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Eugenie Wanders in Gardens Where Once She Reigned

"The Spanish Woman," Is Revisiting the Scenes of Her Departed Glory

By Fred B. Pitney

IS IT more bitter for a nation to lose a province than for an Empress to lose a crown? Is revenge sweeter to a nation than to an individual? Does revenge matter at ninety-three? Nations may be chastened and learn by bitter experience. France has proved this. What about an Empress?

Eugénie, ex-Empress of the French, ninety-three years old, walking with a cane, wanders through the Tuileries Gardens, plucking withered autumn flowers from the beds that were once laid out at her command. Fifty years ago, through her folly, France lost Alsace-Lorraine, and she lost her crown. France has had her revenge on Germany, and France's revenge is Eugénie's. France's joy over victory was delirious. Eugénie walks through the Tuileries Gardens followed by a single maid. She speaks to no one. No one knows her thoughts.

"The Spanish woman," the people of France called her when the glories of the Second Empire began to fade after the catastrophe of Maximilian in Mexico. "The Spanish adventuress," the great ladies of her court never failed to call her behind her back. "The improvised sovereigns" was the kindest word of the rulers "by divine right" for Eugénie and her imperial spouse.

To-day she is an aged and mysterious figure. Enormously wealthy and more than half forgotten, she wanders unrecognized through the scenes of long past glories and triumphs.

Her Origin Disputed

Even the facts of her origin are now disputed, and a legend has grown up that gives her a left-handed splash of royal blood. May 5, 1826, is the official date of her birth and the place Granada, but the legend says her father had been dead three years when she was officially born, and that her birthplace was not Spain, but Italy, while her mother was a Bourbon and not the daughter of a Scottish wineshop keeper in Malaga. It would be in keeping with the wonderful romance of her career that it should have begun with a romance of birth.

The story is that before Christine, daughter of Francis I of Naples, became the fourth wife of King Ferdinand VII of Spain she had been secretly married to an English painter named Ward and by him had three children—two girls and a boy. The marriage to Ward was no obstacle to the royal union in the eyes of the law, as it had never received the royal assent, and the children were conveniently ignored. Queen Christine disposed of them by giving the two girls to the Countess de Montijo, who brought them up as her own, while the boy was left as a foundling at the gates of the palace of the Duke of San Fernando in Madrid.

The boy was adopted by the Duke and his wife and brought up as Don Alessandro Soler; and, while he was not a grandee and therefore had no recognized position at court, he was always treated by the entire royal family of Spain as a non-royal relative, and when he died, a few years ago, left his extensive fortune to King Alfonso. Of the two girls the elder, Paca, became the Duchess of Alba and the younger, Eugénie, Empress of the French.

Hardly less romantic is the official version. This begins in the wineshop in Malaga kept by the broken-down Scottish exile, William Kirkpatrick, who was for many years American consular agent in that city. He had married a Spanish woman, and his daughter, Manuela, was dancing on the tables for the amusement of the customers when Don Cypriano de Guzman became a frequenter of the place.

Don Cypriano was a one-eyed veteran of the First Napoleon's wars. He angered his brother, the Count de Montijo, by fighting for Napoleon against Spain, and now completed the estrangement by falling in love with Manuela Kirkpatrick and marrying her. But a few years later the count died childless and Don Cypriano succeeded to the title and the estates.

There is no question that Don Cypriano de Guzman married Manuela Kirkpatrick and succeeded to the title and estates of the Count de Montijo, but, according to official Spanish records, he is said to have died October 30, 1823. The pages of the register of the parish of Arevalo that contained the statement of his death are said to have been mutilated and removed, but official records of the Madrid law courts contain frequent mention of the date of his death in connection with several lawsuits brought by his brothers against his widow.

The Official Record

The description given of Eugénie by the Royal Almanac of Spain when she married Napoleon III was:

"Dona Maria Eugenia de Guzman Porto-carrero y Palafox, Countess of Teba, Marchioness of Ardales, of Osera, of Moya, Countess of Ablitas, of Banos (with grandeeship of the first class), Countess of Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Viscountess of Calzada."

Whatever may be the facts of their birth, Eugénie and her sister were taken to Paris by the Countess de Montijo and educated in the Convent of the Sacred Heart. Their education completed, the two girls were taken back to Madrid and there made the acquaintance of Prosper Merimée and Henri Beyle, who entertained them and fired their imaginations with tales of the First Napoleon.

There was little to choose between the two girls for beauty, but there was a vast difference in the spirit they displayed. Paca captivated and married the Duke of Alba. Eugénie refused all suitors. When she was a little girl a gypsy had prophesied that she would one day be a queen, and Eugénie at the court of Spain set out to dazzle the world. She rode through the streets of Madrid on an unsaddled horse, attended the fencing school, led the applause at bullfights, flirted with toreadors and embroidered caps for them in gold. A writer of the time said of her:

"Her slender figure is well defined by a costly bodice, which enhances her beauty and elegance. Her dainty hand is armed with a riding whip instead of a fan, for she generally arrives at the arena on a wild Andalusian horse, and in her belt she carries a sharp pointed dagger. Her little feet are encased in red satin boots. Her head is crowned with broad golden plaits, interwoven with pearls and real flowers; her clear brow shines with youth and beauty and her gentle blue eyes sparkle from beneath the long lashes which almost conceal them. Her exquisitely formed nose; her mouth fresher than a rosebud; the perfect oval of her face, the loveliness of which is only equaled by her graceful bearing, arouses the admiration of all. She is the recognized queen of beauty. It is she who crowns the victorious toreador, and her white hands present him with the prize due to his courage and agility, while she accompanies the gift with her most captivating smile."

Lacked Royal Dignity

Eugénie dazzled Madrid, but she did not gain the royal favor. There was too much of the gypsy in her conduct. Looking back on this part of her career, one sees foreshadowed the criticism of von Moltke, when he visited the French court in 1867:

"Her delivery is fast and fluent and her bearing is hardly that which one expects to find in such high station."

The denouement was inevitable. By request of Queen Isabella the Countess de Montijo and Eugénie left the Spanish court after the marriage of Paca to the Duke of Alba and again went to Paris, where they took a small apartment in the Place Vendôme, near where the Ritz Hotel now stands. At first Eugénie was well received in French society. She had met the French princes in Madrid at the time of the royal weddings, had ridden with the Duc de Montpensier, danced with the Prince de Joinville and visited museums with the Duc d'Aumale. She was quickly taken up in Paris and renewed her acquaintance with Merimée.

But it was not long before gossip began, and she was then dubbed "the Spanish adventuress." It was the time of the Second Republic and Louis Napoleon was Prince-President. Whispers of the coming coup d'état filled the air, and Eugénie, through Merimée, contrived an invitation to one of the Presidential receptions. Napoleon's infatuation was instant. He sought her out twice that evening and later said he knew he should meet her again.

Eugénie took care that he should not be mistaken. Here was her quarry. Here was the fulfillment of the gypsy's prophecy. She put herself in his way. She sympathized with him in his plans and ambitions. She helped him in his dangerous and complicated plottings, and on the night of the coup d'état stood beside him at the telegraph instrument that bore the message of success.

But there were yet obstacles to be overcome. Louis Napoleon was Napoleon III, Emperor of the French, and wildly infatuated with Eugénie de Montijo, Countess of Teba, but his throne was extremely insecure and he and his advisers and supporters intended to make it secure by marriage. He had no thought at that time of marrying Eugénie. His ambassadors and agents were sounding all the courts of Europe for an empress for Napoleon, while he was pursuing Engénie and gossip was growing clamorous.

But Not Marry Her

Napoleon's ambassadors met with nothing but rebuffs in their search for a bride for the Emperor, while Eugénie and her mother received constant invitations to Compiègne and the Elysée Palace. Napoleon gave hunts like a sovereign at Fontainebleau and Compiègne; and the beautiful Spanish girl, fearless horsewoman and tireless dancer, was always of the company. Prince Jerome Bonaparte was moved to write to Napoleon:

"One may admire and love the daughter of the Countess de Montijo, but one does not marry her."

The ladies of the court said the marriage was impossible. They insulted Eugénie. When she sought to join them at the gatherings of the court they withdrew and left her standing alone. One morning she stood with tears in her eyes on the terrace at Compiègne. The other ladies of the court were in a group a short distance away. Napoleon went to Eugénie and asked her what was the trouble. She told him of the latest insult that had been heaped upon her.

The Emperor took a spray of ivy and plaited it into a crown, which he placed on her head.

"Wear this," he said, in a voice which carried to the watching group, "until the other is ready."

Not another murmur arose from the court ladies. At once they flocked around Eugénie.

The civil marriage took place at the Elysée Palace January 29, 1853, and the religious ceremony was held in the Cathedral of Nôtre Dame the next day. The Emperor and his bride drove to Villeneuve l'Etang, near St. Cloud, and spent there the first week of their married life, returning at the end of this brief honeymoon to the palace of the Tuileries.

Still, though an empress in name, Eugénie was not treated as an empress in fact. Neither she nor her husband knew exactly what was the reason so little respect was shown to them. Their court was gorgeous and extravagant, but it was slovenly. Immense sums of money were spent in great entertainments, beautiful women and gallant men gathered there from all corners of all the world, but the atmosphere was of a plebeian familiarity, and liberties of all kinds were taken with the rulers, especially with Eugénie.

The Emperor and Empress determined on a visit to England in order to try to establish themselves in the courts of Europe. It was a dangerous experiment, but Eugénie was carefully heralded beforehand as a descendant of Robert Bruce. It was explained that her grandfather, the wineshop keeper, was descended in the direct line from the Bruces and thus in her veins ran the royal blood of England. It was a fiction that has served her to this day.

Napoleon and Eugénie were received with great pomp and ceremony in England, and when they returned to France they knew what was lacking at the Tuileries. Eugénie set ministers at work studying details of gold and silver lace, stripes and buttons, distinctions of privileges. Under her direction a book of imperial ordinance was compiled. A Lord High Chamberlain a Grand Master of the Palace, a Grand Master of the Hounds and a Grand Master of the Horse were appointed, and strict rules were laid down for every hour of the day, according to which at stated times and on the slightest provocation certain honors had to be rendered to her in accord with the circumstances and the hour.

Compelled Deference

The court went better after that, and the period of its real magnificence began. A writer in "The St. James's Magazine" in 1862 said:

"Luxurious and yet elegant splendor, most refined judgment and a poetic temperament are revealed in the arrangements of the boudoir of the Empress Eugénie. The doors are made of ivory, inlaid with gold; the furniture is rosewood, of graceful shape, and inlaid with gold; mirrors of ivory; the sofas and chairs are covered with pale red silk; the walls hung with a dark paper and the ceiling is an exquisite fresco. A magnificent Smyrna carpet voluptuously deadens the sound of footfalls. Around hang the most valuable paintings of the old masters, borrowed from the Louvre and Versailles. On the writing desk lie splendid portfolios and books, bound in tortoise shell, inlaid with gold. Nothing is wanted which a sense of complete luxury can devise, not even the toning of light. The red silk curtains, heavily edged with black velvet, throw a subdued hue over every object, and any one who enters the room may imagine he is inhaling poetry."

Describing Eugénie, the same writer said:

"She leans back on the cushions as if fatigued, so that her light muslin dress with its countless lace-edged flounces is gently raised and exposes her dainty feet, in the white silk stockings and shoes, as high as the ankle. She has thrown back her beautiful head, surrounded with the pale golden hair, and appears to be in a reverie. The soft azure eye is only half visible beneath the inimitable eyelid and her entire appearance indicates exhaustion and fatigue. The lines of the face are so fine, so noble and run into each other so harmoniously that it seems as if a sculptor had incarnated his ideal. But the color of the cheeks is no longer that of youth. The forehead, broad and slightly arched, displays those fine ripple marks which the woman of thirty fears and the woman of thirty-six—for so old is the Empress—endures with a sigh.

An Active Plotter

"The whole expression of this waxlike countenance, with its enchanting blending of the Moorish and Germanic types, displays somewhat of Southern languor. But if she were to smile, if words were to pass those exquisitely carved lips, the coldness of this face would melt away, the eyes would open to their full size and sparkle like stars in a tropical heaven. At present she seems poetical and gentle, but she would be enchanting were she to burst into passion and all the feelings she possesses display themselves in their might and fullness. At such times there flashes from her eyes something unexpected—a look of hatred, contempt, triumph and craft—which forms the most wondrous contrast with this St. Cecilian countenance."

This was the heyday of her power and glory. It was also the time when the malady which ultimately caused Napoleon's death began to cause him intense suffering, and Eugénie took advantage of this to increase her ascendancy over her husband, always marked. It was she who led France to back the hazard of Maximilian in the Mexican venture. It was she again who led France to stand with Prussia against Austria and thus not only estranged Austria from France, but helped to raise up the power that was to overwhelm France and her. It was she who was the center of the plottings over the succession to the Spanish throne, and when it came to the final act that meant war with the growing power of Prussia it was she who, when the foreboding Napoleon was seized with an acute attack in the midst of a council of ministers, where he was constantly repeating, "We do not want war. We do not want war," gave the orders that left it open to Bismarck to force war on France.

In early August, 1870, Eugénie was boasting of the Franco-Prussian War as "My little war." The afternoon of September 3 she received this dispatch:

"The army is defeated and taken. I am a prisoner. Napoleon."

At 2 o'clock next morning a lady-in-waiting announced the proclamation of the Republic, and the enraged mobs surged around the palace of the Tuileries. Eugénie's courage failed her. Hurried plans were made for her to ride through the streets and appeal to the generosity of the rioters, but she took the advice of two foreigners, her worst enemies, against both of whom Napoleon had warned her, Metternich, the Austrian Ambassador, and Nigra, the Ambassador of Italy.

Metternich and Nigra advised her now to fly from France. They smuggled her out of the palace and then deserted her in the streets, leaving her to find her way as best she could to the home of the American dentist, Evans, who escorted her to Boulogne and there persuaded an English yachtsman, Sir John Burgoyne, to take her on his yacht, the Gazette, to Ryde.

Sent Fortune to England

Eugénie's foresight — Napoleon called it her stinginess—had led her to place a large fortune in England. She went to live at Chislehurst and there was joined by the Prince Imperial, a lad of sixteen, who had not followed his father to Sedan, but escaped to Belgium. Thither also came Napoleon after his release from imprisonment at Wilhelmshohe and the plans were ripe for another "return from Elba" when the schemes were brought to an end by Napoleon's death, January 9, 1873, at Chislehurst in the arms of Eugénie.

The ex-Empress now lived only for her son, the Prince Imperial. But she still treated him as a boy and, though she had an income of $400,000 a year, allowed him only $10 a week for pocket money and took possession of a legacy of $60,000 a year that had been left to him. Fretting under the maternal restraint, the young man joined the British expedition to Zululand in 1879 and was there killed, stripped and mutilated by the savage warriors June 1, 1879. When the body was recovered it could only be identified by a locket with portraits of his father and mother that had been left by the natives in the belief that it was a magic charm.

Eugénie never recovered from this blow. She sought a suitable site for a mausoleum for her husband and son and bought Farnborough Hall, near which she erected a memorial chapel at a cost of $500,000. Napoleon III and the Prince Imperial are buried there and a place is left for her. She assumed the title of Comtesse de Pierrefonds after the death of the Prince Imperial and under that name makes periodical visits to Paris, where she occupies rooms in the Hotel Continental, overlooking the Gardens of the Tuileries, the site of the palace destroyed by the Paris mobs in their rage against her.

The gypsy who prophesied that she would be a queen also prophesied that she would live to be 100, "a little more or less." She nearly approaches that span of life, and she is still the enigma she was to the gypsy fortune teller, who replied to a final question:

"I cannot tell, for she is a woman, a Spanish woman, and a princess of fortune."

Winterhalter's painting "The Empress and Her Court," showing Eugenie seated in the royal gardens and surrounded by her ladies in waiting

Medallion portrait of Eugenie in the days of her beauty and power, painted by Winterhalter, and snapshot of the ex-Empress taken recently in Paris

France and the Former Empress Are Both Revenged by the Downfall of Germany