1905 as the date of her retirement. "It shall be next summer," she says. And her friends say that it will be so.

In spite of her brilliant success Sarah Bernhardt has not