

Madame Réjane

By Dauphin Meunier

A FABULOUS being, in an everyday human form ; a face, not beautiful, scarcely even pretty, which looks upon the world with an air at once ironical and sympathetic ; a brow that grows broader or narrower according to the capricious invasions of her aureole of hair ; an odd little nose, perked heavenward ; two roguish eyes, now blue, now black ; the rude accents of a street-girl, suddenly changing to the well-bred murmuring of a great lady ; abrupt, abundant gestures, eloquently finishing half-spoken sentences ; a supple neck—a slender, opulent figure—a dainty foot, that scarcely touches the earth and yet can fly amazingly near the ceiling ; lips, nervous, senuous, trembling, curling ; a frock, simple or sumptuous, bought at a bargain or created by a Court-dressmaker, which expresses, moulds, completes, and sometimes almost unveils the marvellous creature it envelops ; a gay, a grave demeanour ; grace, wit, sweetness, tartness ; frivolity and earnestness, tenderness and indifference ; beauty without beauty, immorality without evil : a nothing capable of everything : such is Woman at Paris : such is the Parisienne : and Madame Réjane is the Parisienne, is all Parisiennes, incarnated.

What though our Parisienne be the daughter of a hall-porter, what though she be a maid-servant, a courtesan, or an arch-duchess, she

she goes everywhere, she is the equal of every one, she knows or divines everything. No need for her to learn good manners, nor bad ones : she's born with both. According to the time or place, she will talk to you of politics, of art, of literature—of dress, trade, cookery—of finance, of socialism, of luxury, of starvation—with the patness, the sure touch, the absolute sincerity, of one who has seen all, experienced all, understood all. She's as sentimental as a song, wily as a diplomate, gay as folly, or serious as a novel by Zola. What has she read ? Where was she educated ? Who cares ? Her book of life is Paris ; she knows her Paris by heart ; and whoso knows Paris can dispense with further knowledge. She adores originality and novelty, but she can herself transmute the commonplace into the original, the old into the new. Whatever she touches forthwith reflects her own animation, her mobility, her elusive charm. Flowers have no loveliness until she has grouped them ; colours are colourless unless they suit her complexion. Delicately fingering this or that silken fabric, she decrees which shall remain in the darkness of the shops, which shall become the fashion of the hour. She crowns the poet, sits to the painter, inspires the sculptor, lends her voice to the musician ; and not one of these artists can pretend to talent, if it be her whim to deny it him. She awards fame and wealth, success and failure, according to her pleasure.

Madame Réjane—the Parisienne : they are interchangeable terms. Whatever rôle she plays absorbs the attention of all Paris. Hearken, then, good French Provincials, who would learn the language of the Boulevards in a single lesson ; hearken, also, ye children of other lands who are eager for our pleasures, and curious about our tastes and manners ; hearken all people, men and women, who care, for once in a way, to behold what of all Parisian things is most essentially Parisian :—Go and see Réjane.

Don't

Don't go to the Opéra, where the music is German ; nor to the Opéra-Comique, where it is Italian ; nor yet to the Comédie-Française, where the sublime is made ridiculous, and the heroes and heroines of Racine take on the attitudes of bull-fighters and cigarette-makers ; nor to the Odéon, nor to the Palais-Royal, nor here, nor there, nor elsewhere : go and see Réjane. Be she at London, Chicago, Brussels, St. Petersburg—Réjane is Paris. She carries the soul of Paris with her, wheresoever she listeth.

A Parisienne, she was born in Paris ; an actress, she is the daughter of an actor, and the niece of Madame Aptal-Arnault, sometime *pensionnaire* of the Comédie-Française. Is it a sufficient pedigree ? Her very name is suggestive ; it seems to share in the odd turn of her wit, the sauciness of her face, the tang of her voice ; for Réjane's real name is Réju. Doesn't it sound like a nick-name, especially invented for this child of the greenroom ? " Réjane " calls up to us the fanciful actress—fanciful, but studious, conscientious, impassioned for her art ; " Madame Réjane " has rather a grand air ; but Réju makes such a funny face at her.

I picture to myself the little Réju, scarcely out of her cradle, but already cunningly mischievous, fired with an immense curiosity about the world behind the scenes, and dreaming of herself as leading lady. She hears of nothing, she talks of nothing, but the Theatre. And presently her inevitable calling, her manifest destiny, takes its first step towards realisation. She is admitted into the class of Regnier, the famous *sociétaire* of the Théâtre-Français. Thenceforth the pupil makes steady progress. In 1873, at the age of fifteen, she obtains an honourable mention for comedy at the Conservatoire ; the following year she divides a second prize with Mademoiselle Samary. But what am I saying ? Only a second prize ? Let us see.

To-day,

To-day, as then, though twenty years have passed, there is no possibility of success, no chance of getting an engagement, for a pupil on leaving the Conservatoire, unless a certain all-powerful critic, supreme judge, arbiter beyond appeal, sees fit to pronounce a decision confirming the verdict of the Examining Jury. This extraordinary man holds the future of each candidate in the palm of his fat and heavy hand. Fame and fortune are contained in his inkstand, and determined by his articles. He is both Pope and King. The Jury proposes, he disposes. The Jury reigns, he governs. He smiles or frowns, the Jury bows its head. The pupils tremble before their Masters; the Masters tremble before this monstrous Fetich,—for the Public thinks with him and by him, and sees only through his spectacles; and no star can shine till his short sight has discovered it.

This puissant astronomer is Monsieur Francisque Sarcey.

Against his opinion the newspapers can raise no voice, for he alone edits them all. He writes thirty articles a day, each of which is thirty times reprinted, thrice thirty times quoted from. He is, as it were, the Press in person. And presently the momentous hour arrived when the delicate and sprightly pupil of Regnier was to appear before this enormous and somnolent mass, and to thrill it with pleasure. For Monsieur Sarcey smiled upon and applauded Réjane's début at the 'Conservatoire. He consecrated to her as many as fifty lines of intelligent criticism; and I pray Heaven they may be remembered to his credit on the Day of Judgment. Here they are, in that twopenny-halfpenny style of his, so dear to the readers of *Le Temps*.

“I own that, for my part, I should have willingly awarded to the latter (Mademoiselle Réjane) a first prize. It seems to me that she deserved it. But the Jury is frequently influenced by extrinsic and private

private motives, into which it is not permitted to pry. A first prize carries with it the right of entrance into the Comédie Française; and the Jury did not think Mademoiselle Réjane, with her little wide-awake face, suited to the vast frame of the House of Molière. That is well enough; but the second prize, which it awarded her, authorises the Director of the Odéon to receive her into his Company; and that perspective alone ought to have sufficed to dissuade the Jury from the course it took. . . . Every one knows that at present the Odéon is, for a beginner, a most indifferent school. . . . Instead of shoving its promising pupils into it by the shoulders, the Conservatoire should forbid them to approach it, lest they should be lost there. What will Mademoiselle Réjane do at the Odéon? Show her legs in *La Jeunesse de Louis XIV.*, which is to be revived at the opening of the season! A pretty state of things. She must either go to the Vaudeville or to the Gymnase. It is there that she will form herself; it is there that she will learn her trade, show what she is capable of, and prepare herself for the Comédie Française, if she is ever to enter it. . . . She recited a fragment from *Les Trois Sultanes*. . . . I was delighted by her choice. The *Trois Sultanes* is so little known nowadays. . . . What wit there is in her look, her smile! With her small eyes, shrewd and piercing, with her little face thrust forward, she has so knowing an air, one is inclined to smile at the mere sight of her. Does she perhaps show a little too much assurance? What of it? 'Tis the result of excessive timidity. But she laughs with such good grace, she has so fresh and true a voice, she articulates so clearly, she seems so happy to be alive and to have talent, that involuntarily one thinks of Chénier's line:

Sa bienvenue au jour lui rit dans tous les yeux.

. . . I shall be surprised if she does not make her way."

Praised be Sarcey! That was better than a second prize for Réjane. The Oracle gave her the first, without dividing it. She

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got an immediate engagement ; and in March, 1875, appeared on that stage where to-day she reigns supreme, the Vaudeville, to which she brought back the vaudeville that was no longer played there. She began by alienating the heart of Alphonse Daudet, who, while recognising her clever delivery, found fault with her unemotional gaiety ; but, in compensation, another authoritative critic, Auguste Vitu, wrote, after the performance of *Pierre* : “Mademoiselle Réjane showed herself full of grace and feeling. She rendered Gabrielle’s despair with a naturalness, a brilliancy, a spontaneity, which won a most striking success.”

Shall I follow her through each of her creations, from her début in *La Revue des Deux-Mondes*, up to her supreme triumph in *Madame Sans-Gêne* ? Shall I show her as the sly soubrette in *Fanny Lear* ? as the woman in love, “whose ignorance divines all things,” in *Madame Lili* ? as the comical Marquise de Menu-Castel in *Le Verglas* ? Shall I tell of her first crowning success, when she played Gabrielle in *Pierre* ? Shall I recall her stormy interpretation of Madame de Librac, in *Le Club* ? and her dramatic conception of the part of Ida ?—which quite reversed the previous judgments of her critics, wringing praise from her enemy Daudet, and censure from her faithful admirer Vitu. The natural order of things, however, was re-established by her performance of *Les Tapageurs* ; again Daudet found her cold and lacking in tenderness ; and Vitu again applauded.

Her successes at the Vaudeville extend from 1875 to 1882 ; and towards the end of that period, Réjane, always rising higher in her art, created Anita in *L’Auréole*, and the Baronne d’Oria in *Odette*. Next, forgetting her own traditions, she appeared at the Théâtre des Panoramas, and at the Ambigu, where she gave a splendid interpretation of Madame Cézambre in Richepin’s *La Glu* ; and at Les Variétés as Adrienne in *Ma Camarade*. Now
fickle,

fickle, now constant to her first love, she alternated between the Variétés and the Vaudeville; took an engagement at the Odéon; assisted at the birth and death of the Grand-Théâtre; and just lately the Vaudeville has won her back once more.

Amidst these perambulations, Réjane played the diva in *Clara Soleil*. The following year she had to take two different parts in the same play, those of Gabrielle and Clicquette in *Les Demoiselles Clochart*. Gabrielle is a cold and positive character; Clicquette a gay and mischievous one. Réjane kept them perfectly distinct, and without the smallest apparent effort. In 1887, she telephoned in *Allô-Allô*, and represented so clearly, by means of clever mimicry, the absurd answers of the apparatus, that from the gallery to the stalls the theatre was one roar of laughter and applause; I fancy the salvos and broadsides must still sometimes echo in her delicate ears.

Réjane's part in *M. de Morat* should not be forgotten; nor above all, the inimitable perfection of her play in *Décoré* (1888). Sarcey's exultation knew no bounds when, in 1890, she again appeared in this rôle. Time, that had metamorphosed the lissom critic of 1875 into a round and inert mass of solid flesh, cruel Father Time, gave back to Sarcey, for this occasion only, a flash of youthful fire, which stirred his wits to warmth and animation. He shouted out hardly articulate praise; he literally rolled in his stall with pleasure; his bald head blushed like an aurora borealis. "Look at her!" he cried, "see her malicious smiles, her feline graces, listen to her reserved and biting diction; she is the very essence of the Parisienne! What an ovation she received! How they applauded her! and how she played!" From M. Sarcey the laugh spreads; it thaws the scepticism of M. Jules Lemaitre, engulfs the timidity of the public, becomes unanimous and universal, and is no longer to be silenced.

In 1888, M. Edmond de Goncourt entrusted Réjane with the
part

part of *Germinie Lacerteux*. On the first night, a furious battle against the author was waged in the house. Réjane secured the victory *sans peur et sans reproches*.

Everything in her inspires the certitude of success; her voice aims at the heart, her gestures knock at it. Réjane confides all to the hazard of the dice; her sudden attacks are of the most dare-devil nature; and no matter how risky, how dangerous, how extravagant the jump, she never loses her footing; her play is always correct, her handling sure, her coolness imperturbable. It was impossible to watch her precipitate herself down the staircase in *La Glu* without a tremble. And fifteen years before Yvette Guilbert, it was Réjane who first had the audacity to sing with a voice that was no voice, making wit and gesture more than cover the deficiency. In *Ma Cousine*, Réjane introduced on the boards of *Les Variétés* a bit of dancing such as one sees at the Elysée-Montmartre; she seized on and imitated the grotesque effrontery of Mademoiselle Grille-d'Egout, and her little arched foot flying upwards, brushed a kiss upon the forehead of her model; for Réjane the "grand écart" may be fatal, perhaps, but it is neither difficult nor terrifying.

Once more delighting us with *Marquise* in 1889; playing with such child-like grace the Candidate in *Brevet Supérieur* in 1891; immediately afterwards she took a part in *Amoureuse* at the Odéon. The subject is equivocal, the dialogue smutty. Réjane extenuated nothing; on the contrary, accentuated things, and yet knew always how to win her pardon.

Now, it so happened that in 1882, after having personified the Moulin-Rouge in *Les Variétés de Paris*, Réjane was married on the stage, in *La Nuit de Noces de P. L. M.*, to P. L. Moriseau. On the anniversary day, ten years later, her marriage took place in good earnest, before a real M. le Maire, and according to all legal formalities,

formalities, with M. Porel, a sometime actor, an ex-director of the Odéon, then director of the Grand-Théâtre, and co-director to-day of the Vaudeville. . . . But to return to her art.

Just as the first dressmakers of Paris measure Réjane's fine figure for the costumes of her various rôles, so the best writers of the French Academy now make plays to her measure. They take the size of her temperament, the height of her talent, the breadth of her play; they consider her taste, they flatter her mood; they clothe her with the richest draperies she can covet. Their imagination, their fancy, their cleverness, are all put at her service. The leaders in this industry have hitherto been Messrs. Meilhac and Halévy, but now M. Victorien Sardou is ruining them. *Madame Sans-Gêne* is certainly, of all the rôles Réjane has played, that best suited to bring out her manifold resources. It is not merely that Réjane plays the washerwoman, become a great lady, without blemish or omission; she *is* Madame Sans-Gêne herself, with no overloading, nothing forced, nothing caricatured. It is portraiture; history.

Many a time has Réjane appeared in cap, cotton frock, and white apron; many a time in robes of state, glittering with diamonds; she has worn the buskin or the sock, demeaned herself like a gutter heroine, or dropped the stately curtsey of the high-born lady. But never, except in *Madame Sans-Gêne*, has she been able to bring all her rôles into one focus, exhibit her whole wardrobe, and yet remain one and the same person, compress into one evening the whole of her life.

The seekers after strange novelties, the fanatics for the mists of the far north, the vague, the irresolute, the restless, will not easily forget the Ibsenish mask worn by Réjane in Nora of *The Doll's House*; although most of us, loving Réjane for herself, probably prefer to this vacillating creation, the
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firm drawing, the clear design, the strong, yet supple lines of Madame Sans-Gêne.

Why has Réjane no engagement at the Comédie-Française? Whom does one go to applaud on this stage, called the first in France, and from which Réjane, Sarah Bernhardt, and Coquelin the elder, all are absent? I will explain the matter in two words.

The house of Molière, for many years now, has belonged to Molière no more. Were Molière to come to life again, neither he nor Réjane would go to eat their hearts out, with inaction and dulness, beneath the wings of M. Jules Claretie—although he is, of course, a very estimable gentleman. Were Réjane unmarried, Molière to-day would enter into partnership with her, because she is in herself the entire Comédie-Française. I have already said she is married to M. Porel, director of the Vaudeville, where she reigns as Queen. I am quite unable to see any reason why she should soon desert such a fortunate conjugal domicile.

Notwithstanding the dryness and the rapidity of this enumeration of Réjane's rôles, I hope to have given some general idea of the marvellous diversity and flexibility of her dramatic spirit and temperament; it seems to me that the most searching criticism of her various creations, would not greatly enhance the accuracy of the picture. This is why I make no attempt to describe her in some three or four parts of an entirely different character. Besides, I should have to draw on hearsay; and I desire to trust only to my own eyes, my own heart. Needless to say, I have not had the good luck to see Madame Réjane in each of her characterisations since her first appearance. Her youthful air has never changed; but I have only had the opportunity of admiring it during the last few years. I confidently maintain, however, that she could not have been more charming in 1875 than she is to-day, with the devil in her body, heaven in her eyes.