

"I discovered quite by chance, in consultation with clippings from the late nineteenth century, the Countess Greffulhe, born Elisabeth de Caraman-Chimay, was in her time the most visible woman in Paris. Thanks to documentation entrusted to me by Anne de Cosse Brissac, her great-great-granddaughter, author of the first book on her, which appeared in 1991. Also thanks to rich private archives deposited in the National Archives, I realized that there was still much to say about this exceptional personality who fascinated her contemporaries with her great beauty, her youthful figure, her "inspired" eyes, her often eccentric elegance.

Married to the wealthy Henry Greffuhle, the Countess occupied a unique worldly position. It is precisely for this reason that history will forget her, in categorizing her a bit too quickly as so many other society women who don't have a thought in their brain. They forget she has done a number of great things for the arts, particularly music, and science: the friend of Rodin and Marie Curie was a fund raiser ahead of her time, raising funds to organize shows, encourage basic research.

She gave honors to Wagner, sponsored Fauré, supported the Ballets Russes, promoted the works of Edouard Branly, found financing for the Radium Institute. She had a genius for public relations, the gift of contacting the right people at the right time. By creating the League of great musical auditions, she made the connection between musicians and socialites, some of whom had vast fortunes and could fund concerts and fill theaters. All Paris dreamed of being received in her legendary mansion on the rue d'Astorg, in the 8th arrondissement, nicknamed "the Vatican."

A solid address book

Countess Greffulhe knew everyone, all the crowned heads of Europe and the elite, as well as luminaries from politics. She was a friend of Georges Clemenceau, of Blum, who called her "the Oracle", Aristide Briand, Joseph Caillaux, and many others. She was pro-Dreyfus, a philanthropist, a feminist -- I found an incredible manuscript, written in her own hand about 1904, entitled *My study on the rights to be given to women*.

It should be emphasized that Elizabeth did not receive formal education for young girls of her time, a rigid and appalling poverty. Her father, Joseph Caraman-Chimay, came from a long line of patrons and music lovers. Her mother, Marie de Montesquiou, was an exceptional woman, educated, musician, very close to her eldest daughter, which gave them the most intimate of confidences. Their correspondence deserves to be published.

The Caraman-Chimay family was poor, but happy; their fortune was not material but spiritual. Their six children had received very extensive arts educations, each playing an instrument. In this context, the marriage of Elizabeth to Count Henry Greffuhle in 1878, arranged by Marie de Montesquiou, may seem surprising. But the handsome and wealthy Henry was dreamed of by all the mothers -- even if he collected mistresses, like many of his contemporaries. At the very beginning of their marriage, Elizabeth was frustrated, she was isolated in the countryside, chaperoned by her mother-in-law, subject to the dictates of her prosaic in-laws, who were only interested in hunting: Reading a book or playing the piano was a waste of time.

"Entrepreneur of spectacles"

The early death of her mother at age 50, plunged her into disarray. But she will find the

loophole to get out of her "prison": organizing a concert to benefit the Greffuhle foundation, which is still well within the norm of her good works. Its success is immense: she discovered her vocation as "impresario" ... She also has a passion for the sciences, which supports her spiritual quest, and for politics, where she serves as a link between men of good will. She was a cultivated woman, pragmatic, intelligent.

Her letters are full of spirit, starting with those she exchanged with Marcel Proust. He always sought to minimize the role played by the Countess Greffulhe in *La Recherche*. For her part, Elizabeth, at the end of her life, claimed that she had "barely known" him. Everyone took her word for it. In fact, their correspondence reveals much more closeness. A deeper analysis of the work and its drafts shows that Elizabeth inspired not only the characters of Oriane and Princess Marie de Guermantes, but also, notably, that of Odette de Crecy, who borrows the elegance of her grooming.

She was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. "All those who see the Countess remain as fascinated by her infinite eyes filled with light and shadows, and a glow that sings before her perfect beauty, before her absolute and divine grace," he wrote in an unpublished article from 1903, *Le Salon de la Comtesse Greffulhe*, which I miraculously found.

"Too accessible" in the eyes of Proust

During his "worldly" period, Proust dreamed of meeting her, then of winning her friendship, and of closely examining Count Greffuhle (almost unique model of the Duke de Guermantes). His friendship with the Duke of Guiche, son of the Countess Greffulhe, allowed him to approach her more closely. From 1906, he locks himself away to produce his work...

Their roles are now reversed: it was she who wrote to him, invited him to her parties and her shows ... And he who refuses: he has the material he needed; she became too "accessible." Twice he refused, with horror, her suggestion to come and pay him a visit. "It is not of course possible that you would risk venturing into my trench, among the poison gasses that are my anti-asthma fumigations!" he writes to her in 1916.

They correspond through 1920. Proust was fascinated by the historical dimension, the "race" of Caraman-Chimay, a dynasty of lords of the Holy Roman Empire going back to the eleventh century. His draft notebooks show that his musings on family inspired the discovery of the "magic" name of Guermantes, which emerged in *La Recherche*.

The power of fiction has won over "real life." The shadow of the Guermantes has relegated to obscurity this woman who had nevertheless managed her image as a work of art, with the aim of being "unforgettable." The memory of her was extinguished with her last contemporaries. And yet, this exciting and romantic life would make a great subject for a film or television series, of which the English know the secret ... "