CALIFORNIA LIFE OF A POLISH AUTHOR
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IT IS PERHAPS not generally known that the great novelist of the day, the famous author of "Quo Vadis," was twenty years ago quietly leading a farmer's life in Southern California.

Henrick Sienkiewicz came to this country in search of a spot in which to plant a Polish colony. When he had discovered a site he considered desirable he sent for his friends, Mme. Helena Modjeska and her husband, Count Bozenta, and together they bought a ranch near Los Angeles, worked it for all it was worth, and found to their cost—$15,000—that it was worth nothing.

They could not lay any claim to originality in the result they attained, which was to lose every penny of the amount they had put into the enterprise.

Mme. Modjeska came up from Southern California to San Francisco, and taking up her abode with a Polish nobleman, Mr. Bielawski, who has been for many years a resident of this city, she began the study of the English language, and finally made her debut in "Adrienne Lecouvreur," with what success we already know.

Mr. Sienkiewicz—by-the-by it is not possible to dwell too softly or too caressingly on the "S," which to the foreigner sounds almost like "sh" when it falls from the lips of a Pole, but which he quickly resents should you try so to pronounce it, and which you never get, no matter how hard you try. Nor can the second syllable be given with too great a snap.

In the Polish language the accent, with very rare exceptions, falls on the second syllable.

Mr. Sienkiewicz spent about two years on this Coast. While in San Francisco he made Mr. Bielawski's home his headquarters. A trip up Mount Diablo was among the amusements provided by his host for Mr. Sienkiewicz' entertainment. It was a four-days' outing, and thoroughly enjoyed with a party of his countrymen, although, as Mr Bielawski remarked, with a deprecatory smile, "when we reached the top of course it was too foggy to see the view!" In return for his disappointment Mr. Bielawski presented the good-looking young man to a family living in Martinez. It sounded strange to hear that gentleman remark, "And Mr. Sienkiewicz made himself look very fine to meet the pretty young girls." And it evidently seemed strange to him, since he thought it worth mentioning that a handsome nobleman of charming manners took the trouble to make as good an impression as he could on the gentler sex. "Strange," when we look upon the intellectual brow, the melancholy eyes, when we know the serious, high moral character of the man, Sienkiewicz, to picture him, like any ordinary individual, committing even the very innocent frivolity of "making himself pretty," as Mr. Bielawski put it, "for the girls."

What seems more in keeping with our conception of this celebrated writer, gathered from our knowledge of his love of romance and adventure, is the following incident:

In his own country Mr. Sienkiewicz is a nobleman, and the informality of our American ways rather surprised him. He was both puzzled and amused when the hack driver who had been taking them about the country in the neighborhood of Martinez, extended him a polite invitation to visit his mother and sisters on their ranch, which, he said, was a fine, large one, worthy of inspection, and situated within a few miles of the town.

"Eh," said Mr. Sienkiewicz to his friend, Mr. Bielawski. "How is this? Strange country, where a coachman from a livery stable invites a gentleman to pay him a visit!"

But he went, and not only went, but staid a good, long week, and was charmed with the pretty daughters of the house and the cordial hospitality he received.

Though still unknown as a writer, Mr. Sienkiewicz made a lasting impression as a lecturer. He spoke in Polish, before Poles and of a Pole, their famous poet, and he roused his countrymen to a state of enthusiasm by his eloquence and by his marvelous memory, which, to the surprise of his audience, enabled him to quote pages upon pages with wonderful effect. It seems to be a characteristic of the Polish nation to accomplish things on a colossal scale. Mr. Sienkiewicz astounded his hearers with the prodigiousness of his memory and with the prodigiousness of his novels he astounds the world.

The leading writer of Poland during the last century was Joseph Ignatius Kraszewski, of whose innumerable novels one, at least, "The Jew," has been translated into English. Kraszewski was the author of more than 450 volumes, and Mr. Sienkiewicz threatens to be no less prolific.

Mr. Sienkiewicz was born in 1846 of Lithuanian parents. He is, as he himself states, as well as others, a pure child of Lithuania. After finishing his studies at the University of Warsaw he adopted a wandering existence, and joined a nomadic tribe of gypsies. While in America he sent back to Warsaw stories and impressions of travel, which found a market there.

Henry Sienkiewicz as He Was When in California.

From all accounts Sienkiewicz was not yet prominent in his thirty-sixth year. It is since 1884 that he has earned the reputation which he now enjoys in Poland.

In 1880 he published under the title of "Pisma" a great many short stories and incidents of country life which have not yet been translated into English, but enjoy a great popularity in Germany. About this time he became editor of the newspaper (or magazine) called Slowo. In this paper Sienkiewicz began to publish the first chapters of an immense historical romance. From 1880 to 1888 it seems to have been running its gigantic course. For at least eight years Polish readers, without any sign of impatience, followed the lengthy adventures of a group of half-chivalrous, half-savage nobles during the middle years of the seventeenth century. The genius of Sienkiewicz to excite and maintain the interest of his public is certainly not to be questioned. The romance appeared by installments and was completed in thirteen massive volumes.

With regard to his short stories, the productions of his youth, most of them are village idyls which suggest the influence of Jeremias, Gotthelf and Auerbach, and sometimes come very close to the early manner of Bjornson. From Nitschmann's account of recent Polish literature we gather that the minute and romantic observation of episodes in peasant life, so familiar to German, Swiss and Scandinavian readers, had the charm of novelty for Poles. The European critic will not see much originality in the early tales of Sienkiewicz. The following, "Janko, the Musician," is an example: A weakly, rickety son is born to a poor woman in a remote Lithuanian village, and is looked upon in the family as a burden. As he grows up almost every one except his mother wishes that Janko had died. The poor boy is conscious of this lack of sympathy, and, constantly harassed by weakness, cold and hunger, shrinks more and more from the rough life of the village and steals at every opportunity into the surrounding forest. Here a supernatural sense is developed in him; he awakens to the consciousness of nature. The wind in the trees, the birds, the grass sing to him. "His poor little soul is transformed into an Aeolian harp, across which every elemental force sweeps its wild, fitful melodies. His starved body becomes a sort of rude or primitive violin, ready to respond to a touch. To the vague wonder of the neighbors, more scornful than sympathetic, he is a kind of crazy creature—'Janko, the Musician.' One day Janko watches with delight the playing of a fiddler at a feast, and he is lost in the yearning to possess, or at least to play upon, to touch the divine instrument." This being impossible, he constructs a rough violin which gives out no louder sound than "a murmuring of gnats on a summer evening."

On this miserable instrument Janko plays from morning until night. "But the footman at the great house has a beautiful violin, and one bright moonlight night Janko steals out in his shirt, patters with naked feet over the gravel and peeps through the window. In the moonshine hangs the mysterious violin, its pegs shining, its bow like a rod of silver. The house is silent, doubtless deserted. Over Janko there falls an intolerable yearning to dart in and touch with but one finger the exquisite sacred object. Dare he do so? The wind, the pine trees, the whispering creepers urge him on and then the voice of the nightingale rises, piercing the silence, thrusting him onward to this mad adventure. Only the owl, sailing softly by, hoots, 'No, Janko. No!' But the other voices prevail, and the little, crumpled, trembling figure darts into the doorway, then crouches almost on all fours and creeps toward the fiddle. He has just reached it, one sob rises from a string that he has touched, when a rough voice in the darkness calls out, 'Who's there?' A match is struck, Janko discovered, and, amid a storm of tears and entreaties, is cuffed and carried off to prison as an intending thief. He is condemned by the magistrate to be whipped by the town crier, and so brutally is this done and so feeble is the attenuated body and so deep the soul's despair that on the third day Janko dies in his distracted mother's arms."

The Contemporary Review calls attention to the final words of "Janko, the Musician," as "showing a touch of satire which distinguished the Polish writer from his German prototypes":

"Next day the quality came back from Italy to their mansion (in which Janko had been caught). The daughter of the house was accompanied by the cavalier who was courting her and said: 'Quel beau pays que l'Italie!' 'And such a nation of artists! Un est heureux de chercher la bas des talents et de les proteger,' continued the young lady.

"Over Janko's grave there was a sound of rustling among the birch trees."

"Na Marne," or "Shattered," a novel of student life in Kiew, has been translated into German. It was published by Sienkiewicz before 1881, and describes the arrival of a Polish youth at the great university of Southern Russia, and his adventures there in love and war. The charm of this book is the faithful friendship of the two contrasted heroes, Schwarz and Augustinowicz, who remained loyal to each other to the tragic close of the tale. The moral of the book is that Slavonic youth expends too much vital energy in the pursuit of love. "Love flies from us like a bird, and we find too late that all our force is shattered," says Augustinowicz, as the last page closes.

"With Fire and Sword" is the title of the book that is the beginning of Sienkiewicz' great historical trilogy, which has been compared in size to the huge heroic novels of the seventeenth century—"Cyrus" and "Clelie" and "Pharamond"—and also with regard to certain qualities of these earliest heroic novels.

Mme. de Sevigne, referring to one of them, said: "The beauty of the sentiments, the violence of the passions, the grandeur of the events and the miraculous success of the heroes' redoubtable swords all draw me on as if I were a little girl." Precisely the same may be said of the works of Sienkiewicz.

Edmond Gosse bewails the difficulty of mastering or even becoming casually acquainted with the names of persons and places in these gigantic Polish romances. He says: "One becomes accustomed to the names of the principal characters, however strangely they are spelt; it is the secondary persons that give the trouble. In 'With Fire and Sword' there is a delightful creature called Volodyoski, to whom I would like to make frequent reference, but it would be an act of inhumanity to the printers. How is a reader to recollect Zatsvilikhovski, Konyetspolski, Rzendzian, Szczaniecki? No doubt these are as plain to the Polish eye as Brown and Jones, and my remarks may seem flippant to Polish scholars, but I believe that I shall have some sympathizers at home."

The works of Sienkiewicz have now become familiar to the reading public. "With Fire and Sword" gives us the history of a million of men and one woman, and, as Emund Gosse remarks: "So completely is this a book of men—of fighting, stamping, galloping, shouting males—that the plot seems to run more smoothly while Helena is disguised in small clothes. There never was written a story since the beginning of the world in which there was found so little use for petticoats."

"The Deluge" (Panop) is a still longer book than "With Fire and Sword," and is the second of the series, "Pan Michael" being the third. The three friends, who have the interests of the gallant nobleman, Pan Yan Skshetwski, at heart, are suggestive of the "Three Musketeers" of Dumas.

The position of events is explained in an introduction to "The Deluge," but, as Mr. Gosse remarks, "which introduction, after a long experience, I venture to call the most densely obscure document I have ever met with." He advises the easy-going reader to skip the "intolerable exordium" and plunge into the enormous book itself. "The only work of fiction," he adds, "which seems to me at all comparable with the great trilogy of Sienkiewicz is the celebrated contemporary romance of Simplicissimus, written by Geimmelshausen, and published in 1669.

This very remarkable book, a German classic, and not well enough known in this country, presents a series of awful scenes from the Thirty Years' War, in which its author took a personal part. Nowhere in the range of literature is the strange, vague frenzy of warfare rendered with more thrilling horror. It would be interesting to know whether the Polish author was consciously influenced by reading Geimmelshausen's extraordinary romance, parts of which present a curious resemblance to picture after picture in the trilogy of Sienkiewicz.

"Without Dogma" is a modern novel which Sienkiewicz wrote almost immediately after finishing the trilogy. In it the writer wishes to show the mental and moral impotence engendered in Slavonic persons by wealth and noble birth. It is in the form of a diary. The egoism of the hero in the prolonged soliloquy brings to mind Miss Marie Bash-Rirtseff. The story is a melancholy one, ably treated, but it is questioned whether there be much profit in a study of so great length. As compared with Tolstoi's "Anna Karenina," which is no less sad and long, and in the world's eyes much more criminal, it does not appear to us as effectually as the emotions depicted are not so common to humanity, and as there are fewer personages and a less variety of types.

The last work of the Polish novelist is a romance of the time of Nero, "Quo Vadis." Of this work Edmond Gosse says: "If I have not read 'Quo Vadis' it is partly because life is short and partly because I have an invincible dislike to stories written for the purpose of contrasting the corrupt brilliance of paganism with the austere and self-reliant teaching of early Christianity." One knows all the "business" by heart—the orgies, the arena, the Christian maiden with her hair let down her back, the Roman noble's conversion in the nick of time, the glimpse of the "bloated and sensual figure of the Emperor." It all lies outside the pale of literature; it should be reserved for the Marie Corellis and the Wilson Barretts.

Mr. Gosse regrets that Mr. Sienkiewicz should have taken up this easy theme, and that he should have treated it in very much the old conventional manner. "It lessens my respect for his talent," he says, and he wonders at the end of his essay whether Sienkiewicz had ever read or heard of De Quincey's "Revolt of the Tartars," which in subject certainly, and probably in style also, is more like the trilogy than any other work which can be mentioned in English literature."

Mr. Sienkiewicz is not a Tolstoi or a Meissonier, but Mr. Gosse is willing to rank him, in time, just below Scott and Dumas, provided he does not expend his strength in the effort to excel in all other branches of fiction, but will confine himself to the rendering of the movements and phenomena of savage warfare, for which he has "a curious, virile gift."

Those who are interested in Mr. Sienkiewicz as a man will care to know that he has been married twice. His first wife, a Lithuanian lady of rank, died young. He has two beautiful children, to whom he devotes much of his time—to them and to foreign travel, in which he delights. It is said that Italy stands next to Brittany high in the novelist's affections. Mr. Sienkiewicz is tall and dignified, with delightful manners, calm, reserved, but sympathetic. He has recently been made a member of the Academy in Cracow, which is as great a distinction in Poland as to become an "Academicien" in France. As a conversationalist Mr. Sienkiewicz is very earnest. He takes a keen interest in science, likes to associate with men of letters, but of late years has not been seen much in society. He is a thorough Pole, possessing the wit, the artistic taste and the pride characteristic of his countrymen.

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