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## SALONS OF THE REVOLUTION AND THE EMPIRE.

THE salons of the Revolution were no longer simply the fountains of literary and artistic criticism, the centers of wit, intelligence, knowledge, philosophy, and good manners, but the rallying points of parties. They took the tone of the time and assumed the character of political clubs. The salon of 1790 was not the salon of 1770. A new generation had arisen, with new ideals and a new spirit that made for itself other forms or greatly modified the old ones. It was not led by philosophers and *beaux esprits* who evolved theories and turned them over as an intellectual diversion, but by men of action, ready to test these theories and force them to their logical conclusions. Mirabeau, Vergniaud, and Robespierre had succeeded Voltaire, Diderot, and D'Alembert. Impelled towards one end by vanity, ambition, love of glory, or genuine conviction, these men and their colleagues turned the salon, which had so long been the school of public opinion, into an engine of revolution. The exquisite flower

of the eighteenth century had blossomed, matured, and fallen. Perhaps it was followed by a plant of sturdier growth, but the rare quality of its beauty was not repeated. The time was past when the gentle touch of women could temper the violence of clashing opinions, or subject the discussion of vital questions to the inflexible laws of taste. No tactful hostess could hold in leading-strings these fiery spirits. The voices that had charmed the old generation were silent. Of the women who had made the social life of the century so powerful and so famous many were quietly asleep before the storm broke; many were languishing in prison cells, with no outlook but the scaffold; some were pining in the loneliness of exile; and a few were buried in a seclusion which was their only safeguard.

But nature has always in reserve fresh types that come to the surface in a great crisis. The women who made themselves felt and heard above the din of revolution were distinguished for quite other qualities than those which shine in a drawing-room or lead a coterie, though by no means deficient in these attractions. They were either women of rare genius and the courage of their convictions, or women trained in another school, who found their true *milieu* in the midst of stirring events.

The names of Mme. de Staël, Mme. Roland,



and Mme. de Condorcet readily suggest themselves as the most conspicuous representatives of this stormy period. With different gifts and in different measure, each played a prominent rôle in the brief drama to which they lent the inspiration of their genius and their sympathy, until they were forced to turn back with horror from that carnival of savage passions which they had unconsciously helped to let loose upon the world.

Of these Mme. Roland most fitly represents the spirit of the Revolution. It is not as the leader of a salon that she takes her place in the history of her time, but as one of the foremost and ablest leaders of a powerful political party. Born in the ranks of the *bourgeoisie*, she had neither the prestige of a name nor the distinction of an aristocratic lineage. Reared in seclusion, she was familiar with the great world by report only. Though brilliant, even eloquent in conversation when her interest was roused, her early training had added to her natural distaste for the spirit, as well as the accessories, of a social life that was inevitably more or less artificial. She would have felt cramped and caged in the conventional atmosphere of a drawing-room in which the gravest problems were apt to be forgotten in the flash of an epigram or the turn of a *bon mot*. The strong and heroic outlines of her character were more clearly defined on the theater of the world. But at a time when the empire of the salon was waning, when vital interests and burning convictions had for the moment thrown into the shade all minor questions of form and *convenance*, she took up the scepter in a simpler fashion, and, disdaining the arts of a society of which she saw only the fatal and hopeless corruption, held her sway over the daring and ardent men who gathered about her, by the unassisted force of her clear and vigorous intellect.

It would be interesting to trace the career of the thoughtful and precocious child known as Manon or Marie Phlipon, who sat in her father's studio with the burin of an engraver in one hand and a book in the other, eagerly absorbing the revolutionary theories which were to prove so fatal to her, but it is not the purpose here to dwell upon the details of her life. In the solitude of a prison cell and under the shadow of the scaffold she told her own story. She has introduced us to the simple scenes of her childhood, the modest home on the Quai de l'Horloge, the wise and tender mother, the weak and unstable father. We are made familiar with the tiny recess in which she studies, reads, and makes extracts from the books which are such strange companions for her years. We seem to see the grave little face as it lights with emotion over the inspiring pages of Féne-

lon or the chivalrous heroes of Tasso, and sympathize with the fascination that leads the child of nine years to carry her Plutarch to mass instead of her prayer-book. She pictures for us her convent life with its dreams, its exaltations, its romantic friendships, and its ardent enthusiasms. We have vivid pictures of the calm and sympathetic Sophie Cannet, to whom she unburdens all the hopes and aspirations and sorrows of her young life; of the lively sister Henriette, who years afterward, in the generous hope of saving her early friend, proposed to exchange clothes and take her place in the cells of Sainte-Pélagie. In the long and commonplace procession of suitors that files before us one only touches her heart. La Blancherie has a literary and philosophic turn, and the young girl's imagination drapes him in its own glowing colors. The opposition of her father separates them, but absence only lends fuel to this virgin flame. One day she learns that his views are mercenary, that he is neither true nor disinterested, and the charm is broken. She met him afterward in the Luxembourg gardens with a feather in his hat, and the last illusion vanished.

There is an idyllic charm in these pictures so simply and gracefully sketched. She sees with the vision of one lying down to sleep after a life of pain, and dreaming of the green fields, the blue skies, the running brooks, the trees, the flowers, that made so beautiful a background for youthful loves and hopes. Perhaps we could wish sometimes that she were a little less frank. We miss a touch of delicacy in this nature that was so strong and self-poised. We would rather she had not dismissed La Blancherie quite so theatrically. There is a trace too much of consciousness in her fine self-analysis, and we half suspect that her unchild-like penetration and precocity of motive was sometimes the reflection of an afterthought. But it is to be remembered that, even in childhood, she had lived in such close companionship with the heroes and moralists of the past that their sentiments had become her own. Her frankness was a part of that uncompromising truthfulness which scorned disguises of any sort, and led her to paint faults and virtues alike.

Family sorrows—the death of the mother whom she adored, and the unworthiness of her father—combined to change the current of her free and happy life and to deepen a natural vein of melancholy. In her loneliness of soul the convent seemed to offer itself as the sole haven of peace and rest. The child who loved Fénelon, and dreamed over the lives of the saints, had in her much of the stuff out of which mystics and fanatics are made. Her ardent soul was raised to ecstasy by the stately ceremonial of the Church; her imagination was captivated





MME. DE STAËL. (FROM THE PAINTING BY GÉRARD.)

by its majestic music, its mystery, its solemnity, and she was wont to spend hours in rapt meditation. But her strong fund of good sense, her firm reason fortified by wide and solid reading, together with her habits of close observation and analysis, saved her from falling a victim to her own emotional needs, or to chimeras of any sort. She had drawn her mental nourishment too long from Voltaire, Rousseau, Montesquieu,

the English philosophers, and classic historians to become permanently a prey to exaggerated sensibilities, though it was the same temperament, fired by a sense of human inequality and wrong, that swept her at last along the road that led to the scaffold. At twenty-six the vocation of the *religieuse* had lost its fascination; the pious fervor of her childhood had vanished before the skepticism of her intellect,



its ardent friendships had grown dim, its fleeting loves had proved illusive, and her romantic dreams ended in a cold marriage of reason.

It may be noted here that, though Mme. Roland had lost her belief in ecclesiastical systems, and, as she said, continued to go to mass only for the "edification of her neighbors and the good order of society," there was always in her nature a strong undercurrent of religious feeling. Her faith had not survived the full illumination of her reason, but her trust in immortality never seriously wavered. The Invocation that was among her last written words is the prayer of a soul that is conscious of its divine origin and destiny. She retained, too, the firm moral basis that was laid in her early teachings, and which saved her from the worst errors of her time. She might be shaken by the storms of passion, but one feels that she could never be swept from her moorings.

Tall and finely developed, with dark brown hair; a large mouth whose beauty lay in a smile of singular sweetness; dark, serious eyes with a changeful expression which no artist could catch; a fresh complexion that responded to every emotion of a passionate soul; a deep, well-modulated voice; manners gentle, modest, reserved, sometimes timid with the consciousness that she was not readily taken at her true value—such was the *personnelle* of the woman who calmly weighed the possibilities of a life which had no longer a pleasant outlook in any direction, and, after much hesitation, became the wife of a grave, studious, austere man of good family and moderate fortune, but many years her senior.

It was this marriage, into which she entered with all seriousness, and a devotion that was none the less sincere because it was of the intellect rather than the heart, that gave the final tinge to a character that was already laid on solid foundations. Strong, clear-sighted, earnest, and gifted, her later experience had accentuated a slightly ascetic quality which had been deepened also by her study of antique models. Her tastes were grave and severe. But they had a lighter side. As a child she had excelled in music, dancing, drawing, and other feminine accomplishments of her age, though one feels always that her distinctive talent does not lie in these things. She is more at home with her thoughts. There was a touch of poetry, too, in her nature, that under different circumstances might have lent it a softer and more graceful coloring. She had a natural love for the woods and the flowers. The single relief to her somber life at La Platière, after her marriage, was in the long and lonely rambles in the country, whose endless variations of hill and vale and sky and color she has so tenderly and so vividly noted. In her last

days a piano and a few flowers lighted the darkness of her prison walls, and out of these her imagination reared a world of its own, peopled with dreams and fancies that contrasted strangely with the gloom of her surroundings. This poetic vein was closely allied to the keen sensibility that tempered the seriousness of her character. With the mental equipment of a man she united the rich sympathy of a woman. Her devotion to her mother was passionate in its intensity; her letters to Sophie throb with warmth and sentiment. She is tender and loving, as well as philosophic and thoughtful. Her emotional ardor was doubtless partly the glow of youth and not altogether in the texture of a mind so eminently rational; but there were rich possibilities behind it. A shade of difference in the mental and moral atmosphere, a trace more or less of sunshine and happiness, are important factors in the peculiar combination of qualities that makes up a human being. The marriage of Mme. Roland led her into a world that had little color save what she brought into it. Her husband did not smile upon her friends. Sympathy other than that of the intellect she does not seem to have had. But her story is best told in her own words, written in the last days of her life.

"In considering only the happiness of my partner I soon perceived that something was wanting to my own. I had never, for a single instant, ceased to see in my husband one of the most estimable of men, to whom I felt it an honor to belong; but I have often realized that there was a lack of equality between us, that the ascendancy of an overbearing character, added to that of twenty years more of age, gave him too much superiority. If we lived in solitude, I had many painful hours to pass; if we went into the world, I was loved by men of whom I saw that some might touch me too deeply. I plunged into work with my husband, another excess which had its inconvenience; I gave him the habit of not knowing how to do without me for anything in the world, nor at any moment.

"I honor, I cherish my husband, as a sensible daughter adores a virtuous father to whom she would sacrifice even her lover; but I have found the man who might have been that lover, and remaining faithful to my duties, my frankness has not known how to conceal the feelings which I subjected to them. My husband, excessively sensitive both in his affections and his self-love, could not support the idea of the least change in his influence; his imagination darkened, his jealousy irritated me; happiness fled; he adored me, I sacrificed myself for him, and we were miserable.

"If I were free, I would follow him every-





MME. ROLAND. (FROM THE PORTRAIT BY HEINSIUS.)

where to soften his griefs and console his old age; a soul like mine leaves no sacrifices imperfect. But Roland was embittered by the thought of sacrifice, and the knowledge once acquired that I made one ruined his happiness; he suffered in accepting it, and could not do without it."

The sequel to this tale is told in allusions and half-revelations, in her letters to Buzot, which

glow with suppressed feeling; in her touching farewell to one whom she dared not to name, but whom she hoped to meet where it would not be a crime to love; in those final words of her "Last Thoughts"—"Adieu. . . . No, it is from thee alone that I do not separate; to leave the earth is to approach each other."

Beneath this semi-transparent veil the heart-drama of her life is hidden.



For the sake of those who would be pained by this story, as well as for her own, we would rather it had never been told. We should like to believe that the woman who worked so nobly with and for the man who died by his own hand five days after her death, because he could stay no longer in a world where such crimes were possible, had lived in the full perfection of domestic sympathy. But, if she carried with her an incurable wound, one cannot

to the protection of her fame. Perhaps, after all, she shows here her most human and lovable if not her strongest side. We should like Minerva better if she were not so faultlessly wise.

The outbreak of the Revolution found Mme. Roland at La Platière, where she shared her husband's philosophic and economic studies, brought peace into a discordant family, attended to her household duties and the training of her



MME. NECKER. (FROM A PRINT.)

help regretting that her Spartan courage had not led her to wear the mantle of silence to the end. Posterity is curious rather than sympathetic, and the world is neither wiser nor better for these needless soul-revelations. There is always a certain malady of egotism behind them. But it is often easier to scale the heights of human heroism than to still the cry of a bruised spirit. Mme. Roland had moments of falling short of her own ideals, and this was one of them. Pure, loyal, self-sustained as she was, her strong sense of verity did not permit the veil which would have best served the interests of the larger truth. It is fair to say that she thought the malicious gossip of her enemies rendered this statement necessary

child, devoted many hours to generous care for the sick and poor, and reserved a little leisure for poetry and the solitary rambles she loved so well. The first martial note struck a responsive chord in her heart. Her opportunity had come. Democratic by reason and inheritance, embittered by class distinctions over which she had long brooded, saturated with the sentiments of Rousseau, and full of untried theories constructed in the closet, with small knowledge of the wide and complex interests with which it was necessary to deal, she centered all the hitherto latent energies of her forceful nature upon the quixotic effort to redress human wrongs. Her birth, her intellect, her character, her temperament, her



education, her associations—all led her towards the rôle she played so heroically. She had a keen appreciation for genuine values, but none whatever for factitious ones. Her inborn hatred of artificial distinctions had grown with her years and colored all her estimates of men and things. When she came to Paris she noted with a sort of indignation the superior poise and courtesy of the men in the Assembly, who had been reared in the habit of power. It added fuel to her enmity towards institutions in which reason, knowledge, and integrity paid homage to fine language and distinguished manners. She found even Vergniaud too refined and fastidious in his dress for a successful republican leader. Her old contempt for a "philosopher with a feather" had in no wise abated. With such principles ingrained and fostered, it is not difficult to forecast the part Mme. Roland was destined to play in the coming conflict of classes. It is not the intention to discuss here her attitude towards the Revolution, of which she represented at least the most sincere side. As she stood white-robed and courageous at the foot of the scaffold, facing the savage populace she had laid down her life to befriend, perhaps her perspectives were truer. Experience had given her an insight into the characters of men which is not to be gained in the library, nor in the worship of dead heroes. If it had not shaken her faith in human perfectibility, it had taught her at least the value of tradition in chaining brutal human passions.

The tragical fate of Mme. Roland has thrown a strong light upon the modest little salon in which the unfortunate Girondists met four times a week to discuss the grave problems that confronted them. A salon in the old sense it certainly was not. It had little in common with the famous centers of conversation and *esprit*. It was simply the rallying point of a party. The only woman present was Mme. Roland herself, but at first she assumed no active leadership. She sat at a little table outside of the circle, working with her needle, or writing letters, alive to everything that was said, venturing sometimes a word of counsel or a thoughtful suggestion, and often biting her lips to repress some criticism that she feared might not be within her province. She had left her quiet home in the country fired with a single thought—the regeneration of France. The men who gathered about her were in full accord with her generous aims. It was not to such enthusiasms that the old salons lent themselves. They had been often the centers of political intrigues, as in the days of the Fronde; or of religious partizanship, as during the troubles of Port Royal; they had ranged themselves for and against rival candidates for literary or

artistic honors; but they had preserved, on the whole, a certain cosmopolitan character. All shades of opinion were represented, though social brilliancy was the end sought, and not the triumph of special ideas. It is indeed true that earnest convictions were, to some extent, stifled in the salons, where charm and intelligence counted for so much, and the sterling qualities of character for so little. But the etiquette, the urbanity, the measure, which assured the outward harmony of a society which courted distinction of every kind were quite foreign to the iconoclasts who were bent upon leveling all distinctions. The Revolution, which attacked the whole superstructure of society, was antagonistic to its minor forms as well, and it was the revolutionary party alone which was represented in the salon of Mme. Roland. Brissot, Vergniaud, Pétion, Guadet, and Buzot were leaders there—men sincere and ardent, though misguided, and unable to cope with the storm they had raised to be themselves swept away by its pitiless rage. Robespierre, scheming and ambitious, came there, listened, said little, appropriated for his own ends, and bided his time. Mme. Roland had small taste for the light play of intellect and wit that has no outcome beyond the meteoric display of the moment, and she was impatient with the talk in which an evening was often passed among these men without any definite results. As she measured their strength, she became more outspoken. She communicated to them a spark of her own energy. The most daring moves were made at her bidding. She urged on her timid and conservative husband, she drew up his memorials, she wrote his letters, she was at once his stimulus and his helper. Weak and vacillating men yielded to her rapid insight, her vigor, her earnestness, and her persuasive eloquence. This was probably the period of her greatest influence. Many of the swift changes of those first months may be traced to her salon. The moves which were made in the Assembly were concocted there, the orators who triumphed found their inspiration there. Still, in spite of her energy, her strength, and her courage, she prides herself upon maintaining always the reserve and decorum of her sex.

If she assumed the favorite rôle of the French woman for a short time while her husband was in the ministry, it was in a sternly republican fashion. She gave dinners twice a week to her husband's political friends. The fifteen or twenty men who met around her table at five o'clock were linked by political interests only. The service was simple, with no other luxury than a few flowers. There were no women to temper the discussions or to lighten their seriousness. After dinner the guests lingered for



an hour or so in the drawing-room, but by nine o'clock the rooms were deserted. She received on Friday, but what a contrast to the Fridays of Mme. Necker in those same apartments! It was no longer a brilliant company of wits, *savants*, and men of letters, enlivened by women of beauty, *esprit*, rank, and fashion. We hear of no dramatic recitations, no reading of new works. There was none of the diversity of taste and thought which lends such a charm to social life. Mme. Roland tells us that she never had an extended circle at any time, and that, while her husband was in power, she made and received no visits, and invited no women to her house. She saw only her husband's colleagues, or those who were interested in his tastes and pursuits, which were also her own. The world of society wearied her. She was absorbed in a single purpose. If she needed recreation, she sought it in serious studies.

It is always difficult to judge what a man or a woman might have been under slightly altered conditions. But for some single circumstance that converged and focused their talents, many a hero would have died unknown and unsuspected. The key that unlocks the treasure house of the soul is not always found, and its wealth is often scattered on unseen shores. But it is clear that the part of Mme. Roland could never have been a distinctively social one. She lived at a time when great events brought out great qualities. Her clear intellect, her positive convictions, her boundless energy, and her ardent enthusiasm gave her a powerful influence in those early days of the Revolution that looked towards a world reconstructed, but not plunged into the dark depths of chaos, and it is through this that she has left a name among the noted women of France. In more peaceful times her peculiar talent would doubtless have led her towards literature. In her best style she has rare vigor and simplicity. She has moments of eloquent thought. There are flashes of it in her early letters to Sophie, which she begs her friend not to burn, though she does not hope to rival Mme. de Sévigné, whom she takes for her model. She lacked the grace, the lightness, the wit, the humor, of this model, but she had an earnestness, a serious depth of thought, that one does not find in Mme. de Sévigné. She had also a vein of sentiment that was an underlying force in her character, though it was always subject to her masculine intellect. She confesses that she should like to be the annalist of her country, and longs for the pen of Tacitus, for whom she has a veritable passion. When one reads her sharp, incisive pen-portraits, drawn with such profound insight and masterly skill, one feels that her true vocation

was in the world of letters. At the close she verges a little upon the theatrical, as sometimes in her young days. But when she wrote her final records she felt her last hours slipping away. Life, with its large possibilities undeveloped and its promises unfulfilled, was behind her. Darkness was all around her, eternal silence before her. And she had lived but thirty-nine years.

Mme. Roland does not belong to the world of the salons. She was of quite another *genre*. But she foreshadows a type of woman that has had great influence since the salons have lost their prestige. She relied neither upon the reflected light of a coterie, the arts of the courtier, nor the subtle power of personal attraction; but firm in her convictions, clear in her purposes, and unselfish in her aims, she laid down her own interests, and, in the end, her own life, upon the altar of liberty and humanity. She could hardly be regarded, however, as herself a type. She was cast in a rare mold and lived under rare conditions. She was individual, as were Hypatia, Joan of Arc, and Charlotte Corday—a woman fitted for a special mission which brought her little but a martyr's crown and a permanent fame.

Another salon which reflected the spirit of this stormy period was that of the young, beautiful, and gifted Mme. de Condorcet. Unlike that of Mme. Roland, it had its roots in the old order of things. The Marquis de Condorcet was not only philosopher, *savant*, *littérateur*, a member of two academies, and among the profoundest thinkers of his time, but a man of the world, who inherited the tastes and habits of the old *noblesse*. His wife was Sophie de Grouchy, sister of the Maréchal, and was noted for remarkable talents, as well as for surpassing beauty. Belonging by birth and associations to the aristocracy, and, by her pronounced opinions, to the radical side of the philosophic party, her salon was a center in which two worlds met. In its palmy days people were only speculating upon the borders of an abyss which had not yet opened visibly before them. The revolutionary spirit ran high, but had not passed the limits of reason and humanity. Mme. de Condorcet, who was deeply tinged with the new doctrines, presided with charming grace, and her youthful beauty lent an added fascination to the brilliancy of her intellect and the rather grave eloquence of her conversation. In her drawing-room were gathered men of letters and women of talent, nobles and scientists, philosophers and *beaux esprits*. Turgot and Malesherbes represented its political side; Marmontel, the Abbé Morellet, and Suard lent it some of the wit and vivacity that shone in the old salons. Literature, science, and the arts were discussed



here, and there was often reading, music, or recitation. But the tendency was towards serious conversation, and the tone was often controversial. During the ministry of Necker this salon was in some degree a rival of the Salon Helvétique, and included many of the same guests; later it became a rendezvous for the revolutionary party.

The character of Condorcet seems to have been a sincere and elevated one. He aimed at enlightening and regenerating the world, not at overturning it; but, like many others, strong souls and true, he was led from practical truth in the pursuit of an ideal one. His wife, who shared his political opinions, united with them a fiery and independent spirit that was not content with theories. Her philosophic tastes led her to translate Adam Smith and to write a fine analysis of the "Moral Sentiments." But the sympathy of which she spoke so beautifully, and which gave so living a force to the philosophy it illuminated, if not directed by broad intelligence and impartial judgment, is often like the *ignis fatuus* that plays over the poisonous marsh and lures the unwary to destruction. For a brief day the magical influence of Mme. de Condorcet was felt more or less by all who came within her circle. She inspired the equable temper of her husband with her own enthusiasm, and urged him on to extreme measures from which his gentler soul would have shrunk. When at last he turned from those scenes of horror, choosing to be victim rather than oppressor, it was too late. Perhaps she recalled the days of her power with a pang of regret when her friends had fallen one by one at the scaffold, and her husband, hunted and deserted by those he had tried to serve, had died by his own hand, in a lonely cell, to escape a sadder fate; while she was left, after her timely release from prison, to struggle alone in poverty and obscurity, for some years painting water-color portraits for bread.

She was not yet thirty when the Revolution ended, and lived far into the present century, always devoted to the principles of her youth, to serious studies, and a broad humanity.

But the fame of all these women is overshadowed by that of one who was not only supreme in her own world, but who stands on a pinnacle so high that time and distance only serve to throw into stronger relief the grand outlines of her many-sided genius. It would take me far beyond my present limits to touch even lightly upon the various phases of a character so complex, and gifts so versatile, as those of Mme. de Staël. As woman, novelist, philosopher, *littérateur*, and conversationist she has marked, if not equal, claims upon our attention. To speak of her as simply the leader of a salon is

to merge the greater talent into the less, but her brilliant social qualities in a measure brought out and illuminated all the others. It was not the gift of reconciling diverse elements, and calling out the best thoughts of those who came within her radius, that distinguished her. Her personality was too dominant not to disturb sometimes the measure and harmony which fashion had established. She did not listen well, but her gift was that of the orator, and taking whatever subject was uppermost into her own hands, she talked with an irresistible eloquence that held her auditors silent and enchained. Living as she did in the world of wit and talent which had so fascinated her mother, she ruled it as an autocrat.

The mental coloring of Mme. de Staël was not taken in the shade, as that of Mme. Roland had been. She was reared in the atmosphere of the great world. That which her eager mind gathered in solitude was subject always to the modification which contact with vigorous living minds is sure to give. The little Germaine Necker who sat on a low stool at her mother's side, charming the cleverest men of her time by her precocious wit; who wrote extracts from the dramas she heard and opinions from the authors she read; who made pen-portraits of her friends, and cut out paper kings and queens to play in the tragedies she composed; whose heart was always overflowing with love for those around her, and who had supreme need for an outlet to her sensibilities, was a fresh type in that age of keen analysis, cold skepticism, and rigid forms. We may note the drift of her ardent and imaginative nature in the youthful tales into which she wove her romantic dreams, her fancied grief, her inward struggles, and her tears. In the pages of "Corinne" we read the poetry, the sensibility, the passion, the melancholy, the thought of a matured woman whose illusions neither sorrow nor experience could destroy. We may divine the direction of her sympathies and the fountain of her inspiration, in her letters on Rousseau, written at twenty, and foreshadowing her own attitude towards the theories which appealed so powerfully to the generous spirits of the century. We may follow the active and scholarly workings of her versatile intellect, in her pregnant thoughts on literature, on the passions, on the Revolution; or measure the clearness of her insight, the depth of her penetration, the catholicity of her sympathies, and the breadth of her intelligence, in her profound and masterly, if not always accurate, studies of Germany. All this pertains to a critical estimate of her character and genius, which cannot be attempted here. Misguided she sometimes was, and carried away by the resistless rush of thought that, like the



mountain torrent, gathered much debris along its course. She had not always the exactness of the critical scholar, nor the simplicity of the careful artist. But who cares to dwell upon the shadows that scarcely dim the brilliancy of a genius so rare and so commanding? They are but spots on the sun that are only discovered by looking through a glass that veils its radiance. It has grown to be somewhat the fashion to depreciate Mme. de Staël. Measured by present standards, she leaves something to be desired in logical precision; the luxuriance of her language often obscures her thought; but these flaws in workmanship are more than counterbalanced by that inward illumination which is Heaven's richest and rarest gift. It is just to weigh her by the standards of her own age. Born at its highest level, she soared far above her generation. She carried within herself the vision of a statesman, the penetration of a critic, the insight of a philosopher, the soul of a poet, and the heart of a woman. The source of her power, as also of her weakness, lay perhaps in her vast capacity for love. It was this quality that gave color and force to her rich and versatile character. The serious utterances of her childhood were always suffused with feeling. She loved that which made her weep. Her sympathies were full and overflowing, and when her vigorous and masculine intellect took the ascendancy it directed them, but only partly held them in check. It never dulled nor subdued them. It was this keen sensibility that animated all she did and gave point to all she wrote. It found expression in the eloquence of her conversation, in the exaltation and passionate intensity of her affections, in the fervor of her patriotism, in the self-forgetful generosity that brought her very near the verge of the scaffold. Here was the source of that indefinable quality we call genius — not genius of the sort which Buffon has defined as patience, but the divine flame that crowns with life the dead materials which patience has gathered. It was impossible that a child so eager, so sympathetic, so full of intellect and *esprit*, should not have developed rapidly in the atmosphere of her mother's salon. Whether it was the best school for a young girl may be a question, but a character like that of Mme. de Staël is apt to go its own way in whatever circumstances it finds itself. She was habituated to a high altitude of thought. Men like Marmontel, La Harpe, Grimm, Thomas, and the Abbé Raynal delighted in calling out her ready wit, her brilliant repartee, and her precocious thought. Surrounded thus from childhood with all the appointments as well as the talent and *esprit* that made the life of the salons so fascinating; inheriting the philosophic insight of her father,

the literary gifts of her mother, to which she added a genius all her own; heir also to the spirit of conversation, the facility, the enthusiasm, the love of pleasing, which are the Gallic birthright, she took her place in the social world as a queen by virtue of her position, her gifts, and her heritage. Already, before her marriage, she had changed the tone of her mother's salon. She brought into it an element of freshness and originality which the dignified and rather precise character of Mme. Necker had failed to impart. She gave it also a strong political coloring. This influence was more marked after she became the wife of the Swedish ambassador, as she continued to pass her evenings in her mother's drawing-room, where she became more and more a central figure. Her temperament and her tastes were of the world in which she lived, but her reason and her expansive sympathies led her to ally herself with the popular cause; hence she was, to some extent, a link between two conflicting interests.

It was in 1786 that Mme. de Staël entered the world as a married woman. This marriage was arranged for her after the fashion of the time, and she accepted it as she would have accepted anything tolerable that pleased her idolized father and revered mother. When only ten years of age she observed that they took great pleasure in the society of Gibbon, and she gravely proposed to marry him, that they might always have this happiness. The full significance of this singular proposition is not apparent until one recalls that the learned historian was not only rather old, but so short and fat that one of his friends remarked that when he needed a little exercise he had only to take a turn of three times around M. Gibbon. The Baron de Staël had an exalted position, fine manners, a good figure, and a handsome face, but he lacked the one thing that Mme. de Staël most considered, and that was a commanding talent. She did not see him through the prism of a strong affection which transfigures all things, even the most commonplace. What this must have meant to a woman of her genius and temperament, whose ideal of happiness was a sympathetic marriage, it is not difficult to divine. It may account, in some degree, for her restlessness, her perpetual need of movement, of excitement, of society. But, whatever her troubles may have been, they were of limited duration. She was quietly separated from her husband in 1798. Four years later she decided to return to Coppet with him, as he was unhappy and longed to see his children. He died *en route*.

The period of this marriage was one of the most memorable of France, the period when



noble and generous spirits rallied in a spontaneous movement for national regeneration. Mme. de Staël was in the flush of hope and enthusiasm, fresh from the study of Rousseau and her own dreams of human perfectibility; radiant, too, with the reflection of her youthful fame. Among those who surrounded her were the Montmorencys, Lafayette, and Count Louis de Narbonne, whose brilliant intellect and charming manners touched her perhaps too deeply for her peace of mind. There were also Barnave, Chénier, Talleyrand, Mirabeau, Vergniaud, and many others of the active leaders of the Revolution. A few women mingled in her more intimate circle, which was still of the old society. Of these were the ill-fated Duchesse de Gramont, Mme. de Lauzun, the Princesse de Poix, and the witty, lovable Maréchale de Beauvau. As a rule, though devoted to her friends and kind to those who sought her aid, Mme. de Staël did not like the society of women. Perhaps they did not always respond to her elevated and swiftly flowing thoughts; or it may be that she wounded the vanity of those who were cast into the shade by talents so conspicuous and conversation so eloquent, and felt the lack of sympathetic *rapprochement*. Society is *au fond* republican, and is apt to resent autocracy, even the autocracy of genius, when it takes the form of monologue. It is contrary to the social spirit. The salon of Mme. de Staël not only took its tone from herself, but it was a reflection of herself. She was not beautiful, and she dressed badly; indeed she seems to have been singularly free from that personal consciousness which leads people to give themselves the advantages of an artistic setting, even if the taste is not inborn. She was too intent upon what she thought and felt to give heed to minor details. But in her conversation, which was a sort of improvisation, her eloquent face was aglow, her dark eyes flashed with inspiration, her superb form and finely poised head seemed to respond to the rhythmic flow of thoughts that were emphasized by the graceful gestures of an exquisitely molded hand in which she usually held a sprig of laurel. "If I were queen," said Mme. de Tessé, "I would order Mme. de Staël to talk to me always."

But this center in which the more thoughtful spirits of the old régime met the brilliant and active leaders of the new was broken up by the storm which swept away so many of its leaders, and Mme. de Staël, after lingering in the face of dangers to save her friends, barely escaped with her life on the eve of the September massacres of 1792. "She is an excellent woman," said one of her contemporaries, "who drowns all her friends in order to have the pleasure of angling for them."

Mme. de Staël resumed her place and organized her salon anew on her return to Paris in 1795. Though her enthusiasm for the republic was much moderated, and though she had been so far dazzled by the genius of Napoleon as to hail him as a restorer of order, her illusions regarding him were very short-lived. She had no sympathy with his aims at personal power. Her drawing-room soon became the rallying point for his enemies and the center of a powerful opposition. But she had a natural love for all forms of intellectual distinction, and her genius and fame still attracted a circle more or less cosmopolitan. Ministers of state and editors of leading journals were among her guests. Joseph and Lucien Bonaparte were her devoted friends. The small remnant of the *noblesse* that had any inclination to return to a world which had lost its charm for them found there a trace of the old politeness. Mathieu de Montmorency, devout and charitable; his brother Adrien, delicate in spirit and gentle in manners; Narbonne, still devoted and diplomatic; and the Chevalier de Boufflers, gay, witty, and brilliant, were of those who brought into it something of the tone of the past régime. There were also the men of the new generation, men who were saturated with the principles of the Revolution though regretting its methods. Among these were Chénier, Regnault, Talleyrand, and Benjamin Constant.

The influence of Mme. de Staël was at its height during this period. Her talent, her liberal opinions, and her persuasive eloquence gave her great power over the constitutional leaders. The measures of the Government were freely discussed and criticized in her salon, and men went out with positions well defined and speeches well considered. The Duchesse d'Abrantes relates an incident which aptly illustrates this power and its reaction upon herself. Benjamin Constant had prepared a brilliant address. The evening before it was to be delivered she was surrounded by a large and distinguished company. After tea was served he said to her:

"Your salon is filled with people who please you; if I speak to-morrow, it will be deserted. Think of it."

"One must follow one's convictions," she replied, after a moment's hesitation.

She admitted afterward that she would never have refused his offer not to compromise her if she could have foreseen all that would follow.

The next day she invited her friends to celebrate his triumph. At four o'clock a note of excuse; in an hour, ten. From this time her fortunes waned. Many ceased to visit her salon. Even Talleyrand, who owed her so much, came there no more.



In later years she confessed that the three men she had most loved were Narbonne, Talleyrand, and Mathieu de Montmorency. Her friendship for the first of these reached a passionate exaltation which had a profound and not altogether wholesome influence upon her life. How completely she was disenchanted is shown in a remark she made long afterward of a loyal and distinguished man: "He has the manners of Narbonne and a heart." It is a character in a sentence. Mathieu de Montmorency was a man of pure motives who proved a refuge of consolation in many storms, but her regard for him was evidently a gentler flame that never burned to extinction. Whatever illusions she may have had as to Talleyrand — and they seem to have been little more than an enthusiastic appreciation of his talent — were certainly broken by his treacherous desertion in her hour of need. Not the least among her many sorrows was the bitter taste of ingratitude.

But Napoleon, who, like Louis XIV., sought to draw all influences and merge all power in himself, could not tolerate a woman whom he felt to be in some sense a rival. He thought he detected her hand in the address which lost her so many friends. He feared the wit that flashed, the satire that wounded, the criticism that measured his motives and his actions, in her salon. He recognized the power of a coterie of brilliant intellects led by a genius so inspiring. His brothers, knowing her vulnerable point and the will with which she had to deal, gave her a word of caution. But the advice and intercession of her friends were alike without avail. The blow which she so much feared fell at last, and she found herself an exile and a wanderer from the scenes she most loved.

We have many pleasant glimpses of her life at Coppet, but a shadow always rests upon it. A few friends still clung to her through the bitter and relentless persecutions that form one of the most singular chapters in history, and offer the most remarkable tribute to her genius and her power. Among those we find here were Benjamin Constant, Schlegel, Sismondi, Mathieu de Montmorency, Prince Augustus, Mme. Récamier, and many other distinguished visitors of various nationalities. She revived the old literary diversions. At eleven o'clock, we are told, the guests assembled at breakfast, and the conversations took a high literary tone. They were resumed at dinner, and continued often until midnight. Here, as elsewhere, Mme. de Staël was queen, holding her guests entranced by the magic of her words. She was a veritable Corinne in her *esprit*, her sentiment, her gift of improvisation, and her underlying melancholy. But in this choice company hers was not the only voice,

though it was heard above all the others. Thought and wit flashed and sparkled here. Dramas, too, were played — the "Zaire" and "Tancred" of Voltaire, and tragedies written by herself. Here Mme. Récamier played the *Aricie* to Mme. de Staël's *Phèdre*. This life, that seems to us so fascinating, has been described too often to need repetition. It had its stormy elements, its passionate undercurrents, its romantic episodes. But in spite of its attractions Mme. de Staël fretted under the peaceful shades of Coppet. Its limited horizon pressed upon her. The silence of the snow-capped mountains chilled her. She looked upon their solitary grandeur with "magnificent horror." The repose of nature was an "infernal peace," which plunged her into gloomier depths of *ennui* and despair. She confessed that even the gutters of the Rue du Bac were dearer to her than the beauties of Lake Lemane.<sup>1</sup> It was people, always people, who interested her. "French conversation exists only in Paris," she said, "and conversation has been from infancy my greatest pleasure." Restlessly she sought distraction in travel, but wherever she went the iron hand pressed upon her still. Italy fostered her melancholy. She loved its ruins, which her imagination draped with the fading colors of the past and associated with the desolation of a living soul. But its exquisite variety of landscape and color does not seem to have touched her. "If it were not for the world's opinion," she said, "I would not open my window to see the Bay of Naples for the first time, but I would travel five hundred leagues to talk with a clever man whom I have not met." Germany gave her infinite food for thought, but her "astonishing volubility," her "incessant movement," her constant desire to know, to discuss, to penetrate all things, wearied the moderate Germans. "We are in a perpetual mental tension," said Charlotte Schiller. Even Schiller himself grew tired. "It seems as if I were relieved of a malady," he said, when she left. It was this excess of vivacity and this abounding sensibility that constituted at once her fascination and her misfortune.

When at last the relentless autocrat of France found his rock-bound limits, and she was free to return to the spot which had been the goal of all her dreams, it was too late. Her health was broken. It is true her friends rallied around her, and her salon, opened once more, retook a little of its ancient glory. Few celebrities who came to Paris failed to seek the drawing-room of Mme. de Staël, which was still illuminated with the brilliancy of her genius and the splen-

<sup>1</sup> To some one who was admiring the beauties of Lake Lemane she replied, "I should like better the gutter of the Rue du Bac."



dor of her fame. But her illusions had faded and life was receding. Her few remaining days of weakness and suffering, darkened by vain regrets, were passed more and more in the warmth and tenderness of her devoted family, in the noble and elevated thought that rose above the strife of politics into the serene atmosphere of a Christian faith.

The life of Mme. de Staël was in the world. She embodied the French spirit, but she added to social gifts something infinitely higher and deeper. Few women have exercised so wide and varied an influence. With one or two exceptions, none stands on so high a pinnacle. George Sand was perhaps a more finished artist; George Eliot was a greater novelist, a more accurate scholar, and a more logical thinker; but in versatility, in intellectual spontaneity, in brilliancy of conversation and natural eloquence of thought, she was without a rival.

Her moral standards, too, were far above the average of her time. Her ideals were high and pure. The wealth of her emotions and the rich coloring of sentiment in which her thoughts and feelings were often clothed left her sometimes open to possible misconceptions. But the world, which is rarely indulgent, has been in the main just to her motives and her character. Her friends regretted her second marriage; but if it was a weakness to bend from her high altitude, it was not an unpardonable one, though more creditable to her heart than to her worldly wisdom. It shadowed a little the radiance of her position, but it gave her tender consolation in her last days. She was a victim to the contradictory elements in her own nature, but she walked always bravely among storms. This nature so complex, so rich, so intense, so passionate, could it ever have found permanent repose?

*Amelia Gere Mason.*



## LIGHT.

WHAT does the blind man, blind from infancy,  
 Note in the vistas of his sleeping dream?  
 Living in darkness 'neath light's glowing stream,  
 What can dreams show him that would lovely be?  
 Loud would he sing, joy-brimming, suddenly  
 To know the blessing of day's faintest gleam—  
 Brighter than bright dream pictures then would beam  
 Life's radiant beauties in his vision free.  
 And would not we, reposing in the gloom,  
 Dreaming in shadow, reft by death of sight,  
 In awe-struck joy and wonder wake to see,  
 Like the day breaking into sudden bloom,  
 About us burst the rolling sea of light  
 That gilds the white shores of eternity?

*R. K. Munkittrick.*