

## EDMOND ROSTAND

BY ANNA ROBESON BURR

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ROSTAND'S death has been almost unnoticed. In that fierce Twilight of the Gods of December, 1918, the passing of a romantic poet seemed but a small incident, disregarded in the tumult that marked, to so many of us, the very passing of romance herself.

Edmond Rostand died in his fiftieth year. His literary life had been brief; the period of dramatic composition lasting only from 1894, the date of *Les Romanesques*, to that of *Chantecler* in 1910. In 1893 he had published a volume of verse entitled *Les Musardises*, which, though delicate, and giving promise of that astonishing verbal dexterity which later was to distinguish his work, are only the "trifles" that they were named. Other fugitive pieces appeared in 1897 and since 1910—but the Rondeau and Ballade in *Cyrano*; the song in "*La Princesse Lointaine*;" the sonnets, hymn to the sun and Prayer of the Little Birds in *Chantecler* remain the best work of a writer whose lyrical strain was ever heightened and inspired by his dramatic sense. None of the verse published by him separately touches his dialogue in point of terseness, wit, color, or learned ornament. In these regards, he often strikes the English reader as essentially Elizabethan, if indeed that term be still held to imply a higher vitality, a fuller romantic spirit, a larger heroic vision and a plethora of dramatic and verbal invention.

Nor must it be forgotten that Rostand displays these qualities while yet held within the narrow limits of the classic versified drama, which seems to stimulate the French genius by the very difficulties and limitations it imposes. When *Cyrano* appeared, Victor Hugo was still in memory, but Hugo had been grandiose without humor and even the traditional patience of Parisian audiences was beginning to

fail them during the long tirades of *Hernani*. Their stage had familiarized them with the heroic, while it had never failed to provide a delightful abundance of humorous invention; the two blended into one play were, however, something entirely new, and the sensation caused by the first performance of *Cyrano* will not soon be forgotten. There were moments when the action was halted by the delight of the audience, when the salvos of wit was followed, time after time, by prolonged salvos of applause. At once the romantic hero seemed to be revitalized in this new and typically Gallic conception, far more human, as well as more French than any of Hugo's solemn and rhetorical figureheads. Poetic drama since Racine had tended toward a certain stridency in declamation, which the color and fire of Hugo at his best had only subdued. In *Cyrano*, the heroic note seemed to regain humanity and flexibility; while critics observed that the author, delighting in allusion and verbal play, preferring to call himself "*précieux*," could yet at need sharpen his dialogue with an edge that was intensely modern.

Now the public had scarcely been prepared for the success of *Cyrano* by Rostand's three previous plays. The first, *Les Romanesques*, is a graceful and charming comedy in the style of de Musset, slight of texture and light in manner. The second, *La Samaritaine*, is more difficult to place. The verse is full of dignity and has moments of tranquil beauty; but the drama is lacking in action, nor can the author successfully create a Divine figure which has already been drawn in words of transcendent inspiration. To our minds, re-writing the New Testament is an experiment foredoomed to failure; and one not redeemed here by the tenderness which informs it. In *La Princesse Lointaine*, Rostand gives for the first time marked indications of his moving flexibility in dialogue. But the play is apart from life. His puppets move vaguely through a mist of antiquity; his heroine is stiff, and self-satisfied; while neither of his troubadour heroes is free from self-consciousness. The musical verse is jewelled with strange words in Rostand's favorite manner, yet nowhere rises above the merely artificial.

Throughout the piece, we seem perpetually conscious of Mme. Bernhardt's golden voice and *moyen-âge* attitudes; the emotion is the kind of emotion that Mme. Bernhardt likes to portray, while the conversion at the end brings no

sense of reality. The play is, in a word, factitious; while of Cyrano's originality, drama, humanity, humor and close texture, there is no indication whatever.

That *Cyrano de Bergerac*, which remains the greatest of Rostand's works, was founded on the life and legend of a 17th Century dramatist and satirical romancer, whose pieces, notably his "Voyage to the Moon," had startled the naive and amused the learned at the court of the Great Louis. The real Cyrano was a personality out of Dumas, but the playwright, while closely following the main incidents of his career, gives him a fineness and nobility which lift him above that d'Artagnan with whom he is so often compared. Technically, the piece presents much of interest, but its structural characteristics hardly come within the limits of this essay. Termed by the author an "heroic comedy," it rises now and again to the heights of an heroic tragedy. The plot built around the highly-colored central personality and inspired by the legend of his heroism, unfolds before us in a series of episodes, which move with unflagging verve and are elaborated with abundant poetic and dramatic ingenuity. No modern play surpasses it in that sense of stage effectiveness, for which there exists no English term—it is at all times incomparably *theatrical*. This does not mean that it is always theatrical; for indeed, many of the best scenes, notably the last, are human, poignant, and make a direct appeal that is the very reverse of theatrical. But they are scenes built to be played, to challenge the resources and to exhibit the powers of the actor, who must employ, from the attack to the finale, the whole range of emotion and a high degree of physical force. Coquelin made of the part a living figure, never to be forgotten by anyone who saw him, and created on those large, free lines which we yet think of as Elizabethan. Around this hero, who is almost never absent from the scene, cluster a series of lesser portraits, differentiated with spontaneous perception, gayety, and humor. The opening is filled with small, brilliant episodes; as when Cyrano meets the musketeer d'Artagnan, or the entrance of the *précieuses*, all in the spirit of polished comedy. This, unfortunately, degenerated in English into mere mechanical stage business quite lost on the audience, who however, were altogether won by the larger moments of the play.

It is in these episodes and through these smaller figures

that one comes to realize the amazing flexibility of Rostand's style. Obligated to compose this long drama entirely within the cramping limitations of metre, he yet manages his dialogue with such ease, that one is practically never once reminded of them, and never once bored by the conviction that "*soir*" is going to be rhymed with "*espoir*." The metrical form is as rapid and sure as though it were his natural speech; it is handled with a color, a fullness and a dexterity that is in the very spirit of genius. He seems to invent verbal difficulties for the pure pleasure of surmounting them, making use of occult rhymes, strange puns, cryptic allusions, intricate plays on words, while his exchanges fairly scintillate with a wit that is at each riposte, freshly inventive.

There were early indications of this power to be found, as in the charming *Charivari à la Lune* in *Les Musardises*, but such admirable poetic trifling had surely never been previously used in order to enliven the long and monotonous tirade, so dear to the French stage. That famous speech in which Cyrano gives, in quick succession, twenty different descriptions of his own nose and rhymes to such a word as "*Hippocampelephantocamélos*"; or his "*Non, merci*" speech, struck an entirely new note. While their humor is purely Gallic, they show a sheer virtuosity savoring of the heroic. In *Chantecler*, Rostand repeats these effects with an ever-increasing mastery, until at last we feel it is the author himself who takes the centre of the stage and amuses himself with our astonishment at his own volubility. *Chantecler's* "*coq*" speech;—

*Oui, Coqs affectant des formes incongrues,  
Coquemars, Cauchemars, Coqs, et Coquecigrues, . . .*

is in reality nothing less than patter, but a patter that would have amused Shakespeare and delighted Aristophanes. Rostand was one to whom words were a passion, one for whom language held an inexhaustible miracle . . .

*La merveille  
Du beau mot mystérieux  
C'est qu'on le lit d'oreille,  
Et qu'on l'écoute des yeux!*

It is unfortunate that this delicate distinction became in English only a sort of meaningless verbosity—that those bits of dialogue invented for the sake of their wit, or for some verbal quip—served to lend the scene merely an effect of

restless bustle. In his own country, of course, Rostand had enjoyed an immense inspiration from his public, which responded at once to the virtuosity of *Cyrano*. If the critic be tempted to insist on this quality, it is because he must insist on the virtuosity of any artist of rank, be he Paderewski, Caruso, or Swinburne, because it is the first quality of the artist to be insisted on. The first, but not the last. There are qualities counting for more in a final estimate, and Rostand's place in future will not be determined by his verbal dexterity, although this is sufficiently remarkable. Audiences outside of France, and readers the world over, found in *Cyrano* poetry and emotion and distinction, which needed no verbal dexterity, but speak a direct and universal language. The last act, in particular, had a feeling and a restraint, that made the most of its note: "*Le destin est railleur!*"

Re-reading *l'Aiglon*, one is struck by the author's development in more than one direction. As a piece, it is simpler, because the central figure is conceived on definite Hamlet lines; yet more complicated in construction and in dramatic effects. This complexity is unfortunate, it detracts from the appeal of the situation and its inevitability; so that there are times when we feel the author is indulging himself in rhetoric. Napoleonic legend has ever a fascination for our minds; the book which furnished Rostand with his material (*Le roi de Rome* by Henri Welschinger,) displays this fascination upon every page. All the characters in the play are drawn from it, with most of the incidents and text for the principal speeches. Technically, the drama is uneven and suffers from an apparent desire to include everything, real and imaginary, that could be discovered concerning the hero. This may be responsible for the existence of the IV Act, so dull and weak that the writer's charm and concentration seem alike to fail him; while the last Act of all is a long-drawn, deliberate playing on one note, making the death-scene of Rostand's "little white Hamlet" far less pathetic than the final scene in *Cyrano*, so moving, because so reticent. Yet this play contains much of Rostand's most striking work; his Flambeau is indeed conceived in an epic spirit; his wit and irony were never more terse and stinging; while the V Act is drawn to the imagination with an intensity and a prophetic thrill, more keenly to be felt to-day than when it was written.

*Ah, je comprends! . . . Le cri de cet homme qui meurt  
Fut pour ce val qui sait tous les rôles par coeur,  
Comme le premier vers d'une chanson connue  
Et quand l'homme se tait, la plaine continue!*

These cries of the wounded and the dying borne by the wind over that "immense plain" of Wagram have a new and terrible meaning in our ears to-day.

Both *Cyrano* and *l'Aiglon* were founded on the work of that supreme and original dramatist, Life. *Chantecler*, the last of Rostand's plays, is an effort to get away from Life, and therefore becomes a *tour-de-force*. It took well-nigh ten years in preparation and was held back from production for many months in order that the author might polish certain verses in the third Act. Rostand evidently prefers it to his other plays; he makes his characters the mouthpiece of a more definite philosophy, he fills it with his most charming poetry and diversifies the action with a store of puns, parodies and learned wit. With delight, he returns to the rôle of "*précieux*"; in common parlance, he seems constantly to be "letting himself go." If the result is by no means dramatically successful, it is because the stage demands more than novelty of theme and cleverness of dialogue. *Chantecler* remains, however, the most friendly and satisfying of all Rostand's pieces to read.

Satire has made use of the animal kingdom in all literatures since the days of Reynard the Fox, and Rostand's revival of this ancient form became at once the subject of academic discussion. In his hands, as in Chaucer's it becomes the peg on which to hang a criticism of life. He himself has said of *Chantecler* that it represented the drama of human endeavor grappling with life. The Cock is man, the Idealist, perpetually under the delusion of his own importance and success. The Pheasant is modern woman, wearing the plumage of the male and ever his antagonist in the fields of thought, but in the last analysis, Woman still, ready to sacrifice herself for man, and for his ideas, in which she herself does not believe.

*Vous n'en restez pas moins une femelle encor  
Pour quit toujours l'idée est la grande adversaire.*

Woman, adversary of the Idea, is ready through her love for Man, to die for the Idea; and thus, in Rostand's drama, the Pheasant shares the romantic interest with the illusioned hero. Now all this might be very dull but for the fact that



these bird-figures move in an imaginative setting, equally responsive to nature, whether in her most homely or most hidden beauty. The poet's feeling is not only delicate, it is absolutely simple. His verse is warm with the glow of sunshine and summer earth, in a "*Silence chaud, rempli de gloussements heureux*;" or sparkles with the moonlight on the forest at the singing of the nightingale:

*Je sens, tout petit, perdu dans l'arbre noir  
Que je vais devenir l'immense coeur du soir.*

As in the earlier plays, Rostand's minor incidents and characters yield us a rich store of humor. Who can forget the ancient hen, Chantecler's foster-mother, who puts up her dishevelled head now and again from an old basket, and lets fall some barnyard saw, or "flower of folk-lore"? Or the little grey hen who was in love with the cuckoo clock,

*Celui qui loge  
Dans les bois, ou celui qui loge dans l'horloge?*

Or Patou, the old dog, "made to sleep anywhere"! (*partout*). Or the Raven, the true Parisian, cynic, wit, eternal boulevardier? The farm-yard and its inmates are portrayed by that sane and penetrating vision which lends dignity to reality; while the forest lies before us in the same mysterious light which bathes the forest in *As You Like It*. We are the spectators of a world whose tragedy interprets our own. If Rostand is at all times a romantic of the romantics, yet he is also a modern of the moderns. He draws the romantic spirit in its contest with the real world, and shows that it is predestined to failure, and must expect failure. Thus *Cyrano* fails, and *l'Aiglon* fails, and *Chantecler*, that heroic comedian, who is but another *Cyrano* in feathers, fails also. Their success in life has been but the *beau geste*, and the *beau geste* remains their only accomplishment. This modernity of conception lifts Rostand above the ranks of the romantics and sets him on the plane with the great satirists Rabelais, Molière. In his mind, the personality is what counts; the heroic figure is one who lives by and for his Idea. All of his heroes live for their Idea, by no means necessarily a true one, which consoles and rewards them for a lack of worldly success. Joffroy Rudel is content to die in the arms of that Far-Away Princess, whose quest had been the inspiration of his song. *L'Aiglon* turns back to his prison with the thought that he, perchance, is the expiatory sacrifice for the Napoleonic dream of empire.

Chantecler returns to his homely barnyard, constant in adoration of the sunshine, though he knows now his song has never caused it, and content in his philosophy of the microcosm.

*Quand on sait regarder et souffrir on sait tout.  
Dans une mort d'insecte on voit tous les désastres,  
Un rond d'azur suffit pour voir passer les astres.*

To Cyrano, his gesture, his free art, his "*panache*," meant more than the purse of gold, or fame in the world, or even his Roxane herself. He is a hero through his character and not through his achievement; while the poet's tenderness toward him is a tenderness toward all mankind.

One comment remains. The student is especially struck by the absence of any valid Rostand criticism. Doubtless this is for the reason that as poet, he has taken his stand in the full sunlight. The academic world took him in the course of the day's work, and translated him in uninspired and rather a bedazzled manner. But the critic is not tempted; he prefers half-lights and shadows. This poet is his own interpreter; his note is that of the nightingale, at whose song the Frogs must cease their croaking; and hence criticism for the most part lets him alone.

But the value of his sun-lit philosophy has heightened since he wrote and since our world has descended into the Valley of the Shadow where only real and ultimate things remain. The shadows that delighted 1895-1910 suddenly deepened into blackness; and Rostand passed as we were frantically seeking for the sunshine he might well have helped us to find. To-day, fundamental needs and problems press on us, so that we listen gratefully to this poet of them and in our doubt as to the future, we ask with the Pheasant,—

*Mais comment reprend-on du courage  
Quand on doute de l'oeuvre?*

and Chantecler answers—

*On se met à l'ouvrage!*

The best of us feel that Rostand's philosophy is, after all, the only means by which we shall be able to save ourselves and our shaken and faltering world.

ANNA ROBESON BURR.



# SOME IMPRESSIONS OF MY ELDERS

H. G. WELLS

BY ST. JOHN ERVINE

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## I

THERE are men, such as Dr. Johnson, who are mentally active and physically torpid, and there are other men, such as Jack Johnson, who are very alert physically, but not quite so alert in their minds. It seldom happens that a man combines great physical energy with great intellectual energy. Such a man is Mr. Bernard Shaw. So is Mr. H. G. Wells. I imagine that Mr. Wells is more active, both in body and in mind, than Mr. Shaw, despite the fact that the latter is the slender man of the two and that his tongue works more rapidly in conjunction with his brain; for Mr. Shaw feels fatigue sooner than Mr. Wells. I doubt whether Mr. Wells suffers from fatigue at all or to any serious extent. He takes few, if any, holidays, works for many hours every day, plays games very assiduously, and is unhappy if he has not got some work on hand. He begins to write a new book immediately he has completed its predecessor, having no belief, seemingly, in fallow time. When he is not working or playing, he is talking. His conversation has a curious resemblance in its shape, if I may use that word, to the style of his writing. One listens for the suspended sentence, for the four dots with which, in his prose, he breaks a thought so that the reader may himself complete it. Mr. Shaw once told me that he could not work at creative writing for more than two hours every day, and I suspect that he suffers more from physical fatigue than he will admit. Mr. Wells works for considerably more than two hours every day (and sometimes during the night) though I do not suppose he works for two consecutive hours at any time. If you are a guest in his house, you will see him engaged in some game, tennis or hockey or that wild game of his own invention, "barn-