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73

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FRANÇOISE DE GRUNNE—1927-60

IN the annals of exploration and mountaineering of that great mountain complex made up of the western Himalaya, Karakoram, Hindu-Kush and Pamir, the names of few women stand out. Fanny Bullock-Workman, Jenny Visser-Hooft and E. O. Lorimer will be remembered for their written contributions and personalities; and in another category the names of Ella Maillart, Jean Shor and Barbara Mons should also not go unnoticed. But possibly in a category by itself stands the name of Françoise de Grunne, whose recent disappearance on Mount Dobani in Gilgit removes from the scene one of the most remarkable women ever to have ventured among these giants of the earth's surface.

Born in Brussels on October 20, 1927, daughter of the late Comte Xavier de Henricourt de Grunne, Miss de Grunne was educated in convent schools and the University of Louvain. Early in life she became interested in travel and mountaineering, and following her formal education she travelled widely in Italy, Syria, Lebanon, Israel and Greece. During these travels, which were usually undertaken alone and often by the most primitive means, she acquired a strong interest in Byzantine and Eastern art.

In 1957, accepting an opportunity to extend her travels farther east, she arrived in Pakistan to begin a teaching assignment at Peshawar University. She quickly became interested in Gandharan art, that peculiar blending of Greek and Indian Buddhist influences, of which the Peshawar and Swat valleys are such rich repositories. In addition, she lost no time in finding out what the opportunities were for travel and climbing in the adjacent tribal areas and frontier states; the lure of their semi-restricted character probably acting as an additional incentive. By dint of a singular combination of adroitness, charm and perseverance, she invariably succeeded in her efforts to get permission, and for the next three years—during every university recess and vacation—embarked on one after another enterprising trip into the remote confines of these areas, often becoming a thorn in the side of officials responsible for the safety of foreigners travelling therein.

Although she made some forays into the area south of Peshawar—e.g., Kurram, and also in Afghanistan—the bulk of her travels were to the north—in Swat, Chitral and Gilgit, and she came to know this country as few other contemporary foreigners have known it. Her incredible physical stamina, fearlessness and ability to travel lightly soon made her the object of numerous stories amongst the local population. One of the most widely known of these concerned a horse-back ride she made from Astor to Gilgit, a distance of some eighty miles, in one night; this over a mountain track usually covered in six to eight day stages—a truly phenomenal feat and one which was later narrated with wonder in the drawing-rooms of Lahore and Karachi.



306



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In the summer of 1958, she spent some two months trekking in the Astor, Punial and Yasin areas of Gilgit Agency. During this time she crossed several passes over 14,000 feet, including the historic Darkot Pass (15,400 feet) near the Wakhan Corridor where, 1,200 years before, the Korean general Kao Hsien-chih had led 10,000 Chinese troops down into Gilgit to drive a wedge between the advancing Tibetans and Arabs.

During the following year (1959), she persuaded officialdom to allow her to go through Darel and Tangir which, until 1953, were virtually entirely unadministered tribal territories. Only two foreigners are believed to have been there before: Sir Aurel Stein in 1913 and Dr. Karl Jettmar in 1956. There she observed unusual and highly interesting aspects of the culture—women's costumes, dances and mosque decoration. Following her return from Darel and Tangir, she proceeded to Chitral, where she joined a group from the Karakoram Club in an attempt on Tirich Mir (25,263 feet). For various reasons, including her highly individualistic character, this arrangement did not work out and she soon broke away and proceeded to another nearby mountain. Accompanied by one porter, she climbed to a vantage point of about 18,000 feet from where she viewed with great excitement the spectacular sight of the dozens of towering ice-clad peaks lying to the west and north.

In 1960, so far as can be determined from her notebook, she followed a route from Drosh in Chitral through Swat Kohistan to Laspur, then across Kuh-Ghizar and Punial to Gilgit. From there she gathered porters and went on to Dobani, some thirty miles to the east, where, on September 14, 1960, in a solo attempt on the 20,126-foot peak, she disappeared in a snow-storm. Later search parties found traces of a slip, and she is presumed to have been swept away by an avalanche.

Miss de Grunne combined the qualities of adventurer, "seeker after truth" and prospective student—a combination which, coupled with her fierce determination to accomplish goals set, did not endear her to many, and in fact earned her the reputation of an eccentric or worse. But eccentrics have played important roles in human affairs—not least of all in British India, and there is sufficient reason to believe that she might well have followed in that tradition. Unfortunately, she never published her observations or experiences. That there was a need for knowledge and observations of this type to be worked up is amply demonstrated in Dr. Jettmar's article, "Urgent Tasks of Research among the Dardic Peoples of Eastern Afghanistan and Northern Pakistan." In this article Dr. Jettmar particularly emphasized the rich field awaiting the student of art history. In another direction there also remains much work to be done on the relationships between the Gandharan art of this area and Mediterranean or Greek art. With her keen eye for art forms and her deep interest in Western and Byzantine art generally, the conclusion is unmistakable that whatever she might have written would have been of considerable interest to scholars of the area.

But for her passion for mountains then, we might have still had among us this unique individual singularly endowed by experience to fulfil a needed task. It may be, on the other hand, that the end she found was not out of keeping with the idea she was pursuing—a kind of Alpine mysti-

cism. The grasp this idea had on her imagination is clearly revealed in a number of poetic passages penned in her last notebook, some of considerable beauty and evocative power.

As an English philosopher once wrote of those who turn to mountains for spiritual satisfaction, she "caught the reflection of eternal beauty in the temporal hills."

J. H.



