

August Wilhelm von Schlegel an Priscilla A. Fane of Westmorland Coppet, 14.08.1817

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Coppet,

August 14, 1817.

I have just received your touching letter of July 18, and the date of this will explain to you the involuntary delay in my reply. I had left Paris on July 17 with Madame de Staël, to accompany the remains of my immortal friend to her father's grave here. You ask me for details, my lady: alas! it would be a long story of desolation, 'a tale of woe' more than a letter could contain. The blow that has struck us was not unexpected by me. For six months past I had been anticipating the loss of my illustrious patroness, and had only been partially reassured by short intervals of improvement. It appeared that several grave maladies at once were attacking that noble life; as soon as one alarming symptom disappeared, another took its place. In spite of the previous decline of her health, the innate vigour of her constitution sustained a long and painful struggle against death. The terrible agitations of her past life, especially during the ten years of her exile, the prodigious activity of her mind and spirit, ended in breaking down the more delicate part of her organization, the nerves which control movement and sensibility. But before the vital organs were quite paralyzed, the irregular actions of the nerve centres produced the most violent spasms; after five weeks, during which the malady had been apparently stationary, a terrible crisis, accompanied by the most alarming symptoms, announced the approach of the final catastrophe. She felt this herself, and sent for me to her bedside several times during the night, declaring she had not half an hour to live. During the next few days she solemnly took leave of us, and told us all her last wishes. She survived four weeks longer after this. The approach of death no doubt produces terrible sensations unknown to us in life, but that limit once passed, softer sensations are experienced. Her soul, though still imprisoned in her failing body, seemed already to breathe the purer air of the happy heaven in which the weary traveller, so long battered by storms, was to find eternal rest. She had overcome the worst enemy of humanity, Fear. She liked to fancy there might still be a future for her in this life, for she much regretted leaving her friends. She was often sufficiently relieved to be able to enjoy the attentions of her friends, and even a few social distractions. On the eve of her death she had a violent attack of suffocation, caused by the paralysis having reached the lungs. Relieved towards evening of this last suffering, she fell asleep to wake no more. No sigh, no convulsive movement, showed the actual moment of departure. 'There broke a noble heart.'

It would be vain to attempt to describe the grief of her children, who, each in their own way, are models of filial piety. Madame de Broglie has from her childhood had a passionate devotion to her mother, whose soul has been reflected in that of her daughter. Having lost everything myself, I yet had my heart still further wrung at the sight of that poor distracted orphan, so early confronted with the greatest of all mysteries. Kneeling beside the inanimate form of her mother, speaking to her as though she could still hear, and imploring a word or a look of love! 'The rest is silence.'

The time came at last for parting even with the coffin, but Madame de Broglie's grief and her veneration for her mother's memory will endure as long as her own life. She is much altered, but I hope her health is not seriously affected, though even her confinement in the month of March only kept her a very few weeks from nursing her mother day and night, and though she has since had three months of constant fatigue and constant alarms. Miss Randall, whom you saw in Paris, had shown marvellous devotion; throughout the illness she never left her friend; sat up at night, and in the strength of her affection found all the most ingenious devices for comforting and relieving her.

On July 28 the mortal remains of your illustrious friend were deposited at the side of her parents in a marble tomb, in the presence of a large assembly. It was a solemn moment; all felt the departure of a kind and most [*illegible*] spirit from this sad earth of ours. I can see from my window the shrubs surrounding the tomb, which gives me a melancholy pleasure, but we shall have to leave in a few days

this place, now so solitary. We are called to Paris by affairs connected with Madame de Staël's last wishes, only Monsieur Rocca has to leave us and go to Italy. His health is always delicate, and the shock it has experienced may make it worse.

You have heard, no doubt, that Madame de Staël in the latter parts of her life, and finally by her will, acknowledged the marriage which had united them so long ago. Monsieur Rocca will take with him to Italy the little son, who will now be his chief comfort. This interesting child is delicate, but has a charming face and is very promising. He has been loaded with kindness and affection by his brother and sister.

Having now replied to all your questions, allow me, my lady, to ask after your own health and your general condition. The short time in which I saw you in Coppet has left a great impression on me. I have been intending all the winter to write, but have never ventured to do so. Just after your departure from Paris I felt it would be impossible not to allude to the subject of your grief, and I feared that to do so would only renew it. Afterwards, during Madame de Staël's illness, I kept delaying, in the hope that I might be able to give a more satisfactory account. I had seen you in Florence radiant in beauty, grace, youth, and happiness; when I saw you again you were pale and bowed down by grief, and the accounts of your health we have since received have only too much confirmed our apprehensions. Pray let me hear if the beneficent action of time and of nature have enabled you to recover from your cruel shock.

I need not tell you that your friend, in the midst of her own sufferings, was occupied by the thought of yours with the most tender solicitude. She had always been especially attracted to you; she thought you amiable in your happiness and irresistible in your affliction.

Madame de Broglie desires a thousand messages to you. The sight, or even the recollection, of those who loved her mother still upsets her very much, and this will go on for a long time, for who that really knew her mother did not love her?

I would beg you, when you have the opportunity, to offer my respects to the Duke of Wellington, and also express to him in the name of my late friend our eternal gratitude for all the friendly interest he showed her, and for the daily visits, which were a great comfort to her. Such compassion well becomes a hero.

I shall never forget the intense feeling in the expression of his noble and manly face the first time he saw her in her illness. He thought her convalescent, as had been reported. I had warned him he would find her very ill; but he was nevertheless very much shocked, and on leaving expressed to me in a few broken words his fears for her life.

Pray present my respects to Lord Burghersh, and remain, etc.,

A. W. Schlegel.