

A MEETING WITH NIETZSCHE

BY GABRIELE REUTER

[This article by a well-known German novelist is taken in advance of publication from her latest book, Die Geschichte meiner Jugend, which is to appear this autumn.]

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IN the early nineties we had at Weimar a little circle of passionate seekers after truth, who joyously tore to pieces every conventional scientific or artistic literary venture which came into our hands, until — in our eyes at least — it was stripped of all its value and charm. I must confess, we had enough justification for our intellectual iconoclasm. Unfortunately, the victims of our criticism were mostly unaware of our labors, if not of our existence, because we did not proclaim our achievements to the world, but enjoyed our keenness, independence, and merry cynicism within the seclusion of our own private circle. We were already mature enough to have left the illusions of youth behind us, but we had not yet arrived at that elder stage of experience, where we recognized that truth and falsehood are ascendant in eternal alternation, like day and night, and that there can be no existence and no culture without incessant compromises.

We were all ardent natures, utterly impatient with our decadent era.

My own first flight into the world had ended so unhappily that I had returned to the mother-nest humiliated and depressed. This fire of criticism with which my new friends played was for me like passing through a mental annealing furnace. Sometimes I felt that an evening in their company was like a session on the dueling ground, where steel flashed against steel and a

man must have sure skill and a clear head to escape ridiculous defeat.

All of us were individualists of the first water. We had already tested every social theory and found it wanting. We honestly believed that we were developing our own promising personalities exclusively, when in reality we were merely passing through the typical evolutionary phases of our age. Since we were people of sensibility, we responded to every movement of the time, even in our Weimar retirement: We let the world's rising tides lift us to glittering heights, and then flattered ourselves that we had scaled them by our own strength.

Friedrich Nietzsche had become our God, around whom our minds revolved like planets around the sun.

I first became familiar with Nietzsche's writings in a most peculiar way, when I was at Munich in 1890. I had a letter of introduction to an elderly lady of the high nobility, who was living in an ultra-orthodox Catholic ladies' home. I discovered that she was one of those remarkable women whom you so often find in Germany, who manage, in spite of the narrowest intellectual surroundings, to attain broad culture and remarkable freedom of thought. They are a body of modern female pioneers, settled here and there in villages, small towns, and cloister-like institutions, who rise above their unpromising environment and apparent dearth of

opportunity, and succeed in living a life rich in thought and intellectual experience. On the table of this poor old lady in a Catholic home lay *Zarathustra* and *Fröhliche Wissenschaft*. Here the lofty, lonely spirit of their author had found an ardent admirer and an understanding soul.

Nietzsche at once took possession of me in a marvelous way. For the first time since I began to study 'the moderns,' I was thrilled to the depths by a powerful poetic influence. Here a store of untold treasure was revealed to me — here were the portals to wonderful domains, where the colors, the fresh verdure, the bold contours of the landscape held me entranced. And the bright sun-saturated air of the South which bathed these landscapes! The fine purple mists of a deep mysticism, which cast a veil of glamour over their dim, distant heights, and made them seem the lofty seats of living Gods!

Above all, I felt that Nietzsche was the herald of the future — a sower of the seeds of a great coming harvest, of a new ethics, which would transcend individualism and yet inspire us to labor more diligently than ever for human weal.

Our little circle at Weimar consisted of persons of very different temperament, each of whom this many-sided, captivating enchanter influenced in his peculiar way. Since all of us possessed appreciative imaginations, each found his own reason for loyalty and paid honest reverence to Friedrich Nietzsche.

What a wealth of wit and wisdom was lavished during our endless discussions in the sumptuous mansions or modest villas, as the case might be, of our little group of scholars and writers. Each of us was lord of his own universe, centre of his own solar system, and defended his sovereignty as an individual with the most absurd and humor-

ous arguments and the most daring conclusions. I recall especially Rudolf Steiner, — now the head of the anthroposophists, — who was then editing Goethe's articles on natural science. He delighted in presumptuous, unheard-of, baroque premises, which he enunciated and then defended with an astounding display of logic, science, bold conjecture, and paradox.

We all felt that we had left commonplace existence, with its bourgeois standards, far behind, and had reached the land 'beyond the realm of good and evil.' But it was not so easy settling down in our new country. We women, especially, had our practical problems. Steiner himself was struggling with privation, and even hunger. I sat night and day at the sick bed of my invalid mother, snatching a moment occasionally for my manuscript, where I hoped to justify myself at last in the literary world. It took four years' labor under the most discouraging circumstances to complete my novel, *Aus guter Familie*.

One evening Eduard von der Hellen, the trustee in charge of the Goethe archives, invited us to his house, to meet Dr. Kögel, whom Friedrich Nietzsche's sister, Elisabeth, had selected to decipher and prepare for eventual publication the unprinted manuscripts of the sick philosopher. I was invited to be one of a small party to visit Nietzsche's mother in Naumburg, where Dr. Kögel wished to read us passages from the manuscript *Anti-Christ*. It was a great opportunity for all of us, and we gladly accepted the invitation which he brought from the two Nietzsche ladies.

We were cordially received by old Mrs. Nietzsche, the pastor's wife, and Mrs. Förster-Nietzsche, her daughter. Their little house next to the old city wall at Naumburg was a typical, comfortable, old-fashioned clergyman's widow's cottage, and the simple elderly

serving-maid, with her kindly loyal countenance, who opened the door for us, was in perfect harmony with the whole establishment.

The pastor's widow by no means showed her seventy years. Her brown hair betrayed no trace of gray, and her strong countenance revealed scarcely a wrinkle. She was seated at a burnt-wood sewing-table near the window, upon which was inscribed the text:—

'For the mountains shall depart, and the hills be removed; but my kindness shall not depart from thee, neither shall the covenant of my peace be removed, saith the Lord that hath mercy on thee.' Friends had sent it to her as a token of sympathy, on learning of the severe illness of her son. How often had the tear-blinded eyes of the poor old mother rested on these lines! How often had her hands been folded upon them in prayer!

The daughter, Elisabeth, at once informed me of the difficulty she was in with her mother. The pious old lady believed it her duty — indeed a sort of expiation which might help her unhappy son in the life to come — to burn his godless manuscripts. When the daughter returned from South America, where she managed for a time the colony founded by her deceased husband, she had great difficulty convincing the mother that the works of a genius do not belong to his family, but to the world.

Finally, she secured control of the literary remains of her beloved brother. His writings were at this time preserved in a beautiful oak case, surmounted by a symbolical serpent and eagle.

How inconsistent is the human heart! The old mother, in spite of everything, was obviously proud because the fame of her great son brought many visitors to the house. They came from distant parts to visit her modest home, as pil-

grims visit a temple within whose holy of holies a divinity sleeps.

Mrs. Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, as she called herself thereafter, spoke freely and with great emotion — often with tear-filled eyes — of her dear brother. She suffered intensely from the thought that she could not be with him during his last days of struggle, just before the fearful tragedy befell him. No one ventured to tell her, what we all felt, that no sisterly love and forethought could have warded off his tragic fate.

She was an exceedingly feminine woman, what the French call *une femme très femme*. She was small, delicate, vivacious, though so short-sighted that she did not move about with freedom. She was one of those women whom every man feels called upon to protect and help, who inspire no confidence in their ability to help themselves, for whom a railway guard will hasten to open a compartment door, or manage things at a crowded ticket-window. And yet, with all her apparent helplessness and unfamiliarity with the world, she possessed a wonderful amount of energy and resourcefulness. She proved this by successfully publishing our model edition of her brother's collected works, a task for which the thinkers of the whole world are beholden to her. To-day, when Nietzsche is recognized both by his disciples and by his dissenters as one of the giants of philosophy and poetry, whose powerful influence over the younger generation is incontestable, it is hard to realize what difficulties this valiant little lady had to master. At first, it was almost impossible to secure the aid of scientific experts to decipher the almost illegible manuscripts. Professional scholars kept prudently aloof. Who could tell but that the connection of their names with that of Friedrich Nietzsche might pre-

judice their academic careers? Funds were lacking for such an ambitious undertaking, and it took much courage and persistence to procure them. Now, when the Nietzsche papers at Weimar draw thither hundreds of enthusiastic pilgrims from every land in the world, and the gray-haired sister is venerated like a princess, she often speaks with satisfaction, and yet with a note of melancholy, of the little cottage in Naumburg where, on an afternoon which I shall never forget, Dr. Kögel read, in his sympathetic, emotional, youthful voice, the manuscript of *Anti-Christ*.

And whenever a pause occurred, we could hear from some neighboring room — an uncanny accompaniment to this bold, defiant hero's song, to the challenging irony with which a mighty intellect shook the very altars at which the world had prayed for centuries — a deadened growling and snarling, like the sounds made by a caged animal. It was Nietzsche who sat there, and no longer knew aught of his work to which we were doing reverence. Yet he was physically alive. I shall never forget that hour and the impression it made.

Then came the human, the all-too-human incident. While our little group listened breathless in rapt attention, the pastor's wife, who had withdrawn for a moment, returned, accompanied by her faithful maid, with a tray of wine, glasses, and bread and butter. Though her daughter motioned her eagerly to stop, she insisted energetically in fulfilling what she considered the obligations of hospitality. Her kind guests must not leave without a little lunch. There were revealed the souls of Martha and Mary, who disputed for the body and for the spirit of Christ — the age-old symbol, the eternal return of the identical.

We were all so unspeakably shaken by the reading of *Anti-Christ* that we

agreed unanimously that the time had not come for its publication — that it would be prohibited, and thereby prejudice the rest of Nietzsche's writings, and possibly arouse a scandal, which must be avoided just then at all cost. We now know that we were mistaken. Rather remarkably, the publication of *Anti-Christ* was never prohibited, although there are few writings in existence which attack Christianity so bitterly and with such destroying effect — few which breathe such hatred. Nietzsche's lofty, pure ethics do not qualify this. It is a work in which he liberates himself by a mad struggle from the ardent, longing love of his youth. I, too, had just staggered with bleeding wounds from a battlefield where I had struggled with mighty spirits, where I had laid down many of the best years of my life; and every word pierced my tortured, pillaged heart, for whom its Saviour had become a myth.

Was I finding here a new and a sure guide?

As we departed, I heard again the low, suppressed snarling and growling.

Later, I frequently visited the little cottage alone. Mrs. Förster-Nietzsche soon became a close friend, so that we 'thoued' each other. I have spent happy days with her, which remain indelible in my memory. Had it not been for my invalid mother, who needed me, I should have been happy to aid her with the biography of her brother, which she had already begun.

I also heard Dr. Kögel read *Ecce Homo* from the manuscript — that thrilling soul-revelation, where the first premonitions of the author's approaching madness at times appeared, without, however, impairing his profound unveiling of the artist's faculty — the eternal truth that every artistic and creative mind is, in its act of creation, the centre of its own universe.

I do not recall whether I was the one who introduced the painter Stöwing to the Nietzsche home, when he told me how he longed to paint Nietzsche. In any case, he had his wish; for the patient was temporarily better, and used to sit for long periods on the cottage verandah, in the shade of a green grape-arbor. It is thus that Stöwing painted him, the verdant shadows playing over the haggard countenance, lending to the latter a corpselike pallor. I saw the portrait in the artist's studio in Berlin, and was much affected by it. But Stöwing was not the man to catch and fix on canvas the ultimate, the overpowering forces, which slumbered in the background of this sick man's countenance.

Neither Nietzsche's mother nor his sister was satisfied with the portrait. The mother said to me indignantly one day, when I was calling, that her son looked in his picture like a pale man at the point of death, although in truth he had a glowing, healthy complexion, and no one would suspect his malady from his appearance. I was to judge this for myself. She would take me to her son, in order that I might form my own opinion.

I was startled and shocked. No visitor was ever allowed to see the invalid. If Mrs. Förster-Nietzsche had been present, I am certain it would not have happened this time. But she was away, and did not return till later.

I followed old Mrs. Nietzsche upstairs to the second story — I confess with trembling knees. The mother opened a door and entering the room called back to me: 'Come closer. He will not notice you.'

Opposite me, lying in a reclining chair, facing the door, so that I looked directly into his face, was Friedrich Nietzsche. I regarded for a moment

the remarkably delicate and yet powerful, sun-browned features which rose above his immense beard, his sensitive, finely chiseled nose, his glorious forehead. His large eyes were fixed upon me with a fearfully intent, serious, penetrating glance. His pale, wonderfully modeled hands lay crossed upon his breast, like those of the carved figures on ancient tombs. I stood there trembling under his piercing gaze, which was riveted upon me as if flashing forth from some fathomless abyss of suffering. A moment later his eyes sank, half closed, and only their whites were visible, rolling blindly and horribly under the fallen lids.

'Come right in,' said his mother, who stood by his side.

A tremor of distress flashed across the corpselike countenance.

'No, no, mother. Enough, enough!' I heard a voice murmur, as if from the grave.

No power in the world could have prevailed upon me at that moment to disturb the peace of this slowly dying fighter for truth. I drew back, and it was some time before I could master myself enough to speak to his mother. His sister thought later that the reason he looked at me so intently was because it was the hour she usually visited him, and he was expecting her. To me his mind seemed infinitely remote from all human things, withdrawn into the depths of a fathomless solitude. Who will dare to say how much of the great unhappy soul still tenanted its decaying tabernacle?

That was the last time I visited the little home in Naumburg. I removed almost immediately thereafter to Munich; and for some years the circumstances of our lives separated me from many former acquaintances including Mrs. Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche.

OXFORD, OLD AND NEW

BY FREDERIC HARRISON

[The second Congress of the universities of the British Empire, held at Oxford early in July, gives special timeliness to Mr. Harrison's account of the changes that time has made in Oxford since he knew it as an undergraduate, seventy years ago.]

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IN June, 1848, — *die Joan: Bapt.*, — I was elected scholar of Wadham; and in June, 1921, I came again to look at my old college, university, and city, and to meditate on the changes which more than seventy years have brought to all. Are they all changed so much? To the eye — in form — in rule — materially — yes! the change is, indeed, startling. Is it so in substance — morally — intellectually — spiritually? I am not so sure.

Seventy years ago, Oxford was a petty, quiet, beautiful city of the cathedral and historic order, the market town of a rich agricultural county. It has grown immensely — doubled itself rather in area than in population; has lost the air of a rural market town; has grown to be a big residential modern kind of villadom. When I first saw Oxford in 1848, there was really very little of new habitations outside the limits, say, of Hollar's sketch of 1643 — little of recent work outside of St. Giles, or of Magdalen bridge, or of the Castle remains. From Wadham there were open fields. Neither Parks, nor Keble, nor Manchester Colleges, nor Museum, nor Library. It was all country down to the Cherwell: no school buildings in the High-street — no Gothic or Tudor new buildings to the colleges. All additions to the colleges since my undergraduate days have greatly changed the look of Central Oxford. New College,

Balliol, Christ Church, have thrown out vast new buildings, which will not amalgamate with the tone of the original for a century at least.

When I first saw Wadham, it looked what it really was — one of the later foundations, added on to antique Oxford outside the early wall. Now Wadham is almost the only college which still looks as it was founded and built by Dorothy Wadham three centuries and ten years ago. Almost every other college shows signs of enlargement, restoration, and modernity. And the vast new world of villas, halls, schools, and playgrounds, which encircle Oxford now, just as Hampstead, St. John's Wood, Battersea, and Wandsworth encircle the City of London, have, to the eye at least, entirely destroyed the tone of the old-world collegiate town we loved seventy years ago. It was then a city of reformed monasteries. It is become an expanse of agreeable villas. Where, oh! where, is

that sweet city with its dreaming spires?

It is there still — much changed by new Gothic enlargements, and quite engulfed in commodious residential avenues, such as we find in Cheltenham and Clifton. There is little dreaming in Oxford now. Men retired from Army or Civil Service, or busy with colleges, usually do themselves very well.

This huge growth of the city area,