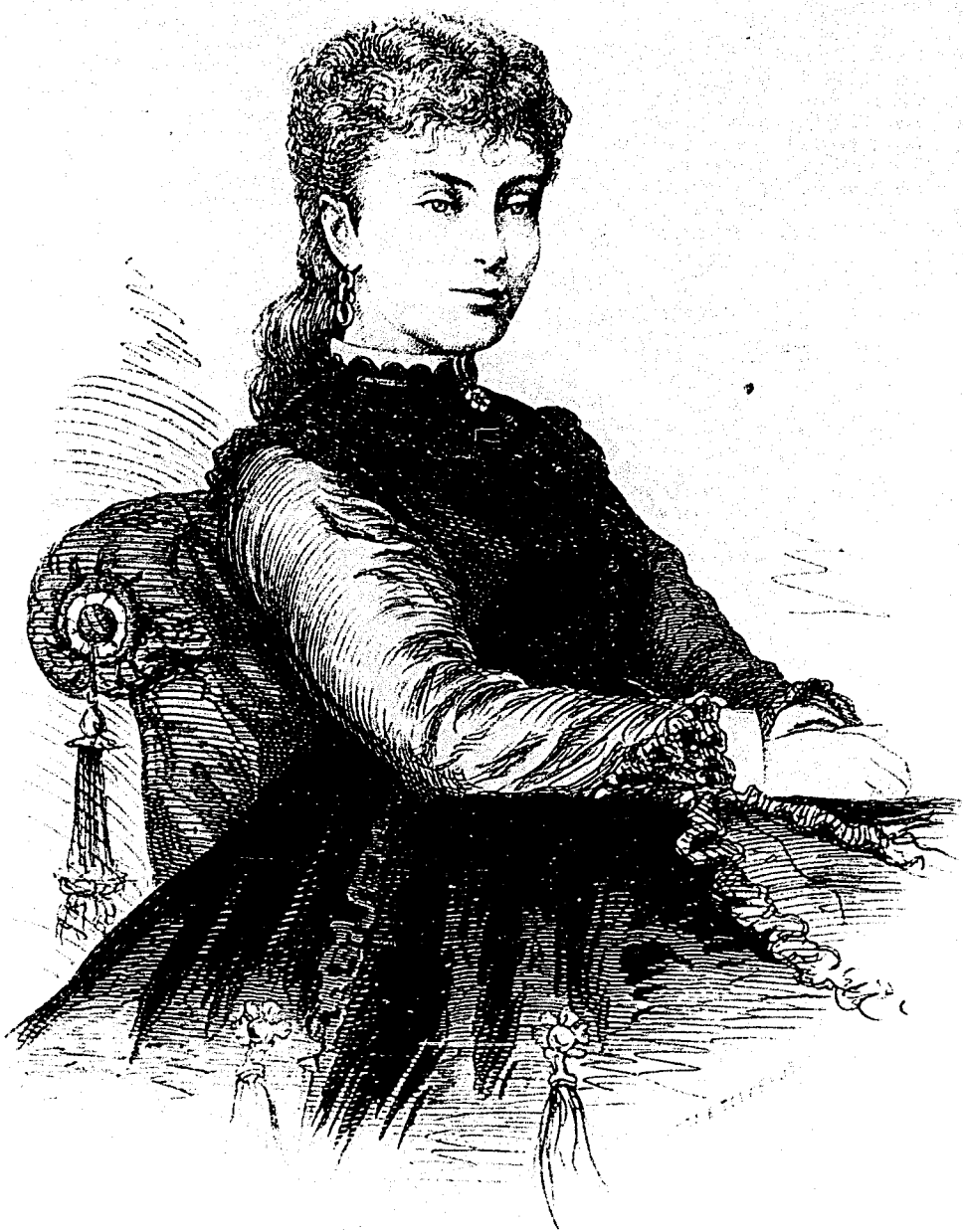


AIMEE DESCLÉE.

A writer in the *Pall Mall Gazette* gives the following criticism of the subject of our sketch: "The irony of life has never been more cruel than it has shown itself in the brief story of a great artist, discovered only to be lost. For years a struggling actress, discredited and unrecognized, Aimée Desclée, came into the full light at last, conscious probably that her long privations and her hard battle had killed her; knowing how surely the seeds of death were sown with the seeds of fame. And it was all the harder upon her, all the harder upon art, because this was no common case of talent which it takes years and long practice to ripen, but genius so spontaneous and so new that it needed no better training than success, no greater chastener than its own instinctive modesty.

"I have seen many fine and some great actresses, but none the least like this. I mean no comparisons, and cannot make them, for Desclée could be compared only to herself, so distinct and peculiar was her style. She seemed to have taken up acting at its beginning, and studied it as a new art. She spoke as no other player; for she spoke, not as one who knows beforehand what has to be said, in speech more or less measured and prepared, as all others have spoken, as far as I have seen or know, but now rapidly and decidedly, now hesitating for a word here and there, now with some slight repetition. So people speak in real life. She listened like no other player; for she listened sometimes with an air of deep attention, sometimes as with an evident effort, like a person distracted by the conversation supposed to be carried on round her, the eye a little wandering, the ear but half commanded. Often the thoughts were clearly far away. So people listen in real life. When first I saw her act it was in 'Frou-

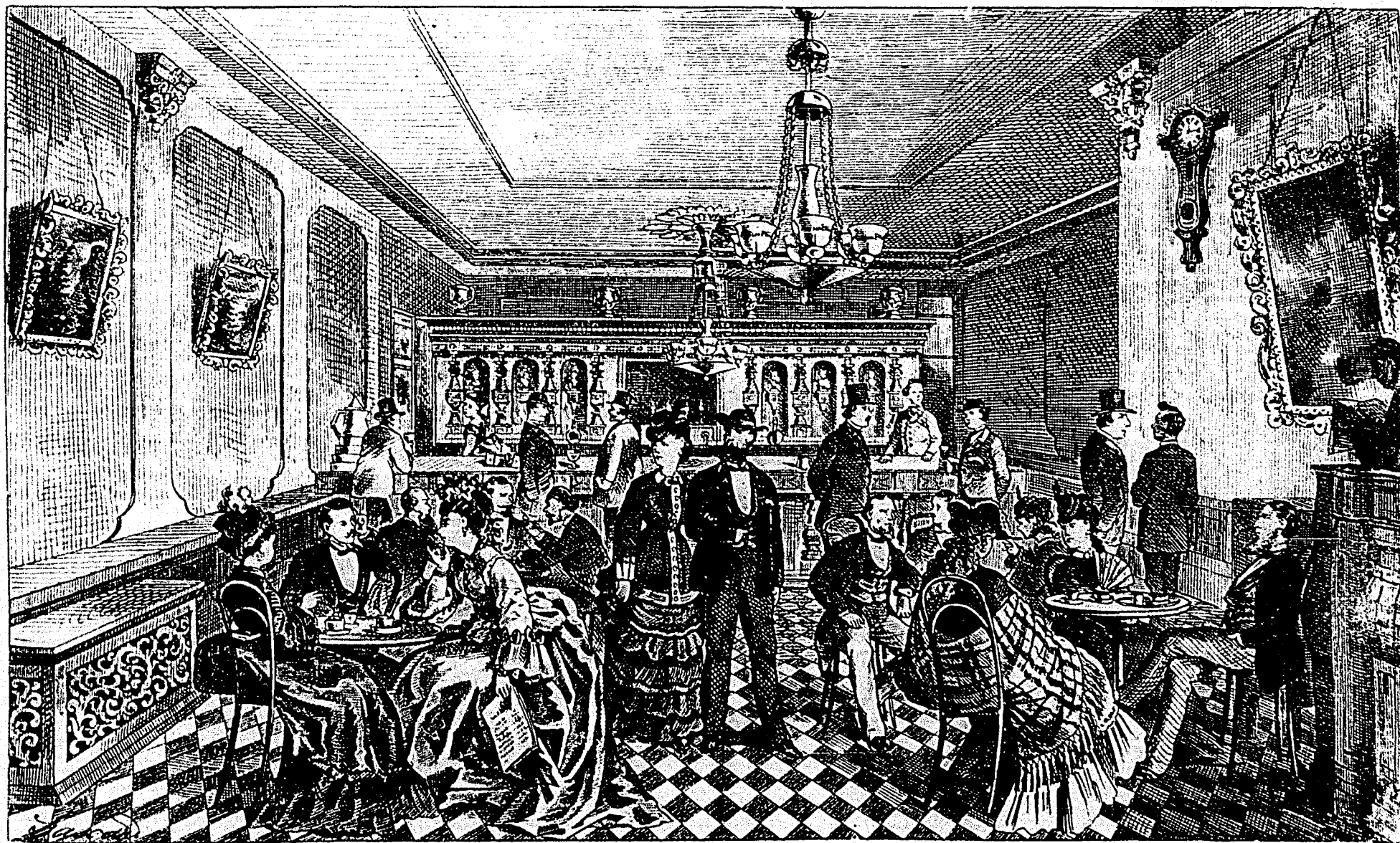


THE LATE MDLLE. AIMEE DESCLÉE.

Frou," when she had played it for many consecutive nights. My first impression, caused by this her peculiar method of speaking and listening, was that she was not sure of the words of her part, and was careless of it. Only by degrees, as the play went on, did we learn that this was the very consummation of the art of hiding art itself. And thus it was that she grew on her audience. As she said herself, she never took them by storm at first, as some great tragic artists have done. It was easy to depreciate and difficult to understand her; while at the best many who believed in her could give no reason for the faith that was in them.

"To the nervous, she was a revelation. Nerves are the bitter growth of the day, born of railways on the one side, and the propagation of weaklings, through improved medical science, on the other. And the name of the sufferers is legion. There is genius with nerves, and genius without them. The last means happiness and success; the first may mean failure, and must mean misery. Desclée was nerves from head to foot. In the wonderful little scene in 'Frou-Frou,' where she tried in vain to make her husband understand that the child-wife has grown into a woman, every nerve crisped and every sense rebelled at the good-natured stolidity of the sensible man whom she had married. Alas for the little misunderstandings of life! If George Eliot writes their epics, Aimée Desclée was their best interpreter.

Her eyes were wonderful. She acted whole histories with them alone. There was one little scene in the 'Visite de Noces,' in which she stood quietly recalling some happy memories of the past to the man who had made them, when a whole world of joy and of sorrow seemed concentrated in her eyes. She never made 'points'—as it is now the fashion to call them—for



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