

MEMORIES OF MY LIFE

***Being my Personal, Professional, and Social
Recollections as Woman and Artist***

By

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MEMORIES OF MY LIFE



SARAH BERNHARDT AS *GISMONDA*, FROM A PAINTING BY CHARTRAN.

MEMORIES OF MY LIFE

CHAPTER I

MY AUNTS

My mother was fond of traveling: 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 latter 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 were always promising to come to see me, but rarely kept their word. My nurse hailed from Brittany and lived near Quimperle 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 present epoch of velocity of travel. 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 bed 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 tray for my toys. She threw a fagot 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 neighbors. 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 plowed by stagecoaches that 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 more 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 folk 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 neighbors used to bring butter to make masks for Milk Blossom.

Mother, admirably 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 lowered her eyes. 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 the nurse, the foster father, and me back in triumph to Paris, 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 colored like wooden balls. My aunts never came there. My mother used to send money, bonbons, and toys. The foster father died and my nurse married a *concierge*, who used to 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 toward five o'clock in the evening, in the month of November, when everything looks gray. 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 boxwood, no leaves falling, nothing, nothing, but stone, cold, gray, ugly stone, and panes of glass opposite me.

"I want to go away," I screamed. "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 anæmic, and I 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 named 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 her go. 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 toward 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 kneecap. I only came to myself again a few hours later, to find that I was in a beautiful, wide bed which smelled 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.

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 splendor, 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 slowly, too, 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: Régie 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 going to arrange about 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 gray, 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. Mme. Fressard came forward to meet us, and I liked her at once. She was of medium height, rather stout, with a small waist, and her hair turning gray, *en Sévigné*. She had beautiful, large eyes, rather like George Sand's, 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 bedrooms, 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 Mme. 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.

Mme. 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." Mme. Fressard smiled in a good-natured, but rather ironical way. She picked up a packet of the chocolate, and looked at the mark.

"Ah! from Marquis! 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 Mme. 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 everyone 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, etc.”

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 to the barracks, and you’ll have to mind your pace!”

I pulled his long mustache, and he said, winking, and looking in the direction of Mme. Fressard, who had a slight mustache: “You mustn’t do that to a 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, while I was taken away to the cage where I was to be imprisoned.

I spent two years at the *pension*. I was taught reading, writing, and reckoning. I also learned a hundred new games. I learned to sing rondeaus 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 Mme. 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 spellbound. 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 Mme. Fressard's, and this sister, Clothilde, is now the wife of M. Pierre Merlon, 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 practice saying in a low voice: "*Tremble, fille digne de moi.*" I used to twist my head in my shoulders, swell out my cheeks and commence:

"Tremble—trem-ble—trem-em-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.

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