



MARIE BASHKIRTSEFF. (AFTER A PHOTOGRAPH.)

TWO VIEWS OF MARIE BASHKIRTSEFF.

I

MARIE BASHKIRTSEFF has shot like a flame across the sky. Six months ago her name had scarcely been spoken; to-day it is well-nigh a household word, and around it hot discussion has waged, and the most violent extremes of opinion have been called forth, ranging from a sort of cult to the most indignant protest and denunciation. Difficult indeed is it to fix the gaze calmly and steadily upon so meteor-like an apparition—to scan its orbit and take into account the eccentricities and aberrations of its course. Each of us must be content to see in Marie Bashkirtseff what we are capable of seeing. She has a personality that fairly exasperates some susceptibilities, and it is probably her own sex who will be most lenient to her; for the generality of men do not easily pardon an egotism which encroaches upon their own, an ambition which measures itself with theirs, and an absence of reserve which seems the very abdication of womanhood. To state the case against her: we must look upon her almost as a monstrosity—an abnormal and irrational being, entirely unworthy of our attention, sympathy, or respect; devoid of the

natural affections and of every instinct of moderation and restraint; actually feeding upon self, and in turn devoured by self. On the other hand we may range ourselves with Mr. Gladstone, who bids us be careful how we deal with these same “abnormal beings, who seem to warn us common mortals,” he says, “how we handle them roughly or lightly, because they are above and beyond us; our arms do not encompass them.” From this point of view we may perhaps find in Marie, not alone that which repels and is to be dreaded and shunned, but that which supremely attracts, which animates and inspires us—so glowing and redundant a vitality that our own faculties are intensified, our perceptions quickened, and our energies reënfined. Centered in self as she was, there revolves around Marie a whole world of possibility and suggestion—a world that is so often blank and inert to our dull sense, but that to her was luminous, plastic, and full of revelation; visions of beauty beckon and invite her, lovely sounds woo her, and on all sides she is called out to the infinite. Like an Æolian harp her resonant nature vibrated at every touch. Art, music, books, nature, the whole gamut of the emotions swept over the strings that rang and finally snapped with the effort to express the ardent, concentrated, insatiable individuality that burned within her.

Call this selfishness if you will. Fortunately

for mankind, there are many unselfish women in the world—so many, that we understand how Marie comes to be looked upon as an anomaly, a *lusus nature* even. There are good daughters, good wives, and good mothers, to whom all honor and reverence, for the world could not exist without them. But in justification of Marie let us apply a broader test to these as well, and ask to how many of the most exemplary women does a larger unselfishness appeal? How many of them are capable of abstract and disinterested ideas—of motives and aims in no wise connected with their personal affections and the narrow circle of their routine and domestic experience? Marie is not a model in the household (Heaven forbid that we should suggest it!), but even here she may supply an element that is lacking, and that, under more favorable circumstances and conditions, could be put to noble service and win worthy report. For, if not in justification, in charity, at least, let us remember what was her training, what the influences that surrounded her, and the moral and religious ideals into which she was born. Had she lived longer, who has the right to say that she might not have redeemed her faults, and have risen out of self into higher spiritual growth? Such as she was, the tragic figure of Marie Bashkirtseff has flitted across the scene and passed into silence and rest. Twenty-four years had not gone over her head, and her face looks out upon us, in its immortal freshness and youth, with surprised and unanswered eyes. Whom the gods love, die young. Did the gods then love Marie? Many gifts were showered upon her, but much was denied her. Of sorrow she had her full measure, and of happiness only the dream unfulfilled, the divine expectation. May peace be with her now. *Ave atque Vale, Maria!*

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II.



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raphical ladies. It was the fashion for the young lady to look upon herself as an "object of interest," and carefully to describe her emotions and actions when brought in contact

with Genius or Royalty or Superior Intelligence. That literature was often charming, and though not especially accurate or natural, it sometimes gave us side lights upon Great People which help us to understand their almost miraculous power.

The so-called naturalistic method changes all this. A young and gifted girl, full of ardor and enthusiasm, takes up her journal to relate at length her own sensations; analyzing her impulses, dissecting her emotions, and leaving us in the end ignorant of the most important factor in a woman's life—the impression which she made on others. What use to us are the details of her dress, or the color of her hair or eyes, if by dint of iteration of trivialities we are made to forget the impression of the whole? The fatal element of disintegration in the photographic method is the habit of accenting everything equally: the effect is monotonous, and the result is that the mind, having no point of especial interest to dwell upon, loses tone, and gradually grows to dislike the subject under consideration. We may be scientific, and, according to the theory of some writers, we are bound to feel as little for a girl who breaks her heart as for one whose new gloves have torn in pulling them on. But we all know that we do not and cannot feel so; and though we may read for the sake of the writer, we also protest for the sake of the writer—who does not dare give his theory full sway. Marie has attempted a photograph of her daily life, going into the least agreeable details; yet, for that very reason, she wearies the reader and gives us little of her best self. The things which to her seem of no moment are to us soul-searching, as when she tells, without a word of compunction, of her unsealing a letter from one doctor to another—a piece of dishonesty which even the law punishes severely, but which she does not appear to think wrong. Her attitude towards marriage would interest an American from its business-like tone in contrast to her visionary hopes and plans for her accomplishments and fame. *Fame* is her constant desire and cry from childhood. She thinks of it as a thing to be *done*, not as the result of something better done for itself or for humanity. In reading this journal one cannot help asking one's self if the self-analysis which it attempts is a possible thing, or a useful experiment. Goethe called his confessions "Poesy and Truth"; and Marie Bashkirtseff, though she has no sense of poetry and strives after truth, gives us really a less vivid and less sympathetic view of herself than if she had fused her journal into an artistic form—as perhaps George Eliot did in her painting of Maggie Tulliver.

"It is curious," she says in the preface; "it



IN POSSESSION OF HER MOTHER.

MARIE BASHKIRTSEFF. (FROM A PORTRAIT BY HERSELF.)

ENGRAVED BY C. STATE.

M.

Bashkirtseff

is the life of a woman, day by day, without veil and without affectation; it is very interesting, merely as human statistics: ask M. Zola, and even M. de Goncourt or Maupassant." It is unusual and it is interesting; but it can hardly be instructive as "human statistics," in the sense in which Marie uses the word. It interests women more than men: men do not like to see the machinery by which they are to be captivated; and with all her analysis and her powers of charming, she seems not to have possessed that mysterious power, "the eternal femininity" of Goethe, which "draws us onward." Her admirers do not seem to have been lovers. In Paris and London groups of "scientific" people, especially those affiliated with the French naturalists of to-day, have thought it useful to write out their experiences, telling everything, as they understand everything,—that is, everything that should not be told,—to be read after death; or, if it makes a salable book, to be brought out without that artistic finale. Does not this method place the public in the attitude of the *valet de chambre*, before whom the greatest is unheroic? What gain to have this adage verified? We are still ignorant of the Hero, the exceptional being who can what others would. His own essence escapes himself. He can never understand himself dramatically as the actor of a comedy ending alway in a tragedy—death.

With this poor girl our interest rises as the gloom of the approaching fate begins to spread over the pages. Now comes the drama; and now the character, before vague and piecemeal, begins to develop. We are never deceived; we always know the fair, young, foolish thing must die, and her cries for fame, for love, for life, fill us with painful sympathies; her indifference and heartlessness to her family make us groan: we long to say, "Child, love your mother, do not criticize her; caress your poor aunt, who thinks only of you; do not turn from her to analyze her and your own feelings for her." Love is and ought to be blind, that it may have the heavenly sight unmarred by the accidents of human imperfection. Too caustic even towards herself, she never felt love in this sense; she was always watching and longing for it, but she never even guessed its "pure realm over sun and star."

The girl who leaves these two thick volumes behind her, together with a great quantity of studies and a number of clever finished pictures, as the result of a brief, precocious life, was Russian to the core. Immensely gifted,—with a lovely voice, wealth, beauty, and position,—she had all that could be given or gained by the usage of society, the freedom of

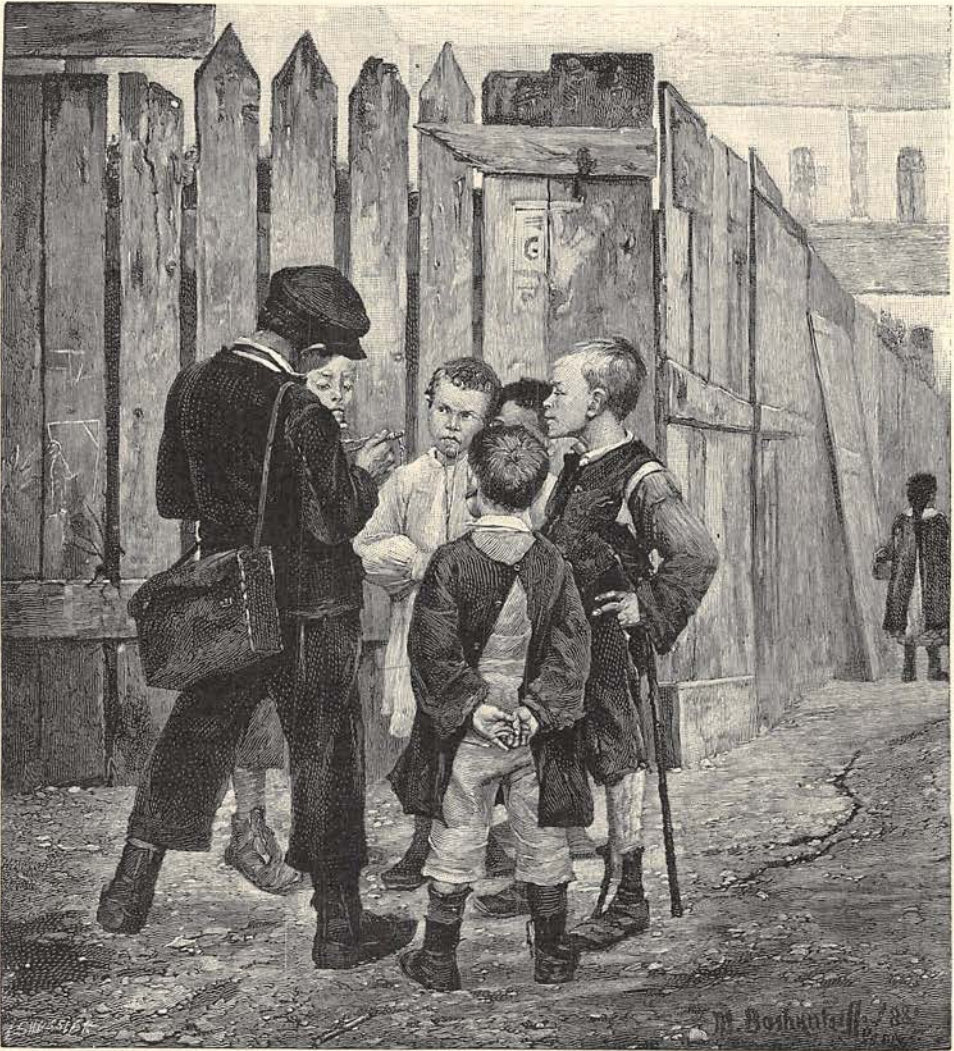
unlimited money, a devoted and indulgent family, a very remarkable power of application. That she should die early was a constant thought, and it is curious to trace back her fears and "visions of the night," dreams and anxieties, lest she should die and leave no sign. Yet here comes the impossibility to a human, living, breathing creature to think itself dead. "I shall die young," is a favorite phrase of young people,—it makes them interesting,—and she says, "It is a 'pose,' an emotion; I inclose a mystery; Death has touched me with his finger; there is a charm about it; besides, it is something new." But she does not believe it. She hesitates to spoil her *skin* to cure her lung!

The thread of savage blood, ever to be noted in the Russian, shows often in the early pages—rage, and fierce denunciations of people and things, an astonishing familiarity (at twelve years old) with the immoralities about her in Nice; and at sixteen, in Russia, where nothing is left unsaid, a lack of maidenliness (for want of a better word) in her treatment of her own soul and body—those liftings of the veil which the sensitive soul does not make even to itself. These seem to me to indicate a rank soil of savagery which the hot-house atmosphere of Nice and Paris covers with brilliant flowers.

We often see in persons of high birth, especially among women, a total lack of education,—in the sense of a drawing out of the faculties and a philosophical method in acquiring knowledge,—in spite of an appearance of having great advantages. The only sequence is, that all subserves to vanity. The men escape because their schools and colleges bring them perforce in contact with other kinds of people, and the world outside forces itself upon them. Deference was never taught this poor little princess, or the knowledge that there can be a higher joy than to get a Salon medal, be an admired singer, marry a duke with a mistress, or the nephew of a cardinal who may be pope, or set a fashion in a circle of the *beau monde*. Humanity, contemporary history, does not exist for her or her circle, and it is when she goes into the atelier with other girls that she first discovers with rage and jealous misery that others have a right to life, place, fame, and joys.

To any art student, especially to any girl studying art, the atelier part of the book is interesting; and in spite of the writer's crudeness, and her lack of nobility in her relations with her fellow-pupils and her masters, it is much the most sympathetic.

We feel as we do before the life-drawing of some of the French students, as if the ugly had too large a space—was insisted on with viru-



A "MEETING."

lence; that the lesson of nature could be taught better by choosing beauty and nobility to record, than by a minute attention to the hideous, the disgusting, and the ignoble. We feel sure that Marie did not show so selfish, so jealous, and so unwomanly a side to her young companions as she would have us believe, but that, when alone with her journal, she made an unconscious confession of the bad and forgot the good of her nature.

It could hardly be expected that her pictures should be great,—the mechanical difficulties of painting and sculpture are enormous,—but they are very fair student work. She is greatly under the influence of Lepage, and has little relish or understanding of the subtle-

ties of form and color in the great art of the past.

The most interesting part to the world is her affection for and kindness to Bastien-Lepage, who died a few weeks after her death. When he was too ill to walk he was often carried to her house, where he and she sat, stretched out on two lounges, silent, dull with pain, letting their young lives drift away, seeming to have no outlook, no hope, and at the last no apparent desire for another and a purer, more ideal, life.

The book is a lesson in literary art read backwards, for it leaves us, by dint of explaining and detail, uncertain as to the real being beneath the appearance.