Bella Duffy

Madame de Staël

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Table of Contents

PREFACE.

Table of Contents

Unpublished correspondence—that delight of the eager biographer—is not to be had in the case of Madame de Staël, for, as is well known, the De Broglie family either destroyed or successfully hid all the papers which might have revealed any facts not already in possession of the world.

The writer of the present brief memoir has, consequently, had to fall back upon the following well-known works:

The *Correspondance* of the Abbé Galiani, of Mme. Du Deffand, of Rahel Varnhagen, and of Schiller; the *Memoirs* of Marmontel, of Mme. D'Arblay, of Mme. de Rémusat, of Mme. d'Abrantè, of Bourrienne, and of the Comte de Montlosier; Ticknor's *Letters*; Châteaubriand's *Mémoires d'Outre Tombe*; De Goncourt's *Histoire de la Société Française pendant la Révolution*, and *Histoire de la Société Française pendant le Directoire*; Lacretelle's *Dix Années d'Épreuve*; Michelet's *Le Directoire*, *Le Dix-huit Brumaire*, and *Jusqu'à Waterloo*; *Le Salon de Madame Necker*, by Vicomte d'Haussonville; *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy*, by Vernon Lee; Byron's *Letters*; Benjamin Constant's *Letters to Mme. Récamier*; *Coppet and Weimar*; *Les Correspondants de Joubert*, by Paul Raynal; *Les Causeries du Lundi*, and other studies by Ste. Beuve; Droz' *Histoire du Règne de Louis XVI.*; Villemain's *Cours de Littérature Française*; the fragments from Constant's *Journals*, recently published in the *Revue Internationale*; Sismondi's *Journals* and *letters*; and sundry old articles in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*; besides various

other volumes, of which the list would be long and wearisome to detail.

BELLA DUFFY.

MADAME DE STAËL.

Table of Contents

CHAPTER I.
THE MOTHER.

Table of Contents

“My dear friend having the same tastes as myself, would certainly wish always for my chair, and, like his little daughter, would beat me to make me give it up to him. To keep peace between our hearts, I send a chair for him also. The two are of suitable height and their lightness renders them easy to carry. They are made of the most simple material, and were bought at the sale of Philemon and Baucis.”

Thus wrote Madame Geoffrin to Madame Necker when the intimacy between them had reached such a pitch as to warrant the introduction into the Necker salons of the only sort of chair in which the little old lady cared to sit.

The “dear friend” was M. Necker, and the “little daughter” of the house must then have been about four or five years old, for it was in the very year of her birth (1766) that Madame Geoffrin took her celebrated journey to Poland, and it was some little time after her return that she became intimate with Germaine Necker’s parents.

They were still in the Rue de Cléry. M. Necker’s elevation to the Contrôle Général was in the future and had probably not been foreseen; it is possible that even the *Éloge de Colbert*, which betrayed his desire for power, had not yet appeared; nevertheless, he was already a great man. His controversy with the Abbé Morellet, on the subject of the East India Company, had brought him very much into notice; and, although his arguments in favor of that

monopoly had not saved it from extinction, they had caused his name to be in everybody's mouth.

His position as Minister for the Republic of Geneva gave him the entry to the Court of Versailles, and brought him into contact with illustrious personages, who otherwise might have disdained a mere wealthy foreigner, neither a noble nor a Catholic. His well-filled purse completed his popularity, for it was not seldom at the service of abject place-hunters and needy literati. Moreover, he had been fortunate in his choice of a wife.

By the time that the King of Poland's *bonne maman* wrote that little note to Madame Necker, the wife of the Genevese banker had founded a salon as brilliant and crowded as Madame Geoffrin's own. She had achieved this in a few years, whereas Madame Geoffrin for the same task, and in spite of her wealth and generosity, had required a quarter of a century.

But Madame Necker, besides being young, rich and handsome, was bitten with the prevailing craze for literature, could listen unweariedly for hours to the most labored *portraits* and *éloges*, and, although herself the purest and most austere of women, would open her salon to any reprobate, provided only he were witty.

Madame Necker, first known to us as Suzanne Curchod, was the daughter of a Swiss pastor, and saw the light in the Presbytery of Crassier in the Pays de Vaud. The simple white house, with its green shutters, is still to be seen, separated from the road by a little garden planted with fruit trees. The Curchods were an ancient and respectable family whom Madame Necker (it was one of her weaknesses) would fain

have proved entitled to patents of nobility. Some Curchods or Curchodis are found mentioned in old chronicles as fighting beneath the banners of Savoy, and it was from these that Madame Necker sought vainly to trace her descent. She held a secret consultation for this cherished object with the Sieur Chérin, genealogist to the King; but his decision disappointed her. Chagrined, but not convinced—for her opinions were not easily shaken—she carried home the precious papers and locked them up without erasing the endorsement, *Titres de noblesse de la famille Curchod*, which she had written with her own hand.

M. Curchod took pains to give his only daughter an unusually thorough and liberal education. She knew Latin and a little Greek, “swept with extreme flounce the circle of the sciences,” and was accomplished enough in every way to attract the admiration, very often even the love, of sundry grave and learned personages.

Mixed with her severe charm there must have been some coquetry, for at a very early age she began making conquests among the young ministers who arrived on Sundays at Crassier, ostensibly to assist M. Curchod in his duties; and a voluminous correspondence, somewhat high-flown, as was the fashion of the day, is extant, to prove that Suzanne possessed the art of keeping her numerous admirers simultaneously well in hand. Verses, occasionally slightly Voltairian in tone, were also addressed to her; and later in life Madame Necker reproached herself for her placid acceptance of the homage thus expressed, and owned that had she understood it better she would have liked it less.

Suzanne’s parents, proud, no doubt, of their daughter’s talents and accomplishments, took her after a while to Lausanne. That pleasant city, since giving up its own political ideals and falling under the sway of Berne, had lapsed into easy-going, intellectual ways, and even professed a discreet and modified form of Voltairianism. Ever since the author of the “Henriade” had dazzled it with his presence, it had been on the look-out for illustrious personalities, and welcomed all foreigners who showed any promise of literary distinction.

What with her pretensions to be a *bel-esprit*, her youth and beauty, Mademoiselle Curchod captivated the town at once, and very soon had the proud joy of founding an *Académie de la Poudrière*, and being elected to preside over it under the fantastic name of Thémire. The members of this intellectual society were of both sexes and all young. Their duties consisted in writing *portraits* of one another, and essays or odes on subjects in general. Combined with these profound pursuits there seems to have been a good deal of flirtation, and, doubtless, both the scholasticism and the sentiment were equally to Suzanne Curchod’s taste.

During her stay in Lausanne she fascinated Gibbon, and, for the first time in her career of conquest, fell in love herself. So profound was her passion—or so profound, in her self-tormenting way, did she imagine it to be—that she remained constant to her engagement during the four years of Gibbon’s absence in England, and wrote him agitated, abject letters of reproach, when he, alleging his father’s invincible objections, broke off the engagement. Her devoted friend, Moulton, who appears to have loved her all

his life, was so touched by her despair, that, with Suzanne's own consent, he sought the mediation of Rousseau in order to bring the recreant lover back to his allegiance. But the attempt was vain. Gibbon showed himself as heartless as Mademoiselle Curchod had proved indulgent, and when the lady, as a last resource, proposed that they should at least remain friends, he declined the amiable offer as being "dangerous for both." Nevertheless, when they met again in Paris, some years later, Mademoiselle Curchod, then married, welcomed Gibbon with kindness, and even wrote him notes containing, here and there, allusions to the past. For the age was evidently sentimental, and to cherish memories of vanished joys, and make passing, pathetic reference to them, was a luxury of which Madame Necker would have been the last to deprive herself.

On the death of her parents, Suzanne found herself obliged to seek for a situation as governess, or companion. All her life, fortunate in making and keeping the most devoted friends, she found plenty anxious to help her in carrying out her plans. Among her sincerest admirers was the charming Duchess d'Enville, whose sweetness, grace, and naïf enthusiasm for Switzerland (as a kind of romantic republic, all shepherds and shepherdesses, toy-châlets, natural sentiments and stage liberty) were so characteristic of the age, and so admiringly celebrated in Bonstetten's letters. It was, in all probability, through her introduction at Geneva that Suzanne became acquainted with Madame de Vermenoux, a rich Parisian widow, who fell immediately under the young orphan's charm, and, engaging her as a companion, took her back to Paris. In that intellectual centre

—the promised land of all her thoughts—Suzanne speedily came into contact with several interesting people, among others the delightful Bonstetten, then still young in years, destined to be always young in heart, and whom, in the course of this work, we shall often see among the band of fervent admirers surrounding Madame de Staël.

Another frequent visitor at Madame de Vermenoux's house was M. Necker, at that time a partner in Thellusson's bank, and already possessed of ample means. He was a rejected suitor of the hostess, but continued on very good terms with her, and perhaps was expected to propose a second time. If such were the widow's ideas, they were doomed to disappointment; for very soon after Necker's introduction to Suzanne he made a transfer of his affections to her. He left, however, for Geneva, without declaring his sentiments; and Mademoiselle Curchod, once again in love, and once again in despair, poured out her feelings in a long letter to Moulton. That ever faithful friend did his best to bring things to a happy termination, by taking care that M. Necker, during his sojourn in Geneva, should hear nothing but praise of Suzanne. The device, if needed, was most successful; for the banker returned to Paris with his mind made up. He proposed without loss of time, and it is, perhaps, not too much to say, that Mademoiselle Curchod jumped into his arms.

All the friends of the bride elect were delighted, and even Madame de Vermenoux proclaimed her pleasure at the turn which affairs had taken. Some little subsequent coolness, however, she must have manifested, for the date fixed for the wedding was kept a secret from her. When the day

dawned, Suzanne stole out quietly and met M. Necker at the church door.

In what form the news was broken to the widow is not known; but any annoyance she may have felt was not of long duration, for in after years we find Madame de Vermenoux a frequent guest of the Neckers, and the little daughter, born on the 22nd April, 1766, was named Germaine after her.

CHAPTER II.
GERMAINE.

Table of Contents

When Germaine was about six years old, M. Necker retired from the bank, and devoted himself to the study of administrative questions. This was in preparation for the career to which he felt himself called. For years past his wealth had come frequently to the aid of a spendthrift Government and an exhausted exchequer; and it was natural that he should seek his reward in power. In his *Éloge de Colbert*, published in 1773, he was at no pains to conceal that he was thinking of himself when drawing the portrait of an ideal Minister of Finance; and some annoyance at Turgot's appointment is thought to have added force to his attacks on the latter's theories concerning free trade in corn.

Madame Necker, profiting by her husband's growing importance, quickly attained the summit of her ambition in becoming the presiding genius of a salon thronged with intellectual celebrities. Buffon and Thomas were her most trusted friends, but, austere though she was, she did not disdain to admit to a certain intimacy men like Marmontel, the Abbé Galiani, St. Lambert, and Diderot. They all flattered her outrageously to her face, while some of them, Marmontel especially, sneered at her behind her back. All made love to her, and, misled by the studied warmth of pompous eloquence with which she proclaimed her delight in their society, they not rarely persuaded themselves that they had added her to the list of their conquests, and were

chagrined and not a little disgusted later to discover that the only man she cared for was her husband. Indeed, she bored everybody with praise of M. Necker, composing and reading aloud in her own salon a preposterous *portrait* of him, in which she compared him to most things in heaven and earth and the waters under the earth, from an angel to a polypus. Her rigidity, her self-consciousness, her want of charm, and absence of humor, were a fruitful theme of ridicule to the witty and heartless parasites who crowded her drawing-rooms and made raids on her husband's purse. And yet such was the native force of goodness in her that, sooner or later, in every instance, detraction turned to praise. The bitter Madame de Genlis, who detested the Neckers, and ridiculed them unsparingly, admits that the wife was a model of virtue; and Diderot paid her the greatest compliment which she, perhaps, ever received, when declaring that had he known her sooner, much that he had written would never have seen the light.

Grimm was another frequenter of the Necker salons; and the mistress of the house being no less prodigal of gracious encouragement towards him than towards everybody else, he also eventually declared his sentiments of friendship and admiration, with as much warmth as his manners allowed of. Like Voltaire, he called her "Hypatie"; and testified the genuineness of his regard by scolding her about her religious opinions. Needless to say these were not infidel, but they were, in Grimm's opinion, disastrously illogical; and, his fine taste in such matters being offended, he expressed his displeasure on one occasion in no measured terms. Madame Necker retorted, for she loved a discussion

too fervently ever to be meek; but apparently Grimm was too much for her. Either his arguments were irrefragable, or his manner was irritating; the result was that Madame Necker—to the polite consternation of her numerous guests—dissolved into tears.

Humiliated, on reflection, at having made such a scene, with characteristic ardor, she seized the opportunity to write Grimm a high-flown apology; and an interchange of letters followed in which the philosopher compared the lady to Venus completed by Minerva, and Madame Necker ransacked the universe for metaphors wherewith to express her admiration of the gentleman's sensibility.

As the Neckers spent their summer at St. Ouen—not the historic Château associated with Louis XVIII., but another in the neighborhood, and of the same name—the proximity to Paris enabled them to continue unbroken their series of dinners, suppers and receptions, twice a week.

Many of the guests were notable personages, and most of them types which vanished forever a few years later—engulphed by the storm-wave of the Revolution. There was the Abbé Morellet, clear-headed, gravely ironical, with as much tact in concealing as in displaying the range of his knowledge and the depth of his insight; St. Lambert, a little cold, but full of exquisite politeness, supremely elegant in expression, and, without being lively himself, possessed of the delicate art of never quenching liveliness in others; D'Alembert, charming, if frigid, and destined soon to be an object of sentimental interest, because of his inconsolable grief for Mlle. L'Espinasse; the Abbé Raynal, doubtless enchanted to pour into Madame Necker's respectful ears the

floods of eloquence for which Frederick the Great laughed at him; these, with Marmontel and Thomas, were almost always present.

A few years earlier the Abbé Galiani, delightful and incorrigible, would also have been seen. This extraordinary little man, political economist, archæologist, mineralogist, diplomatist and pulcinello, was one of Madame Necker's professed adorers. Everybody liked and admired him; Diderot described him as "a treasure on a rainy day"; Marmontel as "the prettiest little harlequin," with "the head of Macchiavelli"; while, for Madame Geoffrin, he was her *petite chose*. After so much praise, and from such people, Madame Necker must certainly have accepted him unconditionally; but it would be interesting to know exactly with what air she listened to his impassioned declarations. When eventually restored to his native land—or, as he expressed it, exiled from Paris—he wrote her impudent and characteristic epistles, in which reproaches at her virtue, intimate interrogations regarding her health, and envy of M. Necker's happiness, mingled with inquiries after everybody in the beloved capital, and wails of inconsolable grief at his own departure. "*Quel désert que cinquante mille Napolitains!*" he exclaims.

Madame Du Deffand was also for a time an intimate guest at the Neckers'. The friendship did not last long. The marquise, by this time infinitely weary of men and things, appears soon to have tired of Madame Necker's declamations and M. Necker's superiority. Her final judgment on the wife was very severe, rather ill-tempered, and therefore unjust. Madame Necker was, she says, "stiff

and frigid, full of self-consciousness, but an upright woman." Her liking for the husband held out longer, but finally succumbed to the discovery that, while very intelligent, he failed to elicit wit from others. "One felt oneself more stupid in his company than when with other people or alone."

There is no trace of any variation in the friendship between Madame Necker and Madame Geoffrin. Perhaps the latter, with her habitual gentle "*Voilà, qui est bien*," called her young friend to order, and early repressed the emphatic praises which could not but have wearied her.

We are told that she hated exaggeration in everything; and how could Madame Necker's heavy flattery have found favor in her eyes? Her delicate *savoir-vivre*, too, that preternaturally subtle sense which supplied the place in her of brilliancy and learning and early education, must have been vexed at Madame Necker's innocent but everlasting pedantry. We can fancy, however, that she managed, in her imperceptible, noiseless way, to elude all these disturbing manifestations; and then she was doubtless pleased at Madame Necker's good-humored patience with her scoldings. All Madame Geoffrin's friends, as we know, had to submit to be scolded; but probably few showed under the infliction the magnanimity of Madame Necker, who must have possessed all the power of submission peculiar to self-questioning souls. The calm old lady, ensconced in her own peculiar chair, whether in Paris or at St. Ouen, in the midst of the sparkling society to which she had perseveringly fought her way, was disturbed in her serenity by no presage of misfortune.

In point of reputation the most illustrious, and in point of romantic ardor the most fervent, of all Madame Necker's friends, was Buffon. He wrote her some eighty letters full of fervid flatter and genuine, almost passionate affection, to which she responded in the terms of adulation that the old man still held dear. Such incense had once been offered to him in nauseating abundance; now that he was old and lonely it had diminished, and this fact, joined to his unquestionable admiration for Madame Necker, made him all the more easily intoxicated by her praise. Mixed with her high esteem for his genius was a womanly compassion for his bodily sufferings that rendered the tie uniting their two minds a very sweet and charming one. On hearing that his end was near, she hastened to Montbard, where he was residing, and established herself by his bedside, remaining there five days, and courageously soothing the paroxysms of pain that it tortured her own sensitive nature to see.

Perhaps her strong and unconcealed desire that the philosopher should make a Christian end, lent her fortitude to continue the self-imposed task. There is no proof that she directly influenced him in that final declaration of faith by which he scandalised a free-thinking community; but she had often discussed religious questions with him, and deplored his want of a definite creed; consequently, it is possible that her mere presence may have had some effect upon him at the last.

On the brink of the irrevocable, even the pride of controversy may come to be a little thing; and Buffon's wearied spirit perhaps recoiled from further speculation on the eternal problem of futurity. And to be at one, in that

supreme moment, with the pitying woman who had come to solace his final agony, may have weighed with him above the praise and blame over which the grave was to triumph forever.

Madame Necker delighted in making herself miserable, and the melancholia natural to him probably caused Thomas to be the most thoroughly congenial to her of all her friends. The author of the *Petréide* and the foe of the Encyclopædists, he enjoyed during his life a celebrity which posterity has not confirmed. He was the originator of the unhappy style of writing in which Madame Necker so delighted that she modelled her own upon it. For the rest, he was a man of extremely austere and simple life, as well as of very honest character. Passion was unknown to him, unless, indeed, the profound and sentimental esteem which he felt for Madame Necker was of a nature under more favorable treatment to have developed into love. If so, she found the way in his case, as in all, to restrain his feelings within platonic bounds, and indulged him chiefly with affecting promises not to forget him when she should be translated to heaven.

Madame Necker may be said to have touched the zenith of social distinction the day on which the Maréchale de Luxembourg entered her salon. This charming old lady and exquisite *grande dame*, the arbiter of politeness and fine manners, was felicitously and untranslatably described by Madame du Deffand, in one delightful phrase, as "*Chatte Rose!*" Upon all those who met her at this period (when she was already nearly seventy), she seems to have produced

the same impression of softness and elegance, of fine malice and caressing, irresistible ways.

Madame de Souza—that sweet little woman round whose name the perfume of her own roses still seems to cling—drew a portrait of the Maréchale in her novel *Eugénie de Rothelin*, under the name of the Maréchale de'Estouteville; nor did she, as Ste. Beuve tells us, forget to introduce, by way of contrast, in the person of Madame de Rieny, the pretty and winning Duchess de Lauzun, grand-niece of the Maréchale, and another flower of Madame Necker's salon.

This little Duchess, "*joli petit oiseau à l'air effarouché*" (to quote Madame du Deffand once again), was so devoted an admirer of M. Necker, that, hearing somebody in the Tuileries Gardens blame him, she slapped the speaker's face. Apart from this one outburst, which saves her from seeming too meek, she flits shadowy, sweet and pathetic, across the pages of her contemporaries. The record of her life, as we know it, is brief and touching. She kept herself unspotted from a most depraved world; loved a very unworthy husband and died, during the Terror, on the scaffold.

Another friend, and apparently a very sincere one, of Madame Necker, was Madame d'Houdetôt. Madame Necker seems to have accepted that interesting woman just as she was, including her relations with St. Lambert, whom the letters exchanged between the two ladies mention quite naturally. The affection which she felt for the mother was extended by Madame D'Houdetôt to the little daughter, and there are letters of hers extant describing visits which she

had paid to Germaine, while Madame Necker was at Spa or Mont Doré for her health.

They were written to relieve the natural pain of absence on the parents’ part, and are full of praises of the child, of her engaging ways, her air of health, and her magnificent eyes.

CHAPTER III.
GIRLHOOD AND MARRIAGE.

Table of Contents

In the brilliant world in which she awoke, Germaine very soon found her place. It is a very familiar little picture that which we have of her, seated on a low stool beside her mother at the receptions, and fixing on one speaker after another her great, astonished eyes.

Soon, very soon, she began to join in the conversation herself, and by the time she was ten or eleven years old she had grown into a person whose opinion was quite seriously consulted. Some of the friends of the house, Marmontel, Raynal and others, enchanted to have a new shrine in the same temple at which to worship, talked to her, wrote verses to her, and laid at her young feet some of the homage up to then exclusively devoted to Madame Necker.

That lady began by being enchanted at Germaine's amazing powers, and set to work to educate her with characteristic thoroughness and pedantry. Everything that was strongest in her, family pride, the sense of maternal authority, the love of personal influence, the passion for training, seemed to find their opportunity in the surprising daughter whom Heaven had given her. She drove the child to study with unrelenting ardor, teaching her things beyond her age, and encouraging her at the same time further to exercise her intelligence by listening to conversations on all sorts of subjects. The consequence was that at eleven Germaine's conversational powers were already stupendous. On being introduced to a child of her own age,

a little Mademoiselle Hüber, who was her cousin, she amazed her new acquaintance by the questions she put to her. She asked what were her favorite lessons; if she knew any foreign languages; if she often went to the theatre. The little cousin confessing to having profited but rarely by such an amusement, Germaine was horror-stricken, but promised that henceforward the deficiency should be remedied, adding that on their return from the theatre they should both proceed to write down the subject of the pieces performed, with suitable reflections; that being, she said, her own habit. In the evening of this first day's acquaintance, Mademoiselle Hüber, already sufficiently awe-struck, one must think, was further a witness to the attention paid to Germaine by her mother's most distinguished guests.

"Everybody addressed her with a compliment or a pleasantry. She answered everything with ease and grace.... The cleverest men were those who took most pleasure in making her talk. They asked what she was reading, recommended new books to her and ... talked to her of what she knew, or of what she had yet to learn."

From her tenderest years Germaine wrote *portraits* and *éloges*. At fifteen she made extracts from the *Esprit de Lois*, with annotations, and about the same time the Abbé Raynal was very anxious that she should contribute to his great work an article on the Revolution of the Edict of Nantes.

But before this, when she was only twelve, the effects of such premature training had made themselves visible. Her feelings had been as unnaturally developed as her mind. Already that rich, abundant nature, so impetuous, generous,

and fervid, which was at once the highest gift and deepest curse, had begun to reveal itself in an exaggerated sensibility. Praise of her parents moved her to tears; for the little cousin she had an affection amounting to passion; and the mere sight of celebrated people gave her palpitation of the heart. She did not care to be amused. What pleased her best was what pained her most, and her imagination was fed upon the “Clarissa Harlowe” school of novels.

By degrees her health began to fail, and at fourteen the collapse was so complete as to cause the most serious alarm. Tronchin was consulted, and prescribed absolute rest from study. This was a cruel blow to Madame Necker. A nature allowed to develop spontaneously, a mind virgin of the pruning-hook, were objects of as much horror to her as if they had been forbidden by Heaven. That her daughter, just at the final moment, when what was doubtless the mere preliminary course of study had been traversed, should be released from bondage and abandoned to her own impetuosity, was well-nigh insupportable. She had no alternative but to resign herself, and therefore, silently and coldly, as was her wont, she accepted the situation. Nevertheless, she was neither reconciled to it, nor felt the same interest in Germaine again. Years afterwards, the bitterness that she had hoarded in her soul betrayed itself in one little phrase. Madame Necker de Sausanne was congratulating her on her daughter’s astonishing powers. “She is nothing,” said Madame Necker, coldly, “nothing to that which I would have made her.”

Despatched from Paris to the pure air of St. Ouen, and ordered to do nothing but enjoy herself, the young girl