SALONS OF THE EMPIRE AND RESTORATION.

IN its best sense, society is born, not made. A crowd of well-dressed people is not necessarily a society. They may meet and disperse with no other bond of union than a fine house and lavish hospitality can give. It may be an assembly without unity, flavor, or influence. In the social chaos that followed the Revolution, this truth found a practical illustration. The old circles were scattered. The old distinctions were virtually destroyed, so far as edicts can destroy that which lies in the essence of things. A few who held honored names were left, or had returned from a long exile, to find themselves bereft of rank, fortune, and friends, but these had small disposition to form new associations, and few points of contact with the *parvenus* who had mounted upon the ruins of their order. The new society was composed largely of these *parvenus*, who were ambitious for a position and a life of which they had neither the spirit, the taste, the habits, nor the mellowing traditions. Naturally they mistook the gilded frame for the picture. Unfamiliar with the gentle manners, the delicate sense of honor, and the chivalrous instincts, which underlie the best social life, though not always illustrated by its individual members, they were absorbed in matters of etiquette of which they were uncertain, and exacting of non-essentials. They regarded society upon its commercial side, contended over questions of precedence, and, as one of the most observing of their contemporaries has expressed it, "bargained for a courtesy and counted visits." "I have seen quarrels in the imperial court," she adds, "over a visit more or less long, more or less deferred." Perhaps it is to be considered that in a new order which has many aggressive elements, this balancing of courtesies is not without a certain *raison d'être* as a protection against serious inroads upon time and hospitality; but the fault lies behind all this, in the lack of that subtle social sense which makes the discussion of these things superfluous, not to say impossible.

It was the wish of Napoleon to reconstruct a society that should rival in brilliancy the old courts. With this view he called to his aid a few women whose name, position, education, and reputation for *esprit* and fine manners he thought a sufficient guarantee of success. But he soon learned that it could not be commanded at will. The reply of the Duchesse d'Abrantes, who has left us so many pleasant reminiscences of this period, in which she was an actor as well as an observer, was very apt.

"You can do all that I wish," he said to her; "you are all young and almost all pretty; ah, well! a young and pretty woman can do anything she likes."

"Sire, what your Majesty says may be true," she replied, "but only to a certain point. . . . If the Emperor, instead of his guard and his good soldiers, had only conscripts who would recoil under fire, he could not win great battles like that of Austerlitz. Nevertheless, he is the first general in the world."

But this social life had a personal end. It was to furnish an added instrument of power to the autocrat who ruled. It was to reflect always and everywhere the glory of Napoleon. The period which saw its cleverest woman in hopeless exile, and its most beautiful one under a similar ban for the crime of being her friend, was not one which favored intellectual supremacy. The empire did not encourage literature, it silenced philosophy, and oppressed the talent that did not glorify itself. Its blighting touch rested upon the whole social fabric. The finer elements which, to some extent, entered into it, were lost in the glare of display and pretension. The true spirit of conversation was limited to private coteries that

kept themselves in the shade and were too small to be noted.

The salon which represented the best side of the new régime was that of Madame de Montesson, wife of the Duc d'Orleans, a woman of brilliant talents, finished manners, great knowledge of the world, fine gifts of conversation, and, what was equally essential, great discrimination and perfect tact. Napoleon was quick to see the value of such a woman in reorganizing a court, and treated her with the greatest consideration, even asking her to instruct Josephine in the old customs and usages. Her salon, however, united many elements which it was impossible to fuse. There were people of all parties and all conditions, a few of the nobles and returned *émigrés*, the numerous members of the Bonaparte family, the new military circle, together with many people of influence "not to the manner born." Madame de Montesson revived the old amusements, wrote plays for the entertainment of her guests, gave grand dinners and brilliant fêtes. But the accustomed links were wanting. Her salon simply illustrates a social life in a state of transition.

MARQUISE DE MONTESSON. (FROM A LITHOGRAPH BY BELLIARD.)

Madame de Genlis, who was a niece of Madame de Montesson, had lived much in the world before the Revolution, and her position in the family of the Duc d'Orleans, to-

gether with her great versatility of talent, had given her a certain vogue. After ten years of exile she returned to Paris, and her salon at the Arsenal was a center for a few celebrities. Many of these names have small significance to-day. A few men like Talleyrand, La Harpe, Fontanes, and Cardinal Maury were among her friends, and she was neutral enough, or diplomatic enough, not to give offense to the new government. But she was a woman of many affectations, and, in spite of her numerous accomplishments, her cleverness, and her literary fame, her social influence was never great. As a historic figure, she is more remarkable for the variety of her voluminous work and her educational theories than personally interesting.

MME. DE GENLIS. (FROM A PRINT AFTER A DRAWING BY DEVERIA.)

There is little to attract in the ruling social life of this period. It had neither the dignity of past traditions, nor freedom of intellectual expression. Its finer shades were drowned in loud and glaring colors. The luxury that could be commanded counted for more than the wit and intelligence that could not.

As the social elements readjusted themselves on a more natural basis, there were a few salons out of the main drift of the time in which the literary spirit flourished once more, blended with the refined tastes, the elegant manners, and the amiable courtesy that had distinguished the old régime. But the interval in which history was made so rapidly, and the startling events of a century were condensed into a decade, had wrought many vital changes. It was no longer the spirit of the eighteenth century that reappeared under its revived and attractive forms. We note a tone of seriousness that had no permanent place in that world of *esprit* and skepticism, of fine manners and lax morals, which divided its allegiance between fashion and philosophy. The survivors of so many heart-breaking tragedies, with their weary weight of dead hopes and sad memories, found no healing balm in the cold speculation and scathing wit of Diderot or Voltaire. Even the devotees of philosophy gave it but a half-hearted reverence. It was at this moment that Chateaubriand, saturated with the sorrows of

his age, and penetrated with the hopelessness of its philosophy, offered anew the truths that had sustained the suffering and broken-hearted for eighteen centuries, in a form so sympathetic, so fascinating, that it thrilled the sensitive spirits of his time, and passed like an inspiration into the literature of the next fifty years. The melancholy of "René" found its divine consolation in the "Genius of Christianity." It was this spirit that lent a new and softer coloring to the intimate social life that blended in some degree the tastes and manners of the old *noblesse* with a refined and tempered form of modern thought. It recalls, in many points, the best spirit of the seventeenth century. There is a flavor of the same seriousness, the same sentiment. It is the sentiment that sent so many beautiful women to the solitude of the cloister, when youth had faded, and the air of approaching age began to grow chilly. But it is not to the cloister that these women turn. They weave romantic tales out of the texture of their own lives, they repeat their experiences, their illusions, their triumphs, and their disenchantments. As the days grow more somber and the evening shadows begin to fall, they meditate, they moralize, they substitute prayers for dreams. But they think also. The drama of the late years had left no thoughtful soul without earnest convictions. There were numerous shades of opinion, many finely drawn issues. In a few salons these elements were delicately blended, and if they did not repeat the brilliant triumphs of the past, if they focused with less power the intellectual light which was dispersed in many new channels, they have left behind them many fragrant memories. One is tempted to linger in these temples of a goddess half-dethroned. One would like to study these women who added to the social gifts of their race a character that had risen superior to many storms, hearts that were mellowed and purified by premature sorrow, and intellects that had taken a deeper and more serious tone from long brooding over the great problems of their time. But only a glance is permitted us here. Most of them have been drawn in living colors by Sainte-Beuve, from whom I gather here and there a salient trait.

Who that is familiar with the fine and exquisite thought of Joubert can fail to be interested in the delicate and fragile woman whom he met in her supreme hour of suffering, to find in her a rare and permanent friend, a literary *confidante*, and an inspiration. Madame de Beaumont—the daughter of Montmorin, who had been a colleague of Necker in the Ministry—had been forsaken by a worthless husband, had seen father, mother, brother, perish by the guillotine, and her sister escape it only by losing her reason, and then her life, before the fatal day. She, too, had been arrested with the others, but was so ill and weak that she was left to die by the roadside *en route* to Paris—a fate from which she was saved by the kindness of a peasant. It was at this moment that Joubert befriended her. These numerous and crushing sorrows had shattered her health, which was never strong, but during the few brief years that remained to her she was the center of a coterie more distinguished for quality than numbers. Joubert and Chateaubriand were its leading spirits, but it included also Fontanes, Pasquier, Madame de Vintimille, Madame de Pastoret, and other friends who had survived the days in which she presided with such youthful dignity over her father's salon. The fascination of her fine and elevated intellect, her gentle sympathy, her keen appreciation of talent, and her graces of manner, lent a singular charm to her presence. Her character was aptly expressed by this device which Rulhière had suggested for her seal: "Un souffle m'agite et rien ne m'ébranle." Chateaubriand was enchanted with a nature so pure, so poetic, and so ardent. He visited her daily, read to her "Atala" and "René," and finished the "Genius of Christianity" under her influence. He was young then, and that she loved him is hardly doubtful, though the friendship of Joubert was far truer and more loyal than the passing devotion of this capricious man of genius, who seems to have cared only for his own reflection in another soul. But this sheltered nook of thoughtful repose, this conversational oasis in a chaotic period, had a short duration. Madame de Beaumont died at Rome, where she had gone in the faint hope of reviving her drooping

MME. DE BEAUMONT.
(FROM A PRINT AFTER THE PAINTING BY DE LA TOUR.)

MME. DE RÉMUSAT. (FROM A PRINT.)

health in 1803. Chateaubriand was there, watched over her last hours with Bertin, and wrote eloquently of her death. Joubert mourned deeply and silently over the light that had gone out of his life.

We have pleasant reminiscences of the amiable, thoughtful, and spirituelle Madame de Rémusat, who has left us such vivid records of the social and intimate life of the imperial court. A studious and secluded childhood, prematurely saddened by the untimely fate of her father in the terrible days of 1794, an early and congenial marriage, together with her own wise penetration and clear intellect, enabled her to traverse this period without losing her delicate tone or her serious tastes. She had her quiet retreat into which the noise and glare did not intrude, where a few men of letters and thoughtful men of the world revived the old conversational spirit. She amused her idle hours by writing graceful tales, and after the close of her court life and the weakening of her health she turned her thoughts towards the education and improvement of her sex. Blended with her wide knowledge of the world, there is always a note of earnestness, a tender coloring of sentiment, which culminates towards the end in a lofty Christian resignation.

We meet again, at this time, Madame de Flahaut, who had shone as one of the lesser lights of an earlier generation, had seen her husband fall by the guillotine, and after wandering over Europe for years as an exile, returned to Paris as Madame de Souza and took her place in a quiet corner of the unfamiliar world, writing softly colored romances after the manner of Madame de La Fayette, wearing with grace the honors her literary fame brought her, and preserving the tastes, the fine courtesies, the gentle manners, the social charms, and the delicate vivacity of the old *régime*.

One recalls, too, Madame de Duras, whose father, the noble and fearless Kersaint, was the companion of Madame Roland at the scaffold; who drifted to our own shores until the storms had passed, and, after saving her large fortune in Martinique, returned matured and saddened to France. As the wife of the Duc de Duras, she gathered around her a circle of rank, talent, and distinction. In her salon one finds nobles, diplomats, statesmen, and *littérateurs*. Chateaubriand, Humboldt, Cuvier, de Montmorency were among her friends. What treasures of thought and conversation do these names suggest! What memories of the past, what prophecies for the future! Madame de Duras, too, wore gracefully the mantle of authorship with which she united pleasant household cares. She, too, put something of the sad experiences of her own life into romances which are vividly and tenderly colored. She, too, like many of the women of her time whose youth had been blighted by suffering, passed into an exalted Christian strain. The friend of Madame de Staël, the literary *confidante* of Chateaubriand, the woman of many talents, many virtues, and many sorrows, died with words of faith and hope and divine consolation on her lips.

The devotion of Madame de Chantal, the mysticism of Madame Guyon, find a nineteenth century counterpart in the spiritual illumination of Madame de Krüdener. Passing from a life of luxury and pleasure to a life of penitence and asceticism, singularly blending

MME. DE SOUZA. (FROM A PRINT DRAWN BY CHRÉTIEN.)

worldliness and piety, opening her salon with prayer, and adding a new sensation to the gay life of Paris, this adviser of Alexander I. and friend of Benjamin Constant, who put her best life into the charming romances which ranked next to "Corinne" and "Delphine" in their time; this beautiful woman, novelist, prophetess, mystic, *illuminée*, fanatic, with the passion of the South and the superstitious vein of the far north, disappeared from the world she had graced, and gave up her life in an ecstasy of sacrifice in the wilderness of the Crimea.

It is only to indicate the altered drift of the social life that flowed in quiet undercurrents during the Empire and came to the surface again after the Restoration; to trace lightly the slow reaction towards the finer shades of modern thought and modern morality, that I touch so briefly and so inadequately upon these women who represent the best side of their age, leaving altogether untouched many of equal gifts and equal note.

There is one, however, whose salon gathered into itself the last rays of the old glory, and whose fame as a social leader has eclipsed that of all her contemporaries. Madame Récamier, "the last flower of the salons," is the woman of the century who has been, perhaps, most admired, most loved, and most written about. It has been so much the fashion to dwell upon her marvelous beauty, her kindness, and her irresistible fascination that she has become, to some extent, an ideal figure, invested with a subtle and poetic grace that folds itself about her like the invisible mantle of an enchantress. Her actual relations to the world in which she lived extended over a long period, terminating only on the threshold of our own generation. Without strong opinions or pronounced color, loyal to her friends rather than to her convictions, of a calm and happy temperament, gentle in character, keenly appreciative of all that was intellectually fine and rare but without exceptional gifts herself, fascinating in manner, perfect in tact, with the beauty of an angel and the heart of a woman — she presents a fitting close to the long reign of her salon.

We hear of her first in the bizarre circles of the Consulate, as the wife of a man who was rather father than husband, young, fresh, lovely, accomplished, surrounded by the luxuries of wealth, and captivating all hearts by that indefinable charm of manner which she carried with her to the end of her life. Both at Paris and at her country house at Clichy she was the center of a company in which the old was discreetly mingled with the new, in which enmities were tempered, antagonisms softened, and the most discordant elements brought into harmonious *rapport*, for the moment, at least, by her gracious word or her winning smile. Here we find Adrien and Mathieu de Montmorency, who already testified the rare friendship that was to outlive years and misfortunes; Madame de Staël before her exile; Narbonne, Barère, Bernadotte, Moreau, and many distinguished foreigners. Lucien Bonaparte was at her feet; La Harpe was her devoted friend; Napoleon was trying in vain to draw her into his court, and treasuring up his failure for another day. The salon of Madame Récamier was not, in any sense, philosophical or political, but after the cruel persecution of La Harpe, the banishment of Madame de Staël, and the similar misfortunes of other friends, her sym-

MME. DE DURAS.
(FROM A PRINT AFTER THE PAINTING BY MME. ROUCHIER.)

pathies were too strong for her diplomacy, and it gradually fell into the ranks of the opposition. It was well known that the emperor regarded all who went there as his enemies, and this young and innocent woman was destined to feel the full bitterness of his petty displeasure. We cannot trace here the incidents of her varied career, the misfortunes of the father to whom she was a ministering angel, the loss of her husband's fortune and her own, the years of wandering and exile, the second period of brief and illusive prosperity, and the swift reverses which led to her final retreat. She was at the height of her beauty and her fame in the early days of the Restoration, when her salon revived its old brilliancy, and was a center in which all parties met on neutral ground. Her intimate relations with those in power gave it a strong political influence, but this was never a marked feature, as it was mainly personal.

But the position in which one is most inclined to recall Madame Récamier is in the

MME. DE KRÜDENER. (FROM THE PORTRAIT IN THE LOUVRE.)

convent of Abbaye-aux-Bois, where, divested of fortune and living in the simplest manner, she preserved for nearly thirty years the fading traditions of the old salons. Through all the changes which tried her fortitude and revealed the latent heroism of her character, she seems to have kept her sweet serenity unbroken, bending to the passing storms with the grace of a facile nature, but never murmuring at the inevitable. One may find in this flexible strength and gentleness of temper a clue to the subtle fascination which held the devoted friendship of so many gifted men and women, long after the fresh charm of youth was gone.

The intellectual gifts of Madame Récamier, as has been said before, were not of a high or brilliant order. She was neither profound nor original, nor given to definite thought. Her

letters were few, and she has left no written records by which she can be measured. She read much, and was familiar with current literature, also with religious works. But the world is slow to accord a twofold superiority, and it is quite possible that the fame of her beauty has prevented full justice to her mental abilities. It is certain that no woman could have held her place as the center of a distinguished literary circle and the confidante and adviser of the first literary men of her time without a fine intellectual appreciation. "To love what is great," said Madame Necker, "is almost to be great one's self.' Ballanche advised her to translate "Petrarch," and she even began the work, but it was never finished. "Believe me," he writes, "you have at your command the genius of music, flowers, imagination, and elegance. . . . Do not fear to try your hand on the golden lyre of the poets." He may have been too much blinded by a friendship that verged closely upon a more passionate sentiment to be an altogether impartial critic, but it was a high tribute to her gifts that a man of such conspicuous talents thought her capable of work so exacting. Her qualities were those of taste and a delicate imagination rather than of reason. Her musical accomplishments were always a resource. She sang, played the harp and piano, and we hear of her during a summer at Albano playing the organ at vespers and high mass. She danced exquisitely, and it was her ravishing grace that suggested the shawl dance of "Corinne" to Madame de Staël and of "Valérie" to Madame de Krüdener. One can fancy her, too, at Coppet, playing the rôle of the angel to Madame de Staël's Hagar — a spirit of love and consolation to the stormy and despairing soul of her friend.

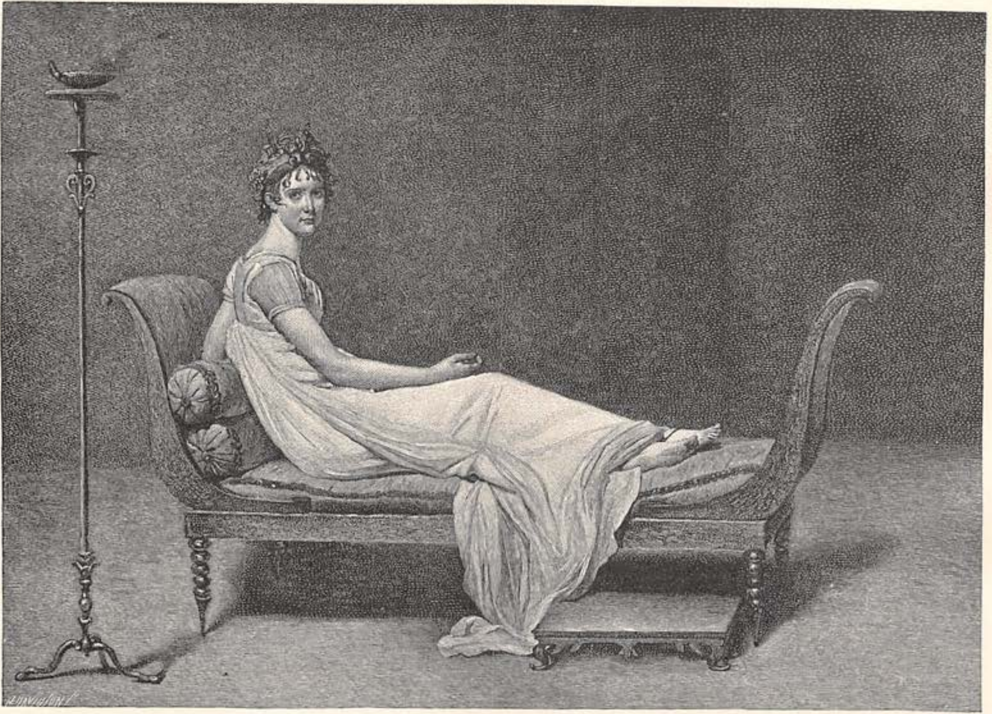
But her real power lay in the wonderful harmony of her nature, in the subtle penetration that divined the chagrins and weaknesses of others only to administer a healing balm, in the delicate tact that put people always on the best terms with themselves, and gave the finest play to whatever talents they possessed. Add to this a quality of beauty which cannot be caught by pen or pencil, and one can understand the singular sway she held over men and women alike. Madame de Krüdener, whose salon so curiously united fashion and piety, worldliness and mysticism, was troubled by the distraction which her entrance was sure to cause, and begged Benjamin Constant to write and entreat her to make herself as little charming as possible. His note is certainly unique, though it loses much of its piquancy in translation:

I acquit myself with a little embarrassment of a commission which Madame de Krüdener has just given me. She begs you to come as little beautiful as you can. She says that you dazzle all the world, and that consequently every soul is troubled and attention is impossible. You cannot lay aside your charms, but do not add to them.

In her youth she dressed with great simplicity and was fond of wearing white with pearls, which accorded well with the dazzling purity of her complexion.

Madame Récamier was not without vanity, and this is the reverse side of her peculiar gifts. She would have been more than mortal if she had been quite unconscious of attractions so rare that even the children in the street paid tribute to them. But one finds small trace of the petty jealousies and exactions that are so apt to accompany them. She liked to please, she wished to be loved, and this inevitably implies a shade of coquetry in a young and beautiful woman. There was an element of fascination in this very coquetry, with its delicate subtleties and its shifting tints of sentiment. That she carried it too far was no doubt true; that she did so wittingly is not so certain. Her victims were many, and if they quietly subsided into friends, as they usually did, it was after many struggles and heartburnings. But if she did not exercise her power with invariable discretion, it seems to have been less the result of vanity than a lack of decision, and an amiable unwillingness to give immediate pain, or to lose the friend in the lover. With all her fine qualities of heart and soul, she had a temperament that saved her from much of the suffering she thoughtlessly inflicted upon others. She roused many violent passions without at all disturbing her own serenity. The delicate and chivalrous nature of Mathieu de Montmorency, added to his years, gave his relations to her a half-paternal character, but that he loved her always with the profound tenderness of a loyal and steadfast soul is apparent through all the singularly disinterested phases of a friendship that ended only with his life.

Prince Augustus, whom she met at Coppet, called up a passing ripple on the surface of her heart, sufficiently strong to lead her to suggest a divorce to her husband, whose relations to her, though always friendly, were only nominal. But he appealed to her generosity, and she thought of it no more. Why she permitted her princely suitor to cherish so long the illusions that time and distance do not readily destroy, is one of the mysteries that are not easy to solve. Perhaps she thought it more kind to let absence wear out a passion than to break it too rudely. At all events, he cherished no permanent bitterness and never forgot her. At his death, nearly forty years later, he or-



MME. RÉCAMIER. (FROM THE PAINTING BY DAVID.)

dered her portrait by Gérard to be returned, but her ring was buried with him.

The various phases of the well-known infatuation of Benjamin Constant, which led him to violate his political principles and belie his own words rather than take a course that must result in separation from her, suggests a page of highly colored romance. The letters of Mlle. de Lespinasse scarcely furnish us with a more ardent episode in the literature of hopeless passion. The worshipful devotion of Ampère and Ballanche would form a chapter no less interesting, though less intense and stormy.

But the name most inseparably connected with Madame Récamier is that of Chateaubriand. This friendship, of an unquestioned sort that seems to have gone quite out of the world, had all the phases of a more tender sentiment, and goes far towards disproving the charge of coldness that has often been brought against her. It was begun by the deathbed of Madame de Staël after she had reached the dreaded forties, and lasted more than thirty years. It seems to have been the single sentiment that mastered her. One can trace the restless undercurrents of this life that was outwardly so serene in the letters of Chateaubriand. He writes to her from Berlin, from England, from Rome. He confides to her his ambitions, tells her his anxieties, asks her counsel as to his plans, chides her little jealousies, and commends his wife to her care and attention. This recalls a remarkable side of her relations with the world. Women are not apt to love formidable rivals, but the wives of her friends apparently shared the admiration with which their husbands regarded her. If they did not love her, they exchanged friendly notes, and courtesies that were often more than cordial. She consoles Madame de Montmorency in her sorrow, and Madame de Chateaubriand asks her to cheer her husband's gloomy moods. Indeed, she roused little of that bitter jealousy which is usually the penalty of exceptional beauty or exceptional gifts of any sort. The sharp tongue of Madame de Genlis lost its sting in writing of her. She idealized her as Athénaïs, in the novel of that name which has for its background the beauties of Coppet, and vaguely reproduces much of its life. The pious and austere Madame Swetchine, whose prejudices against her were so strong that for a long time she did not wish to meet her, confessed herself at once a captive to her "penetrating and indefinable charm." Though she did not always escape the shafts of malice, no better tribute could be offered to the graces of her character than the indulgence with which she was regarded by the most severely judging of her own sex.

But she has her days of depression. Chateaubriand is absorbed in his ambitions and

sometimes indifferent; his antagonistic attitude towards Montmorency, who is far the nobler character of the two, is a source of grief to her. She tries in vain to reconcile her rival friends. Once she feels compelled to tear herself from an influence which is destroying her happiness, and goes to Italy. But she carries within her own heart the seeds of unrest. She still follows the movements of the man who occupies so large a space in her horizon, sympathizes from afar with his disappointments, and cares for his literary interest, ordering from Tenerani a bas-relief of a scene from "The Martyrs."

MME. SWETCHINE. (FROM A PRINT.)

After her return her life settles into more quiet channels. Chateaubriand, embittered by the chagrins of political life, welcomed her with the old enthusiasm. From this time he devoted himself exclusively to letters, and sought his diversion in the convent-salon which has left so wide a fame, and of which he was always the central figure. The petted man of genius was moody and capricious. His colossal egotism found its best solace in the gentle presence of the woman who flattered his restless vanity, anticipated his wishes, studied his tastes, and watched every shadow that flitted across his face. He was in the habit of writing her a few lines in the morning; at three o'clock he visited her, and they chatted over their tea until four, when favored visitors began to arrive. In the evening it was a little world that met there. The names of Ampère, Tocqueville, Montalembert, Merimée, Thierry, and Sainte-Beuve suggest the literary quality of this circle, in which were seen from time to time such foreign celebrities as Sir Humphry and Lady Davy, Maria Edgeworth, Humboldt, the Duke of Hamilton, the gifted Duchess of Devonshire, and Miss Berry. Lamartine read his "Méditations" and Delphine Gay her first poems there. Rachel recited, and Pauline Viardot, Garcia, Rubini, and Lablache sang there. Delacroix, David, and Gérard represented the world of art, and the visitors from the *grand monde* were too numerous to mention. In this brilliant and cosmopolitan company, what re-

sources of wit and knowledge, what charms of beauty and elegance, what splendors of rank and distinction were laid upon the altar of this lovely and adored woman, who recognized all values, and never forgot the kindly word or the delicate courtesy that put the most modest guests at ease and brought out the best there was in them!

One day in 1847 there was a vacant place, and the faithful Ballanche came no more from his rooms across the street. A year later Chateaubriand died. After the death of his wife he had wished to marry Madame Récamier, but she thought it best to change nothing, believing that age and blindness had given her the right to devote herself to his last days. To her friends she said that if she married him, he would miss the pleasure and variety of his daily visits.

Old, blind, broken in health and spirit, but retaining always the charm which had given her the empire over so many hearts, she followed him in a few months.

Madame Récamier represented better than any woman of her time the peculiar talents that distinguished the leaders of some of the most famous salons. She had tact, grace, intelligence, appreciation, and the gift of inspiring others. The cleverest men and women of the age were to be met in her drawing-room. One found there genius, beauty, *esprit*, elegance, courtesy, and the brilliant conversation which is the Gallic heritage. But not even her surpassing fascination added to all these attractions could revive the old power of the salon. Her coterie was charming as a choice circle gathered about a beautiful, refined, accomplished woman, and illuminated by the wit and intelligence of thoughtful men, will always be, but its influence was limited and largely personal, and it has left no perceptible traces. Nor has it had any noted successor. It is no longer coteries presided over by clever women that guide the age and mold its tastes or its political destinies. The old conditions have ceased to exist and the prestige of the salon is gone.

The causes that led to its decline have been already more or less indicated. Among them, the decay of aristocratic institutions played only a small part. The salons were *au fond* democratic in the sense that all forms of distinction were recognized so far as they were amenable to the laws of taste, which form the ultimate tribunal of social fitness in France. But it cannot be denied that the code of etiquette which ruled them had its foundation in the traditions of the *noblesse*. The gentle manners, the absence of egotism and self-assertion, as of disturbing passions, the fine and uniform courtesy which is the poetry of life, are the product of ease and assured conditions. It is struggle that destroys harmony and repose, whatever stronger qualities it may develop, and the greater mingling of classes which inevitably resulted in this took something from the exquisite flavor of the old society. The increase of wealth, too, created new standards which were fatal to a life in which the resources of wit, learning, and education in its highest sense were the chief attractions. The greater perfection of all forms of public amusement was not without its influence. Men drifted, also, more and more into the one-sided life of the club. Considered as a social phase, no single thing has been more disastrous to the unity of modern society than this. But the most formidable enemy of the salon was the press. Intelligence has become too universal to be focused in a few drawing-rooms. Genius and ambition have found a broader arena. When interest no longer led men to seek the stimulus and approval of a powerful coterie, it ceased to be more than an elegant form of recreation, a theater of small talents, the diversion of an idle hour. When the press assumed the sovereignty, the salon was dethroned.

Amelia Gere Mason.

NOTE.— The frontispiece portrait, in the September CENTURY, of the Princesse de Conti, was offered in illustration of Mrs. Mason's article on the "Women of the French Salons"; but we have since learned that the portrait represents the sister, not the wife, of the Prince de Conti, and that consequently it was out of place with the allusion to the social gatherings at the Temple.— EDITOR.