

COMTESSE DE NOAILLES

ANNA DE NOAILLES has died recently in Paris

To anyone with a rudimentary interest in French currents of thought or literature the fact signalizes at once a loss and a liberation. The loss is to a public of readers, the liberation has come, one hopes, to herself. Madame de Noailles, in a generation of poets obsessed to an unprecedented extent by the fear of death, was pre-eminent in that fear. Two motives may be said exclusively to inspire her poems and, of the two, the horror of death predominated.

Although by birth a Princess de Brancovan, of the Bibescos who so long ago as in 1300 were prince-rulers of Valachia, Anna de Noailles was born, in 1876, in Paris where her family possessed, in the Avenue Hoche, a strange eastern palace straight from the Thousand and One Nights. Her mother was a Greek and also a princess, of the house of Musurus. 'I am of that country,' wrote her daughter, 'which begins in Asia and stretches as far as Sicily.'

But, if she had come trailing clouds of glory from so far, she was to assimilate much from the *grands boulevards* which saw her birth, their atmosphere and culture, their semi-pagan love of beauty in line and form, and their intellectualism. She was different only inasmuch as she was a poet and loved, indeed worshipped, nature; for Paris may be said to hate the country, its skies undimmed by smoke, its deep-starred nights and all that she made acceptable to Paris, on paper.

Of the larger world of Paris and France she knew little, perhaps nothing, the world of the simply good, the humble, the sturdily noble. Abnegation or renunciation might, as lovely words, have found place in her mind; in life they would have amazed, and then appalled her—her whole large contribution to literature is an impassioned protest against such things.

The world of the Catholic intellectual renaissance she did touch at certain points, but only with a half-hearted, rather wistful and quite barren, admiration for principles

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she could not emulate and a security at which she could but enviously shrug.

All her Parisian culture, grafted on to a quite other temperament, that semi-eastern, semi-mystic, drawn from that 'warm magic of the Orient' of which she wrote, produced a notable, but a most unhappy, poet. Of *all* the moderns, the Comtesse de Noailles has probably written most, and most passionately—though nobly, according to her lights—of passion; her whole output is saturated and drenched with human love, no note is missed in that ascending gamut, no fierce depth of longing but is plumbed, no height of tenderness, sometimes pure and, indeed, innocent, that is not scaled. Yet no writings are so impregnated with a personal unhappiness, a more acrid despair in the midst of a wild joy of life, a more patent lack of God. Whatever else the town of her family's adoption gave the writer it was not Him. In no writer—and herein lies her interest to us—is that one vital lack more emphasized. It simply cries out from pages, beautiful in words, often beautiful in feeling, a fact more startling because the writer is a woman, more poignant from the greatness of gifts thwarted and stultified, and that express, in the end, no more than the desolation, the loneliness and the ultimate despair of the human heart. Anna de Noailles had, in the full sense of the words, done all, seen all, possessed all that the most brilliant destiny could shower, love, beauty, riches, power, fame.

She was born, so to speak, golden pen in hand; she wrote almost as a child. Mistral, the Provençal poet of rustic life and legend, visited her schoolroom and was a first bright inspiration. He dazzled her. No pages of her work have more charm and, in view of her later development, more pathos than those which evoke her childhood by the lake at Evian, whether or not coloured in a poet's retrospect.

'Quand j'étais cette franche, humble petite fille
Qui donne tout son bien aux pauvres, et qui croit
Qu'un mendiant est Dieu descendu de sa croix.'

'When I was that candid, humble little girl'

Henri Bordeaux remembered having noticed in the streets of Thonon, his native town, two little girls in light dresses, with dancing steps and large, dark eyes. Having enquired, he was told they were the little Brancovan princesses.

Their home by the Lake of Geneva was another palace, but the child, precociously an artist, loved only the lakeside, the blue of its waters and mountains, its dreaming nights, an enchantment of glancing woods and moon-pale shores. But she not only loved, she must already conquer. She noticed that she *knew* too little, and laboriously she set herself to acquire names of plants and flowers, rushes and trees, of all that crawled or flew, in her magic world; late at night she transferred to paper in a childish writing not only the impressions but the actualities of her brooding days. She acquired the observation of a naturalist which, later, was transfused into the word-painting of a poet.

At this time, in spite of a 'warning note of melancholy,' she believed she must die of happiness . . . of 'suffocating ecstacy,' of the joy of life.

Already the child-prodigy—an object of adulation not only to brother and little sister and a mother gently vapourous and music-mad, but to a circle of Talleyrands, Rochefoucaulds and great families with villas on the lake—was herself so wrapped and steeped in what must be called, what she herself would have called, the sensuality of her nature-worship as to accept almost carelessly, and certainly as due, the terrific pandering to her childish pride. Was it quite her fault if her life was to be so spiritually barren and unstable? As far as one can judge, she had no religious training, God was a beautiful word and idea that she had acquired, as she acquired so much, almost by intuition.

From the age of fifteen she was alive, in all pagan innocence, to the existence of what was to be the chief *leit-motif* of her work, human love. But it was not till she was twenty that a sufficiently brilliant marriage was arranged for so remarkable a young person. Mathieu de Noailles was of

the great nobility of France which since the fourteenth century had given admirals and generals and ambassadors to his country. Her summers by the lake were to be varied by residence in the great château of the Duchesse de Noailles, her mother-in-law, at Champlâtreux.

She was twenty-five before, in 1901, her first collection of poems, *Le Cœur Innombrable*, appeared, and was acclaimed as marking the arrival of a new genius; its success was stupendous, of the kind of which young poets may dream but which almost never comes true.

The poems were strange and lovely, and Paris found piquancy in the fact that their author was a young woman of the great world with the same enigmatic qualities; but this did not account for the praise of thin-blooded, celibate critics nor the warm ardour of countless buyers. *Le Cœur Innombrable* was a golden goblet filled with the dark wine of passion, of a languorous charm, of a sadness that might be simulated—who knew?—but that touched the sensibilities of hard-bitten *boulevardiers*, of the ‘*High Life*,’ of readers in France and in the world.

But what was new about the book was its newness! It might owe allegiance to the great symbolists from Verlaine to Francis Jammes—both Catholics—but it reverted, for all its actuality, to the half forgotten romantics, even to Lamartine, his Elvire and his Lake whose Savoy waters Paris remembers because they bathe at one point the summer hotels of Aix les Bains . . .

Already, then, in her twenty-sixth year she was writing, in *The Time of Living*, of ‘ardent life’ that it ‘drew towards the night.’

‘Déjà la vie ardente incline vers le soir

Respire ta jeunesse!

Le temps est court qui va de la vigne au pressoir,

De l’aube au jour qui baisse.’

If time was short between the vine and the wine-press, between dawn and fall of day, only the more surely was one to love effort, hope and pride, above all to ‘love Love.’

It is the thing profound—' la chose profonde.' It is an exquisite lyric as far as it can be made so by rhythm and the sound of words and the minor, disturbing, music never absent from her work. In it is the pride she inculcates, but little of the hope:

' Combien s'en sont allés, de tous les cœurs vivants
 Au séjour solitaire
 Sans avoir bu le miel ni respiré le vent
 Des matins de la terre:
 Ils n'ont pas répandu les essences et l'or
 Dont leurs mains étaient pleins.'

The fear of the possible waste of life was another dominating note, failure to seize with outheld hands the 'honey and the winds of morning,' to 'spread around the essences and gold' with which she never disguised she felt her hands were filled. She had always, at least, the courage of her pride, a quite open appropriation of great gifts of mind and body of which, indeed, the brilliant world in which she already moved with so exotic an assurance did not fail to hymn the praises. Anna de Noailles must have been the most adulated woman of her time.

Further lines have been translated:

' Behold them now, in that shadow where one sleeps
 Without breath or dreams,
 Love thou! Be unnumbered by the strength of thy desires
 Of shudders and of ecstasy
 Lean thou o'er the paths where man must serve
 Thy soul as in a vase.
 ' Mixed with the play of days, press to thy breast
 Life acrid and savage
 Let joy sing, and love, as a swarm of bees upon thy
 mouth . . .
 And then see, without regret or torment,
 The faithless banks recede—
 Having given thy heart and thy consent—
 Into the night eternal.'

The night eternal . . . that was all the hope she had for those 'living hearts' whose passing she so passionately deplored while life in herself was still so young, and memories of childish idealism by the lake-side might still, one thinks, have coloured her vision.

But nothing supernatural touched or could withdraw her from what was already an intense and morbid watch beside the graves and the earthy bed of her kind. For her no place of light and peace shone above the darkling clouds bent upon the tomb-stones of the world, no morning stars sang for her; the one great hope of humanity was not hers. Taine, with his stale theories, had formed, or deformed, her childish mind; he was her first intellectual guide. Nietzsche had ably seconded him in her early twenties.

Yet she loved Spinoza, and more Christian writers such as Pascal, Claudel, Psichari, Léon Bloy. Francis Jammes and Péguy were of her time, Huysmans had written *En Route*, Coppée his *Bonne Souffrance*; she could only adhere to her despairing nihilism, the only immortality in which she could believe was that of evolution—nothing is lost, nothing is created, all things undergo transformation. Of Christianity, Nietzsche, her teacher, had taught that it was 'the unique and immortal dishonour of humanity.'

Who can say what mystery of destiny or of human pride made of one who might most easily have been a mystic, a poet only of human passions?

Anna de Noailles was sincere, that is certain; she was too proud and had too personal a genius to be otherwise—her whole output was a transmutation of her own personality. There is, too, a certain nobility in all sincerity, a bringing into action of the soul; she was in constant intercourse with her own soul, hence what nobility there is in her work. She had certain definite qualities of the saints, courage and ardour and fearlessness; the real tragedy of her life, filled with half-sought suffering as it was, lay in its *narrowness*, all the kingdoms of the earth could satiate but could no more satisfy her than less dowered souls.

She was not, in the ordinary sense of the term, well educated, for she had evaded the routine lessons of governesses and tutors when it pleased her, and no one had crossed her whims. In another sense she was highly educated, for she had read constantly what pleased her; the classics, Greek and Latin, philosophy, science, history, sociology, and this enabled her not only to fill, but to hold a salon as Paris understood it, the hostess the salon's brilliant centre, with wit enough for herself and others, enough to conceal, yet reveal, knowledge and a fine sense of the arts and music. It was her habit to place before her poems stanzas, or some words, from those she considered her fore-runners, Anacreon, Pindar, Aeschylus, even Plato, of all people For she had elected Greece as her native land, possibly because 'it had vanquished time,' her arch-enemy.

'Tu sus vaincre le temps, même tes léthargies
Enivraient les humains.'

'Even its lethargies intoxicated humanity.' Like Byron she thought the best of life was but intoxication, that is a non-seeing or only through a haze of gold. In *Les Vivants et Les Morts*, which appeared in 1913, she writes with her reckless truthfulness, of her eyes which had 'never really seen the exact or the real,

'Qui n'ont jamais bien vu l'exact ou le réel.'

Though acclaimed by writers as various and belonging to such different categories as Maurice Barrés, Anatole France, Henri de Régnier and Francis Jammes, there were others who could not forgive this inexactitude of vision nor her unfettered prosody, her looseness of phrasing; French clarity and logic could not always be overborne by sheer beauty of words and imagery. Yet she had not violated Paris in a moment of aberration in the nineties, the first heady raptures did not evaporate; her poems, none of them considerable in length, survived the realism of the period and its translation into action in the War; they were still bought in their thousands in her last lyric work, *The Honour of Suffering*, in 1927.

Suffering was a tragically apt word with which to close her work—the word and the fact were too evident in its warp and woof. ‘Ne sois jamais heureux, de peur qu’il t’en souviennne’ is surely the most profoundly pessimistic utterance of a century in which pagan grief has played no small part.

Yet at one moment her work had been filled with the name of God, of the word prayer, of the need of God—Francis Jammes hoped much for her, but, in as far as we can tell, the light was too soon extinguished.

‘ Mais jamais rien à moi ne vous a révélé
 Seigneur! ni le ciel lourd comme une eau suspendue,
 Ni l’exaltation de l’été sur les blés,
 Ni le temple ionien sur la montagne ardue.’

Though born in 1876, she has died, as we are told, ‘still young and beautiful’; in so much she has conquered life. A great figure at the world’s centre has gone down to the grave by which she was obsessed and has found that it was not the End. It may be that the little girl, humble and frank, who gave all she had to the poor, met the older, way-worn poet in that Living of which the pride of our poorer life and its false teaching had till then deprived her.