

## MY DOUBLE LIFE

### *The Memoirs of Sarah Bernhardt*

By Sarah Bernhardt

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## CONTENTS

I. — CHILDHOOD

II. — AT BOARDING SCHOOL

III. — CONVENT LIFE

IV. — MY DÉBUT

V. — THE SOLDIER'S SHAKO

VI. — THE FAMILY COUNCIL AND MY FIRST VISIT TO A THEATRE

VII. — MY CAREER—FIRST LESSONS

VIII. — THE CONSERVATOIRE

IX. — A MARRIAGE PROPOSAL AND EXAMINATIONS—THE CONSERVATOIRE

X. — MY FIRST ENGAGEMENT AT THE COMÉDIE FRANÇAISE

XI. — MY DÉBUT AT THE HOUSE OF MOLIÈRE, AND MY FIRST DEPARTURE  
THEREFROM

XII. — AT THE GYMNASSE THEATRE—A TRIP TO SPAIN

XIII. — FROM THE PORTE ST. MARTIN THEATRE TO THE ODÉON

XIV. — LE PASSANT—AT THE TUILERIES—FIRE IN MY FLAT

XV. — THE FRANCO-PRUSSIAN WAR

XVI. — SARAH BERNHARDT'S AMBULANCE AT THE ODÉON THEATRE

XVII. — PARIS BOMBARDED

XVIII. — A BOLD JOURNEY THROUGH THE GERMAN LINES

XIX. — MY RETURN TO PARIS—THE COMMUNE—AT ST. GERMAIN-EN-LAYE

XX. — VICTOR HUGO

XXI. — A MEMORABLE SUPPER

XXII. — AT THE COMÉDIE FRANÇAISE AGAIN—SCULPTURE

XXIII. — A DESCENT INTO THE ENFER DU PLOGOFF—MY FIRST APPEARANCE AS  
PHÈDRE—THE DECORATION OF MY NEW MANSION

XXIV. — ALEXANDRE DUMAS—L'ÉTRANGÈRE—MY SCULPTURE AT THE SALON

XXV. — "HERNANI"—A TRIP IN A BALLOON

XXVI. — THE COMÉDIE FRANÇAISE GOES TO LONDON

XXVII. — LONDON LIFE—MY FIRST PERFORMANCE AT THE GAIETY THEATRE

XXVIII. — MY PERFORMANCES IN LONDON—MY EXHIBITION—MY WILD  
ANIMALS—TROUBLE WITH THE COMÉDIE FRANÇAISE

XXIX. — THE COMÉDIE FRANÇAISE RETURNS TO PARIS—SARAH BERNHARDT'S  
COMMENTS ON ACTORS AND ACTRESSES OF THE DAY

XXX. — MY DEPARTURE FROM THE COMÉDIE FRANÇAISE—PREPARATIONS FOR MY FIRST FIRST AMERICAN TOUR—ANOTHER VISIT TO LONDON  
XXXI. — A TOUR IN DENMARK—ROYAL FAMILIES—THE "TWENTY-EIGHT DAYS" OF SARAH BERNHARDT  
XXXII. — EXPERIENCES AND REFLECTIONS ON BOARD SHIP FROM HÂVRE TO NEW YORK  
XXXIII. — ARRIVAL IN NEW YORK—AMERICAN REPORTERS—THE CUSTOM HOUSE—PERFORMANCES  
XXXIV. — AT BOSTON—STORY OF THE WHALE  
XXXV. — MONTREAL'S GRAND RECEPTION—THE POET FRECHETTE—AN ESCAPADE ON THE ST. LAWRENCE RIVER  
XXXVI. — SPRINGFIELD—BALTIMORE—PHILADELPHIA—CHICAGO—ADVENTURES BETWEEN ST. LOUIS AND CINCINNATI—CAPITAL PUNISHMENT  
XXXVII. — NEW ORLEANS AND OTHER AMERICAN CITIES—A VISIT TO THE FALLS OF NIAGARA  
XXXVIII. — THE RETURN TO FRANCE—THE WELCOME AT HÂVRE

## **I. — CHILDHOOD**

My mother was fond of travelling: she would go from Spain to England, from London to Paris, from Paris to Berlin, and from there to Christiania; then she would come back, embrace me, and set out again for Holland, her native country. She used to send my nurse clothing for herself and cakes for me. To one of my aunts she would write: "Look after little Sarah; I shall return in a month's time." A month later she would write to another of her sisters: "Go and see the child at her nurse's; I shall be back in a couple of weeks."

My mother's age was nineteen; I was three years old, and my two aunts were seventeen and twenty years of age; another aunt was fifteen, and the eldest was twenty-eight; but the last one lived at Martinique, and was the mother of six children. My grandmother was blind, my grandfather dead, and my father had been in China for the last two years. I have no idea why he had gone there.

My youthful aunts always promised to come to see me, but rarely kept their word. My nurse hailed from Brittany, and lived near Quimperlé, in a little white house with a low thatched roof, on which wild gilly-flowers grew. That was the first flower which charmed my eyes as a child, and I have loved it ever since. Its leaves are heavy and sad-looking, and its petals are made of the setting sun.

Brittany is a long way off, even in our epoch of velocity! In those days it was the end of the world. Fortunately my nurse was, it appears, a good, kind woman, and, as her own child had died, she had only me to love. But she loved after the manner of poor people, when she had time.

One day, as her husband was ill, she went into the field to help gather in potatoes; the over-damp soil was rotting them, and there was no time to be lost. She left me in charge of her husband, who was lying on his Breton bedstead suffering from a bad attack of lumbago. The good woman had placed me in my high chair, and had been careful to put in the wooden peg which supported the narrow table for my toys. She threw a faggot in the grate, and said to me in Breton language (until the age of four I only understood Breton), "Be a good girl, Milk Blossom." That was my only name at the time. When she had gone, I tried to withdraw the wooden peg which she had taken so much trouble to put in place. Finally I succeeded in pushing aside the little rampart. I wanted to reach the ground, but—poor little me!—I fell into the fire, which was burning joyfully.

The screams of my foster-father, who could not move, brought in some neighbours. I was thrown, all smoking, into a large pail of fresh milk. My aunts were informed of what had happened: they communicated the news to my mother, and for the next four days that quiet part of the country was ploughed by stage-coaches which arrived in rapid succession. My aunts came from all parts of the world, and my mother, in the greatest alarm, hastened from Brussels, with Baron Larrey, one of her friends, who was a young doctor, just beginning to acquire celebrity, and a house surgeon whom Baron Larrey had brought with him. I have been told since that nothing was so painful to witness and yet so charming as my mother's despair. The doctor approved of the "mask of butter," which was changed every two hours.

Dear Baron Larrey! I often saw him afterwards, and now and again we shall meet him in the pages of my Memoirs. He used to tell me in such charming fashion how those kind folks loved Milk Blossom. And he could never refrain from laughing at the thought of that butter. There was butter everywhere, he used to say: on the bedsteads, on the cupboards, on the chairs, on the tables, hanging up on nails in bladders. All the neighbours used to bring butter to make masks for Milk Blossom. Mother, adorably beautiful, looked like a Madonna, with her golden hair and her eyes fringed with such long lashes that they made a shadow on her cheeks when she looked down.

She distributed money on all sides. She would have given her golden hair, her slender white fingers, her tiny feet, her life itself, in order to save her child. And she was as sincere in her despair and her love as in her unconscious forgetfulness.

Baron Larrey returned to Paris, leaving my mother, Aunt Rosine, and the surgeon with me. Forty-two days later, mother took back in triumph to Paris the nurse, the foster-father, and me, and installed us in a little house at Neuilly, on the banks of the Seine. I had not even a scar, it appears. My skin was rather too bright a pink, but that was all. My mother, happy and trustful once more, began to travel again, leaving me in care of my aunts.

Two years were spent in the little garden at Neuilly, which was full of horrible dahlias growing close together and coloured like wooden balls. My aunts never came there. My mother used to send money, bon-bons, and toys. The foster-father died, and my nurse married a concierge, who used to pull open the door at 65 Rue de Provence.

Not knowing where to find my mother, and not being able to write, my nurse—without telling any of my friends—took me with her to her new abode.

The change delighted me. I was five years old at the time, and I remember the day as if it were yesterday. My nurse's abode was just over the doorway of the house, and the window was framed in the heavy and monumental door. From outside I thought it was beautiful, and I began to clap my hands on reaching the house. It was towards five o'clock in the evening, in the month of November, when everything looks grey. I was put to bed, and no doubt I went to sleep at once, for there end my recollections of that day.

The next morning there was terrible grief in store for me. There was no window in the little room in which I slept, and I began to cry, and escaped from the arms of my nurse, who was dressing me, so that I could go into the adjoining room. I ran to the round window, which was an immense "bull's-eye" above the doorway. I pressed my stubborn brow against the glass, and began to scream with rage on seeing no trees, no box-weed, no leaves falling, nothing, nothing but stone—cold, grey, ugly stone—and panes of glass opposite me. "I want to go away! I don't want to stay here! It is all black, black! It is ugly! I want to see the ceiling of the street!" and I burst into tears. My poor nurse took me up in her arms, and, folding me in a rug, took me down into the courtyard. "Lift up your head, Milk Blossom, and look! See—there is the ceiling of the street!"

It comforted me somewhat to see that there was some sky in this ugly place, but my little soul was very sad. I could not eat, and I grew pale and became anaemic, and should certainly have died of consumption if it had not been for a mere chance, a most unexpected incident. One day I was playing in the courtyard with a little girl, called Titine, who lived on the second floor, and whose face or real name I cannot recall, when I saw my nurse's husband walking across the courtyard with two ladies, one of whom was most fashionably attired. I could only see their backs, but the voice of the fashionably attired lady caused my heart to stop beating. My poor little body trembled with nervous excitement.

"Do any of the windows look on to the courtyard?" she asked.

"Yes, Madame, those four," he replied, pointing to four open ones on the first floor.

The lady turned to look at them, and I uttered a cry of joy.

"Aunt Rosine! Aunt Rosine!" I exclaimed, clinging to the skirts of the pretty visitor. I buried my face in her furs, stamping, sobbing, laughing, and tearing her wide lace sleeves in my frenzy of delight. She took me in her arms and tried to calm me, and questioning the concierge, she stammered out to her friend: "I can't understand what it all means! This is little Sarah! My sister Youle's child!"

The noise I made had attracted attention, and people opened their windows. My aunt decided to take refuge in the concierge's lodge, in order to come to an explanation. My poor nurse told her about all that had taken place, her husband's death, and her second marriage. I do not remember what she said to excuse herself. I clung to my aunt, who was deliciously perfumed, and I would not let go of her. She promised to come the following day to fetch me, but I did not want to stay any longer in that dark place. I asked to start at once with my nurse. My aunt stroked my hair gently, and spoke to her friend in a language I did not understand. She tried in vain to explain something to me; I do not know what it was, but I insisted that I wanted to go away with her at once. In a gentle, tender, caressing voice, but without any real affection, she said all kinds of pretty things, stroked me with her gloved

hands, patted my frock, which was turned up, and made any amount of charming, frivolous little gestures, but all without any real feeling. She then went away, at her friend's entreaty, after emptying her purse in my nurse's hands. I rushed towards the door, but the husband of my nurse, who had opened it for her, now closed it again. My nurse was crying, and, taking me in her arms, she opened the window, saying to me, "Don't cry, Milk Blossom. Look at your pretty aunt; she will come back again, and then you can go away with her." Great tears rolled down her calm, round, handsome face. I could see nothing but the dark, black hole which remained there immutable behind me, and in a fit of despair I rushed out to my aunt, who was just getting into a carriage. After that I knew nothing more; everything seemed dark, there was a noise in the distance. I could hear voices far, far away. I had managed to escape from my poor nurse, and had fallen down on the pavement in front of my aunt. I had broken my arm in two places, and injured my left knee-cap. I only came to myself again a few hours later, to find that I was in a beautiful, wide bed which smelt very nice. It stood in the middle of a large room, with two lovely windows, which made me very joyful, for I could see the ceiling of the street through them. My mother, who had been sent for immediately, came to take care of me, and I saw the rest of my family, my aunts and my cousins. My poor little brain could not understand why all these people should suddenly be so fond of me, when I had passed so many days and nights only cared for by one single person. As I was weakly, and my bones small and friable, I was two years recovering from this terrible fall, and during that time was nearly always carried about. I will pass over these two years of my life, which have left me only a vague memory of being petted and of a chronic state of torpor.

## **II. — AT BOARDING SCHOOL**

One day my mother took me on her knees and said to me, "You are a big girl now, and you must learn to read and write." I was then seven years old, and could neither read, write, nor count, as I had been five years with the old nurse and two years ill. "You must go to school," continued my mother, playing with my curly hair, "like a big girl." I did not know what all this meant, and I asked what a school was.

"It's a place where there are many little girls," replied my mother.

"Are they ill?" I asked.

"Oh no! They are quite well, as you are now, and they play together, and are very gay and happy."

I jumped about in delight, and gave free vent to my joy, but on seeing tears in my mother's eyes I flung myself in her arms.

"But what about you, Mamma?" I asked. "You will be all alone, and you won't have any little girl."

She bent down to me and said: "God has told me that He will send me some flowers and a little baby."

My delight was more and more boisterous. "Then I shall have a little brother!" I exclaimed, "or else a little sister. Oh no, I don't want that; I don't like little sisters." Mamma kissed me very affectionately, and then I was dressed, I remember, in a blue corded velvet frock, of which I was very proud. Arrayed thus in all my splendour, I waited impatiently for Aunt Rosine's carriage, which was to take us to Auteuil. It was about three when she arrived. The housemaid had gone on about an hour before, and I had watched with delight my little trunk and my toys being packed into the carriage. The maid climbed up and took the seat by the driver, in spite of my mother protesting at first against this. When my aunt's magnificent equipage arrived, mamma was the first to get in, slowly and calmly. I got in when my turn came, giving myself airs, because the concierge and some of the shopkeepers were watching. My aunt then sprang in lightly, but by no means calmly, after giving her orders in English to the stiff, ridiculous-looking coachman, and handing him a paper on which the address was written. Another carriage followed ours, in which three men were seated: Régis L——, a friend of my father's, General de P——, and an artist, named Fleury, I think, whose pictures of horses and sporting subjects were very much in vogue just then.

I heard on the way that these gentlemen were to make arrangements for a little dinner near Auteuil, to console mamma for her great trouble in being separated from me. Some other guests were to be there to meet them. I did not pay very much attention to what my mother and my aunt said to each other. Sometimes when they spoke of me they talked either English or German, and smiled at me affectionately. The long drive was greatly appreciated by me, for with my face pressed against the window and my eyes wide open I gazed out eagerly at the grey muddy road, with its ugly houses on each side, and its bare trees. I thought it was all very beautiful, because it kept changing.

The carriage stopped at 18 Rue Boileau, Auteuil. On the iron gate was a long, dark signboard, with gold letters. I looked up at it, and mamma said, "You will be able to read that soon, I hope." My aunt whispered to me, "Boarding School, Madame Fressard," and very promptly I said to mamma, "It says 'Boarding School, Madame Fressard.'"

Mamma, my aunt, and the three gentlemen laughed heartily at my assurance, and we entered the house. Madame Fressard came forward to meet us, and I liked her at once. She was of medium height, rather stout, and her hair turning grey, *à la Sévigné*. She had beautiful large eyes, rather like George Sand's, and very white teeth, which showed up all the more as her complexion was rather tawny. She looked healthy, spoke kindly; her hands were plump and her fingers long. She took my hand gently in hers, and half kneeling, so that her face was level with mine, she said in a musical voice, "You won't be afraid of me, will you, little girl?" I did not answer, but my face flushed as red as a cockscomb. She asked me several questions, but I refused to reply. They all gathered round me.

"Speak, child——Come, Sarah, be a good girl——Oh, the naughty little child!" It was all in vain. I remained perfectly mute. The customary round was then made, to the bed-rooms, the dining-hall, the class-rooms, and the usual exaggerated

compliments were paid. "How beautifully it is all kept! How spotlessly clean everything is!" and a hundred stupidities of this kind about the comfort of these prisons for children. My mother went aside with Madame Fressard, and I clung to her knees so that she could not walk. "This is the doctor's prescription," she said, and then followed a long list of things that were to be done for me.

Madame Fressard smiled rather ironically. "You know, Madame," she said to my mother, "we shall not be able to curl her hair like that."

"And you certainly will not be able to uncurl it," replied my mother, stroking my head with her gloved hands. "It's a regular wig, and they must never attempt to comb it until it has been well brushed. They could not possibly get the knots out otherwise, and it would hurt her too much. What do you give the children at four o'clock?" she asked, changing the subject.

"Oh, a slice of bread and just what the parents leave for them."

"There are twelve pots of different kinds of jam," said my mother, "but she must have jam one day, and chocolate another, as she has not a good appetite, and requires change of food. I have brought six pounds of chocolate." Madame Fressard smiled in a good-natured but rather ironical way. She picked up a packet of the chocolate and looked at the name of the maker.

"Ah! from Marquis's! What a spoiled little girl it is!" She patted my cheek with her white fingers, and then as her eyes fell on a large jar she looked surprised. "That's cold cream," said my mother. "I make it myself, and I should like my little girl's face and hands to be rubbed with it every night when she goes to bed."

"But——" began Madame Fressard.

"Oh, I'll pay double laundry expenses for the sheets," interrupted my mother impatiently. (Ah, my poor mother! I remember quite well that my sheets were changed once a month, like those of the other pupils.)

The farewell moment came at last, and every one gathered round mamma, and finally carried her off, after a great deal of kissing and with all kinds of consoling words. "It will be so good for her—it is just what she needs—you'll find her quite changed when you see her again"—&c. &c.

The General, who was very fond of me, picked me up in his arms and tossed me in the air.

"You little chit," he said; "they are putting you into barracks, and you'll have to mind your behaviour!"

I pulled his long moustache, and he said, winking, and looking in the direction of Madame Fressard, who had a slight moustache, "You mustn't do that to the lady, you know!"

My aunt laughed heartily, and my mother gave a little stifled laugh, and the whole troop went off in a regular whirlwind of rustling skirts and farewells, whilst I was taken away to the cage where I was to be imprisoned.

I spent two years at this pension. I was taught reading, writing, and reckoning. I also learnt a hundred new games. I learnt to sing *rondeaux* and to embroider handkerchiefs for my mother. I was relatively happy there, as we always went out somewhere on Thursdays and Sundays, and this gave me the sensation of liberty. The very ground in the street seemed to me quite different from the ground of the large garden belonging to the pension. Besides, there were little festivities at

Madame Fressard's which used to send me into raptures. Mlle. Stella Colas, who had just made her *début* at the Théâtre Français, came sometimes on Thursdays and recited poetry to us. I could never sleep a wink the night before, and in the morning I used to comb my hair carefully and get ready, my heart beating fast with excitement, in order to listen to something I did not understand at all, but which nevertheless left me spell-bound. Then, too, there was quite a legend attached to this pretty girl. She had flung herself almost under the horses' feet as the Emperor was driving along, in order to attract his attention and obtain the pardon of her brother, who had conspired against his sovereign.

Mlle. Stella Colas had a sister at Madame Fressard's, and this sister, Clothilde, is now the wife of M. Pierre Merlou, Under Secretary of State in the Treasury Department. Stella was slight and fair, with blue eyes that were rather hard but expressive. She had a deep voice, and when this pale, fragile girl began to recite Athalie's Dream, it thrilled me through and through. How many times, seated on my child's bed, did I practise saying in a low voice, "*Tremble, fille digne de moi*"—I used to twist my head on my shoulders, swell out my cheeks, and commence:

"*Tremble—trem-ble—trem-em-ble—*"

But it always ended badly, and I would begin again very quietly, in a stifled voice, and then unconsciously speak louder; and my companions, roused by the noise, were amused at my attempts, and roared with laughter. I would then rush about to the right and left, giving them kicks and blows, which they returned with interest. Madame Fressard's adopted daughter, Mlle. Caroline (whom I chanced to meet a long time after, married to the celebrated artist, Yvon), would then appear on the scene. Angry and implacable, she would give us all kinds of punishments for the following day. As for me, I used to get locked up for three days: that was followed by my being detained on the first day we were allowed out. And in addition I would receive five strokes with a ruler on my fingers. Ah! those ruler strokes of Mlle. Caroline's! I reproached her about them when I met her again twenty-five years later. She used to make us put all our fingers round the thumb and hold our hands straight out to her, and then bang came her wide ebony ruler. She used to give us a cruelly hard, sharp blow which made the tears spurt to our eyes. I took a dislike to Mlle. Caroline. She was beautiful, but with the kind of beauty I did not care for. She had a very white complexion, and very black hair, which she wore in waved *bandeaux*. When I saw her a long time afterwards, one of my relatives brought her to my house and said, "I am sure you will not recognise this lady, and yet you know her very well." I was leaning against the large mantelpiece in the hall, and I saw this tall woman, still beautiful, but rather provincial-looking, coming through the first drawing-room. As she descended the three steps into the hall the light fell on her protruding forehead, framed on each side with the hard, waved *bandeaux*.

"Mademoiselle Caroline!" I exclaimed, and with a furtive, childish movement I hid my two hands behind my back. I never saw her again, for the grudge I had owed her from my childhood must have been apparent under my politeness as hostess.

As I said before, I was not unhappy at Madame Fressard's, and it seemed quite natural to me that I should stay there until I was quite a grown-up girl. My uncle, Félix Faure, who has entered the Carthusian monastery, had stipulated that his wife, my mother's sister, should often take me out. He had a very fine country place at,



Neuilly, with a stream running through the grounds, and I used to fish there for hours, together with my two cousins, a boy and girl.

These two years of my life passed peacefully, without any other events than my terrible fits of temper, which upset the whole pension and always left me in the infirmary for two or three days. These outbursts of temper were like attacks of madness.

One day Aunt Rosine arrived suddenly to take me away altogether. My father had written giving orders as to where I was to be placed, and these orders were imperative. My mother was travelling, so she had sent word to my aunt, who had hurried off at once, between two dances, to carry out the instructions she had received.

The idea that I was to be ordered about, without any regard to my own wishes or inclinations, put me into an indescribable rage. I rolled about on the ground, uttering the most heartrending cries. I yelled out all kinds of reproaches, blaming mamma, my aunts, and Madame Fressard for not finding some way to keep me with her. The struggle lasted two hours, and while I was being dressed I escaped twice into the garden and attempted to climb the trees and to throw myself into the pond, in which there was more mud than water.

Finally, when I was completely exhausted and subdued, I was taken off, sobbing, in my aunt's carriage.

I stayed three days at her house, as I was so feverish that my life was said to be in danger.

My father used to come to my aunt Rosine's, who was then living at 6 Rue de la Chaussée d'Antin. He was on friendly terms with Rossini, who lived at No. 4 in the same street. He often brought him in, and Rossini made me laugh with his clever stories and comic grimaces.

My father was as "handsome as a god," and I used to look at him with pride. I did not know him well, as I saw him so rarely, but I loved him for his seductive voice and his slow, gentle gestures. He commanded a certain respect, and I noticed that even my exuberant aunt calmed down in his presence.

I had recovered, and Dr. Monod, who was attending me, said that I could now be moved without any fear of ill effects.

We had been waiting for my mother, but she was ill at Haarlem. My aunt offered to accompany us if my father would take me to the convent, but he refused, and I can hear him now with his gentle voice saying:

"No; her mother will take her to the convent. I have written to the Faures, and the child is to stay there a fortnight."

My aunt was about to protest, but my father replied:

"It's quieter there, my dear Rosine, and the child needs tranquillity more than anything else."

I went that very evening to my aunt Faure's. I did not care much for her, as she was cold and affected, but I adored my uncle. He was so gentle and so calm, and there was an infinite charm in his smile. His son was as turbulent as I was myself, adventurous and rather hare-brained, so that we always liked being together. His sister, an adorable, Greuze-like girl, was reserved, and always afraid of soiling her frocks and even her pinafores. The poor child married Baron Cerise, and died during

her confinement, in the very flower of youth and beauty, because her timidity, her reserve, and narrow education had made her refuse to see a doctor when the intervention of a medical man was absolutely necessary. I was very fond of her, and her death was a great grief to me. At present I never see the faintest ray of moonlight without its evoking a pale vision of her.

I stayed three weeks at my uncle's, roaming about with my cousin and spending hours lying down flat, fishing for cray-fish in the little stream that ran through the park. This park was immense, and surrounded by a wide ditch. How many times I used to have bets with my cousins that I would jump that ditch! The bet was sometimes three sheets of paper, or five pins, or perhaps my two pancakes, for we used to have pancakes every Tuesday. And after the bet I jumped, more often than not falling into the ditch and splashing about in the green water, screaming because I was afraid of the frogs, and yelling with terror when my cousins pretended to rush away.

When I returned to the house my aunt was always watching anxiously at the top of the stone steps for our arrival. What a lecture I had, and what a cold look.

"Go upstairs and change your clothes, Mademoiselle," she would say, "and then stay in your room. Your dinner will be sent to you there without any dessert."

As I passed the big glass in the hall I caught sight of myself, looking like a rotten tree stump, and I saw my cousin making signs, by putting his hand to his mouth, that he would bring me some dessert.

His sister used to go to his mother, who fondled her and seemed to say, "Thank Heaven you are not like that little Bohemian!" This was my aunt's stinging epithet for me in moments of anger. I used to go up to my room with a heavy heart, thoroughly ashamed and vexed, vowing to myself that I would never again jump the ditch, but on reaching my room I used to find the gardener's daughter there, a big, awkward, merry girl, who used to wait on me.

"Oh, how comic Mademoiselle looks like that!" she would say, laughing so heartily that I was proud of looking comic, and I decided that when I jumped the ditch again I would get weeds and mud all over me. When I had undressed and washed I used to put on a flannel gown and wait in my room until my dinner came. Soup was sent up, and then meat, bread, and water. I detested meat then, just as I do now, and threw it out of the window after cutting off the fat, which I put on the rim of my plate, as my aunt used to come up unexpectedly.

"Have you eaten your dinner, Mademoiselle?" she would ask.

"Yes, Aunt," I replied.

"Are you still hungry?"

"No, Aunt."

"Write out 'Our Father' and the 'Creed' three times, you little heathen." This was because I had not been baptized. A quarter of an hour later my uncle would come upstairs.

"Have you had enough dinner?" he would ask.

"Yes, Uncle," I replied.

"Did you eat your meat?"

"No; I threw it out of the window. I don't like meat."

"You told your aunt an untruth, then."

"No; she asked me if I had eaten my dinner, and I answered that I had, but I did not say that I had eaten my meat."

"What punishment has she given you?"

"I am to write out 'Our Father' and the 'Creed' three times before going to bed."

"Do you know them by heart?"

"No, not very well; I make mistakes always."

And the adorable man would then dictate to me "Our Father" and the "Creed," and I copied it in the most devoted way, as he used to dictate with deep feeling and emotion. He was religious, very religious indeed, this uncle of mine, and after the death of my aunt he became a Carthusian monk. As I write these lines, ill and aged as he is, and bent with pain, I know he is digging his own grave, weak with the weight of the spade, imploring God to take him, and thinking sometimes of me, of his little Bohemian. Ah, the dear, good man, it is to him that I owe all that is best in me. I love him devotedly and have the greatest respect for him. How many times in the difficult phases of my life I have thought of him and consulted his ideas, for I never saw him again, as my aunt quarrelled purposely with my mother and me. He was always fond of me, though, and has told his friends to assure me of this. Occasionally, too, he has sent me his advice, which has always been very straightforward and full of indulgence and common sense.

Recently I went to the country where the Carthusians have taken refuge. A friend of mine went to see my uncle, and I wept on hearing the words he had dictated to be repeated to me.

To return to my story. After my uncle's visit, Marie, the gardener's daughter, came to my room, looking quite indifferent, but with her pockets stuffed with apples, biscuits, raisins, and nuts. My cousin had sent me some dessert, but she, the good-hearted girl, had cleared all the dessert dishes. I told her to sit down and crack the nuts, and I would eat them when I had finished my "Lord's Prayer" and "Creed." She sat down on the floor, so that she could hide everything quickly under the table in case my aunt returned. But my aunt did not come again, as she and her daughter used to spend their evenings at the piano, whilst my uncle taught his son mathematics.

Finally, my mother wrote to say that she was coming. There was great excitement in my uncle's house, and my little trunk was packed in readiness.

The Grand-Champs Convent, which I was about to enter, had a prescribed uniform, and my cousin, who loved sewing, marked all my things with the initials S.B. in red cotton. My uncle gave me a silver spoon, fork, and goblet, and these were all marked 32, which was the number under which I was registered there. Marie gave me a thick woollen muffler in shades of violet, which she had been knitting for me in secret for several days. My aunt put round my neck a little scapulary which had been blessed, and when my mother and father arrived everything was ready.

A farewell dinner was given, to which two of my mother's friends, Aunt Rosine, and four other members of the family were invited.

I felt very important. I was neither sad nor gay, but had just this feeling of importance which was quite enough for me. Every one at table talked about me; my uncle kept stroking my hair, and my cousin from her end of the table threw me kisses. Suddenly my father's musical voice made me turn towards him.

"Listen to me, Sarah," he said. "If you are very good at the convent, I will come in four years and fetch you away, and you shall travel with me and see some beautiful countries."

"Oh, I will be good!" I exclaimed; "I'll be as good as Aunt Henriette!"

This was my aunt Faure. Everybody smiled.

After dinner, the weather being very fine, we all went out to stroll in the park. My father took me with him, and talked to me very seriously. He told me things that were sad, which I had never heard before. I understood, although I was so young, and my eyes filled with tears. He was sitting on an old bench and I was on his knee, with my head resting on his shoulder. I listened to all he said and cried silently, my childish mind disturbed by his words. Poor father! I was never, never to see him again.

### **III. — CONVENT LIFE**

I Did not sleep well that night, and the following morning at eight o'clock we started by diligence for Versailles. I can see Marie now, great big girl as she then was, in tears. All the members of the family were assembled at the top of the stone steps. There was my little trunk, and then a wooden case of games which my mother had brought, and a kite that my cousin had made, which he gave me at the last moment, just as the carriage was starting. I can still see the large white house, which seemed to get smaller and smaller the farther we drove away from it. I stood up, with my father holding me, and waved his blue silk muffler which I had taken from his neck. After this I sat down in the carriage and fell asleep, only rousing up again when we were at the heavy-looking door of the Grand-Champs Convent. I rubbed my eyes and tried to collect my thoughts. I then jumped down from the diligence and looked curiously around me. The paving-stones of the street were round and small, with grass growing everywhere. There was a wall, and then a great gateway surmounted by a cross, and nothing behind it, nothing whatever to be seen. To the left there was a house, and to the right the Satory barracks. Not a sound to be heard—not a footfall, not even an echo.

"Oh, Mamma," I exclaimed, "is it inside there I am to go? Oh no! I would rather go back to Madame Fressard's!"

My mother shrugged her shoulders and pointed to my father, thus explaining that she was not responsible for this step. I rushed to him, and he took me by the hand as he rang the bell. The door opened, and he led me gently in, followed by my mother and Aunt Rosine.

The courtyard was large and dreary-looking, but there were buildings to be seen, and windows from which children's faces were gazing curiously at us. My father said something to the nun who came forward, and she took us into the parlour. This was large, with a polished floor, and was divided by an enormous black grating which

ran the whole length of the room. There were benches covered with red velvet by the wall, and a few chairs and armchairs near the grating. On the walls were a portrait of Pius IX., a full length one of St. Augustine, and one of Henri V. My teeth chattered, for it seemed to me that I remembered reading in some book the description of a prison, and that it was just like this. I looked at my father and my mother, and began to distrust them. I had so often heard that I was ungovernable, that I needed an iron hand to rule me, and that I was the devil incarnate in a child. My aunt Faure had so often repeated, "That child will come to a bad end, she has such mad ideas," &c. &c. "Papa, papa!" I suddenly cried out, seized with terror; "I won't go to prison. This is a prison, I am sure. I am frightened—oh, I am so frightened!"

On the other side of the grating a door had just opened, and I stopped to see who was coming. A little round, short woman made her appearance and came up to the grating. Her black veil was lowered as far as her mouth, so that I could scarcely see anything of her face. She recognised my father, whom she had probably seen before, when matters were being arranged. She opened a door in the grating, and we all went through to the other side of the room. On seeing me pale and my terrified eyes full of tears, she gently took my hand in hers and, turning her back to my father, raised her veil. I then saw the sweetest and merriest face imaginable, with large child-like blue eyes, a turn-up nose, a laughing mouth with full lips and beautiful, strong, white teeth. She looked so kind, so energetic, and so happy that I flung myself at once into her arms. It was Mother St. Sophie, the Superior of the Grand-Champs Convent.

"Ah, we are friends now, you see," she said to my father, lowering her veil again. What secret instinct could have told this woman, who was not coquettish, who had no looking-glass and never troubled about beauty, that her face was fascinating and that her bright smile could enliven the gloom of the convent?

"We will now go and see the house," she said.

We at once started, she and my father each holding one of my hands. Two other nuns accompanied us, one of whom was the Mother Prefect, a tall, cold woman with thin lips, and the other Sister Séraphine, who was as white and supple as a spray of lily of the valley. We entered the building, and came first to the large class-room in which all the pupils met on Thursdays at the lectures, which were nearly always given by Mother St. Sophie. Most of them did needlework all day long; some worked at tapestry, others embroidery, and still others decalcography.

The room was very large, and on St. Catherine's Day and other holidays we used to dance there. It was in this room, too, that once a year the Mother Superior gave to each of the sisters the *sou* which represented her annual income. The walls were adorned with religious engravings and with a few oil paintings done by the pupils. The place of honour, though, belonged to St. Augustine. A magnificent large engraving depicted the conversion of this saint, and oh, how often I have looked at that engraving. St. Augustine has certainly caused me very much emotion and greatly disturbed my childish heart. Mamma admired the cleanliness of the refectory. She asked to see which would be my seat at table, and when this was shown to her she objected strongly to my having that place.

"No," she said; "the child has not a strong chest, and she would always be in a draught. I will not let her sit there."

My father agreed with my mother, and insisted on a change being made. It was therefore decided that I should sit at the end of the room, and the promise given was faithfully kept.

When mamma saw the wide staircase leading to the dormitories she was aghast. It was very, very wide, and the steps were low and easy to mount, but there were so many of them before one reached the first floor. For a few seconds mamma hesitated and stood there gazing at them, her arms hanging down in despair.

"Stay down here, Youle," said my aunt, "and I will go up."

"No, no," replied my mother in a sorrowful voice. "I must see where the child is to sleep—she is so delicate."

My father helped her, and indeed almost carried her up, and we then went into one of the immense dormitories. It was very much like the dormitory at Madame Fressard's, but a great deal larger, and there was a tiled floor without any carpet.

"Oh, this is quite impossible!" exclaimed mamma. "The child cannot sleep here; it is too cold; it would kill her."

The Mother Superior, St. Sophie, gave my mother a chair and tried to soothe her. She was pale, for her heart was already very much affected.

"We will put your little girl in this dormitory, Madame," she said, opening a door that led into a room with eight beds. The floor was of polished wood, and this room, adjoining the infirmary, was the one in which delicate or convalescent children slept. Mamma was reassured on seeing this, and we then went down and inspected the grounds. There were three woods, the "Little Wood," the "Middle Wood," and the "Big Wood," and then there was an orchard that stretched along as far as the eye could see. In this orchard was the building where the poor children lived. They were taught gratis, and every week they helped with the laundry for the convent.

The sight of these immense woods, with swings, hammocks, and a gymnasium, delighted me, for I thought I should be able to roam about at pleasure there. Mother St. Sophie explained to us that the Little Wood was reserved for the older pupils, and the Middle Wood for the little ones, whilst the Big Wood was for the whole convent on holidays. Then after telling us about the collecting of the chestnuts and the gathering of the acacia, Mother St. Sophie informed us that every child could have a small garden, and that sometimes two or three of them had a larger one.

"Oh, can I have a garden of my own?" I exclaimed—"a garden all to myself?"

"Yes, one of your own."

The Mother Superior called the gardener, Père Larcher, the only man, with the exception of the chaplain, who was on the convent staff.

"Père Larcher," said the kind woman, "here is a little girl who wants a beautiful garden. Find a nice place for it."

"Very good, Reverend Mother," answered the honest fellow, and I saw my father slip a coin into his hand, for which the man thanked him in an embarrassed way.

It was getting late, and we had to separate. I remember quite well that I did not feel any grief, as I was thinking of nothing but my garden. The convent no longer seemed to me like a prison, but like paradise. I kissed my mother and my aunt. Papa drew me to him and held me a moment in a close embrace. When I looked at him I saw

that his eyes were full of tears. I did not feel at all inclined to cry, and I gave him a hearty kiss and whispered, "I am going to be very, very good and work well, so that I can go with you at the end of four years." I then went towards my mother, who was giving Mother St. Sophie the same instructions she had given to Madame Fressard about cold cream, chocolate, jam, &c. &c. Mother St. Sophie wrote down all these instructions, and it is only fair to say that she carried them out afterwards most scrupulously.

When my parents had gone I felt inclined to cry, but the Mother Superior took me by the hand and, leading me to the Middle Wood, showed me where my garden would be. That was quite enough to distract my thoughts, for we found Père Larcher there marking out my piece of ground in a corner of the wood. There was a young birch tree against the wall. The corner was formed by the joining of two walls, one of which bounded the railway line on the left bank of the river which cuts the Satory woods in two. The other wall was that of the cemetery. All the woods of the convent were part of the beautiful Satory forest.

They had all given me money, my father, my mother, and my aunt. I had altogether about forty or fifty francs, and I wanted to give all to Père Larcher for buying seed. The Mother Superior smiled, and sent for the Mother Treasurer and Mother St. Appoline. I had to hand all my money over to the former, with the exception of twenty sous which she left me, saying, "When that is all gone, little girl, come and get some more from me."

Mother St. Appoline, who taught botany, then asked me what kind of flowers I wanted. What kind of flowers! Why, I wanted every sort that grew. She at once proceeded to give me a botany lesson by explaining that all flowers did not grow at the same season. She then asked the Mother Treasurer for some of my money, which she gave to Père Larcher, telling him to buy me a spade, a rake, a hoe, and a watering-can, some seeds and a few plants, the names of which she wrote down for him. I was delighted, and I then went with Mother St. Sophie to the refectory to have dinner. On entering the immense room I stood still for a second, amazed and confused. More than a hundred girls were assembled there, standing up for the benediction to be pronounced. When the Mother Superior appeared, every one bowed respectfully, and then all eyes were turned on me. Mother St. Sophie took me to the seat which had been chosen for me at the end of the room, and then returned to the middle of the refectory. She stood still, made the sign of the cross, and in an audible voice pronounced the benediction. As she left the room every one bowed again, and I then found myself alone, quite alone, in this cage of little wild animals. I was seated between two little girls of from ten to twelve years old, both as dusky as two young moles. They were twins from Jamaica, and their names were Dolores and Pepa Cardaños. They had only been in the convent two months, and appeared to be as timid as I was. The dinner was composed of soup made of everything, and of veal with haricot beans. I detested soup, and I have always had a horror of veal. I turned my plate over when the soup was handed round, but the nun who waited on us turned it round again and poured the hot soup in, regardless of scalding me. "You must eat your soup," whispered my right hand neighbour, whose name was Pepa.

"I don't like that sort and I don't want any," I said aloud. The inspectress was passing by just at that moment.

"You must eat your soup, Mademoiselle," she said.

"No, I don't like that sort of soup," I answered.

She smiled, and said in a gentle voice, "We must like everything. I shall be coming round again just now. Be a good girl and take your soup."

I was getting into a rage, but Dolores gave me her empty plate and ate up the soup for me. When the inspectress came round again she expressed her satisfaction. I was furious, and put my tongue out, and this made all the table laugh. She turned round, and the pupil who sat at the end of the table and was appointed to watch over us, because she was the eldest, said to her in a low voice, "It's the new girl making grimaces." The inspectress moved away again, and when the veal was served my portion found its way to the plate of Dolores. I wanted to keep the haricot beans, though, and we almost came to a quarrel over them. She gave way finally, but with the veal she dragged away a few beans which I tried to keep on my plate.

An hour later we had evening prayers, and afterwards all went up to bed. My bed was placed against the wall, in which there was a niche for the statue of the Virgin Mary. A lamp was always kept burning in the niche, and the oil for it was provided by the children who had been ill and were grateful for their recovery. Two tiny flower-pots were placed at the foot of the little statue. The pots were of terra-cotta and the flowers of paper. I made paper flowers very well, and I at once decided that I would make all the flowers for the Virgin Mary. I fell asleep, to dream of garlands of flowers, of haricot beans, and of distant countries, for the twins from Jamaica had made an impression on my mind.

The awakening was cruel. I was not accustomed to get up so early. Daylight was scarcely visible through the opaque window-panes. I grumbled as I dressed, for we were allowed a quarter of an hour, and it always took me a good half-hour to comb my hair. Sister Marie, seeing that I was not ready, came towards me, and before I knew what she was going to do snatched the comb violently out of my hand.

"Come, come," she said; "you must not dawdle like this." She then planted the comb in my mop of hair and tore out a handful of it. Pain, and anger at seeing myself treated in this way, threw me immediately into one of my fits of rage which always terrified those who witnessed them. I flung myself upon the unfortunate sister, and with feet, teeth, hands, elbows, head, and indeed all my poor little body, I hit and thumped, yelling at the same time. All the pupils, all the sisters, and indeed every one, came running to see what was the matter. The sisters made the sign of the cross, but did not venture to approach me. The Mother Prefect threw some holy water over me to exorcise the evil spirit. Finally the Mother Superior arrived on the scene. My father had told her of my fits of wild fury, which were my only serious fault, and my state of health was quite as much responsible for them as the violence of my disposition. She approached me as I was still clutching Sister Marie, though I was exhausted by this struggle with the poor woman, who, although tall and strong, only tried to ward off my blows without retaliating, endeavouring to hold first my feet and then my hands.

I looked up on hearing Mother St. Sophie's voice. My eyes were bathed in tears, but nevertheless I saw such an expression of pity on her sweet face that, without



altogether letting go, I ceased fighting for a second, and all trembling and ashamed, said very quickly, "She commenced it. She snatched the comb out of my hand like a wicked woman, and tore out my hair. She was rough and hurt me. She is a wicked, wicked woman." I then burst into sobs, and my hands loosed their hold. The next thing I knew was that I found myself lying on my little bed, with Mother St. Sophie's hand on my forehead and her kind, deep voice lecturing me gently. All the others had gone, and I was quite alone with her and the Holy Virgin in the niche. From that day forth Mother St. Sophie had an immense influence over me. Every morning I went to her, and Sister Marie, whose forgiveness I had been obliged to ask before the whole convent, combed my hair out in her presence. Seated on a little stool, I listened to the book that the Mother Superior read to me or to the instructive story she told me. Ah, what an adorable woman she was, and how I love to recall her to my memory!

I adored her as a child adores the being who has entirely won its heart, without knowing, without reasoning, without even being aware that it was so, but I was simply under the spell of an infinite fascination. Since then, however, I have understood and admired her, realising how unique and radiant a soul was imprisoned under the thick-set exterior and happy face of that holy woman. I have loved her ever since for all that she awakened within me of nobleness. I love her for the letters which she wrote to me, letters that I often read over and over again. I love her also because, imperfect as I am, it seems to me that I should have been one hundred times more so had I not known and loved that pure creature.

Once only did I see her severe and felt that she was suddenly angry. In the little room used as a parlour, leading into her cell, there was a portrait of a young man, whose handsome face was stamped with a certain nobility.

"Is that the Emperor?" I asked her.

"No," she answered, turning quickly towards me; "it is the King; it is Henri V."

It was only later on that I understood the meaning of her emotion. All the convent was royalist, and Henri V. was their recognised sovereign. They all had the most utter contempt for Napoleon III., and on the day when the Prince Imperial was baptized there was no distribution of bon-bons for us, and we were not allowed the holiday that was accorded to all the colleges, boarding-schools, and convents.

Politics were a dead letter to me, and I was happy at the convent, thanks to Mother St. Sophie.

Then, too, I was a favourite with my schoolfellows, who frequently did my compositions for me. I did not care for any studies, except geography and drawing. Arithmetic drove me wild, spelling plagued my life out, and I thoroughly despised the piano. I was very timid, and quite lost my head when questioned unexpectedly. I had a passion for animals of all kinds. I used to carry about with me, in small cardboard boxes or cages that I manufactured myself, adders, of which our woods were full, crickets that I found on the leaves of the tiger lilies, and lizards. The latter nearly always had their tails broken, as, in order to see if they were eating, I used to lift the lid of the box a little, and on seeing this the lizards rushed to the opening. I shut the box very quickly, red with surprise at such assurance, and *crac!* in a twinkling, either at right or left, there was nearly always a tail caught. This used to grieve me for hours, and whilst one of the sisters was explaining to us, by figures on

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