

SARAH SIDDONS.



HERE lies before me a scrap of yellowish paper, now for the first time brought to light from the family archives, in which the Queen of Tragedy has expressed her thanks for a gift of game. It was written when she was playing *Volumnia* at Covent Garden, in the last months of her married life. She was fifty-two years of age at the time, still beautiful, still the unquestioned mistress of the stage, still untroubled by "the younger generation knocking at the door," but grown too stiff and massive for any but matronly parts. Let us see how she said "Thank you" for a basket of pheasants.

Nov. 28th, 1807. WESTBOURNE FARM.

MY LORD: As even kindness itself would be irksome were one forbidden to acknowledge it, you must not blame *me*, if I am troublesome in offering you many many thanks for another Basket of Game, which (as you taught me to expect) does indeed excel the former; I really never tasted any so fine.

I have the honor to be
My Lord
Your Lordships most oblig'd Sev^t.
S. SIDDONS.

This note is not less characteristic, in its way, than the experience of Tom Moore, who, edging near her at one of Lady Mount-Edg-cumbe's suppers, in the hope of catching some poetical sentiment from those noble lips, heard her solemn, flute-like voice declare, "I do love ale dearly." It is by little signs of this trivial class that we learn to appreciate the woman as she was: They are merely the significant reverse side of that dignity of bearing which was her prime characteristic. When she was a country girl, and served Lady Mary Bertie as lady's maid, her mistress suffered from an almost irresistible tendency to rise from her chair when Sarah came to wait upon her. When she was over seventy, she froze the blood of her grandchildren by her majestic declamation of *Othello* during a storm of thunder and lightning. From the cradle to the grave hers was a serious, harmonious, imperially impressive personality.

It is thus that she appeals to our imagination. If we think of Mrs. Siddons, it is as a magnificent young empress, pale and erect on a barbaric throne, her arm slightly raised in a gesture of command, the light concentrated on

her uplifted features, while the passions and the elements make obscure war in the darkness behind her chair. Every very prominent figure in intellectual history takes some conventional form in our minds, and this, we may safely say, is the type of the Siddons. Like most such types, it is probably very true and yet very imperfect. That it is superficially true, not merely of her appearance on the stage, but of her behavior off it, is proved by universal tradition. Claire Clairon, the illustrious French actress, whom she probably emulated and certainly surpassed, had started the idea that a great tragic artist should preserve in private life something of the dignity of her public parts. Such a theory could but commend itself to a Kemble, and Mrs. Siddons certainly lived up to this ideal far better than poor Clairon had done.

But it is irresistible that we should ask ourselves what lay behind this lovely marble mask, what humanity breathed within this dignified processional statue. Nothing is more difficult than to realize for ourselves the essential character of classic histrionics. The poet, the painter, the sculptor, the composer, can appeal against the prejudice or the conviction of his own age to our more emancipated conception of art. We have, after a hundred years, as complete an opportunity of ascertaining what his production amounted to as his own immediate associates had. But with the actor it is not so. We are absolutely unable to see him except through eyes whose mode of vision has become obsolete. It is pathetically evasive to turn the pages of that study in which Boaden most conscientiously, most lovingly, put down day by day his impressions of Mrs. Siddons. He analyzes all her gestures, he chronicles the very directions taken by her eyes, her arms, her lips; but when we have read it all, how little remains for the imagination to build upon! We come back to our vague conception of a youthful and serious sovereign on her throne, remote, impassive, superhumanly dignified.

The biographers of Sarah Siddons have not done much to help us. Her inner life is still unwritten, and the materials for it no longer exist. It is difficult to tolerate the poet Campbell, to whom masses of her intimate correspondence were intrusted, and who, deciding that they contained little of public interest, positively lost, and too presumably destroyed, the whole of them. It is probable that he was right in finding the bulk of her buckram correspondence a formidable trial to the patience;

it must be confessed she was not a graceful letter-writer. But there can be no question that the manuscripts which Campbell disdained would have rendered it much easier for us to realize Sarah Siddons as a living woman than can ever now be done.

Even in her own day people found it difficult to distinguish what lay underneath the cold pride of her dignity. It was an accusation brought against her that she lacked "sensitivity." To those who carefully study all the scattered memorials of her life which we possess, the fact that her individuality was a vivid and emphatic one will be patent. But there is no question that to those who met her occasionally she was often disappointing. The versatile Mrs. Thrale exclaimed, "Why, this is a leaden goddess we are all worshipping!" herself meanwhile "skipping about like a young kid, all vivacity and sprightliness." There was very little of the young kid in Mrs. Siddons. She was distinctly lacking in the lively elegancies; they were not her forte. One of the saddest remarks recorded of her is her saying that as she became more famous all her sisters loved her less, although she was forever contriving their welfare. No doubt the sensitive, proud Kemble nature pushed itself obstinately between them. It is hard to appreciate a love which is always riding the high horse, and benefits are apt to be irksome if they are invariably proffered in blank verse.

Her very eulogists seem to have conspired to misunderstand Mrs. Siddons. It has been commonly taken as an instance of her tendency to pathos, that when she stood with Miss Wilkinson gazing over a sublime landscape in North Wales, she replied to that young lady's remark, "This awful scenery makes me feel as if I were only a worm," by the response, "I feel very differently." It was surely impossible for Sarah Siddons, in any landscape, in any company, to feel herself a worm, and the protest seems an example, not of her dullness, but of her sincerity. At heart a very straightforward, ingenuous, simple creature, her letters and utterances give us the impression of a certain painful consciousness of disproportion between the broad folio of her own character and the complicated duodecimos which wrangled and chattered around her. Everywhere but on the stage she was bewildered by the shifting, trivial face of things. She was like a great ship of the line riding in the midst of a flotilla of yachts.

One thing about Mrs. Siddons we can pretty fairly realize—the astonishing effect which she produced upon her own contemporaries. One of the most valuable documents in our theatrical history is that copy of feverish notes scribbled down on the night of the 10th of October, 1782, by one who saw her in the part

of *Isabella* on the occasion of her first performance after her return to Drury Lane. "Her lamentation has a dignity that belongs, I think, to no other woman; . . . her eye is brilliant and varying like the diamond, . . . and has every aid from brows flexible beyond all female parallel, contracting to disdain, or dilating with the emotions of sympathy, or pity, or anguish; . . . so natural are her gradations and transitions, so classical and correct her speech and deportment, and so intensely interesting her voice, form, and features, that there is no conveying an idea of the pleasure she communicates by words. She must be seen to be known." Alas! that is what no man living has done. But of the exquisite pleasure which for twenty years she succeeded in giving, there can be no question, and such pleasure no other woman has given upon the English stage.

It is idle to repeat the comparisons which her own age made between her acting and that of such predecessors as Mrs. Yates, or Mrs. Pritchard, or Mrs. Abington. All these comparisons have become merely pedantic now. What do we know about Mrs. Pritchard or Mrs. Yates? All we see with the ordinary eye is a succession of great epoch-making artists, each dominant through a generation, all of them men, with this one exception. Before Mrs. Siddons reigned David Garrick, and after her reigned Edmund Kean. With these, and with these alone, can she be measured. Any other parallel to her extraordinary genius must be sought outside the confines of her own art. She was, in a certain sense, the combination of a passing temper in the English race. As the eighteenth century approached its close, it developed a taste for a solemn magnificence. Versatility, the mere pleasure of twiddling the intellectual kaleidoscope, ceased to be the quality most fascinating to the public. The great change to romanticism was at hand. Here, there, and everywhere there were signs of a turning of the tide, little romantic ripples hissing up against the stream of conventionality. There was a sudden appetite for the gorgeous, the solemn, the mysterious.

To satisfy this new instinct, Reynolds brought his heroic painting, Burke the splendid texture of his eloquence, Johnson his sonorous periods and magnificent Roman diction. It is with these men—her seniors indeed, but her friends and colleagues—that we ought to identify Sarah Siddons. She was of their mighty line; with them, "trailing clouds of glory," did she come into our tradition. With them she represents to us whatever in English art is most studied, without formality; most imperial and laborious, without bombast or inflation. It is the avoidance of the bad qualities that impinge upon his order of talent which marks the person of

genius, and it was the thrill of passion, the gush of life, that lifted Mrs. Siddons out of the stiff Kemble pomposity. The Kemble manner was the basis of all she did, just as the amplitude of oratory which was in fashion under George III. was the groundwork of Burke's style. But what distinguished each of these great individuals was the superb evidences of personal force which their passion wrung from them; and these were all the more volcanically effective from the dignified weightiness of their typical manner. This seems, indeed, to have been the secret of the unparalleled impressiveness of Mrs. Siddons's great tragic impersonations. By means of her beauty, her intimidating dignity, and her apparently superhuman personal distinction, she reduced the audience to an awe-struck reverence, and then, by a series of exquisite intuitive actions, revealed the human weakness beneath the godlike external splendor.

Every one knows the stories of the effect she produced. Her audiences lost all command over themselves, and sobbed, moaned, and even howled with emotion. She could sometimes scarcely be heard, so loud were the lamentations of the pit. A Scotch poet described the effect at the Royalty Theater, Edinburgh, in 1784:

From all sides of the house, hark! the cry how
it swells,
While the boxes are torn with most heart-piercing
yells.

Young ladies used suddenly to shriek, going off as though they had been stuffed with detonating powder; men were carried out, gibbering, in hysterics. Fashionable doctors attended in the theater with the expectation of being amply occupied throughout the close of the performance. Mme. de Staël has given a celebrated description of Mrs. Siddons's frenzied laugh in the last act of "The Fatal Marriage," a sound which was always the signal for general swooning and moaning.

All this appears very odd to us, and may in part, no doubt, be attributed to an emotional habit of the times; but at least it was the expression of a highly intoxicating popularity, and less than justice has surely been done to the manner in which the great actress received her plaudits. Her development, it must be remembered, had been slow. When first she appeared in London, although she was by no means very young, and in spite of the help that Garrick certainly gave her, her failure was absolute. She is probably unique among great actresses—who have commonly been precocious—in the extreme lateness of her artistic maturity. It was therefore to a nature hungry with disappointment that this profuse banquet of

praise was abruptly offered in 1782. The temptation to be gorged by it, to overdo the parts which so promptly excited her impressionable audiences, was therefore a peculiarly strong one. But here her inherent dignity preserved her. In the very heyday of her triumphs she issued that curious manifesto in which she claimed to know "the danger arising from extraordinary and unmerited favors," pledging herself "carefully to guard against any approach of pride, too often their attendant"; and she kept her promise. But no public favorite can escape from the Nemesis of overpopularity; and though Mrs. Siddons carried her queenship with unruffled propriety of demeanor, she too suffered in her own way. She was the victim of emotional isolation. Longing for love, for the simple conversation of her friends, for all the little ordinary comforts of an unambitious life, she found herself unfitted to enjoy them, and debarred by her greatness from sharing them. She grew more and more lonely, her language and her habits grew more and more stiffly exalted, while her thoughts and feelings remained on a much lower level. At last age and custom drove her from the only spot where she was really at home, and the Queen of Tragedy became simply a reputable middle-aged matron. Then, with all her courage, with all her sweetness, life seems to have become rather a tiresome matter. After the fiery joys of the stage, after excitements such as no other living woman had experienced, private life on a small competence was incalculably tedious. Nor had she the intellectual resources which have rather too readily been attributed to her. Divine actress as she was, Mrs. Siddons was not in any other way a woman of any remarkable power. Her verses and her sculpture are deplorable; her criticisms of the Shakspeare parts in which she triumphed are so poor and unilluminated that it is a positive pity that they have been published; her descriptions of scenes and events read like deliberate burlesque. When Ireland produced his ridiculous forgery of "Vortigern," in April, 1796, nothing but illness prevented Mrs. Siddons from appearing in the part of *Edmunda*, which she relinquished with regret, and, as a letter now in the British Museum shows, with an assurance that "had she fortunately been well enough, she would have done all in her power to justify Mr. Ireland's polite sentiments on the subject." With her ears full of the great familiar music of "Macbeth" and of "Coriolanus," the balderdash of "Vortigern" seemed good enough Shakspeare to her critical faculty. She was an actress, and no more. "This and nothing else I have to give you" might have been her motto as she faced the public from the footlights.

The result of all these conditions upon her mind in advancing age was a species of resentment against the very art which had exalted her so high, and had left her stranded in such a melancholy isolation. She who had enjoyed a success unparalleled in the chronicles of histrionics, she whose career had been so splendid, so prolonged, and so unblemished, she who in her retirement was still looked upon by all classes as one of the unquestioned glories of the nation, had no language strong enough with which to warn probationers away from the theater. This was her reply to a young lady who applied to her for advice on the subject:

Mrs Siddons presents her compliments to Miss A. Goldsmith, and takes the liberty to inform her that, altho she herself has enjoy^d all the advantages arising from holding the first situation in the Drama, yet that those advantages have been so counterbalanced [*sic*] by anxiety and mortification that she has long ago resolved never to be accessory to bringing anyone into so precarious and so arduous a profession. 13th June 1815.

If we could be transported to the pit of Drury Lane Theater as it was a hundred years ago, and

could suddenly see Mrs. Siddons in all her majesty, it does not follow that we should be instantly enchanted. Quin said that she came to London to found a new religion, and that form of faith is now once more out of fashion. In other words, her acting was the sublime of a style which would probably astonish rather than at once delight us. The slow delivery, the extremely marked transitions from one mood to another, the rhythmical gradations of gesture, the oddities of pronunciation, would at first, it seems likely, puzzle a modern eye and ear. But the unrivaled beauty would be there, the sovereign grace and distinction; and in the first moment that she melted into mortal agony, our sense of the unfamiliar would vanish, and we should be utterly captivated. Those emotions which, as an eye-witness put it, she "wrote across her countenance in characters of fire," the tender wildness of her despair, the anguish with which she listened, the "insupportable pathos" of her entreaty—these are to be imagined only, for they have never since been paralleled. To Mrs. Siddons more than to any other woman in the history of tragedy it was given, in the old phrase, to purify the soul by terror and by pity.

Edmund Gosse.



SEXTAINS.

I. A CERTAIN OPTIMIST.

HE sees one half of life, and loves it so:
Yet I would rather bear my bitter pain
And win my peace with straining heart and hand;

For joy is deepest when it springs from woe,
And tears are to the soul as gentle rain
To the deep thirsting of a desert land.

II. BEAUTY.

In flowing field, or in the raucous street,
Round haunts of squalor, in some wanton spot
Where evil like a thwarting fungus grows,

I find this light which makes all darkness sweet,
This deathless dower of every human lot,
Burning like blossoms through the spectral snows.

George Edgar Montgomery.



ENGRAVED BY T. JOHNSON, AFTER THE PORTRAIT BY GAINSBOROUGH IN THE NATIONAL GALLERY, LONDON.

SARAH SIDDONS.