

## I.

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### “GOODNIGHT, LITTLE STAR!”

**E**VEN THE EXACT address of where the great tragedienne was born is a matter of conflicting report. As many streets in Paris claim Bernhardt's birthplace as towns in Greece claim Homer. She is said to have first seen the light at 125 rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré, at 5 rue de l'Ecole-de-Medicine, at 22 rue de la Michodière and at 265 rue Saint-Honoré.

The locale may be disputed but two dates remain in common agreement, that of her birth and that of her death. In the year of her birth, Louis-Philippe, the “Umbrella King,” was conducting his determinedly bourgeois reign in France; in England Sir Robert Peel was minister, the Duke of Wellington was still alive, and Queen Victoria, young and fertile, had given birth to her fourth child; in America John Tyler was President, the Abolitionist agitation was on and Sam Houston headed the independent Republic of Texas; while in Prussia, a young man named Otto von Bismarck had barely come of age. The year of her death, Warren G. Harding was President of the United States; in England, Stanley Baldwin was occupying No. 10 Downing Street; and, in Germany, French troops were occupying the Ruhr. During her long life span this woman, in her own country, existed through a monarchy, an empire, two revolutions, a commune and two major wars. For Sarah Bernhardt was born October 23, 1844, and died March 26, 1923.

Sarah, or Rosine, which was her actual given name but used only during her early childhood, was the illegitimate daughter of a

Judith Van Hard, a Jewish Dutch woman, who lived for a time in Berlin. The Van Hards were of bourgeois middle class although one romantic rumor has it that Judith was the love-child of a Belgian Marquise, Thieule de Petit-Bois de la Nieville, who ran away from a chateau named Saint-Aubin-de-Corbier with a German oculist — which sounds suspiciously like a legend Sarah herself might have thought up. Judith was a milliner — that is, until she came to Paris and switched to a less respectable but more lucrative profession.

Judith, known to her friends as Julie or Youle, was exceptionally beautiful and a conqueror of men. Gay and pregnant she came to Paris with one of her conquests. As to who he was, accounts, as always, differ. The majority say that he was a law student named Edouard Bernard, who later became a successful notary in Havre, and that is as good a supposition as any. The only possible interest he can have is the fact that he sired Sarah Bernhardt. After the baby was born, and very likely in his Left Bank student quarters, he is said to have been called back to Havre. He seems to have had a commendable sense of responsibility for he settled the sum of 100,000 francs on the child as a dowry when she would come of age and he saw to it that Youle had enough to tide her along for a time. Youle, in turn, saw to it that before such time was up, others would tide her further along, and elegantly tided she was.

In the Paris of the 1840's, for a smart young woman without husband, family or fortune, there were just three ways of making a living: by being a milliner, by being a governess or by being kept. Youle was fed up with millinery, she could never have endured the dreary life of a governess and she had all the equipment for the third career which the French glorify by the dashing name of *galanterie*. This was an era when the successful *courtisane* was looked upon with interest and guarded admiration, when infidelity, as long as it was not publicized, was, among a certain class, taken as a matter of course. Morals were anything but rigid and although

a dull, paternal king sat on the throne, smugly setting his subjects an example of marital fidelity (as Louis-Philippe was by then entering his seventies, he must have found little difficulty in maintaining such fidelity), only the respectable bourgeoisie followed his commendable example. The world of fashion and the arts paid little attention to the Seventh Commandment. Among the literati, even the immortals were not above indulging their mortal proclivities. Victor Hugo's mistress was the actress Juliette Drouet, whom he kept quite openly in spite of the propinquity of his wife Adèle, and Adèle Hugo, in turn, found solace in a highly charged if unfulfilled affair with the critic Sainte-Beuve. Alexandre Dumas the elder, not content with one, had practically a harem of lady-loves, and George Sand bestowed her favors on many, including Chopin and Alfred de Musset. Every young dandy of the day, who might have stepped out of the pages of Balzac's Parisian novels, had his kept woman. As for the professional *demi-mondaine*, if she were clever enough to rise to the top of her precarious profession, she found herself in a position as enviable as that of a popular actress or a famous ballerina.

Youle's appearance was one of great distinction. She carried herself with dignity. It was said that she had the head of Raphael's Madonna of the Chair: perfect features, limpid eyes, dark hair parted demurely down the middle. There was apparently a piquant attraction about a madonna of easy virtue which some men found irresistible. Youle risked her stakes on capitalizing that attraction, and in a very few months she became so successful that she had little or no time for baby Sarah, but placed her in the care of a Brittany wet-nurse who took the little thing off to her cottage near Quimperlé and looked after her with a peasant's rough kindness. There was one hair-raising moment when the world might have been deprived in a hideous fashion of the future glory that was Bernhardt. The tiny creature, learning to turn herself over, rolled off her straw pallet-bed and onto the open hearth where a flying ember set her clothes on fire. The nurse, who was out

tending her cabbages, hearing screams, rushed inside, grabbed up the flaming bundle and plunged it into a large bucket of milk, a maneuver which apparently did neither the child nor the milk any appreciable harm except that it might have been the start of Sarah's life-long obsessive terror of fire.

In a year or two Youle, who had become very elegant indeed, feeling that a Breton peasant's hut was hardly the proper setting for a child of hers, rented a little suburban cottage in Neuilly, where she installed the nurse and her charge. Neuilly was only an hour from the center of town, near enough for Youle to pay an occasional duty call on her daughter, not from motives of maternal concern, but to impress some current swain who might drive her out in his smart trap and enjoy the pretty scene of the beautiful young mother making solicitous inquiries and briefly fondling the peaked little bundle of bones whose well-being could not have concerned her less.

Youle had taken to the *demi-monde* and Parisian life as a duck to water. The French capital was a paradise for the fashionable, the frivolous and the pleasure-loving. The daily amusement routine delighted her. There was the noontime "hour for the Bois" when everyone owning a smart equipage, or renting one, would join the parade up the Champs Elysées and into that enchanted forest for a brisk trot around the lakes and down the Allée des Poteaux, in a pageant of luxury horses gleaming like their polished harness, pretty women with stylish escorts in landaus, traps, tandems and cabriolets looking as though they were driving directly out from the lively sketches of Gavarni or Constantin Guys, equestrians on caracoling mounts, dandies from the Club de l'Union, flashing *cuirassiers* and jingling dragoons, and the prancing tandem of Baron de Rothschild. The crowd was made up of the wealthy, the well-born, the cream of Orleanist society, along with the Bonapartists soon to come into their own. This was the hour for the high-priced women of easy virtue. It was also the hour for theatre celebrities to exhibit themselves and remind the public

of their importance. Here one might pass the great star Rachel enjoying the air with her current lover the Prince de Joinville, sporting son of Louis-Philippe, gaily unaware that Rachel was about to jilt him for a man who within four years would become Napoleon III, Emperor of the French. Afternoon was the time for those great arteries of worldly and intelligentsia Paris, the Grand Boulevards with their brilliant cafés, the leading one of which, Tortoni's, was the gathering place for important journalists, patrons of the ballet, clubmen, critics and those charmers of biting wit, the *boulevardiers*. The Café de Paris, then on the corner of the rue Taitbout and the boulevard des Italiens, catered to writers. Here might be sitting Balzac, Eugène Sue, the poet Heine, who was then Paris correspondent for a German newspaper, or that illustrious voluptuary Dumas *père* with his kinky hair, handsome features and irresistible allure. While at the Café de la Régence opposite the Théâtre Français, one might have observed the song bird of youth and love, Alfred de Musset, quietly getting drunk or, as one wit put it, "becoming absinthe-minded."

At night the streets swarmed with theatre or opera-goers. These were the days of Mendelssohn and Meyerbeer, and Monday was the fashionable night for the Opéra. Tuesday was when *Tout Paris* turned out for the Comédie Française, and on evenings when Rachel was billed for *Phèdre*, the venerable house was packed to the rafters. The late supper scene enjoyed an attractive atmosphere of glamor and agreeable sin. The smart restaurants specialized in excellent food and *cabinets particuliers*, elegantly appointed private dining rooms situated on the mezzanine floor and reached by a special stairway. In some establishments the row of discreetly closed doors resembled those along a hotel corridor. The most famous late supper rendezvous was the Café Anglais, and the most famous *cabinet particulier* in all of Europe was the Grand Seize, private dining room No. 16, outside of which was stationed Isabelle, a flower vender to whom gentlemen patrons paid at least two gold louis for an insignificant bouquet and the assurance of

her silence. If, in their day, the walls of the Grand Seize could have talked, the world of society, of high finance, even of Royalty would have rocked. Its patrons were clubmen, bankers, sportsmen, South American millionaires and certain of the more amorous crowned heads of Europe. The patronesses were mainly those delicious creatures of easy virtue and exorbitant price who were known as "The Great Lionesses" or more candidly as "The Grand Horizontals."

Judith Van Hard, who now called herself Madame Bernard — the "h" and "t" were added later — now had a stylish flat in the rue de la Michodière and plenty of admirers to pay for its upkeep as well as for her clothes and jewelry. Being both Jewish and Dutch, Youle was clever with the money she acquired. She knew just how much to spend on the ostentation necessary to her profession and how much to save or entrust to some gentleman friend from the Bourse to invest for her. For her the primrose path became so profitably paved, she persuaded one of her sisters to leave Holland and come join her on the pleasant thoroughfare. This was Sarah's Aunt Rosine, the only relative who was kind to her and whom the lonely girl loved dearly. Tante Rosine was pretty and vivacious. There was always a delicious scent of orris-root sachet about her and Sarah called her *Tante Sentibon*, or "Aunt Smell-good." Rosine came to Paris, took up her sister's chosen trade and also did very well for herself. Within a few months she too had her own little flat, her own fashionable horse and carriage and her own string of beaux to foot the bills.

The persons who footed most of Youle's bills were a wealthy banker named Régis Lavolie and a Baron Larrey, the son of the surgeon-in-chief of Napoleon's army. There were other bill-footers as well as a number of non-paying gentlemen-in-attendance who got into the habit of calling merely to be amused by the hostess' entertaining gatherings. During the '40's and '50's a top-flight *courtisane* was in a position of importance and could, if she played her cards well, surround herself with a brilliant coterie.