

## ELEONORA DUSE.



HERE are, perhaps, only three living actresses now in active life to whom the title "great" would be applied by common consent. These are Sarah Bernhardt, Helena Modjeska, and Eleonora Duse. Janauschek, alas! although still upon the stage, belongs to the past, while Ellen Terry, with all her dainty skill and radiant charm, has not yet reached those heights to which genius alone can aspire. Each of them excels in ways peculiar to herself. Bernhardt, after carrying off all the laurels offered in the artificial and declamatory school of French tragedy, has devoted her maturest powers to the illustration of the most violent passions conceivable by morbid imagination. Her achievements in this direction have been extraordinary, and her dramatic genius cannot be disputed; but some of her latest triumphs have been won in defiance of most of the laws of nature and many of the rules of true art. Modjeska, if less potent in the interpretation of the fiercest emotions than her French rival, need fear no comparison with her in poetic tragedy; while in the field of poetic comedy she is unrivaled. Her performances of *Juliet*, *Rosalind* and *Ophelia* are almost ideally beautiful. Eleonora Duse, whose fame has blazed up with meteoric suddenness, is preëminent above all actresses of her time for versatility, that rare gift of impersonation, still rarer among women than among men, which can conceal the real beneath the assumed identity without resorting to the common expedients of theatrical disguise. The phrase that such or such a part was assumed by this or that actor is heard every day. It is a convenient, conventional, and meaningless expression. In the case of Duse it is used correctly, and signifies just what has happened.

Like most other successful artists, Signora Duse fought her way to distinction through all manner of obstacles and difficulties. She was born about thirty-three years ago in Vigevano, a small town on the borders of Piedmont and Lombardy, and came of theatrical stock, both her father and grandfather being actors of good standing. Her grandfather, Luigi Duse, enjoyed considerable reputation as a reciter, and established the Garibaldi Theater in Padua. Her father, however, was in very poor circumstances, and

she was less than twelve years old when first sent upon the stage to help in making provision for the family. In those days, it is said, she often felt the pangs of hunger, being miserably paid in the inferior theaters in which alone she could secure engagements. Her abilities must have been precocious, for from the first she played leading characters both in tragedy and comedy. She never posed as a juvenile prodigy, but, on the contrary, guarded jealously the secret of her youth, for fear that it might be used to her disadvantage. Her early audiences, doubtless, were not severely critical; but the fact that they accepted a child of twelve as a fitting representative of *Francesca da Rimini* is a sufficient proof of her natural ability. For four years she led a life of incessant drudgery, rehearsing new parts by day and acting at night, subjected to a physical and intellectual strain which tested her endurance and ambition to the uttermost, with scarcely a gleam of hope to brighten the darkness of her prospects.

Amid these conditions she had reached the age of sixteen, when there came to her an opportunity to play *Juliet* in Verona. For a long time she had been enamoured of the part, and had studied it carefully. The representation occurred in an open-air theater, the Arena, and a great crowd was present. Inspired by the occasion, the young actress played with all the power and passion of which she was capable, and provoked a storm of enthusiasm. This was her first great triumph, and, possibly, the sweetest of all; but it had no immediate effect upon her fortunes. She remained the leading actress of a traveling company, and was compelled to resume for a time the old weary wanderings from one provincial town to another. But her probation was not to be prolonged much further. An engagement at the old Florentine Theater, associated with memories of Ristori, Alberti, Salvini, and many other great Italian players, provided her with an appreciative audience and a competent supporting company, and from that moment her fame and fortune were assured. Triumph succeeded to triumph, and the critics vied with one another in expressing admiration of her versatility, of the simplicity and wonderful effectiveness of her methods, of the truthfulness and power of her pathos and passion, and of her sparkling, vivacious, and effervescent humor. She con-



quered Venice as she had conquered Naples, and in a few months had established herself in the front rank of her profession in her native country. Soon reports of her genius were noised abroad, and she was invited to visit the principal European capitals. Paris and Vienna confirmed the verdict of Italian opinion, and, emboldened by success, she crossed the Atlantic to New York, where her genius met with the promptest recognition and appreciation. Soon afterward the critical world of London was at her feet, and her name, scarcely known outside of Italy four years before, had become famous from one end of the theatrical world to the other.

It was on the 23d of January, 1893, that Signora Duse made her first professional appearance in New York, at the Fifth Avenue Theater, before a very large and curious, but rather apathetic, not to say suspicious, audience. The preliminary advertisement of her had not been extensive, but what little there was of it had been couched in what seemed to be rather extravagant terms. Before the end of the evening everybody was willing to admit that the adjectives were fully justified. She enacted the hackneyed rôle of *Camille*, thereby challenging comparison with every actress of note during the last twenty years; and when the curtain fell for the last time, after scenes of uncommon enthusiasm, she had demonstrated her right to be considered the peer of any of them. Her originality, brilliancy, and sincerity carried the house by storm. The impression which she then created was more than confirmed by each of her succeeding impersonations.

Within a very few moments of her first entrance upon the stage in the part of *Camille* her conception of the woman is revealed, as by a flash, with a certainty, swiftness, and sureness that denote the rarest combination of executive and imaginative power. The spoiled favorite stands revealed in all her waywardness, passionate impulsiveness, and discontent—a temperament, as might be expected, Italian, not French. No attempt is made either to gloss over or to exaggerate. Her acting is admirably frank and free, but never indelicate. A hundred subtle touches signify her growing interest in *Armand*; and in her love, when it is finally acknowledged, there is the glow of the true fire. But this impression is conveyed without the least suggestion of studied effort, and as the performance proceeds it is peculiarly interesting to note how the most striking effects are created by the simplest means, one of the infallible tests of good acting. This is especially re-

markable in her scene with the elder *Duval*, in which she expresses the most poignant grief and emotion with extraordinary quietude, and in her leave-taking from *Armand*, in which she excels all previous performers in conveying to the audience the sense of the inward torture which she is enduring, without doing anything which would be likely to excite her lover's suspicions. At this juncture her acting is truer and more touching, if less elaborate, than that of either Bernhardt or Modjeska, and in the subsequent acts she does not fall below the level of those great artists.

Her *Fédora*, the passionate and revengeful heroine of Sardou's drama, is a study of feminine nature differing utterly in physical and spiritual characteristics from that of *Camille*, but no less convincing or complete. Scene for scene, it compares favorably with that of Bernhardt herself. At certain moments, by her audacity of expedient or picturesqueness of pose, the French actress may create a more thrilling momentary effect; but, as a whole, Duse's interpretation, while never lacking in vehemence or variety of emotion, is more satisfying as a consistent and intelligible conception of an imperious, resolute, vindictive, hot-blooded woman, with a veneer of culture over fierce semi-barbaric instincts. Throughout all the complicated motives and situations of the first act she maintains the assumed personality with a wonderful amount of harmonious detail and great variety of feeling. So strong was the illusion which she established on the first night of her performance here that some inconsiderate attempts at applause were checked by an angry «Hush!» from those more appreciative spectators who feared that the spell might be broken. No more eloquent tribute could be paid to genius. In the cleverly devised scene where *Fédora*, by the simulation of love, beguiles *Loris* into a confession of the part which he had taken in her lover's death, the apparently involuntary gestures and facial expressions by which she contrives to indicate the revengeful hate which really possesses her are extraordinarily significant, while the mingled horror and exultation with which she receives the confession itself is a most thrilling achievement. Equally fine and true is her revulsion of feeling upon the discovery that the real traitor was her affianced husband, and that his place in her heart is occupied by *Loris*, the man whom she had doomed to death. Her facial changes and her by-play, as the truth gradually dawns upon her, are no less remarkable for their vividness than for their moderation; and this artistic restraint, by force of con-





DRAWN BY ERIC PAPE.

FROM A PHOTOGRAPH BY BETTINI, LEGHORN.

ELEONORA DUSE.



trast, lends additional impressiveness to the overwhelming outburst of passion with which she sacrifices all—even honor itself—to save him from the trap prepared for him. In the last act her suicide is less melodramatic and horrifying, perhaps, than Bernhardt's, but the despairing pathos of her appeals to the avenging *Loris* are as pitiful as anything of the kind ever seen upon the stage.

As the revengeful *Clotilde* in Dumas's «*Fernande*» she presents a third type of womanhood so completely distinct from either of the others that it is difficult to believe in the identity of the actress. Carriage, walk, and gesture undergo a transformation. Yet the personification is perfect in every detail, and governed by a beautiful consistency. Her first manifestation of great power in this character is in the reading of the despatch which tells of her lover's infidelity. Youth and hope seem to pass out of her face together, and to leave it old and haggard. Her whole attitude and behavior are eloquent of the blankest despair.

Of her performance of the wayward and reckless heroine of «*Francillon*» it may be said that she almost succeeds in making her conduct credible and reasonable. In it she portrays with exquisite skill the growth of jealousy under an assumed mask of feverish gaiety; and the graceful coquetry and womanly tenderness with which she essays to lure her errant husband back to her side reveals her genius in yet another new light. Her management of the risky scenes growing out of her nocturnal adventure is exceedingly adroit, and the occasional hint of malicious glee breaking through her mood of stubborn recklessness is exactly right. Another exquisitely truthful touch is her fit of tearful vexation when she finds that, unwittingly, she has established her own innocence. As an example of imaginative realism her *Santuzza*, in «*Cavalleria Rusticana*,» is a gem of flawless art, perfect as a reproduction of peasant life and manners, entirely free from all adornment and artifice, but lifted into the regions of poetic tragedy by virtue of its pathos and passion. It seems almost incredible that this woman, the unfailing interpreter of the deepest and most turbulent emotions of the human heart, should be able to identify herself, as she does, with the arch-coquette of «*La Locandiera*,» and the piquant, audacious, and volatile *Cyprienne* in «*Divorçons*»—a *Cyprienne* whom she makes as light, gay, variable, and sparkling as that of the lamented Aimée herself. No other actress of this time is capable of such metamorphoses.

As yet Duse has permitted us only a glimpse of her gallery of dramatic portraits. Elsewhere she has achieved triumphs in plays differing as widely as «*La Femme de Claude*» and «*L'Abbesse de Jouarre*.» Her *Juliet* and *Ophelia* have aroused fervent enthusiasm, and her *Cleopatra* is still a bone of critical contention between the commentators who hold that naturalness is the chiefest stage virtue and those who prefer the dazzling artifice of which Sarah Bernhardt is passed mistress. If it be the first object of good acting to hold the mirror up to nature, the French actress, in these later days, would be unwise to dispute the palm with her Italian rival. The women whom she now depicts are, for the most part, mere monstrosities, fanciful developments from one morbid and extravagant type. If Duse, in attempting some of them, has failed to emphasize all the violent and impossible contrasts of which they are compounded, and to amaze or horrify by a cry or a gesture, she at least has contrived to impart to them, by her intuitive sense of truth and proportion, some semblance of humanity. Wherever there is a foundation of human heart to work upon, her power is absolute, and she can interpret all moods with almost equal facility. As has been pointed out, she can sound all the depths of pathos, or simulate a paroxysm of rage or scorn, with the same veracity; can employ with delightful effect all the wiles of feminine seductiveness, play the coquette with unsurpassable archness and vivacity, and tread the perilous paths of the riskiest French comedy with a lightness, a sparkle, an assurance, and an adroitness altogether Parisian. She possesses, moreover, in a larger measure than any other actress, the Protean gift of genuine impersonation. With a face and figure devoid of any peculiar characteristic, she identifies herself with the fictitious personality by subtle and appropriate transformations, in which gait, gesture, carriage, and facial expression all play their part. In this respect, beyond question, she is the greatest actress of the day, and among men Salvini alone takes rank above her or beside her. Her powers in high tragedy or poetic comedy must be for us, as yet, matter for conjecture only. It is to be hoped that ill health may not prevent her from renewing her former triumphs in New York, or from appearing in the great Shaksperian characters which she has enacted so successfully at home, and which offer the widest scope to true dramatic genius such as hers.

J. Ranken Towse.