

The Poet Rostand's Sonnet to Bernhardt's Severed Leg

This Is the Sonnet "To Sarah"

By Edmond Rostand, the Famous French Poet

THOU who madest of genius one long test
Of heroism, how thou must have craved
The destiny of those who would have saved
The valley where they lie at glorious rest!
"Oh, let me have a wound like theirs!" saidst
thou.
"And let it tear and bring me close to death."
Thy shoulders have two wings while thou
hast breath,

To thy one heel the world respondeth now!
Remorse is not for thee, for thou hast aimed
To make thyself like those our martyrs
maimed—
The while they bled, thou bledst for all thy
race.
So set thy sail where blows the wind most free!
The steel with which we sought a Samothrace
Has marred the Muse and made a Victory!



Mme. Bernhardt Sleeping in the Specially designed Coffin That She Used for a Bed for Months. One of the Eccentricities of the Great Actress That Makes Rostand's Extraordinary Revelation Credible.



"The Divine Sarah" in the Costume She Designed for Herself as a Sculptress.



The Skull Given Her by Victor Hugo Which She Carries With Her Always.

Paris, May 8.
THE apotheosis of Sarah Bernhardt is achieved. In the eyes of every French soldier the great actress must henceforth appear as little less than a saint. Her greatest and closest friend, the poet Edmond Rostand, has brought this about.

Rostand in a sonnet addressed "To Sarah" makes to the world the remarkable declaration—clothed in poetic imagery—that it was not necessary for Sarah Bernhardt to have her leg amputated. She condemned herself to that ordeal because of an almost frenzied desire to share in the sufferings and mutilations endured by the brave soldier defenders of her country; and, perhaps, as an example to them of fortitude, not exacted by duty but voluntarily imposed on herself for an ideal.

"Oh, let me share their cruel wounds!" Rostand makes her cry.

She had borne the painful lameness in her right knee for several years. The injury was not a menace to her life, or even to her general health, so her physicians agreed. But with that pleading exclamation for permission to face death as French soldiers face it every hour of the day, she overruled her doctors and went to the operating table.

News of the operation that removed Sarah Bernhardt's right leg above the knee was cabled to every part of the world. The physicians who issued bulletins of its success and of the actress' rapid recovery let it be assumed that Bernhardt's leg could not have been saved. It was not for these scientific gentlemen to divulge the sentimental, or patriotic, motive which inspired the world's greatest tragedienne to complete her career as a cripple.

As the sequel shows, that was Rostand's task. And who could have accomplished it with more splendid effect? Let his sonnet "To Sarah," a translation of which is herewith transmitted, speak for itself.

It is quite true that Bernhardt's knee had become very troublesome. A few months ago its persistent swelling kept her in bed for more than a week. And there were times when it did not bother her at all. The original injury occurred six years ago, when she knocked her knee against something while travelling on an ocean steamship. In an interview early in the present year she said of it:

doubtless I should always have spells of suffering. If this had happened twenty years ago—or thirty years ago—or forty—it might have been a serious handicap!" All of which adds to the credibility of Rostand's astonishing statement that the greatest actress in the world voluntarily sacrificed her right leg through her patriotic imperative desire to stand shoulder to shoulder with the crippled soldiers of France.

Presto! Then this wonderful woman gets busy and supplies her beloved, crippled French soldiers with another noble example. Even before she is out of bed, following the amputation, she busies herself with plans to go right on with her acting! She cables to her agent in America about a tour of that country, looks over her list of plays, selects a repertory and refreshes her memory of lines just as though she still had two legs on which to subjugate the biggest stages demanded by her big productions.

Then—still flat on her back, wincing occasionally from pangs in her bandaged stump—she laughs at the thought of presently having herself fitted out with a wooden leg! As a matter of fact, the divine Sarah was reading catalogues of artificial limb manufacturers before her brain was wholly clear of the fumes of the anesthetic.

During all this period the friend of all her thousands of friends who was most attentive was the poet, Edmond Rostand. This great French personality, generally cold and unapproachable, has for years paid the most flattering homage to Bernhardt, not only to the genius, but to the woman. When he learned that she was suffering and was preparing for the amputation of her leg, the poet emerged from his retirement in the Pyrenees, hurried to Paris and became an hourly caller at the actress' bedside.

To Parisians this was not amazing. They still remembered Rostand's telegram yielding everything to Bernhardt when he learned her wishes in regard to his drama, "L'Aiglon," motion picture rights of which he had sold greatly to his own financial advantage. Bernhardt considered that great character as her own, and applied for an injunction. Learning this, Rostand wrote to her counsel, using these expressions:

"I have the honor to inform you that I would rather have my entire rights in the cinematographic reproduction which are worrying her, and I embrace

"I declare that what she wishes is always good. I abandon to her, if this compensation may satisfy her lawyers, my entire rights in the cinematographic reproductions which are worrying her, and I embrace

The Surprising Revelation By the Great Poet That Mme. Sarah Bernhardt Had Her Right Leg Amputated As An Heroic Example to the Brave Soldiers Who Are Facing Death and Mutilation in the Trenches

"I thought with respect and gratitude her fingers, in which a legal summons assumes for me the grace of a lily." This brought actress and poet into a deadlock of friendship in which neither would accept sacrifices on the part of the other—and they have remained in that attitude ever since. Rostand never missing an opportunity to exalt Bernhardt—and reminding France that it, too, was quite of the poet's opinion.

Actresses, as such, are never decorated with the ribbon of the French Legion of Honor, but Bernhardt could not have escaped it if she had wished to.

The outbreak of the war found her ablaze with patriotism. She promptly gave her theatre, the Sarah Bernhardt, for a military hospital. "It is the holiest war man has ever been engaged in," she said. "The French soldiers are not dying for the flag, but for humanity."

When she heard that the tricolor was floating again over Alsace, she fainted. On coming to, she said: "I am sorry I cannot fight the barbarians, who have too long been the plague of the world."

But—as Rostand's sonnet proclaims—she was in spirit in the trenches with French soldiers, and her sufferings were in her mind when she unnecessarily yielded her body to the same tortures which so many of them are forced to endure.

This is the Sarah Bernhardt of to-day, who is in her seventy-first year. Throughout her long career, coincident with universal admission of her genius and solid artistic attainments, she has been celebrated for eccentricities which outdid those of any other living woman.

In the interests of her art she sought every imaginable human experience that was within the range of possibility. She frequented all sorts of places, associated with all sorts of persons to gain vivid impressions at first hand. She made the acquaintance of murderers and thieves and was familiar with the gruesome sights at the morgue. Also in the hospitals she studied from actual models the subjects of mortal illness and death in various forms.

She studied to put herself into the closest possible association with the mysteries of death, littering up her abode with human skulls and skeletons, and sleeping in a coffin.

Probably most women will agree that this last was a feat requiring considerable fortitude. Accounts of it were published all over the world. It was no transient caprice, either. Bernhardt slept in that coffin nearly every night for months. She carried it with her on one of her several American tours. It was a real coffin, but a handsome one, upholstered in white silk, worthy of the last sleep of one so distinguished.

In her travels, when not accompanied by this coffin, she always had with her for use in lieu of a nightgown a handsome shroud of white silk. In those days people would not believe that such eccentricities were inspired by any serious artistic motive. They



Composite Photograph of Mme. Bernhardt Showing Just How Her False Leg Is Made Up and Fastened to the Stump to Her Right Leg. The Photograph Shows Her in Her Famous Character of "L'Aiglon."

were credited to "Sarah's pose"—her desire for advertisement. Her habit of carrying with her two half-grown tiger cubs was set down to the same "pose."

The members of her company, however, knew better. The great roles which she interpreted with such thrilling effect upon her audiences required her to give realism to all sorts of emotions. She had to meet death by hanging, by poison, by the dagger, by fire, by suffocation, by being drowned or strangled, or by falling a victim to her own unbearable emotions—and she had the true artist's passion for first-hand information on the subject.

Her tomb, built with her own hands—for she has won honors as a sculptress—awaits her veritable death and burial. This work—which most women at all equal to it would look upon as the most melancholy of tasks—was performed in the period when Bernhardt was most active in seeking morbid sensations for the benefit of her art, and figured then as another "eccentricity."

Bernhardt's self-fashioned burial place stands within the reach of high tide on Belle Isle, off the Brittany coast, opposite the spot on the mainland where lies the French poet, Chateaubriand.

Nowadays in Paris, or anywhere in France, no more is heard about the "eccentricities" of Sarah Bernhardt. She is that country's greatest woman. In the language of Rostand, "what she wishes (and does) is always good."

As a matter of fact this attitude toward Sarah Bernhardt is by no means confined to the people of her own country. During the last five years the whole combined world has come to accept her as the greatest of modern geniuses.