

Charlotte Cushman



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From a photograph by Warren, Boston

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**T**HE woman who earned the right to be known as "the first great American actress" did not come easily to her proud distinction. A study of her career fills one with wonder at her genius, truly, but, even more, with respect for her years of patient, unflagging industry and the buoyant hopefulness with which she worked.

A latter-day philosopher has said: "Get your happiness out of your work, or you will never know what happiness is." The truth of it is strikingly evident in the life of the great Cushman, who was seen to be destined for great things even in her early childhood, and, through years of toil, reached the pinnacle of immortal fame.

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"Imitation was a prevailing trait with me," she once said. "On one occasion, when Henry Ware, pastor of the old Boston Meeting House, was taking tea with my mother, he sat at table talking, with his chin resting in his two hands and his elbows on the table. I was suddenly startled by my mother exclaiming, 'Charlotte, take your elbows off the table and your chin out of your hands; it is not a pretty position for a young lady!' I was sitting in exact imitation of the parson, even assuming the expression of his face."

Her passion for thoroughness and original investigation is also indicated very early in life. "My earliest recollections," she says, "are of dolls ruthlessly cracked open to see what they were thinking about; I was possessed with the idea that dolls could and did think."

As often happens, the family of the

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future actress was very poor. When Charlotte was thirteen, her father became unable to provide for them longer, even so scantily as had been his wont. The mother and five children suffered steadily from want, and Charlotte, as many a brave daughter has done before and since her time, avowed her intention of putting the family fortunes upon a firm basis.

Fortunately, the child had a voice. "It had almost two full registers, a full contralto and almost a full soprano, but the lower voice was the natural one." A friend loaned the money which enabled her to study for two years, for, as they thought then, music teaching was the only career open to her. A member of a piano firm gave her the use of a piano for practice in his salesroom—they were too poor to own one—and the young woman of fourteen began work with the same tireless, restless energy which characterised every-

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thing she did through all the rest of her life.

Before long, she was singing in opera in New Orleans. When she was nineteen, she made her professional début, and scored a success. But, too eager to make rapid progress, she worked too hard, overstrained—and ruined—her voice, and was thus left stranded.

Blessings are said to come in disguise, but this one was so heavily veiled that poor Charlotte could not penetrate its mystery. When the unhappy girl asked a New Orleans theatrical manager for advice, he told her, decisively, that she should be an actress, and not a singer. "If you will study a few dramatic parts," he said, "I will get Mr. Barton, the tragedian of our theatre, to hear you and to take an interest in you."

Barton was so much impressed by her first effort that he engaged her to appear as

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Lady Macbeth when he appeared as Macbeth at his own benefit. Enraptured with the idea, she did not tell him she had no stage wardrobe until it was too late to secure anyone else to fill her place. Some of the clothing of the tragedienne of the French Theatre was lengthened and taken in to fit her, and, after much sewing, she was finally provided with a costume or two.

Before a brilliant audience, the young Lady Macbeth scored a complete triumph. At the end of the season, she started for New York. After a number of preliminary discouragements, she secured a position for three years at twenty-five dollars a week. But, a week before she was to make her first appearance, she had a severe attack of rheumatic fever, and missed the first three weeks of her season. She appeared when she was too ill to be out of bed, and, in spite of that, scored another success, fully satisfying her man-

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ager. But, while she was ill again, the theatre was burned, with her costumes, and all her brilliant prospects, as he said, "went up in smoke."

As soon as she was well enough to travel, she secured a situation in Albany. A writer of the period speaks of her thus, as she appeared at a ball: "In all the freshness and bloom of youth, magnificently attired, her head adorned with an immense and beautiful bird of paradise—as she threaded the mazes of the dance, or moved gracefully in the promenade, her stately form towering above her companions, she was 'the observed of all observers,' the bright, particular star of the evening."

During the winter in Albany, love came to Charlotte Cushman for the first and last time. Nothing is known of the affair except what she herself has written:

"There was a time in my life of girlhood when I thought I had been called upon to



bear the very hardest thing that can come to a woman. Yet, if I had been spared this early trial, I should never have been so earnest and faithful in my art; I should still have been casting about for the 'counterpart,' and not given my entire self to my work. God helped me in my art-isolation, and rewarded me for recognising Him and helping myself. . . . My art, God knows, has never failed me, never failed to bring me rich reward, never failed to bring me comfort. I conquered my grief and myself. Labour saved me then and always, and so I proved the eternal goodness of God."

After seven years of hard work, steady devotion and sacrifice to her family, she came into her own. Accompanied only by her faithful coloured maid, "Sally," she went to England, and, after many difficulties in gaining a hearing, appeared at the Princess Theatre in London as Bianca in

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*Fazio.* Her power and passion swept her staid English audience literally off its feet, and the theatre rang with cheers, curtain calls, and cries of "Bravo!"

Writing to her mother, she said: "By the packet of the 10th I wrote you and sent you newspapers, which could tell you in so much better language than I could, of my brilliant and triumphant success in London. I can say no more to you than this: that it is far, far beyond my most sanguine expectations. In my most ambitious moments I never dreamed of the success which has awaited me and crowned every effort I have made. . . . All my successes put together since I have been upon the stage would not come near my success in London; and I only wanted some one of you here to enjoy it with me to make my happiness complete."

The great men and women of the time were proud to be her friends. She gave

a dinner to Ristori, knew the Carlyles, Lord Houghton, Lathrop, Motley, Theodore Parkman, and many lords and ladies of title and renown.

Among the innumerable parts which she played, she is remembered most for her Lady Macbeth, Romeo to her sister Susan's Juliet, Meg Merrilies, and Nancy Sikes. The latter portrayal was said to be so impressive in its powerful realism that women were often carried, fainting, from the theatre in which she played it, and strong men lay awake all night, after having seen it, with the horror of it still upon them.

Once, while she was playing Romeo in Boston, a young man in the audience, intending to be funny, sneezed several times during one of the love scenes. Miss Cushman led Juliet off the stage, then, clad in her doublet and hose, returned to the footlights and said, in a clear, ringing

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voice, "Someone must put that person out or I shall be obliged to do it myself." When the unfortunate man was put out, Romeo resumed her impassioned love scene, amid a storm of cheers.

When she first returned to America, after her English success, she was greeted with an ovation. From that time on, she was the star of the English-speaking stage. Deeply patriotic, she gave benefit performances during the War of the Rebellion, and one performance alone netted over eight thousand dollars for the Sanitary Commission.

In 1875, as Lady Macbeth, the part in which she scored her first success, Charlotte Cushman took her leave of the stage, before one of the most distinguished audiences ever gathered under one roof. The house was brilliantly decorated with autumn leaves, vines, fruits, and flowers, symbolising the maturity of her power and the ripeness of her fame.

William Cullen Bryant addressed her, presenting her with a laurel wreath. Richard Henry Stoddard had written an ode to her, in which he coupled her name with that of Shakespeare. Her response was simple, dignified, modest, and so full of feeling that many in the audience were moved to tears.

"Beggar that I am, I am even poor in thanks, but I thank you. Gentlemen, the heart has no speech; its only language is a tear or a pressure of the hand, and words very feebly convey or interpret its emotions. Yet I would beg you to believe that in the three little words which I now speak, 'I thank you,' there are heart depths which I should fail to express better, though I should use a thousand other words.

"I thank you, gentlemen, for the honour you have offered me. I thank you, not only for myself, but for the whole profession, to

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which, through and by me, you have paid this very graceful compliment. . . .

“To my public—what shall I say? From the depths of my heart, I thank you, who have given me always consideration, encouragement, and patience; who have been ever my comfort, my support, my main help. I do not now say farewell to you in the usual sense of the word. In making my final representation of the mimic scene in the various cities of the country, I have reserved to myself the right of meeting you again where you have made me believe that I give you pleasure which I receive myself at the same time, at the reading desk. To you, then, I say, may you fare well and may I fare well, until at no distant day, we meet—there. Meanwhile, good, kind friends, good night, and God be with you.”