

CHAPTER X

A LADY BIOGRAPHER

A little over a century after the miserable failure of Dr. Nicholas Sanders's expedition to Ireland, Irish troubles still daunted the rulers of England. Whereas in 1580 Ireland was to be stirred to revolt by emissaries of the Vatican and the court of King Philip of Spain, in 1690 (although it was still the Catholic powers who were intent on attacking England from its Irish backdoor), the initiative had become Louis XIV's.

Though Antonin Nompar de Caumont was born of poor Gascon parents, at an early age he became a wily and successful courtier and while yet in his early twenties became a favourite of King Louis XIV. His conquests both of his political rivals and his position of favour with the great heiresses of France knew no bounds; at times he had more influence with the Roi Soleil himself than any man at the court of Versailles. But such men make enemies as fast as they rise to success and de Caumont only approached the throne to fall into a long and harsh imprisonment. He was in prison for ten years. But not long after his release from servitude this remarkable adventurer was back in favour and had pulled off his most remarkable feats in contemporary politics. The throne of England was creaking under the uncertain rule of James II. In France it was known the monarch's days were numbered and his fall would mean a further weakening of the Catholic cause and greater power to the perfidious alliance of Holland and England. One of de Caumont's most audacious achievements, and one which reinstated him in Louis's favour, was in effecting the escape from England of James II's wife, Mary of Modena, and their son the Prince of Wales, who later became known

to History as the Old Pretender. For his part in this exploit de Caumont became probably the only man ever to be invested with the highest order of chivalry of England, the Order of the Garter, in the most famous cathedral of France, Notre Dame de Paris.

Later in 1688 James II himself, remembering his father's execution forty years earlier, sought refuge in France. The protestant alliance was a fait accompli, so it was in the interest of France to reinstate James on the throne of England. Louis XIV's motives fell from no love of James, but from his own anxiety to relieve the pressure of William's English and Dutch navies on the French coasts. De Caumont, who had now been created Duc De Lauzun, was the ideal man to lead the expedition to help James II regain the throne - he knew better than anyone the vacillating character of the exiled King, and his rivals at Court were glad to see him sent on a risky and probably hopeless task, which would keep him away from Versailles for months if not years. So in March that year Louis's armed expedition of 7,000 men under Lauzun left Brest with supplies and arms for 40,000 men: equipped with everything, that is, except a General. Lauzun's instructions were to proclaim the young Prince of Wales King if James was killed. Louis dared not have himself named king, which would have amounted to open annexation.

The total lack of co-operation between Lauzun's army which landed at Cork and the Jacobites under James in the north of the island, culminating in the disaster to James's cause at the Battle of the Boyne needs no explanation here: it is all too clearly debated on the other side of St. George's Channel today. James fled without even waiting to see the outcome and he and Lauzun returned to France to jeers and

disgrace.

Very different are these vivid facts of the life of the audacious adventurer - of whom few in England would even have heard the name - from my impression as a child looking at the spines of two heavy dark brown volumes entitled "Lauzun : Courtier and Adventurer. By Mary F. Sandars". How was it that Mary F. Sandars Aunt May as she was known, being brought up in the staid Victorian atmosphere of nineteenth century Kensington, with its round of visiting, society engagements, "being seen in the Park", and its great material comforts, became so interested in this period, in France and in French literature? How was she regarded by her contemporaries and by her own brothers and sisters, all of whom lived with entirely different pursuits and none of whom seemed to have remotely similar interests? Her productivity as a writer was not prodigious, but her works were compiled with scholarly care, and with varying degrees of success threw new light of the subjects she treated. Her Balzac was highly regarded in its time.

Mary Frances Sandars was the eldest of the seven children of Samuel Sandars, the bibliophile, and his wife Elizabeth Maria Russell. Born in 1864, she was brought up at her father's houses at de Vere Gardens Kensington and Chalfont Grove, near Chalfont St. Giles. Her three younger brothers and sisters were close to her in age. Her father, the shy and retiring Samuel, passed on to his children his great love of the graphic arts and his fine and rare collection of manuscripts. He was a sensitive and kindly man, but his health was not robust and he died suddenly at the age of fifty-seven when his eldest daughter was not yet thirty. After her father's death the social responsibilities of May, as eldest daughter of the family, took up an

increasing amount of her time and it is the more surprising that she found the time and energy to immerse herself in the intrigues of the seventeenth century French political scene. Her mother, who lived to a great age, only dying ten years before May, was a lady to whom the niceties of a correct and rather stylised London Society meant a great deal. She was neither retiring, like her late husband, nor intellectual like her daughter. But family links were very strong and May lived at home, and took her part in the household management and social life, helping to look after her late brother's two young children, so leading a life apart from her literary pursuits. She was disappointed not to be made guardian of her young nephew and niece, however. Her brother George was ordained and undertaking the tasks of a curacy, and later of a parish, in Cheshire. Her two younger brothers were in the Army and the law, and living respectively at Little Tew and Chalfont St. Peter. Each of the three married in the early 1900's. Her sisters Dorothy and Alys, and Norah until her marriage, lived with their mother at Chalfont Grove and in London.

Mary F. Sandars's literary career, although at first sight it appears random in its subjects and with no connecting links except a preponderance of French subjects, divides itself into three periods in which it is possible to see how an interest in one topic led to a study of the next. The only exception to this is her *Life of Christina Rossetti*, a commissioned work which unfortunately had very little success as it was overshadowed by the publication at the same time - the centenary of Christina Rossetti's birth - of another *Life* which received more critical approval. Her first and undoubtedly best known - but not, I think the most interesting - biography, was that of Honore de Balzac.

Published in 1904, it was inspired, and the authoress was encouraged to set pen to paper on the topic by that controversial literary figure of the 1890's and early 1900's, Dr. Emil Reich. Although he was considered by some to be a blatant fraud, by others an undisguised humbug, but by Lord Acton to be "the universal specialist" it is known that he was in fact a notable expert in his own field, Hungarian literature and history. His published works are undoubtedly universal, but probably not specialist. Reich was born in Hungary in 1854 and after education at the universities of Budapest, Prague and Vienna and five years working as a compiler of Appleton's Encyclopaedia in Cincinnati, he arrived in England in 1893 and proceeded to pour forth lectures and publications on philosophy, evolution, religion, geography and history. He lectured to what were described as learned and popular audiences, and in 1906 a course of lectures to the leading ladies of London delivered at Claridges Hotel brought him notoriety and the controversy on which he thrived.

Emil Reich was, for all this, an authority on the literature of his native Hungary. The new approach to Balzac which the Sandars biography opens for the first time, for his life had by this time become a well-explored field, having been covered by established authors such as Theophile Gautier, Taine and Le Breton, is the new emphasis on the effect on the author's work of his life long affair with Madame Hanska. This lady, Polish by birth, had a greater effect on Balzac, in his impoverished privations in France, than had been previously explained, and it was due to Reich that May first became interested in this new approach to Balzac's work. This she acknowledged herself in her informative introduction to the book. May carried out much of the research work in France, and also at Brussels, where

she worked with the great collector and authority on Balzac, who stands in relation to Balzac as, say, Mrs. Gaskell does to Charlotte Bronte, le Vicomte de Spoerlberch de Louvenjoul. From the Viscount and his extensive library at Brussels May received much of the hitherto unpublished source material used in her Balzac. His library now forms the nucleus of the Balzac archives at Chantilly, and from his Roman d'Amour (1896) and other sources came some of the letters and information used in the new Biography, which eventually undoubtedly became her best known work, as well as her first. "Her talents were in the direction of analysis as well as description: her choice of quotations was judicious and exhibited a more trustworthy sense of the value of her sources than is common in popular biographies", such was the tribute paid to her work at the time of her death by The Times.

Following on her life of Balzac, but not next in time, was her study of George Sand, Balzac's contemporary, another tricky subject with many pitfalls for the unwary biographer. Also in the field of French literature was her Life of the Duc de Saint-Simon, which she was engaged on at the time of her death in 1934, but which was never completed.

Another life, contemporary with her intriguing story of the Duke of Lauzun, but published five years later in 1913, is May's biography of William of Orange's wife "Princess and Queen of England, the Life of Mary II". Historical treatment of the reign of William and Mary, succeeding on the fall of James II, is normally concentrated on King William, both because of his being a foreigner on the throne of England and because of his military campaigns, leaving the Queen a neglected figure. Once again May found and aired a source which

had been neglected in previous biographies: James II's determined attempts to separate his daughter from her husband. This had apparently been common knowledge in contemporary Dutch sources, but was largely unknown in England. This study took May months of work at The Hague and at Welbeck Abbey as well as on visits to new sources such as the archives of Lord Bathurst, whose ancestress had been a confidante of Queen Mary. Collecting the sources for these biographies and histories took May to many different places in Europe and brought her in contact with numerous different literary figures of the times. Due to her close friendship with the Rossetti family, whom she visited frequently and came to know intimately, she reaped much enjoyment from writing her life of Christina Rossetti, although its reception was a bitter blow to her. While engaged in writing itself she showed a streak of physical endurance not unusual in the Sandars - writing for long periods at a stretch, sometimes doing so out of doors in the coldest winter weather, swathed in rugs from head to foot.

The third and last group of subjects which May chose consists of two studies which were historically contemporary, and again two personalities who can hardly be considered popular heroes: Louis XVIII and Queen Adelaide. An exiled French King who spent much of his life on the road between one European capital and another and the unprepossessing wife of the debauched and despised "Sailor King" William IV seem to form strange subjects for popular biography. On the latter May worked closely with her brother in law, Colonel R. W. Phipps, who had edited several French historical sources such as the Life of Marie Antoinette and the Memoirs of Napoleon, as well as writing a history of the armies of the first French Republic jointly with his niece Betty Sandars. She received assistance on Queen

Adelaide's life from Prince Radolin, (or, as the Almanach de Gotha styles him, Alfred Bernard Jean Howard Leszczyc Graf von Radolin), whose family owned considerable archives on this period and on the Saxe-Meiningen royal family. One aspect of this study, which was published in 1915, unfortunately fell victim to the hostilities of the Great War: May had carefully arranged with the court photographer at Saxe-Meiningen castle to have him photograph the portraits of Queen Adelaide and her parents. But that gentleman was unfortunately too slow and painstaking over the task and found himself drafted into the Kaiser's army before the work was done. Nevertheless the book was published in lavish style, despite the shortages and privations of 1915.

However May was no detached intellectual living through the Great War ignorant of wartime hardship and hunger by retreating into the intellectual stimulus of nineteenth century French Affairs. She was active in the political field, as a public speaker, which was remarkable considering the status of women in politics at that time. She campaigned for measures of food economy and on questions of health and education, in each of whose causes she turned a forthright and uncompromising style to good account. She advocated the introduction of cheap bread made from maize and other measures of commonsense economy in her speeches, at meetings and in the time-honoured platform of letters to The Times. After the War she became chairman of the South Kensington Conservative and Unionist Association. As a public speaker May was straightforward and persuasive, even though the disabilities of the days before women's suffrage cannot have aided her. She was also interested in the well-being of early social work, and was on the committee of Cambridge House Settlement in Camberwell,

and she also devoted time to regular visits to Chelsea Infirmary for many years.

Mary Frances Sandars died on June 20th 1934, aged seventy, and the writer of her Obituary strikes a neat balance in summing up her character and the contribution of her work in the final words of his tribute to this remarkable lady biographer: "the lively sense of social responsibility implied by her political activities and participation in charitable works was discernible also in her writings as a sense of proportion, and her work bore the stamp of that culture which is the fruit of strenuously cultivated leisure".

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An epilogue to the centuries of the Sandars, many of whom have excelled, but quietly, in their particular chosen milieu while keeping away from publicity and shunning the recognition of those outside their own circle, might well include those same words. Tom Sandars's fear of having his name used as a football by the readers of The Saturday Review, his son Edmund's devoting his life to explaining the beauty of English wildlife to those less familiar with it than himself, in preference to his training and many years work at the Bar, and Jack Sandars's unsung service to Magdalen College, are but a few examples of this strenuously cultivated leisure, to say nothing of years' service by other members of the family as Justices, Sheriffs and on committees and Councils.

It is as though many of them were in sympathy with Jack Sandars, when, years after his withdrawal from the hub of politics, he wrote in his book, Chapters from Turf History, that "when fashion compels the flattery of conspicuous men and the heaping up of superlatives upon their passing deeds,

it is as well that they should realise that their achievements are merely the events which accidentally surround them."