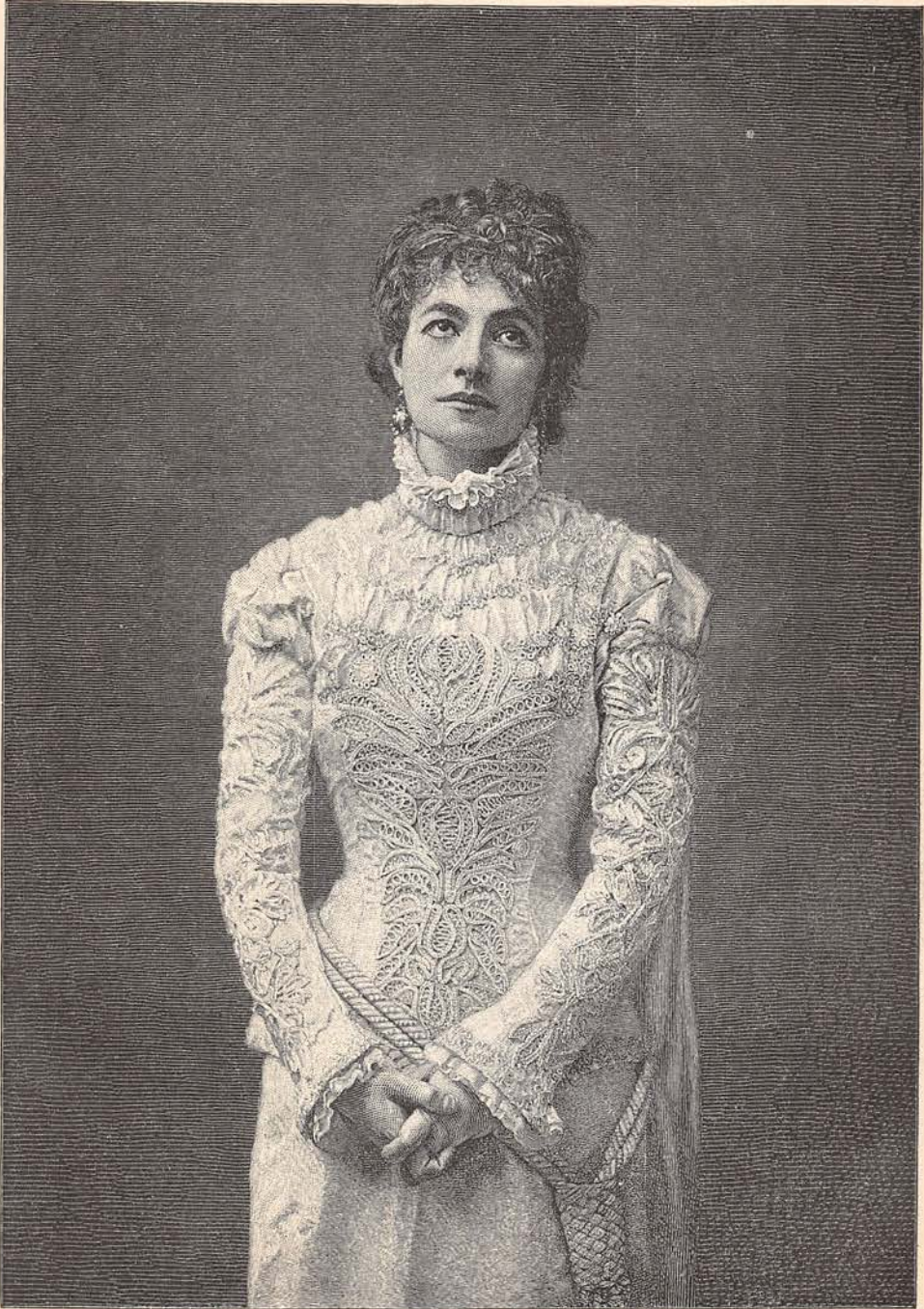


## MODJESKA.



MODJESKA AS "JULIET." (FROM THE PHOTOGRAPH BY SCHOLL.)

IN the year of our Centenary, a son and daughter of Poland reached Philadelphia *via* Hamburg, visited the Exhibition, and took the Pacific Mail Steamer to Panama and San Francisco. It seemed natural to the man to be an exile; he belonged to an an-

cient noble family of Poland, in which the crime of patriotism is hereditary. His wife needed rest after many years of exciting work at a profession in which few excel. Charles Bozenta was glad to get away from the ignoble censorship of Russia; Helena Modjeska, from the worries of the Imperial theater of Warsaw. The proscribed exile, prisoner, and "shadowed" editor longed for rest in the broad bosom of the United States. The vexed and too noisily admired actress needed a holiday to recruit her health; she dreamed of the happiness of a farmer's life far across the sea. So it was that California awoke one morning with two new citizens, so far as applications for that honor could make them citizens,—with two Polish investors in real estate. What could be better than a rancheria in Southern California? Quick then! cattle for a dairy and creamy milk, fowls for new laid eggs, and, above all things, mustangs for wild rides across the bare stretches of the Western slope! Whoever has seen the entrance of a family of Germans upon that farm of Indiana which they at last have bought with their hard-earned thalers will appreciate the humor of the situation. For these are settlers who neither sleep in a hut until a house is built, nor add one cow to another until the herd is formed. How can you expect it? They are children off for a grand holiday; not German immigrants. When they get finally settled and going they will write out to their friends in Warsaw,—some of the editors and artists, noblemen and merchants, who frequented their house of old,—and these will come to build up a small free Poland in California. Madame Helena wants a pastoral life, but, of course, without drudgery. She longs for Arcadia and all its flocks, with the base particulars of murrain and wolves left out. And so, as a matter of course, the cows give no milk whatever; the fowls indeed will sometimes deign to lay an egg; but Madame's poodle finds it and the bull-dog of Monsieur devours it. Well, what does it matter? They are artists and Poles.

Helena Benda, born in Cracow in 1844, married to G. S. Modjeski in 1860, and to Count Charles Bozenta Chlapowski in 1868, deprived the stage of Warsaw of its chief boast, when in 1876 she insisted on an indefinite leave of absence from the Imperial theater. She had been acting since 1861, when she made her first appearance in the small town of Bochnia. She traveled afterward with her brothers, both of them actors, and in 1863 performed at a theater

of her own in Czerniowce, the capital of the Austrian Bukowina. The year 1865 found her the leading actress in Cracow, and in 1868 she made a triumphant *entrée* upon the Warsaw stage. The following year she was engaged for life to the Imperial theaters there, and began to introduce to the Poles the highest class of tragedy. Shakspeare, Corneille, Molière, Goethe, Schiller, Hugo, Moreto—these were the authors she put on the stage. Coming of a family of actors, actresses and musicians, she was taught by Jasinski, a dramatic author of repute, who was also scenic manager in Cracow and Warsaw. But not only did she become the first actress of the land; she was personally beloved. On the night of her farewell performance, after having been called innumerable times before the curtain, she found the street from the theater to her house packed with enthusiastic fellow-countrymen. When she drove to the railway station the ways were again crowded. Their cries were "*Niech zyje Modrzejewska!*" ("Viva Modjeska!") "*Pani Helena, wracaj do kraju!*" ("Madame Helena, return to thy native land!") Among many cartoons in the illustrated papers there was one in which the popular idol is represented aboard ship. In the air a cloud of little winged hearts fly after her, and the legend underneath explains that all the hearts of her countrymen follow her. The poets and poetasters of Warsaw lament in graceful lines her departure. What wonder that after fifteen years of the feverish triumphs, worries and inevitable vexations of an actor's life, the very opposite extreme—to manage a rancheria of Southern California—seemed the best thing in the world? But what wonder, too, that Arcadia should soon begin to cloy?

The stage is a candle that the actor-moth cannot escape. The actress who has seen an amphitheater kindle with the excitement she herself has called forth and partly shares sooner or later must return to the boards. It is true that on the California farm the mustangs fully come up to expectation, but in the long run even the success of rides on horseback will not atone for the fiasco of milkless kine and eggless poultry. Alas, theatricals on a rancho are worse than private! Now San Francisco was not Warsaw; but it has a stage. Madame Modjeska gravitated naturally toward the nearest city which possessed a house of dramatic entertainment, that place of spells where pleasures and vexations succeed each other in equal force. In February she took it into her head to learn English,

beginning with her A, B, C. In June of the same year she was offered a chief rôle in a play in San Francisco,—why not accept it? To attempt English drama while yet so imperfect in the language was somewhat mad, but the whole journey was on a holiday basis, and a little craziness was only one item on the programme. If failure awaited her, who would hear of it? Few outside of Poland were acquainted with her name, because she spoke neither French nor German well enough to figure on the stage of Paris or Berlin. Being a still greater stranger in the United States, not even New York would hear of a fiasco. She accepted, played "Adrienne Lecouvreur," made a success. At once came offers for "star engagements" through the States. Then it was that we first began to hear of a new actress with a strange name who had been heralded through none of the approved channels of theatrical report. Owing partly to differences of language, but more to the ignorance in which Europe is maintained concerning Russified Poland, this newcomer missed the support which other artists gain from laurels previously won in Italy, France, England or Germany. Warsaw is but a minor city of the gigantic Russian commonwealth.

The handsome old town on the west bank of the Weichsel is guarded with unflinching vigilance by the powerful Alexander fort. Warsaw at the present day has a mixed population of Poles, Jews, Germans and Russians. In past centuries races were still more blended. Now it was the Swedes under Charles, now the Saxons and Poles, now the Russians, now the Prussians who stormed or took peaceable possession of Warsaw. While remaining with singular unanimity Polish in sentiment, the populace became much mixed with various strains of race. Cracow, the ancient capital of the early Polish princes, where Madame Modjeska was born, had almost as eventful a history. Bohemians, Mongols, Swedes and Russians captured it in turn. How much the same forces were at work before historical times no one knows. Madame Modjeska, at any rate, has some German and some Hungarian blood in her veins. Her husband is more purely Polish. His great-uncle was that General Chlapowski who was *aide-de-camp* to Napoleon and commanded a wing of the French army on the march to Moscow. His uncle conducted the Polish rising in 1830, when those royal cannibals, Russia, Prussia and Austria, strangled unhappy Poland and divided her up

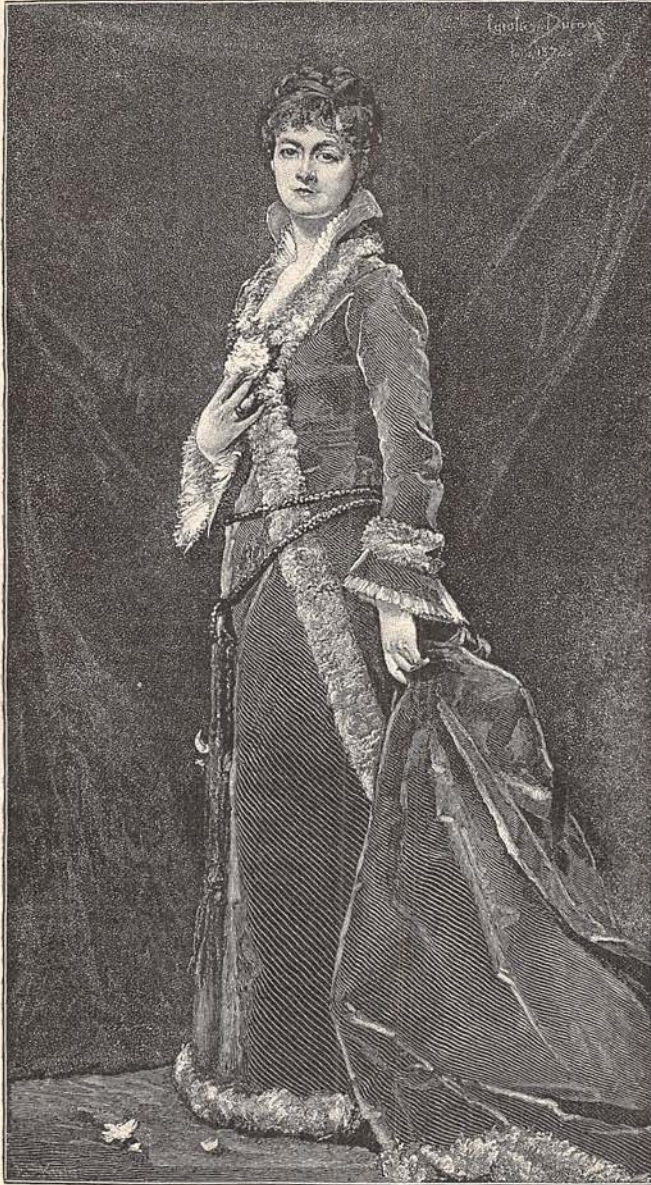
among themselves. Since 1846 Cracow has been incorporated with Austria. Since 1835 the Russian cannon in the Alexander fort have kept Warsaw quiet, and the nephew and grand-nephew of the Chlapowskis has made himself useful in various honorable employments. His career as editor in various cities has been interrupted by visits to Prussian and Russian political prisons because he was thought a dangerous person to governments, uneasy, as all robbers must be, lest their ill-gotten spoil be taken from them again. He has also been a manager of a company in Warsaw for insurance against fire; but his best title to our respect and gratitude lies in the fact that he brought to the United States so admirable an artist as his wife.

The word artist has been much abused, particularly in Europe. Madame Modjeska, however, is an artist in the highest sense—as her fellow-countryman, Chopin, was an artist in music, as De Musset in poetry, Millet in painting, Rachel in acting. She not merely served an apprenticeship to the profession and learned early to be at home on the stage in the face of an excitable, demonstrative audience, but has taken the step beyond excellence into the rank of master. In her *Juliet* it is enough to hear the tone of voice and see the gesture with which she asks her nurse who the masked *Romeo* may be. She strikes at once the key-note of passion and tragedy which, piling up higher and higher, culminates in the savage triumph of death in the last scene. Independently of the play, her acting culminates in the potion scene where *Juliet* conjures up the specters of her dead and slaughtered kinsman in the well-known ghastly words. In this scene, Modjeska rises to the highest of her art. The look she gives is that of a victim of hallucination; her action in flying across the stage and throwing herself into a chair is marvelous; the cry that issues from her parted lips is not loud, but for that reason far more terrible. Neither is it a whisper or a gasp. Such points are the results of a life-time of careful training in one who has a natural genius for the actor's craft.

Owing to comparative obscurity, Modjeska is compelled to play a number of dramas in which she does not fully believe. She does them conscientiously, and would resent the idea that her acting in one is not as good as in another. But it is noticeable that the greater the caliber of the play, the stronger shines her art. This is the test of genius. In "Frou-Frou" she is popular and successful—

but she is playing at a loss; her talents are wasted. In "Camille" she shows better, yet even then her whole heart is not in it. There is room for doubt whether she likes the play or not. In "Romeo and Juliet"

felt and most carefully thought out. Modjeska is not weighed down by the immediate action of the scene to the extent of losing sight for a moment of the story as a whole. Everything is proportioned.



MODJESKA. (FROM THE PAINTING BY CAROLUS DURAN, PLACED BY PARIS HALDEMAN, ESQ., IN THE PENNSYLVANIA ACADEMY OF THE FINE ARTS, PHILADELPHIA.)

her whole force is aroused, for Shakspeare speaks to the artistic nature, be it that of the theater or not. Her acting of *Juliet* presents a series of modulations delicately

And yet, in seeing her, who would think that she kept such general ideas in mind? For the minuteness and beauty of particular attitudes, tones and gestures,



MODJESKA AS "CLEOPATRA." (BY MARY HALLOCK FOOTE.)

suggest constant thought and attention. They are all studied—but only in a certain sense. They are studied in the deep sense. The real work has gone before and the true integral meaning of the scene been fixed in mind of the actress. Yet that these very particulars are not slavishly learned is apparent from the fact that they are not always the same in two successive representations. This gives them spontaneity. When we read how Rachel counted her steps and dropped, just so, each fold of her dress, whenever the same action recurred, we feel, either that she has been misreported, or that to-day her genius can be eclipsed. For step-counting and rigid adherence to a fixed formula of gesture must be looked upon as nothing short of slavishness in the highest walks of the profession.

That Madame Modjeska should play

Shakspeare will not seem so bold when it is remembered that the Polish stage, like that of Germany, is supplied with admirable translations of his dramas. Germany and Poland appreciate Shakspeare far better than England and America, if we measure appreciation by the number of his plays acted during the current year. It was a financial sacrifice on the part of Madame Modjeska to offer "Romeo and Juliet" to a lukewarm community. Dumas is far better appreciated. In respect to the favorite play by Dumas which has shown Madame Modjeska to the greatest number of American audiences, it must be said that no actress has equally purified and ennobled the character of *Marguërite Gautier*, or as we call her, *Camille*. The atmosphere of baseness that surrounds the heroine in that drama must be adhered to—for

without it the play does not exist. But it is Madame Modjeska's privilege as an actress to show with great realism the pathos of *Camille's* fate, and yet as a woman to invest her with so ideal a dignity that the spectator absolutely forgets to think of her as belonging to a dishonorable class. Had the actress been one whit less delicately-minded or less intelligent, realism would have triumphed over the ideal, and we should have felt the same disgust that must arise in clean minds on reading the play called "La Dame aux Camélias." We should have seen an exhibition of the questionable taste that inspires Mademoiselle Croizette when, on the classic boards of the Théâtre Français, she copies faithfully the contortions of death, said to have been learned from physicians and from personal study in the hospitals of Paris.

It may well be a feather in the cap of any actor to have learned English in so short a time and to have made a creditable appearance. Madame Modjeska had more to cope with than a foreign accent. She was wanting in that *sine qua non*—a European reputation. Considering that fact her success was great. For beyond all doubt the bulk of theater-goers in this country care little for, and know little about, the stage. They are much more influenced by a reputation than by real merits, for they respect the former and are not critical enough for the latter. This must be the explanation for the singular and deceptive success which attends the first season of any celebrity in the United States. The mass of people go once for the novelty; few go often because they really appreciate the artist. Each representation of "Romeo and Juliet" was a fresh combat with the prejudices roused by her accent, by the poor support that appears to be inevitable in "star" acting, and by the want of theatrical education on the part of audiences. Applause was not ready to burst forth; it was extorted by sheer force of excellence from our unemotional fellow-countrymen. No European successes pointed the way, as was the case with Rachel, Ristori and Salvini. The frankly ignorant and the weak-kneed would-be connoisseur were forced to return a verdict on their own responsibilities. An actor who can win unbiased plaudits after this fashion has roots in past energies of one kind or another. Acting is not an art for prodigies. Madame Modjeska comes of a family of actors. Her father was a musician of note and she has not neglected, in the study of her own pro-

fession, kindred arts that seem at first blush wholly unconnected with the stage. It was while reading Homer that she had her first dawning consciousness of what art is. Music has taught her things in her own profession that the composer little dreamed of. Sculpture has given her ideas of scenic effects akin to those that ruled the Athenian stage, and poetry has taught her to feel the beauty of what she is to act before she puts the ideas into plastic forms and adds action to the highest efforts of literature. That is why she moves unwilling or indifferent audiences. The acting of Madame Modjeska stands on the same high level with the best in literature, music and the fine arts.

It is indeed a fact that the noblest efforts of civilization radiate from one common center; the drama, when exercised in the right spirit, shows its fundamental kinship with poetry and the arts. That such a claim is not too great for the drama in general, and, in particular, for this Polish genius, is proved by the effect which the acting of Madame Modjeska exerts on poets, musicians, artists. In Warsaw the best artistic and literary people make her house a rendezvous. She possesses many substantial, if not costly, testimonials of the admiration and personal esteem of men and women whose names are known all over Europe for genius in various fields of art. The poets and scribblers of Poland have sung her triumphs on the boards and her charms of character in domestic life. Painters find her acting a school of emotion expressed in tableaux, and sculptors can profit by the natural grace combined with intelligent posing with which she places herself on the stage. Her acting presents a series of delightful studies; she falls both naturally and through wise management into one graceful or expressive pose after another. In this she is helped by her physique; spare, without being thin; she is slender yet well knit, and endowed by nature with what painters call "fine lengths," that is to say, harmonious and noble proportions. Women who think much of dress are in ecstasies over her choice of materials, the beauty and appropriateness of her costumes, and the lady-like management both of her person and garments. Naturally enough this is no unimportant part, as all theater-goers are aware. Musicians will hear in the vibrations of her harmonious and well-trained voice that deep intensity which is sometimes lacking in their own

art, but, when it is struck, forms their greatest triumph. Indeed, for average theatergoers, Modjeska may be said to act too well. She is too intense, too varied, too sudden and unexpected in her changes of tone and position to be accepted at once and heartily by persons who are used, as American and English people are, to see every one about them thoroughly under self-control, and who are often cautious to a ludicrous degree in expressing themselves. A Boston woman said of her: "If I only once dared to admire her acting, I should be carried away by it." That struck the note. We do not dare admire what clashes with our national reserve. Yet in spite of ourselves we Americans soon thawed from our reserve and steadily increased our applause from the first scene to the last.

In the late Mr. Lewes's book on actors and the art of acting, he says: "Rachel was the panther of the stage; with a panther's terrible beauty and undulating grace she moved and stood, glared and sprang. Scorn, triumph, rage, lust, and merciless malignity she could represent in symbols of irresistible power; but she had little tenderness, no womanly caressing softness, no gayety, no heartiness. She was so graceful and so powerful that her air of dignity was incomparable. But somehow you always felt in her presence an indefinable suggestion of latent wickedness." So far as can be learned from those who saw her, Rachel was hardly the superior of Modjeska in stage skill. According to Mr. Lewes, she was wanting in qualities in which the Polish actress is pre-eminent. Madame Modjeska is full of gayety, not violent or riotous, but well controlled, and her womanly manner is winning her admirers in this country almost as warm as those in Poland. Unlike so many women who have reached high levels in the dramatic art, she has lost nothing of her womanliness. Men, who are more sensitive than women to that lack, find her personality feminine, and women have no charge of masculinity to bring against her. But particularly does she not possess the slightest suggestion of wickedness. So far is she from such a character that in her hands rôles which exhibit depraved women are elevated and purified by her management of them. Goodness, rather

than wickedness, is the suggestion flowing from Madame Modjeska's theory and practice. Her tendency is upward, and the influence she carries with her before the foot-lights is highly moral as well as æsthetic. In this she is the superior of Sarah Bernhardt, the actress of the present with whom she is most likely to be compared. Moreover, she is a most conscientious artist, and in that like Ristori, while in other respects greater. She does not, like Rachel in her later days and like Sarah Bernhardt already, play indifferently at times—almost carelessly—until the moment comes for a telling point, in order to flash out then into action of the highest strain. Madame Modjeska gives sufficient attention to all parts of a rôle, and modifies and subordinates the parts in such a manner that the play becomes a finely molded, organic whole. Of course so thorough a workman leaves none of the minor things undone,—those minor things which it is the tendency in all the arts to raise to the dignity of major questions. Thus she studies her costumes for *Cleopatra* or *Juliet*, looks up Greek bass-reliefs for *Medea*, and tries to bring realism into strong play without letting it usurp the interest of an audience.

Modjeska may have her equal, possibly her superior in certain directions, but it is doubtful if Europe possess so well rounded a genius for the stage as she. Madame Walter of Berlin is said to be unrivaled in heavy tragedy; Janauschek has proved in America her marked tragic genius; Bernhardt has her rôles in which she is unsurpassed; but none of these can run the gamut of the emotions like Modjeska. It is noticeable that although the lack of public taste forces her to play the lighter tragedy of the late French Empire, she improves in her acting exactly in proportion to the beauty and depth of the play. Having seen her *Juliet* one thinks of *Medea*. How she would throw fire and terror into that wonderful drama! And her *Cleopatra*! No living actress, unless it be Bernhardt, could enact with equal power the "serpent of old Nile." It is a pity that such a rare bird of passage could not be caught and persuaded to stay with us. She alone would form a powerful school for the education of our youthful actors and actresses.