

## The Spanish amours of the Second Empire

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‘On sait aimer quand on est Espagnol’, sing Piquillo and La Périchole. Two men in the audience were particularly familiar with the splendours and miseries of Hispanic love: Jacques Offenbach and Napoleon III – both of whom had married a Spaniard. Of course, they had no desire to see any reference to their respective wives on stage, but others saw it for them. Offenbach’s characters are so designed that no one recognises themselves in their traits, but everyone sees their neighbour. And even when the allusions are crystal-clear, as in the case of Bismarck who became General Boum in *La Grande-Duchesse de Gérolstein*, the person concerned does not take umbrage. The Iron Chancellor laughed in his box at the Théâtre des Variétés and leaned towards General von Moltke, saying, ‘That’s it. That’s it exactly!’ And each of them was thinking of the other.

La Périchole – or rather La Perricholi – was not, in the first instance, an evocation of a Spanish woman of the Second Empire, but a very real historical figure: the actress and singer Micaela Villegas, born in the suburbs of Lima in 1748, who became the official mistress of the Viceroy Don Manuel de Amat y Junyent Planella Aymerich y Santa Pau. With this name worthy of an operetta, Don Manuel was Catalan and as proud as Micaela was capricious. One of the well-known etymologies for the name – which differs from the version related by Gérard Condé elsewhere in this volume – tells us that one day, having reached breaking point, he sent her packing with the words ‘Adieu Perricholi’, a mixture of the Spanish

‘perro’ and ‘perrita’ (dog and silver coin) and the Catalan ‘pretixol’ (little precious thing) – for La Perricholi was probably all these things at once. Thus he was rid of a mistress who had grown highly cumbersome, and she was saddled with a nickname that has stuck to her for centuries. In 1827, Prosper Mérimée heard this story told by his mother’s doctor, who had just returned from a long period of residence in Peru, and took it as the starting point for his one-act comedy *Le Carrosse du Saint-Sacrement*. When it was published in the *Revue de Paris* in 1829, everyone saw allusions to the liaison of Louis XVIII and his mistress Madame du Cayla. Forty years later, when Meilhac and Halévy adapted Mérimée’s play into a libretto for an *opéra-bouffe*, they brought the story up to date: no one now saw Louis XVIII in it, but a host of little details made spectators think of Napoleon III and his Spanish amours. For the Emperor’s love life was decidedly risqué, or – if we may be forgiven for borrowing an even more appropriate French expression – *olé olé*.

When Napoleon III moved into the Élysée Palace in 1848, the first President of the Republic elected by universal suffrage, he set up his official mistress just a stone’s throw away – exactly like the Viceroy in *La Périchole*. Through a small door in the palace garden, he could reach the rue du Cirque without being seen. Miss Harriet Howard did not live there alone: she was accompanied by the son she had had with a major in the British Life Guards and the two sons Napoleon III had fathered with a linen maid at the fortress of Ham. During the six long years he had been imprisoned there ‘for life’ (following his two failed coup attempts), Éléonore Vergeot had looked after his laundry and prepared the way for his escape by helping him to disguise himself as a humble mason, ‘M. Badinguet’ (a nickname he remained stuck with for decades afterwards). As a reward for her loyal services, Napoleon asked his foster brother to marry the laundry maid and to acknowledge their children, to whom he gave the grandiloquent titles of Comte d’Orx and Comte de Labenne. Harriet called for much more generous treatment, because without her he probably would never have reached the Élysée. He had lived in her house in London, where she had opened not only her heart

to him, but also her purse, which she had filled on her own initiative by selling her charms. She gave him, among other gifts, a property in Civitavecchia, on which he was able to take out a loan of 250,000 francs to finance his political campaign in 1848. The logical reward for such dedication would have been marriage, especially since the beautiful Harriet had faithfully performed quasi-official duties at her companion's side for the past four years. But after the proclamation of the Empire in 1852, it was clear that the daughter of a humble shoemaker from Brighton, who was on first-name terms with an embarrassing number of dukes and princes, could not become Empress of the French.

Napoleon III therefore began to look for a future wife in the upper reaches of the European aristocracy, just as Napoleon I had done after his divorce from Josephine. But all he got was refusals. He finally lowered his sights as far as a granddaughter of the Duchess of Kent. The young Princess Adelaide seemed tempted, but Queen Victoria in person took up her pen to prevent the marriage. She wrote to the girl's mother: 'I feel your dear child is *saved* from *ruin* of every *possible* sort. You know what *he* is...' She did not need to write the word used in European courts to designate Napoleon III: 'bastard'. His 'father', Louis Bonaparte, refused to acknowledge the child his wife had conceived during a stay in the Pyrenees along the Spanish border – but not with a Spaniard (the father was probably French). Thus the little boy had no first name for two months and was only baptised two years later – with his 'father' refusing to participate in this 'comedy'. Napoleon I forced his brother to recognise the child legally, but could not prevent Louis from asking the Pope to annul his marriage, specifying that his wife Hortense was 'a Messalina' who gave him children he had nothing to do with. At the moment when his search for a consort was beginning to become frankly embarrassing, Napoleon III put a stop to all the diplomatic efforts by writing to his ambassador in London, Alexandre Walewski, who was also his 'cousin' (Napoleon I's illegitimate son): 'My dear fellow, I am taken.'

Such was precisely the impression of *Le Tout-Paris*: the Emperor had been ensnared by a beautiful Spanish adventuress, Eugénie (María

Eugenia), and her mother, Doña Manuela. María Manuela Kirkpatrick was the daughter of a Scot who had settled in Málaga as a fruit and vegetable trader and who also served as consul of the United States there. She had married a lame old soldier who had lost an eye while fighting alongside Joseph Bonaparte. His principal quality was to be the second son of the Count of Montijo, with an older brother who was widowed and childless. But that brother was bewitched by an adventuress, who succeeded in marrying him and declared that she was pregnant – even though her husband had become a total invalid. Doña Manuela uncovered this deception by forcibly entering her brother-in-law's house, where she discovered a flat-bellied sister-in-law with a small baby bought in an orphanage. She confiscated the child and kept a close watch on the whole business until the brother-in-law died. Once she had acquired the title of Countess of Montijo, she left her husband in order to settle in Paris and marry off her two daughters. For the first, she found the Duke of Alba, a very good match. For the second, she aimed even higher, since María Eugenia was an outstanding beauty.

Even Empress Elisabeth of Austria ('Sisi') – who was highly discriminating when it came to women other than herself – secretly had some photos of Eugénie bought for her *Schönheiten-Album* and declared that Eugénie was her only rival in beauty on the thrones of Europe. As beautiful as Sisi and as cunning as La Périchole, Eugénie succeeded in turning the Emperor's head. When, after two years of skilful manoeuvring, involving splendid gallops on imperial hunts at Fontainebleau (she was an excellent horsewoman), romantic nocturnal strolls at Saint-Cloud (she knew how to assume a docile, melancholic air) and some witty rejoinders at Compiègne (she could do repartee when necessary), she had finally got the Emperor where she wanted him: at her feet. The British Ambassador wrote admiringly: 'She has played her game so well that he can get her in no other way but marriage.'

It was 'the marriage of the century' (even if no crowned monarch attended), because it was the 'love match' of a 'parvenu acclaimed by universal suffrage'. It was in these surprising terms that Napoleon III presented

his union to the government, thereby putting a stop to the widespread gossip surrounding his birth. That of Eugénie was also the subject of considerable speculation. To draft the marriage contract, Doña Manuela had requested the help of her companion George Villiers, who had meanwhile become British Ambassador in Madrid. When the Emperor asked them the question that was on everyone's lips – whether Villiers was Eugénie's real father – Doña Manuela replied with a denial worthy of an Offenbach operetta: 'Sire, the dates do not match.' Napoleon III was therefore forced to present his future wife to the government in similarly skilful terms:

I have preferred a woman I love and respect to an unknown woman [of high birth]. [...] As a Spaniard, she has the advantage of not having a family in France that must be awarded honours and dignity.

The intriguer Doña Manuela was sent back to Spain and the beautiful Eugénie became very popular – for she was young (almost twenty years younger than her husband), beautiful and, moreover, pious. She refused the 600,000-franc diamond necklace that the city of Paris intended to offer her for her wedding, asking instead that an establishment be erected for impoverished girls (what is now the Eugène Napoléon Foundation, whose building is in the shape of a necklace). She reached the height of her popularity in 1856, thanks to the birth of the Prince Imperial, greeted throughout France by a 102-gun salute. The next day, 600,000 Parisians (half the city's population!) paid 25 centimes each to offer her a 'popular tribute'.

But this event, which came after a labour of three days that placed Eugénie's life in danger, was also the beginning of the deterioration of relations between the imperial couple. Eugénie no longer wished to welcome her husband to her bedroom, because a first pregnancy had already resulted in a miscarriage preceded by seventeen hours of contractions. The Emperor could therefore publicly resume his bachelor existence (in fact he had already done so on the quiet shortly after their marriage). Temperamental Spaniard that she was, Eugénie burst into the homes of her husband's mistresses and caused resounding scandals, to the delight

of her detractors. Among the latter was Princess Mathilde, the Emperor's influential cousin, who played the role of 'first lady' in Parisian salons and who openly hated 'l'Espagnole'. Mathilde was as ugly as Eugénie was beautiful and as closely associated with the intellectuals (the Goncourt brothers) and writers (Flaubert) of the day as Eugénie was remote from them. Mathilde spread the story that when Eugénie and Elisabeth of Austria first met in 1867 – a year before *La Périchole* – they grew so intimate that they withdrew *en déshabillé* and placed themselves in front of a large mirror with a tape measure to compare their respective charms. Sisi's waist measured 55 cm against 57 cm for Eugénie. Elisabeth was the taller (1.72 m, 20 cm taller than Queen Victoria!). Their thighs were quite comparable, but Eugénie had the finer calves and, above all, the more beautiful feet. After receiving such compliments, Eugénie began to show her feet in public, notably by crossing her legs and slipping off a mule at private concerts at the Tuileries – which created a sensation.

In his *Souvenirs d'un demi-siècle*, Maxime Du Camp wrote:

Napoleon III loved fancy-dress balls and had only a moderate taste for intellectual pleasures. [...] The most serious reproach that may be levelled at him is having married that Spanish woman. [...] She was a horse-woman. Around her floated, as it were, a cloud of cold cream, of patchouli; she was superstitious, superficial, not averse to saucy stories, always pre-occupied with the impression she produced, always showing off her shoulders and bosom, her hair dyed, her face painted, her eyes lined with kohl, her lips rubbed with rouge; all she needed to be in her true element was the music of the Cirque Olympique, the canter of the martingaled horse, the hoop to jump through in a single bound and the kiss blown to the spectators on the pommel of the whip.

For the intellectuals of the time, Napoleon III had married a character from an operetta.

He paid her little attention and regularly inspected his troops in Sartory, where he was reunited with Miss Howard, who had meanwhile bought a

château there with the five million francs she had received when they separated (an astronomical sum, but – according to her – the equivalent down to the nearest centime of what she had paid for his political career). When he wanted to stretch his legs, Napoleon changed in his mistress's carriage and donned the clothes of a simple citizen to take a stroll 'incognito' – just like the Viceroy of *La Périchole*. And since, in *La Périchole*, we are told that 'the husband of the favourite is one of the highest dignitaries [in the kingdom]', husbands flocked around the Emperor to introduce him to their spouses. Count Alexandre Walewski came with his ravishing wife (and was promoted from Ambassador in London to Foreign Minister), Baron Haussmann introduced his younger daughter, and so on. During the presentations, the Count of Castiglione even took care to whisper to the Emperor: 'I am a model husband: I never see or hear anything.' Was he afraid of the dark 'dungeon of recalcitrant husbands' (which probably existed only in *La Périchole*) or did he merely wish to show that he knew why he was there? Because the order had been very clear: the Prime Minister of Piedmont, Camillo Cavour, had sent his attractive eighteen-year-old cousin Virginia Oldoini to Paris to 'conquer and, if necessary, seduce the Emperor' (as he wrote to his Foreign Minister). The dazzlingly beautiful Virginia, 'lovely as a Venus come down from Olympus' (according to Pauline von Metternich), succeeded beyond all expectations, and wrote to her cousin:

My mother is an idiot. If she had brought me to Paris before my wedding, there wouldn't be a Spanish woman in the Tuileries now, but an Italian one!

At the urging of the Countess of Castiglione – one of the most eccentric and photogenic personalities of the Second Empire – Napoleon III signed a pact with Cavour in Plombières and set off for Italy with 200,000 soldiers in 1859. That was when he made the mistake of his life: he appointed Eugénie regent in his absence. It was a way of 'redeeming' himself with the wife he had humiliated with his many mistresses. Eugénie was more surprised than anyone, and wrote to her sister:

The Emperor will leave as soon as the army is ready and I will remain as regent... I have a great responsibility, because – as you know – the Parisians are not easy to handle, but I hope God will give me all the knowledge I do not possess.

This was a lot to ask of God, because Eugénie knew absolutely nothing about government affairs. She therefore caused some amusement among those present when she presided over the Council of Ministers, dressed entirely in black. But when the victories of Magenta and Solferino came, she took great pleasure in being cheered by the crowd in an open carriage. At last she had found a meaning for her life and a role worthy of her, as she wrote to her confidant Prosper Mérimée:

There is no longer Ugénie [this was how Napoleon III pronounced her first name], now there is only the Empress.

If we continue the comparison with Offenbach's heroines, we might say that this reborn Empress turned from a peaceful Péricole into a bellicose Grand-Duchess of Gérolstein, ready to 'wield her father's sword' at the slightest opportunity. She finally got her chance to do so in Mexico. For the sake of an affair of state loans that had not been repaid, in which the Duc de Morny (illegitimate half-brother of Napoleon III) stood to lose a great deal of money, Eugénie was ready to go on the warpath. She therefore sent Archduke Maximilian of Austria (Elisabeth's brother-in-law) to Mexico with 36,000 French soldiers to maintain order and establish a Catholic monarchy, something still rather lacking on that continent. The 'great notion of the Empress's reign' ended in a total fiasco with the execution of Maximilian in 1867. A year before *La Péricole*: Offenbach definitely had a good ear for those parts of the world that were 'in the news'. No sooner was the Mexican expedition over than Eugénie began to take a passionate interest in the succession to the Spanish throne, a complicated business that provoked a revolution and led to the Queen leaving the country. Isabella II moved to Paris in 1868 to live with her



'cousin' the Empress. When the two women learned that the Spanish government was finally going to offer the crown to a German prince (a Catholic married to a Portuguese infanta), they almost burst their corsets with rage: a Hohenzollern on their Spanish throne – now there was a good reason to declare war! Even though the prince had refused the proposal, Eugénie asked the King of Prussia – who had nothing to do with this whole business – to declare in writing that never, in any circumstances, would a German accept the Spanish crown. The French Ambassador was sent to see the elderly Wilhelm I, then taking the waters at Bad Ems, which led to an absurd imbroglio over a telegram. And in 1870 France declared war on Prussia – against the opinion of Napoleon III – merely because of a short message, truncated and mistranslated.

The Minister of War, Edmond Le Bœuf, proudly declared:

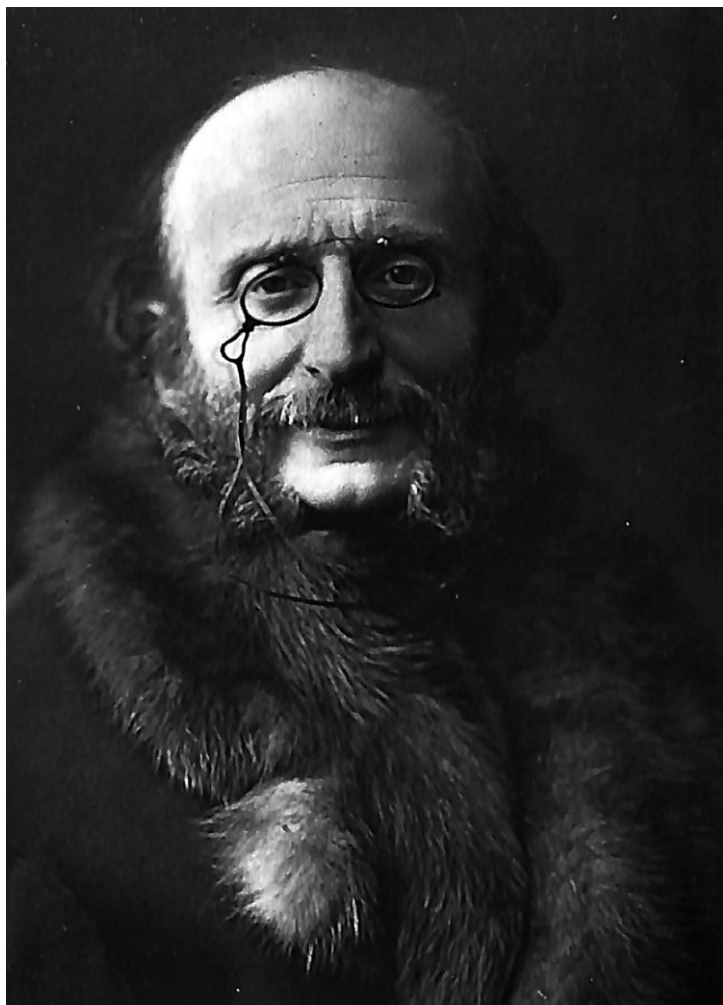
We are ready, completely and utterly ready. If the war were to last two years, our soldiers would not lack a single gaiter button.

That may have been the case in his ministry in Paris, where this Marshal of France seems to have enjoyed inspecting the smallest buttons of his handsome soldiers, but, when he arrived at the front, Napoleon III discovered that much more than a little button was lacking: almost half the army was missing. Instead of the 385,000 men he had been told of, he found only 220,000 on the spot and wrote to Eugénie: 'Nothing is ready, we don't have enough soldiers and I consider we have lost in advance.' After two defeats, Napoleon III and his generals made the wise decision to withdraw to Paris to regroup the army. But when they arrived in Châlons, they learned that Eugénie had dismissed Émile Ollivier's government and appointed new generals, with orders to return to the front as soon as possible. The confusion was total, because the regiments had certainly received very detailed maps of Prussia, but none of France, and more especially of the Champagne-Ardenne region where they were completely lost. Thus the Emperor and his army rushed into the dead end of Sedan, from where the Russian General Todleben wrote: 'The

French soldiers are lions commanded by donkeys.' 'I could never have imagined such a complete disaster', Napoleon wrote to Eugénie, announcing that he would raise the white flag. But it was trampled underfoot by the young general sent by the Empress. Finally Napoleon III handed 'my father's sword' to the King of Prussia, addressing him as 'Monsieur mon frère', which is said to have made Wilhelm I weep with compassion.

When Eugénie received this news, she fainted: 'a Napoleon does not surrender... Why didn't he die in front of the walls of Sedan?' As she returned to her senses, she heard cries of 'Down with the Spanish woman' and 'Long live the Republic'. The people had already invaded the courtyard of the Tuileries, so she could no longer take the imperial carriage and had to flee in a cab to her chamberlain's house. Since he was not at home and she got a most unfriendly reception from his maid, Eugénie decided to take refuge with her American dentist, 'le bel Evans'. But she had no money for a second cab. Even though her travelling bag was filled with diamonds – she had built up one of the largest jewellery collections of her time for the astronomical sum of 3,600,000 francs – she had not a penny on her to pay for a cab. Her lady-in-waiting, Madame Lebreton, not knowing how to bargain with a Parisian coachman, had substantially overpaid him for their first trip with the three francs she had on her. The two now penniless ladies had to walk through Paris, from boulevard Haussmann to what is now avenue Foch, but in those days – the height of irony for them – was called avenue de l'Impératrice. To begin one's reign in a golden carriage at Notre-Dame with a diamond tiara and end it with a long hike on foot in order to take refuge in one's dentist's waiting room – it could only happen to a Spanish adventuress...

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Offenbach at the end of his life.  
Palazzetto Bru Zane Collection.

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