

## LEGEND AND MARIE BASHKIRTSEFF

*What is the use of lying and posing? To begin with, I wrote for a long time without ever thinking that I should be read by others, and now it is just because I do hope to be read that I am absolutely truthful. If this book were not the exact, absolute and faithful truth, there would be no reason for its existence.*

Marie Bashkirtseff thus opens the preface of her “Diary.” It seems to me that my poor, charming friend did not need this preamble. When there is anything that deviates from the strict truth in her memoir it becomes a romance, the title of the book thus becomes inaccurate and makes it lose much of its value.

I had already read Marie Bashkirtseff’s Diary when the first two volumes appeared in print, but during the first perusal of it, I was still too full of emotion, of sorrow, to be able to criticize the book and grasp the wrong impression it gave of the author. She seemed to live again in certain details, certain scenes in which, in nearly every case, the actors and the setting were familiar to me, but I could not judge of the *tout ensemble* of the book, and of the effect that such a work would produce on the indifferent reader. In spite of this, it seemed to me that I did not find in the book the Marie I had known—the best and most intelligent of women, the rare soul to whose advice I owe nearly all the good fortune I have had in my life.

A third volume of Marie Bashkirtseff’s Memoirs appeared recently. I then reread the three volumes, and was disagreeably surprised to discover several misstatements that had escaped me at the first reading, and which, I am sure, were quite unintentional on the part of the authoress.

In 1879 Marie owned to her Diary that she was nineteen, and spoke of the marriage of her brother Paul, who had then attained his Majority. Although it is not mentioned in any part of the Diary, as now published, the fact is that Marie was older than her brother Paul. Again, in the book Marie is present at the Michael Angelo [quarto] centenary fêtes at Florence, and the date is given as the 14<sup>th</sup> September 1874. Unfortunately for the book, I will not say for Marie, these fêtes were celebrated in 1875. People do not think of all these things in arranging.

After this incontrovertible instance, it seems difficult to credit the dates of the book. We are astonished at the precocity, the maturity, the depth of soul with which Marie wrote at the age of twelve. Her reflections of the Duke of Hamilton, reflections of a little girl of twelve, if we are to trust the veracity of the book, provoked the admiration of Lombroso<sup>1</sup> and other specialists. Doctors have gone into this “case” from the beginning, they have put down this unheard-of precocity to atavism, have discovered a humpbacked aunt, consumptive tendencies, extraordinary circumstances of birth, etc., etc. All this has increased the sale of the book and has interested the reader, whilst the real truth, which is better proved by the trickery of the book than even by the publication of Marie’s birth certificate, is that Marie at the moment of her fancy for the Duke of Hamilton was sixteen or seventeen years of age, and that the “freak” who has puzzled all the mind specialists was simply an ordinary young girl waiting for the Prince Charming whom all girls expect at that age.

In light of the *real, plain, unvarnished* truth, Marie is no longer a “freak,” a phenomenon; she leaves Barnum’s show for the ranks of ordinary people, and if she loses something in novelty, I am quite sure she gains greatly in interest. Again in the book certain things are made to stand out, the smallest occurrences in the St. Julian Studio [Académie Julian] are repeated and enlarged indefinitely, whilst in reality, after the first six months of studio life, Marie grew weary of this tittle-tattle, and did not even repeat it to those who, like myself, were her daily confidants.

On the other hand, other pages of the Diary are entirely omitted, or very nearly so. Marie was one of the first apostles of feminism. She aided in the publication of the *Citoyenne*, a feminist paper which preceded the *Fronde*, and which has since disappeared, and for which she wrote the art criticism for a year or two. For a while she was devoted, body and soul, to feminism. She used to be present at the meetings in the Petrelle Hall, and scolded me as if I were the lowest of creatures, because my interest in these questions was not sufficiently lively, and because on one occasion I pushed my indifference so far as to tell her that I had been present at a meeting to which she had sent me, and at which I had not appeared, while I related to her what I had read of the proceedings in the *Citoyenne*. “You are a wretch,” she said, “you have no right to refuse to be interested in a question which is going to change the face of the earth, etc., etc.” It is true that her interest in feminism was but a fire of straw [i.e. ephemeral], but it was real, and in Marie’s “soul-journey,” to borrow the delightful expression of one of the most justly celebrated of her biographers, this phase

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<sup>1</sup> Cesare Lombroso(1835–1909), Italian physician and criminologist. Studied psychology and psychiatry at the University of Vienna.

of her life was worthy to be recorded otherwise than by the simple mention of two visits that Marie paid to Hubertine Auclert, whose portrait she wished to paint.

In 1882 Marie spent two months at the Villa Misé Brun, near Nice. She led there a life of strenuous work, hardly ever going into Nice, and receiving no visits. A great peace descended upon her rather anxious nature. The memory of those two months passed near her is infinitely precious and dear to me. Monsieur and Madame Bashkirtseff, Madame Romanoff, and Paul and his wife, who were all there with us, went in every day to Monte Carlo by midday train, and did not return till Marie, Dina and myself had been long in bed. Marie painted all day; then, after a little walk in the twilight, she would shut herself in her room, where she wrote until dinnertime. At table she used to announce to Dina and myself that she had just written pages, compared to which the writings of all other aestheticians, philosophers and literary men were nothing but nonsense. After dinner she would draw, and Marie never retired to rest without writing a few more pages of her Diary. Not a word concerning this visit has been judged worthy of publication, and I am sorry for it, as it is the only time in her life when Marie, whose personality was so wonderfully interesting and original, could be her real self, freed from the pettiness and the exactions of worldly society, whose meannesses constantly irritated her. But at Villa Misé Brun we were alone, we did not enter a single drawing room at Nice; there was at this period no famous name to mention in the Diary, and these pages thus appeared uninteresting to those who were concerned in the publication of it. They have simply extracted an attack on Breslau inspired in several pages by Albert Wolff's praise of her.

I know that it must have been a difficult task to condense into two volumes the Memoirs of Marie Bashkirtseff which, printed *in extenso*, would have filled ten or twelve volumes at least. I except from blame M. Andre Theuriet, who edited the Diary, and this all the more freely as I know that he never met Marie, nor saw the real manuscript of her Diary, but only a copy which had been edited before he received it. I grant that the question of the moment was to make the book interesting. Marie was quite unknown at the moment of her death, and the mention of celebrated persons in her memoirs would naturally greatly augment the interest of her Diary and increase its sale. Marie, however, in herself, was interesting enough, and real enough; she was much more interesting than can be imagined by those who credit the absurd stories of her precocity which, instead of representing her as the good, amiable and clever girl she really was, make her out to be a "case" or an insupportable and neurotic *arriviste*.

Maurice Donnay, in *L'Autre Danger*, wishing to describe an insupportable young snob, speaks of her as “of the Marie Bashkirtseff order.” Maurice Donnay never knew Marie Bashkirtseff personally, and only judges her from what he has read about her.

Alphonse Daudet, in an interview with the *Figaro*, speaking of Madame Weiss, a Russian who murdered her husband in Algeria, says: “She reminds me of Marie Bashkirtseff. Heaven preserve our families from Franco-Russian unions.” Poor Marie! How abominably false this statement concerning an exquisite being such as you were.

This is all she has gained by her pretended precocity, the irritating reputation of the Julian meetings, and the Breslau success. And what proves more clearly than anything that M. Theuriet was not to blame for the misstatements in the first two volumes; the third volume, published without his supervision, is full of the same errors. These errors are to be found not only in the text, but also in the illustrations.

Under the title “Marie Bashkirtseff’s Studio,” we are shown a little house in the rue Hégésippe Moreau, where Marie never was, and which was taken by Madame Bashkirtseff ten years after the death of her daughter, in order to place there some of Marie’s pictures. There are really beautiful photographs of Marie’s studio taken at the rue de Ampère the day after her death. Why were these not published?

There appeared some years ago in *Black and White* an interesting article which has never been contradicted. This article proved that there is an error of four years in the dates of Marie’s Diary. But it came too late. The legend still prevails of the sentimental freak only twelve years of age, yet noting down her impressions with the ripe judgment of a grown woman. Marie’s admirers have been even more cruel to her than Daudet and Donnay; and the misstatements of the book have given rise to others. Legend has seized hold of Marie Bashkirtseff and daily defaces more and more her real character. Among these traditions the most firmly established is that of Marie Bashkirtseff’s love for Bastien-Lepage.

For years, whenever M. Thuriot has mentioned Bastien-Lepage in his articles, he has always spoken of Marie Bashkirtseff in connection with the great painter, who was his intimate friend, and in return, whenever he has written on the subject of Marie Bashkirtseff, he has mentioned Bastien-Lepage. In Marie’s Diary *everything* she says concerning Bastien-Lepage has been printed. During the last two years of her life his name recurs on nearly every page; whilst the names of people whom

Marie had been in the habit of seeing for years, such as A. de M., for instance, who proposed to her, not once, but three times, are not even mentioned. I know that Marie could not but be charmed with the great painter who united in his personality such a delightful being as Jules Bastien-Lepage. Eager as she always was for artistic society, she used to speak with enthusiasm of the man and his works; but it is going too far to deduce from this fact that their names should always be coupled together. The visit of Jules Bastien-Lepage to Marie only a few days before the young girl's death is also a dramatic incident well calculated to make an impression on the romantic reader, but even legend could hardly gather from it that there had ever been a love affair between the two, or that Marie, whose idea of honour were of the strictest, was ever anything more than the painter's sincere admirer. Taking everything together—visits, meetings in the Bois de Boulogne or at the Salon—Marie and Bastien-Lepage saw each other a dozen times at most; and I am not alone in asserting this. My statement is confirmed by the brother of the great painter, who was with him constantly at the time of his acquaintanceship with Marie. Another clear proof that Marie did not see much of Bastien-Lepage is the way in which she speaks of his mother, who like his brother, was constantly with her son at the time he met Marie. All of us who were in the habit of visiting the Bastien-Lepage household, fell under the spell of her whom he used to call "the little mother," an exquisite creature, at the same time so good, so gentle, and so intelligent. Well, Marie, speaking of her in her Diary, says:

She is a woman of sixty who looks as if she were forty-five or fifty. Her hair is of a pretty, fair colour, with hardly and white in it, and she has a kindly smile. In fact, she is a very sympathetic woman whose whole bearing is well in keeping with her black and white dress. She does very beautiful embroidery, for which she designs her own patterns.

"The little mother" might have created this superficial impression on a stranger, but it is absurd to think that Marie would not have amended this description if she had seen this unique woman but three times. Besides, in the third volume, Marie owns in the last days of her Diary that she hardly knew Bastien-Lepage at all. But the legend has rolled on, biographers have found copy in it, and in the intimacy, nay, more—the love affair of Marie and Bastien-Lepage have become notorious and incontestable facts.

At the time of the Exhibition of Children's Portraits at the Grafton Gallery in London one of my friends showed me a water-colour by Bastien-Lepage, representing a little girl of eight or ten years of age keeping a cow in a meadow. "It is a portrait of Marie Bashkirtseff, by Bastien-Lepage,"

said my friend, a well-known English novel-writer of the new school. I thought he was joking, and began to laugh. But my friend repeated his assertion in a serious tone.

“But look! The water-colour is dated 1880, and Marie owns to being twenty in her Diary, at that period. I know the model—she is a girl called Chandeau de Damvillers, who was ten years old in 1880. Besides, Bastien-Lepage had given up painting when he met Marie.”

“That is true?” answered my friend; “but I assure you that Bastien-Lepage painted a beautiful portrait of Marie Bashkirtseff. Every one knows that he did.”

Maurice Barrès, a great writer and one of the most clear-headed thinkers of our time, once rented the apartment where Jules Bastien-Lepage died. That was twelve years ago. Naturally, he was haunted by the memory of the great painter of Lorraine, and this led him to occupy himself with Marie Bashkirtseff. The eminent writer set to work and put together a biography of Marie Bashkirtseff. I quote M. Barrès' words:—

There are certain spots, famous in the history of human feeling, that carry our souls beyond their own feelings and give us a presentiment of the troubles that will agitate them one day. Such a spot is the terrace at Elsinore where the obscure Hamlet mourned over the death of his father.

They are the psychological spots that act as powerfully upon the imagination as hot springs upon certain physical temperaments; and Catholic pilgrimages of a similar nature show in a marvellous degree that this kind of intellectual exaltation contains all the conditions necessary for elevating curiosity and respect into real passions. But each generation chooses its own particular places of devotion, and it is by these preferences that the variations of feeling are revealed. Who among the younger of our new men would be moved at the sight of the house in the avenue d'Aylau [d'Eylau] which witnessed the close of so splendid a life? The older men, such as M. Catulle Mendès, or M. Camille Pelletan, must pity us for our coldness; and in spite of all their sympathetic comprehension, they would suspect us of bad faith if I added that, though we were indifferent to the last dwelling place of Victor Hugo, a certain little house in the Monceau quarter has power to move us. Marie Bashkirtseff lived for some years and finally died at 61, rue de Prony.

She was well calculated to arouse the interest of this group of liberal minds whose tone, irritating and yet attractive, has interested critics for some years past.

I approached the house by the short road that the young girl herself traversed so many times, when she visited Bastien-Lepage, dying in that house in the rue Le Grande, in which, by a touching accident, I have succeeded the good painter, whom she loved as a brother. The disconsolate mother of the girl whose memory we are recalling told me that when Bastien-Lepage learned the fatal news he hid his tears in the pillows among which he was still to wait three months for death. Marie Bashkirtseff was struck down by one of those miasmas that float about Paris. I saw volumes of Kant and Fichte lying on her desk opened at passionate pages which death prevented her perusing.

M. Maurice Barrès starts on this pilgrimage in a little book entitled *Trois Stations de Psychotherapie*, and describes Marie Bashkirtseff, whom he had known, whose personality he had grasped and sounded in the visit he paid the little house where she lived and died, where ten years after her death he found lying open the Kant and Fichte upon which the girl nourished herself. M. Barrès constitutes himself the biographer of Marie, talks of her in numerous articles that have appeared in the *Figaro* and elsewhere, and draws her portrait *ne varietur*,<sup>‡</sup> because he has often passed along a road that Marie had to traverse to reach the house of Bastien-Lepage.

Marie Bashkirtseff never lived in the rue de Prony; she died at 30, rue de Ampère, and all the details that interested M. Barrès so deeply, the books open on the desk, are due to the chances of unpacking. M. Barrès does not tell us who showed him the house into which he cannot have entered haphazard, nor does he tell us who pointed him out the desk upon which the open books were lying.

M. Maurice Barrès, after having devoted a number of articles to the subject of Marie Bashkirtseff, learned one day that he had been taken in, that there was more artificiality than reality in the cult that was paid to Marie in the little hotel in the rue de Prony, and after having offered too much incense before the young girl, he threw her aside in an article in the *Figaro*, which Marie

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<sup>‡</sup> not varied or changed

certainly did not deserve. Following his example, others, romantically interested in Marie, on learning that certain things they had repeated about her were false, slandered her in their turn, and those who hold her memory dear have each time felt an unpleasant shock. Is Marie to blame for what has happened? Certainly not; we can only feel sorry that the truth she loved so much should have been so minimised in the parts of the Diary that have been published, and that her charming figure should not have been presented to us in its true colours.

Bojidar Karageorgevitch

