

COUNT GEORGE DE SERIONNE

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ANY VISITOR TO HOLY WEEK AT AMPLEFORTH during these forty-five years will remember the tall scarfed figure of George de Serionne, closely attentive to all conferences, and ceremonies, evasive only of draughts and present through all the Prophecies on Holy Saturday, warmly interested in everyone. Some will remember him at an even earlier date when he lived with his mother in the Woodstock Road in North Oxford. He had already taken his degree at the Sorbonne after reading History and Geography under Vidal de la Blache, and proposed to read for a further degree in History at Oxford. It was then that he met Fr Anselm Parker, the Master of our Hall, and Fr Stephen Marwood who was still an undergraduate. Through them he became a devoted friend of Ampleforth, a Confrater from 1915, whose help was often sought when a master fell ill and someone was needed to teach Latin, French or Geography in the school; at times too he tutored some member of the community in French—the service of a friend rather than a tutor, for in those days he never intended to turn permanently to teaching.

Then too began his apostolate of West Oxfordshire and the Cotswolds which for twenty-five years was the main interest of his life; St Hugh's at Witney, St Joseph's at Carterton, his own foundation of St Kenelm at Stow on the Wold, his long collaboration with Fr John Lopes at Eynsham and his address at Shotteswell near Banbury—these were the main centres of a long and vigorous activity which has done immense service to the Faith in those parts. But his knowledge and love of the people and their country was by no means confined to the sacristy; his pursuit by trap or bicycle of remote children in need of instruction, the great number and variety of his friends, his unique knowledge of the topography, architecture and antiquities, his flocks of pure bred Cotswold sheep, his energetic expeditions to see a Saxon window or a Norman arch, his austere life in an impossibly comfortless room at one or other of his chosen centres—all these things made an impression that is hard to convey; the pattern was rich, original and arresting, but not immediately obvious. It was only by spending an apostolic week-end with him that one could discover what it was all about; and the things that stand out are a moving simplicity and humanity of approach to others and a directness of speech that was sometimes disconcerting; a courtliness of manner that rarely failed to please and a reserve that could sometimes perplex; a Faith that was undismayed by the rusticity of catechumens, the eccentricities of the clergy or the inadequacy of its expression in ceremony or song: he loved a High Mass above all things, but did not mind if he served it alone with a crutch in one hand and a thurible in the other. It was a wonderful (and sometimes exhausting) experience to share one of those week-ends: the devious journey in trap or car, dropping priests, bicycles or bottles of wine here and there to perform their proper functions, the Masses said or sung for congregations who largely owed their faith to George, the festive luncheon when the work was over at the Fleece at Witney or the Unicorn at Stow on the Wold, or the tea with Fr Lopes at the White House at Eynsham after the *fiesta* at the end of June and a sermon at the market cross by Mgr Ronald Knox or Fr Vincent McNabb: these are memories that will always deeply move those who share them and who found in George such a loyal and affectionate friend.

But an accident in 1939 brought a great change in his life; on one of those apostolic journeys he fell from a motor bicycle in the blackout and so fractured his hip and thigh that he was in constant torment for months and was hampered by lameness and pain for the rest of his life. After long months of surgical hesitation and disappointment in hospital, he came to Ampleforth in 1941; for three years he lived in the monastery and slowly recovered from the depression shed over him by his accident and by the war, of which he took the gloomiest view. He began to teach in the school and this helped him towards recovery of health and hope, for there he could make a unique contribution; his knowledge of Europe from Achill Island to Warsaw, from the Shetlands to Constantine or to Touggourt in the desert was in our experience unrivalled. One could not allude to the Rumanian church in Baden-Baden without discovering that he had visited it with his mother in 1900, or enquire about the Larig Ghru without finding that he had spent a night under the Shelter Stone at some time in the twenties; and these examples must serve to indicate a store of information as wide and as accurate as Baedeker's and wholly at the service of his friends. The emphasis was on landscape, with an awareness of its geological structure, on railways, with a special delight in their time-tables, on Romanesque architecture, on Oriental liturgies with a predilection for the Ruthenians, on oppressed minorities, on ecclesiastical curiosities; who was more learned about the *Episcopi vagantes* or who else would have lent one a prayer book composed by Père Hyacinthe Loyson? His geography was always human rather than physical, but a certain angularity (as of trigonometry) was felt when there was question of a cross-country railway journey or of the exact distance between (say) Bourton on the Water and Moreton in Marsh.

His marriage in 1944 brought him a new happiness and a great enrichment of experience and of life; the pleasure and interest of the journeys to Morocco or to Prague were doubled because they were sympathetically shared. He and his wife lived first at St Oswald's Cottage where they eased and entertained the last years of Fr Paul's mother, Mrs Nevill. In 1947 they moved to the Guesthouse in Ampleforth and as hospitable friends of the community or as friendly hosts of generations of boys and their parents brought something from a wider world for our enrichment and delight. One cannot help wishing that one had enquired more curiously about the ruined castle of Serionne in the Dauphiné which was the cradle of the family, their survival of the Revolution and re-emergence under the Second Empire, the uncle who presided over the Suez Canal, his own original visits to England as a boy to see the cathedrals, his days at Lycée and University of which he would speak allusively but without the connected detail that leaves a definite history to relate.

In the night after Wednesday January 27th he fell ill of a severe stroke and died early on the 31st, without recovering consciousness but fortified by the rites of the Church and the constant attention of his parish priest. Fr Prior sang a Requiem Mass for him on the following Wednesday and he was buried on the Thursday at Chipping Camden in the country which he had made his own. To his wife we offer our sympathy and the assurance of our constant prayers: we shall always be grateful for his friendship and never cease to miss his presence and his unique contribution to our life. *Requiescat in sancta pace.*