Some Heroines of Shakespere

OPHELIA, by Cecilia Loftus

There's rosemary, that's for remembrance; pray you, love, remember; and there is pansies, that's for thoughts.

I WAS in England taking a vacation after a season in London and the provinces as leading woman with Henry Irving, when I received a cablegram from E. H. Sothern to join him immediately in Pittsburg to play Ophelia to his Hamlet.

While this was not the first time the matter had been broached to me, so that it did not take me wholly by surprise, it was the first positive notification I had received that I was to have the role. Mr Sothern had been in London during the summer trying to find a leading woman. I had appeared with him in "Richard Lovelace" and "If I Were King" before I joined Irving, and he came to me. He told me he was planning to produce "Romeo and Juliet" in addition to "Hamlet," and would I go back to America as his Ophelia and Juliet? The matter, however, still was unsettled when he sailed, and the cablegram really formed the definite engagement.

At the best it barely left time enough to cross the ocean and reach Pittsburg for rehearsals. But the weather during that December crossing was unusually bad, and we were twelve days out in the worst kind of seas. As a result before I made my first appearance as Ophelia, I had just two rehearsals and those not even on the stage, but only in the green room.

I knew nothing of the traditions of the role. I never had seen a performance of "Hamlet." This circumstance may seem strange to those who are unfamiliar with the stage. The actor acts: he rarely finds opportunity to see others act. So it is a fact that I never had seen "Hamlet" when I received Mr Sothern's cablegram, and have not seen it since, except in so far as I have watched the Sothern production from behind the scenes. There remained to me, thus, only the voyage during which to familiarize myself with a role which, up to that time, I neither had seen nor read. On top of all this, the passage was so rough that there were days when it was impossible to raise one's head, let alone learn a part.

I do not suppose Mr Sothern realised what short notice he was giving me. When we had talked over the possible engagement of myself as his leading woman, he had left a copy of his prompt book of the day with me, and not unnaturally, he may have taken it for granted that I had been pondering over it ever since. But the engagement not being then a certainty and needing the rest after my season with Irving, I had done nothing at all about it. There is, however, another reason why Mr Sothern may have given me so little time. I am known as a "quick study"—a "horribly quick study," they sometimes call me—and as I had acted with Mr Sothern before, he knew the facility with which I can learn a role. It is nothing especially to my credit, for it simply is a gift with which one is born; and I would not mention it, or other matters personal to myself, did they not in some way, however remote, seem to bear upon how I came to act Ophelia at all and why I interpret the character as I do.

For this reason I presume to add to what I have said about my being a quick study, that I do not, when evolving a role like Ophelia or any other sit down and deliberately think it out. I have a faculty, possessed, no doubt, by other actors and actresses, of being able to think about a part while doing other things—talking with friends, for example. I will, perchance, be following out a mental picture of the role in a certain situation, without having it interfere in the least with our conversation, whether the latter concerns itself with commonplace or highly interesting matters. Thus it was that my Ophelia (and, again I may add, like all my other roles) was naturally evolved. Good, bad or indifferent, I just let it come.

It may happen occasionally, when I have appeared in a role, that some one will refer to one of the episodes in it and say, "You do that charmingly"; or, on the contrary, "You've missed something in those lines." Then I make it a practice to think over that particular scene and try to realise how I do it, so as to keep it just as it is, or, if the criticism has been adverse and from an intelligent source, to improve upon it.

In spite of the rough passage when I crossed the ocean to join Mr Sothern, I knew the lines of the part before I landed. But, when I came face to face with him in Pittsburg two days before the first performance, I exclaimed:

"What am I to do? I never have seen a performance of 'Hamlet.' What's the 'business' of my role?"

Mr Sothern gave me a rough outline and then began rehearsing me in the green room. Here and there I suggested changes and he said, "That's right. Do it that way if you want to." I am naturally timid, and, from my early experience on the stage—I mean the real stage, as distinguished from the music halls—had been so accustomed when I made a suggestion to have people cry out, 'Good heavens, no!' that when a man, who like Mr Sothern, combines the poetic and intellectual temperaments in a remarkable degree, said, "That's right," it made me gain confidence.

Furthermore, it is an interesting fact, which Mr Sothern probably had forgotten, that two years before, and through his own good offices, I had received some suggestions from real life which were of the greatest value to me in carrying out Ophelia's mad scene, the great scene of the role, and which clinches or undoes whatever success an actress may have made of the earlier scenes. We were playing "If I Were King" in Philadelphia.

One day, during the Philadelphia engagement to which I have referred, Mr Sothern came to me and said, "Have you ever been through a madhouse?" I told him I had not. "Well," he continued, "I have permission to go through one here and you had better join me. Some day you may have to act a mad role and the experience will help you." Accordingly I went with him and I saw a number of unfortunate creatures. Among them was a Frenchwoman whose fantastic actions had a weird fascination for me. She paced up and down, occasionally bursting into song, but never finishing what she started. She began in a clear voice, but when she had sung a couple of lines her memory seemed to lapse and the song would trail off into nothing. It was pathetic; and I was deeply moved by these glimpses of apparent reason followed by mental darkness.

I little knew how soon I would have opportunity to put to practical use the experience Mr Sothern had thrown in my way. It came the very next season in the dungeon scene of "Faust," when I was acting Marguerite with Henry Irving; and again the very next, when Mr Sothern sent for me to play Ophelia. As Marguerite I sang snatches of tunes just as I had heard that unhappy mad woman in Philadelphia sing them. I do the same with the old English songs in Ophelia's mad scene:

> How should I your true love know
> From another one?
> By his cockle hat and staff,
> And his sandal shoon,

or

> He is dead and gone, lady,
> He is dead and gone;
> At his head a grass-green turf,
> At his heels a stone,

> To-morrow is Saint Valentine's day,
> All in the morning betime,
> And I am a maid at your window,
> To be your Valentine.

These verses, sane enough in themselves, become immeasurably pathetic as evidence of a mind diseased from the circumstances under which Ophelia sings them; and I think it possible to render them in a way which will deepen the impression of a sweet, pure reason gone mad. I understand that several actresses with good singing voices make a genuine musical effect with these lines—and certainly the temptation to do this is very great. But Ophelia was not an opera singer, nor the Ophelia of Ambroise Thomas' "Hamlet," but of Shakespeare's. Accordingly, I allow these snatches of song to trail out into mere voids. It seems to me more in keeping with the scene and to heighten its pathos.

I cannot understand why some people consider Ophelia a small part and dislike to play it. In the mad scene she dominates the stage, and the episode in which a strong appeal can be made to the sympathies of the audience. Moreover, although she has few lines before this and none after, the character is a factor in the whole play; and even when she is laid at rest it is into her grave that Hamlet and Laertes leap and grapple in their first struggle—a premonition of the tragic ending. In fact the burial scene is most affecting. Though a dummy is brought in upon the bier and the figure is screened by a line of mourning girls, yet the sorrow of a pure and lovely maiden's death, self-sought in madness, hangs like a pall over the churchyard. Thus the role, if not the flower of the play, at least is the delicate aroma permeating and drifting through it.

Nor can I agree with those who think Ophelia was weak-minded and lacking independence because she submitted, seemingly too readily, to her father's injunctions and did not protest against her brother's warnings regarding Hamlet. She was a shy, timid, gentle child, with strong emotions. In fact, her emotions were too strong for the exquisite, delicate frame that held them. That she should have obeyed her father is no sign that she was weak or vacillating. It was part of her environment, part of the very essence of her day, when a girl's disobedience to her father was punishable with death. Obedience to the primal rule was in every breath she drew as she grew up. She would have been out of character with her time had she not, whatever her inward thoughts, shown at least outward submission to Polonius.

Weak-minded? She was deeply in love with Hamlet. That in itself shows that she was no ordinary girl. Hamlet was a unique character at court, and wholly different from the smooth and polished gallant by whom a common-place young woman would have been attracted. That she recognised his virtues shows that she herself was not an ordinary character. But she was so accustomed to submission to the parental authority that her own deep passion for Hamlet startled, even frightened her. As for Hamlet himself, there is not the slightest doubt of his love for her:

> I lov'd Ophelia; forty thousand brothers
> Could not, with all their quantity of love,
> Make up my sum,

which proves that he recognised her as an unusual character—one whose nature was attuned to his. She adored him for his noble mind, which she saw apparently o'erthrown; and then her own mind gave way, crazed by excessive feeling.

This brings me around to the mad scene again. The flowers which Ophelia mentions were associated in the popular mind with certain symbols—rosemary with remembrance, pansies with thoughts. I do not distribute the flowers named in the lines, but such as I appear to have gathered at haphazard in the fields, and which, in my mental aberration, I have mistaken for those I speak of. I understand that Miss Marlowe goes a point further and does not hand the flowers to the other characters on the stage, but distributes them to the mere air, to creations of a distraught fancy. I myself should say that an insane person still would be able to realise the presence of others. But, after all, it is a question of how a conception is carried out, and I understood Miss Marlowe does the scene beautifully.

I dress the role first in Nile-green crepe de Chine with silver water-lilies and a silver girdle, a simple clinging, soft affair and of my own design. In the mad scene I wear a loose white robe with a cord girdle.

Between my first appearance on the stage and my first engagement with Mr. Sothern which finally lead to my playing of this exquisite Shakespearean role, lay many years of protest and rebellion. I had a knack at imitation, and when I was sixteen I applied to a manager for an engagement. I remember standing on the stage in that cold and awful music hall with no one in the audience but the manager sitting there in the half-light of the daytime. But I hardly had begun before he was roaring with laughter, and I knew I was a success. But from the moment of my first hit I became branded as a mimic, and felt then already that I was making a success at the expense of my higher ambitions.

What seemed a good chance offered in 1894, when Augustin Daly brought me over with the understanding that I was to appear in plays like "The Country Girl," while the larger productions were to be made for Miss Rehan. Then occurred something concerning which nothing ever has been printed. Mr Day suggested that, in order to accustom myself to regular stage work, I should go on the preliminary tour under an assumed named and play minor roles. When the company played "As You Like It," a certain Miss Cecil received some good notices for her Audrey. That Miss Cecil was myself. After the company returned to New York, I found that the opportunities I had looked for were being withheld from me, so I went back to "imitations." Five years later I again was at Daly's in Daniel Frohman's stock company, but only for a season. The opening of the next season found me going the rounds from manager to manager, seeking an engagement. One of the leading producers said to me, "You're a fool to come to me for an engagement when you shine in 'imitations' and can make so much more at that."

Shortly afterwards I read in a chance newspaper paragraph that Mr Sothern and Miss Harned were to star separately, so I wrote to him, sending him some photographs and notices. He tried me at rehearsal and engaged me. I think what impressed him was my willingness to give up the money I could make at 'imitations' and accept a much smaller sum for legitimate engagement.

Few people who are not on the stage realise, I venture to say, what Mrs Jameson's subtle analyses of the women in Shakespeare's plays mean to actresses who are called upon to portray these roles. A woman writing of women for women! The temperamental union is strikingly interesting. Since I have acted Ophelia, I have been deeply moved by Mrs Jameson's analysis of the reasons why the character appeals so strongly to our sympathies. "It is the helplessness of innocence in Ophelia, pictured without any indication of weakness, which, as the authoress says, melts us with such profound pity. Her emotions "are prematurely developed in their full force before she has strength to bear them; and love and grief together rend and shatter the frail texture of her existence, like the burning fluid poured into a crystal vase."

Very finely, too, does Mrs Jameson contrast the racial types as between Juliet and Ophelia, showing how natural is the impulsiveness of the former, the modest hesitancy of the latter. Juliet is of the South, with its dark, splendid eyes and Titian-like complexion, while in Ophelia we have the Scandinavian—a pensive, fair-haired, blue-eyed daughter of the North, "whose heart seems to vibrate to the passion she has inspired—more conscious of being loved than of loving."

And yet she loves too. For when Laertes warns her against Hamlet and bids her hold 'the trifling of his favour' as no more than

> a toy in the blood
> A violet in the youth of primy nature,
> Forward, not permanent; sweet, not lasting,
> The perfume and suppliance of a minute—
> No more!

She replies with a question, uttered as if in the half-awakening from a dream,

> No more but so?

For some reasons I should have liked it had I been able to read Mrs Jameson's comments on Ophelia before I acted the role. Then, at least, I might have felt that there was some reason in the criticisms of my performance which charged that it was not original.

For even when I played Ophelia, the brand of the mimic still was upon me. Several critics wrote that my Ophelia was an imitation of all the other Ophelias I had seen.

There's rosemary, that's for remembrance!

But how could I remember all those other Ophelias I never had seen?