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## Camille du Gast

May 30, 1868-April 24, 1942

Nationality: French

Raced between 1901-1903

**Origins & Early Influences:** Camille du Gast's life in the fast lane was jump-started with her 1890 marriage to Jean Crespin, a stockholder and manager of *Dufayel*, one of the largest department stores in France. With her husband's means, du Gast was able to cater to her adventurous nature, becoming accomplished in fencing, tobogganing, rifle and pistol shooting, ballooning, and, according to some reports, go on to become the first woman to parachute when she jumped from a hot air balloon used to advertise her husband's store. Although Crespin was supportive of his wife's unusual pursuits, he asked her to go by her maiden name so her exploits were not misconstrued as *Dufayel* publicity stunts. When Crespin purchased a Peugeot and a Panhard-Levassor in 1901, du Gast turned her attention to racing.

### Racing Accomplishments:

- Finished 19<sup>th</sup> in heavy class and 33<sup>rd</sup> overall in 1901 Paris-Berlin race, although she was driving her husband's 20CV Panhard-Levassor, which was not designed for racing.
- Competed in 1903 Paris-Madrid race, starting in 29<sup>th</sup> position. Throughout the race, she continued to pass drivers, reaching 8<sup>th</sup> place before stopping to aid a fellow driver involved in a near-fatal crash until medical help could arrive. She eventually placed 44<sup>th</sup> when the race was abruptly stopped in Bordeaux on account of two driver fatalities and numerous spectator injuries and deaths.

**Life off the Track:** du Gast only competed in two races before the Automobile Club de France banned women from racing, with the organization citing "feminine nervousness" and the fear that a woman may be seriously injured as major factors in their decision. du Gast protested this ruling, but ultimately shifted her focus to another type of competition popular in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, motorboat racing, taking part in the 1905 Algiers-Toulon race. While on the last leg of the race, stormy conditions capsized all seven participating boats, but since du Gast's vessel had tipped closest to the finishing point, she was

declared the winner two months after the completion of the race. Around this time her husband died, but this did not slow down her risk-taking lifestyle. She travelled extensively, with the French government commissioning visits to Morocco on behalf of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Agriculture in 1910 and 1912. Not every aspect of du Gast's life centered around speed however; she was also a notable pianist and active in the social scene of Paris, being known as one of "the richest and most accomplished widows in France."<sup>1</sup> Later in life she turned her attention towards the well-being of animals and orphans, becoming president of the French Anti-Cruelty Society and remaining active with the organization until her death in 1942.

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<sup>1</sup> Quote taken from *L'Abeille De La Nouvelle-Orleans* article