

# WITCHES' SABBATH



MAURICE SACHS

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TRANSLATED BY RICHARD HOWARD

SPURL EDITIONS

I  
*I alone knew what I might have done . . .  
For others, I am at best only a perhaps. – STENDHAL*

*To suppose that the trivial details of one's own life are worth recording is to give proof of the pettiest vanity. One writes such things in order to communicate to others the theory of the universe one bears within oneself.* When, undertaking to write these pages, I weighed the occasion and reflected on the serious problems that faced me, on my obligation to give opinions about subjects that exceeded my grasp, these words of Renan came to mind. Is it really the duty of each of us as writers, I wondered, to communicate to others the theory of the universe he bears within himself? Opening at random, almost mechanically, Goethe's *Conversations with Eckermann*, my eyes fell on these lines: *Man is born, not to solve the problems of the universe, but to discover where the problem applies and then to establish himself within the limits of what he can understand.*

I am not a learned man; I have never had a philosophical education; Goethe's dictum is enough for me; one can then, like Renan,

record the trivial details of one's own life. There is no harm in that when they may be instructive.

Meanwhile, how avoid trying in one's way to construct a theory of the universe? But I raise my voice here only as one might speak in a frank and friendly conversation, as one says to a friend: "I believe in God" or "I don't believe in God," which leads to a heart-to-heart, mind-to-mind controversy where one discusses oneself without vanity and without assuming one is a deep thinker for doing so, since even the humblest of us has some notion of eternal things. This notion one can express in telling one's life story without being accused of conceit: one can write it the way one would write a letter.

And that is just what this little book is, whose outline and intent will seem neither very clear nor very firm, and which follows as best it can the difficult paths of my life, parallel to roads that are much greater and more beautiful. Not a message, a letter. Not memoirs but a memorandum, a statement of account, a moral memo. Or should I say immoral? But without that note of squalid self-satisfaction. I am writing these pages to find in the labyrinth of my awareness the clue of a dignity that has become as dear to me as life. I am publishing them because I believe in the absolution public confession affords and because they may be of use to others, if only by showing that there are certain predicaments from which one can escape after all.

Then too, I hope that reading this book will help, however little, to exacerbate two rebellions in the young people who may do so: the rebellion against order, the rebellion against disorder; for one must experience the first, then the second, before being a man.

But one must not put the cart before the horse and fight for order before having fought against it.

*En l'an de mon trentiesme aage,  
Que toutes mes hontes j'eus beues,  
Ne du tout fol, ne du tout sage,*

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*(In this my thirtieth year,  
Having drunk my fill of shame,  
Neither wholly wise nor wholly foolish,)*

I regard myself as a bad example capable of giving good advice.



*The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth  
are set on edge.* – EZEKIEL, XVIII, 2

*Heredity is the only god whose name we know.*  
– OSCAR WILDE (QUOTED BY GIDE)

I was born, thirty-two years ago, into the most disorderly family imaginable. Its members married and then divorced with incredible haste. They loved risk, and possessed several cardinal defects that have been transmitted to me. It seems that my father could only live off women (though he legitimized this expedient in the registry offices). My mother's character is more complex, and I recognize it in myself at certain critical moments: emotional, passionate, helpless, obsessed, she passed through life borne from peak to peak by hope and plunged over and over again into the abyss.

I do not know what has become of her; after the misfortunes I shall discuss below, she sought exile in England. I hoped to meet her again when a certain amount of publicity was attached to my name in London, in 1938. But she gave no sign of life. I have lost track of her.

(Mother, if you read this book, I want you to know that I nur-

tured in myself, repressed but powerful, a tremendous filial devotion.)

I never knew my paternal grandparents. My maternal grandfather, Georges Sachs, was a successful diamond merchant, rabid about politics. Though a capitalist, he counted himself among the twelve founders of *Humanité*, effectively supported Jaurès, then Briand, and prided himself upon being a close friend of Anatole France. He had a maniacal adoration for *le maître*, traveled to Russia with him, collected all the editions of all his books, kept me from going to the theater until I could see one of his plays, and spent a small fortune on *objets d'art* for the decoration of the Villa Saïd.

When Georges Sachs died, Anatole France offered him this splendid funeral oration: "It's a pity! He furnished so much."

My grandfather divorced two wives and died in Switzerland, in the arms of a young mistress. Around 1900, his first wife, my grandmother, had left him in Trouville, where she had fallen in love with Jacques Bizet, a man who typified all the charm and elegance of the period: black beard, pince-nez, white plus-fours and a straw boater for bicycle-riding. Bizet was the only son of the most popular French composer at the end of the nineteenth century and one of the richest, most elegant and most intelligent women in Paris: Mme. Straus, *née* Geneviève Halévy, the widow of Georges Bizet, whose salon has been celebrated in so many memoirs and novels of our time, because there one might meet everyone then famous. Today most of these great men have fallen into oblivion, except for Monet, Pozzi, Abel Hermant, Reynaldo Hahn, and the Prince of Monaco.

It was here that Marcel Proust made his first appearance in Society.

My grandmother became Alice Bizet a few years before I was born.

I inherited my father's laziness, my mother's lack of balance and her passion, my Grandfather Sachs' curiosity and love of literature, my grandmother's frivolity, as well as a certain good taste and a

strange kind of egoism (the toughest), which is actually a profound indifference; and from each of them a need for luxury, for disorder, a touch of madness, and a great sturdiness of skeleton, organs, and soul.

Before them, many ancestors doubtless contributed to the formation of the odd creature I am, but knowing virtually nothing about them, I can say little more.

I do recall, however, one charming great-grandmother, who knew all the Balzacian families, including genealogies, and I remember having heard that she had Swedish blood; this was "Bonne Maman Franckel."

There was also, on my mother's side, Russian and German blood, on my father's side German and English blood, and a young lady from the Antilles. But I don't know whether she was Creole or colored. She was described in the family as lying on an ottoman and spending a fortune on trinkets.

Which, moreover, is how I also see Mme. Straus, stretched out on a chaise-longue, her feet bundled in a chinchilla wrap, her little head resting on laces and pointing to a tall chest filled with chocolates, for toward the end of her life she went out only once a week to buy gloves and sweets, both quite useless to her, given the sequestered life she had chosen and the bad state of her stomach. No one knows for sure whether the morphine she took to excess diminished her strength and reduced her to a supine life when she was of a disposition to be up and about, or if this drug prolonged that life until her eighty-second year, despite her dreadful grief over her son's suicide.

Although Mme. Straus and Jacques Bizet were not related to me by blood, Jacques meant everything to me, and I owe him a great deal.

I must say (unfortunately! for I loved him deeply, and still do), that it is not the best of myself I owe him. When I had reached the age of loving with some sense of what I was doing, he was a ruined creature, spineless and guilty, to whom I feverishly attached myself and whom I was mad enough to imitate later on, even in his worst

excesses. God knows why. To justify him, perhaps, or to lose myself in his shadow.

I admired him the way you admire a legendary figure. His name, his fortune (which was precarious though I didn't know it) and the thick hair that covered his body accorded him a sensational status in my imagination.

Everyone attacked him. I insisted on defending him. People jeered at him, I made him into an idol. His drunkenness seemed to me a kind of refinement, his drug habit the necessity of an ailing body, his licentiousness the norm of a strong and thereby passionate man, his attitude toward a woman who was fatal to him the very ABC of love.

When I was still quite young, I discovered in his house the works of the Marquis de Sade; I stole the *Hundred and Twenty Days of Sodom* from him and reveled in it. This pink volume with its plain wrapper was the bible of my early youth; it engaged my senses, *Juliette* won my heart, while my mind was distracted by *The Sign of the Reine Pédauque*.

If the earliest external influences are held to be as powerful as the advantages and disasters of heredity, I owe my first immoral education to Jacques Bizet. That is why I loved him more like an accomplice than a father.

There were two other branches in my family; they had a negative influence, or let us say an influence by opposition.

Willy Sachs, my grandfather's brother, was a tall, gaunt devil of a man with a Don Juan moustache, a straw hat, bright yellow shoes and the Anglophile elegance of the racetrack. Most of his money went into the pari-mutuels; his wife and two daughters had difficulty keeping body and soul together and loved him all the same. His granddaughter was the first girl I ever wanted to tickle.

My grandmother Bizet had two sisters and a brother. One of the sisters, a fat, kind, timid creature had married a skinny little martinet who looked like Poincaré and always frightened me. He carried his sense of justice to extremes, by which I mean to the point of

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Witches' Sabbath

An odd testament to leave, this book! A pathetic book that describes a wretched hero. I should have preferred describing another man: an example rather than a foil. And I should have preferred that this literary labor be superior, masked by the artisan's care. But everything has failed me. I have spoiled everything. Can this little work escape my fate? Shall I myself escape it? I am leaving, perhaps, only to try once again to tear myself from the infernal round of the witches' sabbath.

*translated by Richard Howard*



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