

In the Clouds

The Impressions of a Chair

SARAH BERNHARDT

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RENARD PRESS

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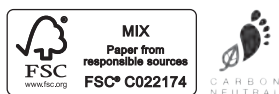
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In the Clouds first published in French as *Dans les nuages* in 1878
The basis of this translation first published in 1880

Translation, text and notes © Renard Press Ltd, 2021
Extra Material © Renard Press Ltd, 2021

Cover design by Will Dady

Printed in the United Kingdom by Severn



ISBN: 978-1-913724-44-3

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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IMPRESSIONS D'UNE CHAISE

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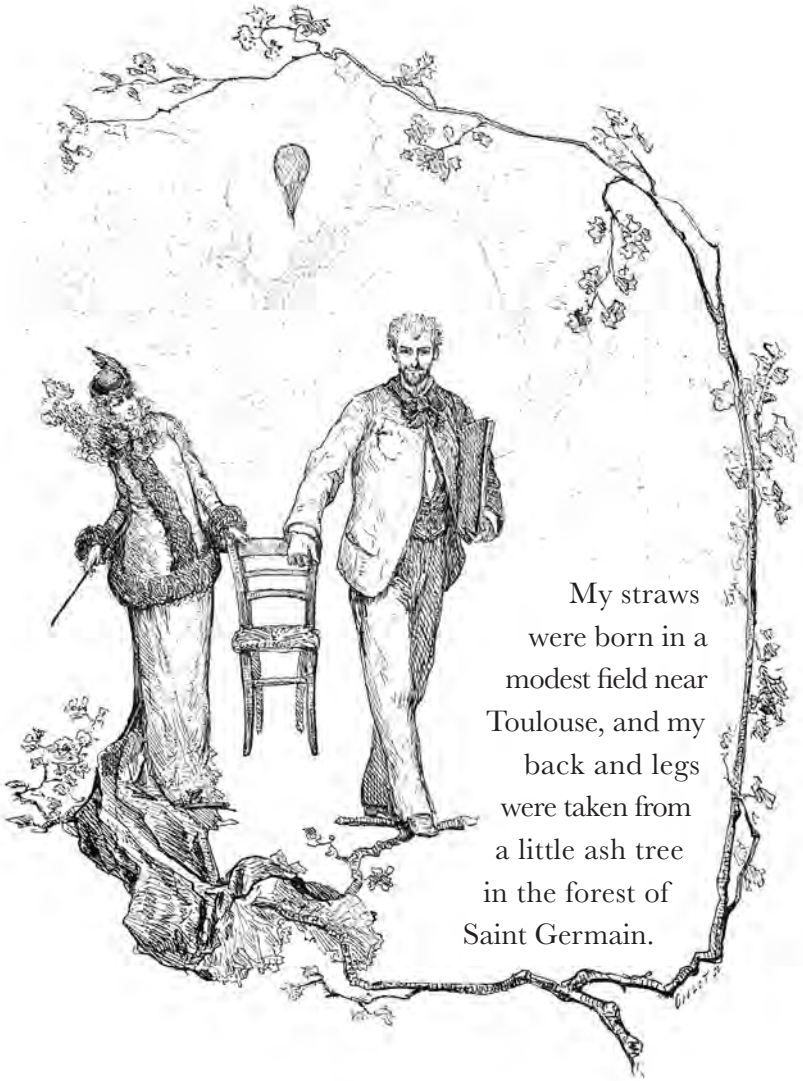
SARAH-BERNHARDT

TO MONSIEUR HENRY GIFFARD

from two grateful artists

SARAH BERNHARDT

GEORGES CLAIRIN



My straws
were born in a
modest field near
Toulouse, and my
back and legs
were taken from
a little ash tree
in the forest of
Saint Germain.

My thoughtful, dreamy nature was forever transporting me into the highest regions.

I longed for luxury, for travel; I envied those gilt chairs whose feet rest on oriental rugs. Being an official chair would have been the delight of my life. The furniture-movers' vans* made my heart beat fast when I saw them driving through the street, loaded down with furniture and chairs which were being carried away to be transported across the seas.

Happy chairs!

And I cried in silence while I hung upside down from an iron bar near the ceiling of a little shop, my tears trickling down, drop by drop, making the gas jet below me crackle.

'What nasty wood!' said the grumbling old dame, the owner of the little shop.

It was a Tuesday. A stout gentleman walked into the shop.

'I would like some chairs,' he said. 'Some cheap chairs.'

It appears that we were cheap, for the shopkeeper displayed twenty-four of my companions.

'That's your affair,' she said. 'How about these?'

'Very well,' said the man, 'but I need more.'

The grumbling old dame showed him thirty more.

‘Here is all my stock. Ah! There’s this chair too – but I warn you, for I never deceive my customers, it is made of bad wood. The wood is green – it cries all the time!’

‘Give it to me anyway,’ said the man.

So, here I am, taken away in a big wagon. I traverse many streets, and after that a grand boulevard; the wagon enters an immense courtyard and stops in front of a gate.

We were unloaded from the wagon, and two days later we were placed three by three around marble-topped tables, on which were placed women’s portraits and advertisements for pharmacists.

I watch; I listen. I am, it appears, in the courtyard of the Tuileries,* which has become the home of the captive balloon.

‘What luck! A balloon!’ I saw a balloon, and it was the very largest that had ever been constructed. And then there was a great machine that kept going, going, going all the while. It seems all this was quite superb, for I heard very competent men around me saying, ‘It’s admirable! Giffard is a truly remarkable man – what a genius organisation!’

I was proud. I didn’t know Monsieur Giffard, but that didn’t matter – I was proud, all the same. There were people here and there who criticised the cable, the basket, the steam engine, but I quickly came to understand

that these detractors were cowards, who made themselves critics because they couldn't be actors.

I laughed behind my straws at all these little weaknesses! One of them said he wouldn't go up because he wished to preserve a husband for his wife; another a father for his children; a third because he was dizzy! And so on – a thousand dull pretexts.

However, I was there for eight days, and the crowd increased with every ascent. Ah! How I would have liked to go up in the balloon too! But no, the passengers always stood up in the basket, so there was no hope for a poor chair.

I was deep in thought one day, but was drawn out of my reverie by the conversation of some men nearby.

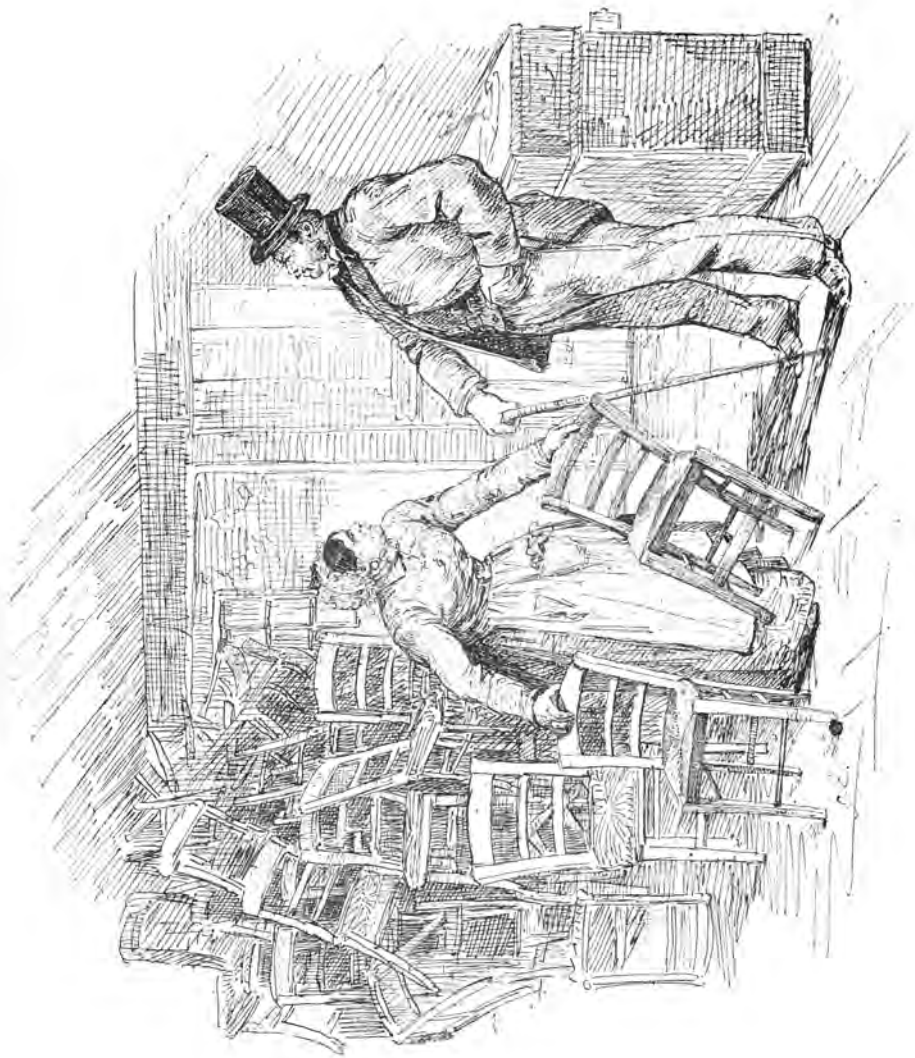
'Who are you waving to?'

'Doña Sol.*'

'Ah! Point her out to me – I don't know her.'

'She's coming over.'

I looked over, and I saw, advancing slowly, surrounded by lots of people, a young woman, rather pale and thin. She held a little cane, and was speaking terribly fast. She went up in the balloon, and then, after the ascent, came and sat down very close to me. She was in raptures – she would come again the following day, and every day, every day! This pleased me greatly – I would very much like to serve as her seat.



*A Biographical Note on
Sarah Bernhardt*

Henriette-Rosine Bernard was born, it is thought, in October 1844. It can never be known for certain, as her birth certificate was lost in the fire at the city archive, when the Paris Commune torched the Hôtel de Ville in May 1871, and her various stories about her early life don't necessarily align.

The name of Bernhardt's father is not known, but she was born to Youle (Judith) Bernard, a young Dutch Jewish woman. While simplistic to label Youle a courtesan, she did keep the company of wealthy young men, who paid her way. She also ran a salon, which attracted men of great standing, including the composer Rossini, the novelist Dumas *père* and Charles de Morny (the half-brother of Napoleon III).

Bernhardt was sent off aged three to live with a nurse in Brittany; however, with her mother visiting her frequently, it was felt, according to the biography by Louis Verneuil, that she ought to be closer at hand, so it was only a few years until Bernhardt was moved to Neuilly, just outside Paris. Disaster struck, however,

according to Bernhardt's own memoirs, when the nurse's husband died. She remarried and moved with Bernhardt into a cramped apartment in Paris; it soon transpired that all contact with Bernhardt's family had been lost, until one day her aunt Rosine happened to pull up in front of her building. Not believing that her aunt would return to collect her the next day as promised, Bernhardt threw herself in front of the carriage, breaking her arm in two places and injuring her knee. Youle soon returned to collect her, and Bernhardt spent the next two years recuperating.

Now aged seven, Bernhardt was sent off to the fashionable nearby boarding school, Madame Fressard's, just to the west of Paris. Here her education took off, and she soon learnt to read and write. She enjoyed her time at the school, and spoke highly of visits from a young actress from the Comédie-Française, who read poetry to the young girls. It appears that Bernhardt was visited by her mother – apparently once joined by de Morny – and by her father, who decided to move her to the Grandchamps Convent in Versailles, so that she could be brought up a Catholic. She stayed at the convent for six years under the watchful eye of Mother Ste. Sophie, who, Bernhardt reports, 'tamed' her.

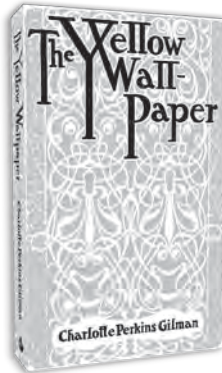
Now aged about fifteen, Bernhardt's future was uncertain; her mother wanted her to marry into



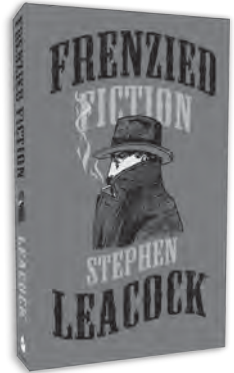
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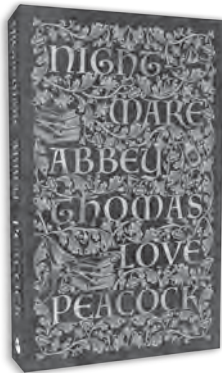
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