

A VISIT TO ELIZABETH FOERSTER-NIETZSCHE.

BY CAROLINE V. KERR.

A LIGHT autumnal haze hung over the little grand-ducal residence of Weimar, as I climbed the steep path leading up to the house on the hill where Friedrich Nietzsche was brought during his last tragic illness, and from which his engloomed soul took its flight into the unknown. The quaint old city lay spread out before me in the broad, bowl-shaped valley formed by the foothills of the Thuringian Mountains, as silent as if dreaming of her glorious past—or was this silence rather that of tense listening to the din of the hideous war raging on all borders of the empire?

The only outward token of the unseen struggle was an insistent humming and whirring, and far up in the blue dome of the sky I could sight two tiny black specks, which I knew meant the birdmen from the aviation camp near Weimar were making ready to take their part in the warfare of the clouds. Mars ruled the hour, and the faint flutterings of the Fokker machines became to my ears the sinister swish of the war-god's wings as he rushed by on his errand of destruction.

As I passed through the silent streets, a curious readjustment of values had already made itself noticeable in the shop-windows, where Goethe and Schiller, Wieland and Herder, Franz Liszt and Ernst von Wildenbruch were being rudely elbowed by a new generation of national heroes created by the hour of destiny.

Weimar of to-day is like a clock with arrested hands; time is waiting, waiting—for what?

Weimar of yesterday seemed very unreal, and for the first time I had difficulty in visualizing the past when the little Athens on the Ilm was the meeting-place of the brains of Europe and all the world pilgrimaged thither to sit at the feet of the Weimarian Jove.

Nor was there anything in the Nietzsche House to banish these depressing thoughts, as the repellent severity of its architectural lines, the dark cypress sentinels, and the air of somber melancholy all bespoke days that are dead and gone. Indeed, I should not have been surprised had a raven croaked a dirge of Nevermore! from his perch above the door, and it was with a feeling of distinct awe that I found myself passing through the mausoleum-like portals.

However, my visit was to the living and not to the dead, a point upon which I had been most explicit in accepting an invitation from Frau Foerster-Nietzsche to come to Weimar, as in her letter she had expressed the fear that I would be disappointed in the Nietzsche Archives, assumed by her to be the objective of my visit.

Overshadowed by a great name, and prompted by a rare spirit of devotion to sacrifice her own individuality on the altar of affection, the only sister of the great philosopher was little known to the world at large until she emerged from the shadows into the strong light on the occasion of her seventieth birthday (July, 1916). All honor had been paid her by the German literary world, and it was this which had piqued my curiosity and drawn me to Weimar to see and talk to Elizabeth Foerster-Nietzsche, a personality in her own rights, quite independent of her official importance as the custodian of the Nietzsche Archives.

Our imagination sometimes plays us curious tricks, and had I been called upon to draw an imaginary portrait of the seventy-year-old widowed and childless sister of Friedrich Nietzsche, whom I was about to meet, I should most assuredly have envisaged a tall, gaunt, somewhat austere old lady, with silvered hair and spectacled eyes. Moreover, she would have been wearing severe black draperies, as nothing but the outward trappings of woe seemed to fit into the somber setting. What I did see in reality, was a sprightly, vivacious woman, seventy years young, with smooth pink cheeks, bright eyes, brown hair upon which a black lace mantilla was coquettishly draped, while her black silk gown, though made after the fashion of bygone days, showed unmistakable signs of a love for femininities. Frau Foerster-Nietzsche stood for *Das Ewigweibliche* in these surroundings, half library, half sanctuary, dedicated to the memory of her beloved brother. But not even a fresh brew of tea, nor a generous slice of "war-cake" of which my hostess was very proud, could banish the feeling that I was paying a call in a mausoleum, nor make me forget for a moment, Klinger's famous bust of Nietzsche in the alcove, which by a curious trick of illumination was made to take on an appearance of startling reality.

Moreover, there was something extremely disconcerting in being confronted by a life-size drawing of the philosopher on his death-bed, every time my eyes strayed from my hostess to the wall above her head. I was told that the death chamber was just above the room in which we were sitting, with its many windows overlooking the fair landscape that Nietzsche never learned to love. He was not a Weimarian in the same sense as were Goethe and Schiller; they lived and worked here, while Nietzsche was only brought here to die. It is, therefore, not surprising that he should have regarded the place as nothing more than the last stage of a long and wearisome journey, and that he should not have been enshrined in the hearts of the people as were the two greater geniuses.

Nietzsche made no secret of his dislike of his native land, which was cold and cheerless to him, both in its physical aspects and its literary atmosphere. It was only after he became a helpless invalid (1890) that the philosopher was forced to take refuge in his mother's house. In a letter written from Venice three years earlier, he makes one of his frequent referencès to his reluctance to living in Germany: "It would be difficult to tempt me back to my beloved fatherland; the narrow-mindedness of the same makes me laugh, and if it should become necessary for me to return (for purely literary reasons) I should first fortify myself with a zoological proverb, running:

'Um das Rhinoceros zu sehn,
Beschloss nach Deutschland ich zu gehn.'

Switzerland and Italy alternately offered an asylum to this tortured spirit, and thus it happens that patient search has been made in these two countries for fragments of his writings. Frau Foerster-Nietzsche showed me one of her most recent acquisitions, bought for an incredible sum from the proprietor of an Italian *albergo* where her brother often stopped. This consisted of a few stray sheets of the manuscript—in fact, of nothing more than notes—of his last unfinished work, *Der Wille zur Macht*.

This indefatigable effort to collect the Nietzsche fragments and bibliography has made heavy inroads upon the private fortune of Frau Foerster-Nietzsche, but she has kept at her task with rare fidelity, never losing sight of the ultimate goal, which was to hand over the Nietzsche Archives as a gift to the German nation. "And now just in the darkest hour," she said, "light has dawned from an unexpected quarter: since the beginning of the war, a high-minded Swede and his wife have made a pilgrimage to Weimar and announced their intention of endowing the institution and enabling

me to pursue my researches without the haunting thought of the expense incurred."

But this was told me later in the afternoon, and not over the tea-cups, where the regal air with which the little lady dispensed her hospitality explained the title often given her by her friends, of "the uncrowned grand-duchess of Weimar"; this she laughingly disclaimed as well as that of the "super-sister," as I had heard her called by the intimates of the Nietzsche House.

In fact, her opening remark was one of self-depreciation, as in response to my belated birthday felicitations, she replied: "Yes, I am surprised to find myself the object of so much interest; I had grown so accustomed to being the anacrusis in the rhythmical measure that it is very pleasant to find the world placing the accent on my insignificant personality. . . ." Either she, or I, suggested that her life-task had been a Kundry-like one of "serving," and at once she was off on a chain of interesting Wagnerian reminiscences—appreciative of the dead, but strongly censorious of the heirs of Bayreuth, particularly of Frau Cosima, at whom she is very bitter for having destroyed that part of Nietzsche's correspondence which is necessary to form a complete record of the one-time historic friendship between the philosopher and Wagner.

Had Nietzsche lived until October 15, 1914, he would have celebrated his seventieth birthday, and in commemoration of this anniversary, Frau Foerster-Nietzsche has published a book entitled *Wagner and Nietzsche at the Time of Their Friendship* (regarded as the most interesting contribution to German belles-lettres brought out since the beginning of the war) and found herself seriously handicapped in this labor of love by the enforced gaps in the correspondence.

According to Frau Foerster-Nietzsche, all letters throwing an unflattering light upon Wagner's character, furnish fuel for a Bayreuth auto da fé, held periodically by Frau Cosima, and she further explained: "My brother's apostasy has never been forgiven in Bayreuth, but despite that fact, I feel very strongly that no one has the ethical right to destroy the correspondence between great men, except by mutual consent of their heirs, as it is just in these intimate documents that they reveal their true personality. But the powers that be at Bayreuth willed otherwise, and I have been obliged to rely upon my brother's note-books and my own memory in supplying the missing context."

This could have been no very difficult task, I suggested, as all the world knows that she was her brother's guide, counselor, and

inseparable companion, until her marriage to Dr. Bernhard Foerster took her across the seas to share his adventure of establishing a German colony in Paraguay. After the latter's death, his widow returned to Europe and is now finishing her life's work as she began it, as the faithful custodian of Nietzsche's literary fame and legacy. Nor is she less jealous of her brother's reputation than the other "guardian of the grail" over at Bayreuth, whose vigilance she so resents.

Later she spoke of the war, not in bitterness but rather in sadness, as defeating her brother's dream of a United States of Europe. Only twice did the fire of indignation flame up in her eyes, once when she referred to what she called "the absurdity" of linking her brother's name with that of Treitschke and Bernhardi when speaking of "the three arch-instigators" of the war. "Can you imagine any more absurdly incongruous combination and one that more clearly illustrates the fatal habit of the unthinking world to deal in indiscriminating generalities? It is true that my brother believed in war—" (here she quoted from his *Zarathustra*—"War is the only means by which the genius of a nation can be set in motion") "but he could never have foreseen the present holocaust of the nations of the earth, and had he lived, would assuredly have grieved his heart out at the ruthless destruction of irreparable values."

This clear-thinking septuagenarian seemed to have her brother's works literally by heart, and quoted many interesting passages from the "Bible for Exceptional Persons," as well as from his *Willen zur Macht*, in which may be found many of his best-defined ideas on war.

Nietzsche, she told me, hardly ever read his own works after they were once published: "He always looked forward instead of backward; he was a philosopher and poet by nature and a professor by accident, and for that reason, found his routine duties at the University of Basle galling and tedious. . . . He liked to escape from the treadmill whenever possible and flee for a soul-bath to Villa Triebtschen, then furnishing an asylum to Richard Wagner and his friend Frau Cosima von Bülow. I shall never forget the letter in which he joyfully announced to me that the long-wished for friends had been found. He wrote, 'I have found the friend for whom I have been looking all my life; this is Richard Wagner, equally great and original both as a man and an artist. I spent blissful days with him and the intelligent Frau von Bülow (Liszt's daughter) at their

villa on Lake Lucerne, where they live withdrawn from the world and its social superficialities.’”

This brought us back to the relations between the two men, and Frau Foerster-Nietzsche said that “a lasting friendship was impossible between geniuses. One individuality is bound to be sacrificed, and realizing this, my brother courageously withdrew from a relationship which threatened to prove fatal to him. Wagner had absolutely no consideration for his friends, and in his sublime egotism, could not understand why my brother did not devote himself, body and soul, to the Wagnerian cause, even though this would have meant an utter neglect of his professional duties and disregard of his physical limitations. This was, at least, more reasonable than the continual demands Wagner made upon my brother for quite trivial matters, such as attending to nondescript commissions for the family in Triebtschen—in short, making himself a sort of messenger-boy. I used to chafe at this useless waste of his time and strength, but my brother was so wrapped up in his idol that no service seemed too slight to be cheerfully performed. My brother’s anguish of mind upon discovering that his god had feet of clay, was tragically pathetic. . . .”

This rude awakening, as the world now knows, came at the time of the first Bayreuth Festival in 1876, and was laconically described by Nietzsche in the words: “I made the mistake of going to Bayreuth with an ideal; instead of having this fulfilled, I was doomed to the bitterest disappointment. . . . I had looked so long for a personality which towered above my own. I believed I had found such a one in Wagner. But I was mistaken. . . . For the rest, I have paid dearly for my Wagner fanaticism. Did this nerve-racking music not undermine my health? And the disappointment and leave-taking from Wagner—did it not imperil my life? Were not six years needed before I recovered from this shock? . . .”

As we talked of these things I thought in my heart of hearts that all men are more or less egotists, and none more so than Nietzsche himself, who was merciless in the demands he made upon his beloved “Lama” (his favorite term of endearment for his sister) although it must be admitted that he repaid her devotion by a like degree of affection and appreciation.

As if divining my thoughts, the sprightly little lady recalled, with evident amusement, her brother’s habit of assuming that she shared his likes and dislikes, and produced a letter as proof of his early display of masculine egotism. “Like all German children, we were allowed to write out a *Wunschzettel* as Christmas time, and

my brother in despair at not being able to expand his own list to include his manifold wishes, once wrote to me: 'I hope you have not yet decided on your Christmas wishes as I should like to make a few helpful suggestions. I have made out a list of books and music, which I am enclosing. It seems to me, that a most suitable present for you would be a copy of Schumann's "Frauenliebe und Leben," the words by Chamisso. I can also warmly recommend two theological works both of which would be of great interest to you and me. They are by Hase, the distinguished Jena theologian and champion of an ideal nationalism. . . . In case you prefer an English book, I would strongly recommend one of Byron's works. . . .' I naturally had my own girlish preferences, and much to my brother's disgust, refused to act upon his suggestions, whereupon he wrote that he was 'much annoyed' at my not caring for the Schumann work, 'above all, because the opposition to my wishes comes from one who could not possibly have any judgment on the subject.'"

Frau Foerster-Nietzsche discussed at some length her brother's attitude toward the French literary world, which I found of such unusual interest, that I begged her to gather up the detached and fragmentary comments and put them into the form of a sustained survey, and to this she was obliging enough to accede.

This line of thought was suggested by a remark that Nietzsche had undeniably lost ground in France during the last five years, "an explanation of which," said Frau Foerster-Nietzsche, "was offered me by a French savant who visited me in Weimar shortly before the outbreak of the war. When I asked him for a reason for this change of heart on the part of the French, he replied: 'You see, Nietzsche is so frightfully German that he discourages us.' By way of answer I said: 'But you know that in Germany Nietzsche is not considered specifically German.' whereupon he replied, rather impolitely as I thought: 'Oh, the Germans are such bad psychologists. Everything that Nietzsche prized most highly was essentially German; strength of will, severity of discipline, a genius for commanding and obeying, and the unremitting but silent military preparedness. On the other hand, he had only contempt for the things lying nearest the heart of every Frenchman, for example, Rousseau, the French Revolution, and many other national manifestations. To be sure, he had only words of the highest praise for our artistic endowment, but this was offset by his frequent references to our weak will and the decadence of modern France. But notwithstanding this criticism, we are a political nation, and the military

awakening now taking place will do much for France. But as I said, Nietzsche discourages us, and therefore we prefer Bergson.¹

"This conversation has often recurred to me," continued Frau Foerster-Nietzsche, "since the beginning of the war, all the more since my brother has been condemned as one of the chief instigators of this world tragedy and since his theories have been exploited in the most perverted manner in support of the argument that Germany's unprecedented demonstration of strength is proof of her culpability in precipitating the catastrophe. . . ."

"He has not only been called a 'Boche,' but a 'super-Boche'—the war translation for 'super-man.' But no one would have been more genuinely distressed over the world war than my brother, as he always entertained the belief that the time was drawing near when all Europe would be united. He had a profound faith in the power of intellectual sympathies, economic and industrial interests, in bridging over racial misunderstandings, and curiously enough, he believed that France and Germany would be leagued together against—England! He never referred to England as belonging to the European coalition, but as standing aloof and apart. In fact, there are many passages in his notebooks and letters, to indicate that he *regarded England and America as forming a logical union, and one which would be so powerful as to array against it the whole of Europe for armed measures of self-preservation.* Looking further into the future, he foresaw a still greater trial of strength, when Asiatic Russia should be in a position to develop her powerful slumbering forces and challenge Europe to battle. But these trials of strength came sooner than my brother had expected and before his wish of a United States of Europe had been realized. . . ."

A few days after leaving Weimar—my visit was made during the closing days of October, 1916—the promised manuscript was sent to me by Frau Foerster-Nietzsche, under the title, "Nietzsche, France, and England."²

¹ Without being able to make a positive assertion to this effect, the writer has reason to believe that the French scholar referred to was the distinguished philosopher Prof. Emile Boutroux, of whom mention was made in the course of the conversation and the time of whose visit to Weimar, as recorded in the guest-book of the Nietzsche House, coincides with the date of the remarks here quoted. Frau Foerster-Nietzsche related this incident with much feeling, and made no attempt to conceal her distress that the growth of the military spirit in both countries should have resulted in alienating French and German intellectuals.

² To be published in the next number of *The Open Court*.