

The Love Letters of SARAH BERNHARDT to Victorien Sardou

"Men Under Thirty Seldom Know How To Love," Wrote Sarah, and She Couldn't Be Bothered Teaching Them—An Amazing Philosophy.

Through the publication of Sarah Bernhardt's love letters to the poet-playwright Victorien Sardou, the people of two worlds will be given a new insight into her extraordinary character. Her frankness in dealing with this love affair—in dealing with any affair—is perhaps not unexpected. But never before have her scorn for the conventional, her wit, her unique and audacious philosophy had such free scope. In Sardou she found what many of her acquaintances believed was her perfect lover. In him were combined the debonaire boulevardier, the dreamy poet, the practical dramatist. He accepted her attentions—she frankly states it is the woman's part to do the pursuing—and to him as her intellectual equal she poured out her inmost thoughts.

By DORIAN HOPE.

In the early eighties there was a cafe-dansant called Chez Caillard in the Rue Caumartin, where it was the fashion—especially among the select of the theatrical life of Paris—to go between four and six in the afternoon to drink vermouth and dance. It was patronized almost exclusively by actors from the Odeon, the Comedie Francaise, and the Opera.

One afternoon Sarah Bernhardt found herself there in the company of a man whose presence was inadequate. He could not hold her attention to himself alone.

She looked about and met the eyes of a young man seated at a table not far away, who was in serious conversation with a beautiful woman. As she declared some time after, he had the most beautiful hands in the world.

"They had a language all their own," Sarah Bernhardt said, "and they called out to my heart, and my heart answered them."

This was Victorien Sardou. Neither of them was able to quit their company of the afternoon and make the acquaintance of the other, and so poor Sarah, on whose side the fascination was strongest, had to leave the place contented with the intriguing smiles that had fallen in her direction from afar.

But she felt assured that she was destined to meet him again, and she returned to that place every afternoon for months, hoping to come across him alone. She did not find him, however, and the days came when she went south to pass the winter at Monte Carlo.

Strangely enough, she saw him there, but at a distance, and he was again with a dangerous-looking woman.

And then, back in Paris, six months later, their eyes again met in a cafe in the Rue Royale. Sarah was seated at a table, and it was the first time she had gone out after an illness that had confined her for several weeks to her rooms.

Sardou was standing at the bar, not far away, talking to an army officer, and appeared to have imbibed freely. Sarah waited and waited, with a cab waiting at the door for her. She had on bedroom slippers in the cafe and hid her feet underneath the table in order not to be seen, and when she came in she hurried before one could

notice her and seated herself against the wall at the first seat she came to. And she had on pajamas under a heavy sable coat.

If my readers wonder how I came into possession of this information, which, since it refers to days long before I was born, it is not improbable, I might add here that it was Sarah Bernhardt herself who told me the story in its entrancing entirety in November, 1921, when I was in her home in Paris.

Two Great Loves.

She said that her two greatest loves had been for Pierre Berton and for Victorien Sardou.

"After those there are the loves that I had for a young Spaniard and several young Frenchmen," Mile. Bernhardt said. "I say young because they were younger than myself only. In actuality they were more than thirty. I was most capable of love myself when about fifty."

"Men younger than thirty seldom know how to love, and if there is anything in the world that I hate it is to be an initiator. I would rather teach arithmetic than to teach how to love—and this may sound strange, because I know far more about love than about figures."

"But it seems to me that a person should be born with a knowledge of how to love. It should be a part of his natural, his divine inheritance; whereas, addition and subtraction are like so many cancers or so many debts—they are of the horrors of life, and should both be ignored as completely as possible."

She did not disclose the name of the young Spaniard, or the names of the dashing Frenchmen.

On this night, to which I have referred, she had been overtaken at one or two in the morning by a desire to drive out in the Bois and get the air around the lakes.

Before returning home to sleep, passing the cafe in the Rue Royale, she thought she would go in just for the adventure, to drink a bottle of champagne, hear some wild music, watch the dancing, and look at the varied types that made up the crowd.

An hour passed, and Sardou only smiled timidly from his place before the bar. Sarah did not want to be seen in bedroom slippers in the cafe, so she waited till all faces were turned in the opposite direction, and then hurriedly made her escape, as she could not wait all night.

She had just taken her seat in the waiting cab before the door when,



Sarah in the Cafe looking for Sardou had on bedroom slippers and pajamas under her sable coat. "The woman who is someone prefers the game of her own catching," she said, explaining her frank pursuit of the poet.

Sarah Bernhardt Said:

"A woman who is someone prefers the game of her own catching and the harder it is to corner the more tightened her clutch."

"Paris in Summer is only fit for sever-rats and American tourists."

"The secret of succeeding in life lies entirely in the capacity to put up a firm bluff."

"A woman should never marry a man who lives beyond her means. This sort of husband is a luxury, not a necessity."

"I do not believe that any woman ever had exactly the same feeling for her husband after once seeing him take his shoes off. In this act a man is rarely, if ever, a gentleman."

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discovering her departure, Sardou rushed to the door and said to the driver:

"I will be here at 1 o'clock tomorrow if anyone should be asking about me."

Sarah was all ears. She spoke to Sardou. Sardou went over to the cab and gave her his card, and made an appointment for luncheon next day.

Sarah Frankly the Pursuer.

Sarah Bernhardt told me: "I did not close my eyes all night for thinking of him—for the first time in my life I was ahead of time at the scene of our rendezvous next day. When I went home, I put his card under my pillow and kissed it vehemently several times during the

night, telling myself that at last I had found my true love. And I was right. We met the next day, had a number of aperitifs together; so many, in fact, that we had no appetite for lunch, but we passed the whole afternoon sitting in the restaurant in an obscure corner exchanging the most intimate sentences.

"You know how true it is with aperitifs (appetizers) whether vermouth cocktails or anything else. One of them is really an appetizer; perhaps two or three, but more than that, and you have no appetite at all."

"I remember once seeing something in front of the Cafe de la Paix, on the terrace, that I will never forget. An old man had been drinking aperitifs all morning, until at last, when he went to pay, the waiter told him that he owed 40 francs. He was, of course, almost drunk, and had no desire to eat! 'Good lord! Forty francs for appetizers, and no appetite!' he exclaimed."

"But from that moment on, Sardou and I were the fondest of friends. Bernhardt appears to have done all the running after; she generally did. She told me once:

"Many men make advances to me, but they are almost invariably toothsome types—and even if they really were not, they would be so if they made the advances themselves."

"It has often been said that women love to be followed. Perhaps the second-hand sort of woman—the plain, unimaginative, every-day sort of woman—does."

"But a woman who is someone prefers the game of her own catching, and the harder it is to corner the more tightened her clutch."

"It compares to the other circumstances as does the hare which one has shot oneself to the hare that is purchased for five francs in the marketplace."

Fit For Rats and Americans. The following is the first letter ever written by Bernhardt to Sardou:

"Dear Friend: 'I have been intensely charmed by the manuscript of the play about which you talked to me several months ago when we were sitting in the Tuilleries gardens and which, like so few dreams, also has passed into the sphere of reality.'

"It is heavily charged with originality such as no one but a beautiful young man, exuberant, overflowing with the joy of living and the joy of learning, and a young man well versed in the ways of loving could ever have written."

"Every phrase of it is significant, and there is not one of them which I would wish away. Every one of its lines is sweet and perfect as were the purple stars of the evening lilies, whose heavy incense enveloped us there in the gardens when first you beheld the vision from which this beautiful work evolved."

"I deem it a sweet privilege to have been admitted into the poet's inner circle, and to have been permitted to share in some measure his tender dream."

"Your pointed adjectives are concise, yet evasive, and pretty as well as precise."

"And your idea of compactness is, to my mind, at least accurate. The shorter a play is the better. The dramatists for whom I have the very most respect are those who never put pen to paper."

"I do not mean to make you the target for my epigrams, to be sure. You will know in what spirit I read my letters when we will have grown sure of each other, and I shall speak to you through to the last page. I am very happy to think that this will not be at any distant day."

"I will go from Paris to Brittany in about two weeks, and am writing now to ask you, as a tremendous kindness to both yourself and me, to come there and rest for a whole month among the green hills and the blue days and the bird-song."

"Paris in summer is only fit for sewer-rats and American tourists. An immediate answer will mean infinite pleasure for me, and begging you to make it affirmative, believe me, 'Far more than friendly yours.'"

"SARAH."

"Far more than friendly has been a noteworthy significance. The words are more accurately used than she intended, certainly."

In a later letter, when their relations are near the end, she quotes from a recently-translated poem of Wilde:

"O had I loved you less and liked you more!"

"I Am Ordained To Teach You." Sardou seems to have answered that he would be pleased to go to Brittany, but that he would not be able to leave Paris until a week or perhaps a fortnight, later than had been proposed in the letter of invitation. The next letter was written a week later, and runs:

"Elusive person: 'You are so grateful for so little that you humiliate me! If your departure is going to be delayed on account of anything at the theatres which might be rectified by the invocation of my name and influence, such as they are, beg that I may be permitted the pleasure of coming to your rescue.'

"I have generally, if indeed not always, had my way with the world. Some secret which was possessed by some of my fathers has been held by me, as seeds the color of the flowers, and I am going to try and transmit some part to you, now that we are both in the very spring-tide of our lives, and you are susceptible to learning wonderful things, and I am ordained to teach them!"

"The secret of succeeding in life lies entirely in the capacity to put up a firm bluff! That and that alone, is the power that moves things, be they sceptres or armies or kneeling throngs."

"In any case, whether you will leave along with me or later, your room will be in readiness with its windows open in the direction of the sea, and I can fancy seeing the pictures on the walls trembling with impatience to see you."

"Poets should be surrounded by people, like the cloaks of the Caesars, and the violets in Ophelia's hand. There shall be all the purples of field and forest

there to intoxicate you with their perfume and abundant beauty and move you to think wonderful things that will lead you on to the heights where you will realize yourself fully."

"Wild wistaria and lilacs, violets and pansies, they shall all be yours, my young and dear friend, and I shall leave nothing undone which might contribute to the tranquillity and satisfaction of your stay."

"Ever faithfully your friend, 'SARAH.'"

Another short note is exchanged before the meeting in Brittany takes place. It is this:

"Dear Poet: 'What must be must not be—reconcile yourself to that reality, if, indeed, one may ever reconcile one's self to any reality—and you will have learned a valuable thing; a thing which I will be proud for having taught you.'

"Acting upon this significant proverb, write the man to take the arrangements up with you by letter, and since you will be having your letters sent in my care, and they will see my name and suspect my connection with it in some way, they will hardly begin making protests."

"The gnashing of my teeth has become proverbial."

"If, however, my influence as yet is not strong enough to convert you to such truths right away, we will look for the best possible, and will be there together among sylvan shades, discoursing about purple, and passion, and poetry, in no longer than one wretched week anyhow."

"Yours in the meantime, most sincerely, 'SARAH.'"

Sarah's Means of Support for Husband. The following letter was written to Sardou from London:

"Dear Boy: 'It is false and wrong for thee to assume that, simply because I am married to another, I am less than before. I am wholly thine!'

"I want thee to come here and spend a few days next week. I did not mention this in my last letter because I had hoped to be able to get away to Paris for a time myself but I cannot find any worthy person to replace me here at the theatre."

"I do not mind for a minute what is being said about my husband—do not think that, my dear; on the contrary, the more he becomes scandalized, the more I will like him!"

"I believe that it was the Scotch author, Stevenson, who wrote that marriage at best, was only a friendship sanctioned by the police!"

"In managing this company I have had my hands full, and I have not been in England an unmarried woman is imposed upon more than in any other country."

"Since people have learned that I have a husband they treat me with far more consideration and when I speak to them my voice carries more weight!"

"There is one thing, however, which I have heard several times said about my husband, against which I must protest. They say

that he has no visible means of support!"

"Now I make no pretense at being fat and conspicuous, but I certainly am visible!"

"A woman should never marry a man who lives beyond her means. It is a tremendous error. This sort of a husband is a luxury—not a necessity; and they who marry such pay for it dearly—with tears and sweat and blood and long sleepless nights of anguish and unrest, alas!—because they do not deserve it."

"They are demanding of life what they do not merit. And theirs alone is the responsibility for the trouble."

"Genius should be defined as the capacity to live within one's means!"

"If it is not genius it is at least the foundation of all happiness, no less than the capacity to love."

"I have had five months of it now, and it is very nearly enough. The tedious arguments that I have had to listen to, the stupid opinions that I have had to put up with, the stinking cigars that I have had to submit to be asphyxiated by—goodness!"

"We had hardly been married a week before the bubble of my illusion began to break. I had looked up to him as a strong man upon whom I could lean for support. He had headaches and I had to rub his head for hours at the time—a few days later and it was the backache and I had to rub his back for hours at the time."

"Other aches developed in impatience succession and became weary of being a nurse and went to a hospital and employed the ugliest and oldest nurse that I could find and sent her off to look after him. He was well and about the next day."

"I married him for a husband, but my word—he married me for a sort of super-sympathetic osteopath!"

Never Explain. "In order to love a man we must find him beyond understanding in some way. The minute he tells his real name or lives his real self, or expresses his real opinions, he explains himself away! The bloom has gone—the petals are shattered—the show is over!"

"Oscar Wilde said that to be immortal was to be misunderstood. To be loved indefinitely one must at least be mysterious. It is so with women and men, too."

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Bernhardt Declares That a Woman of Character Makes Her Own Choice of Men Rather Than Waiting For Man's Uncertain Advances.

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"I know a man who married a

woman because she was red-haired. After a few weeks she bought a dress which required another color, so she ceased to apply henna to her hair, and allowed it to come back to its natural shade."

"So you want to be yourself to me!" he shouted; "you no longer care enough about me to want to deceive and charm me! Very well! And taking his hat and coat, he went to that land from which no traveler returneth, and to which fed-up husbands and the dead alone hold the key."

"I do not believe that any woman ever has exactly the same feeling for her husband after once seeing him take his shoes off! In this act a man is rarely, if ever, a gentleman."

"And then it is assuredly the most awkward and totally unesthetic posture imaginable. A man is never so like an ape as then!"

"So unnatural are the movements with which a man puts on his socks that I cannot bring myself to believe that God ever intended that men should wear them. They were only intended for women, perhaps, like all other immodest things!"

"SARAH."

Married For a Trade Name. "Dear love, 'Thou shouldst be able to understand what I told thee before. I only married in order to have a trade name!'

"The fact that he was obscure was the most creditable thing that I knew about him. His name had never been in the papers, and now, always that is about the highest compliment that may be paid a man's character. The first scandal that he ever had was when he married me, and it is to me alone that he owes all the sensations that he has enjoyed since."

"If he has not pleased my friends, so much the better. A woman should, of course, choose her husband for her friends—that is only just and right, and she must submit to the recognized custom—but, thank the Lord, she has the right to choose her lovers herself!"

"I chose him out of my business reasons. My mind chose him, perhaps. But it was my heart chose thee!"

"The fact that he is not popular means nothing to me. Were he popular, he could not be a personality—and I would be miserable with him, then; more so even than I am now. Every time that one achieves something in life one makes an enemy. To be popular one must either be a fool or a mediocrity."

"SARAH."

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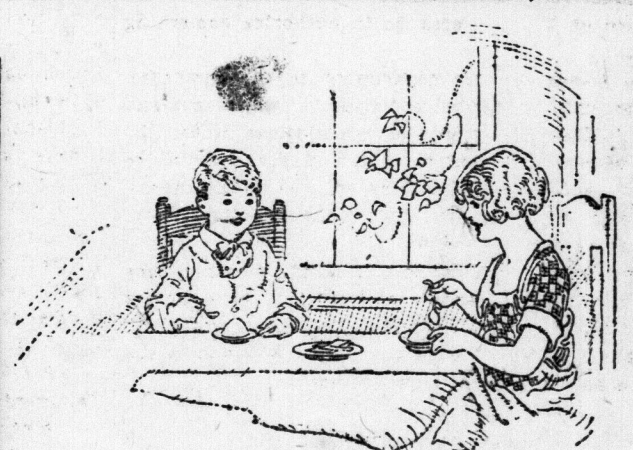
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