

A WOMAN SCORNED

Humiliation! Standing in the throne room whilst the Emperor read out his reasoning for the divorce. And most of the bitching dog kennel of his family were at his side, in full silk and robes, their stone faces concealing their delight that the struggle of thirteen years was ending with the triumph of their will over my own. How often silk socks conceal eczema! There stood Louis the mad King of Holland, Caroline the Queen of Naples, Jérôme the King of Westphalia, and Pauline the pretty but dim-witted Princess Borghese, together through the second born of their number the most crowned family in Europe. Madame Mère, the prize bitch that bred them stayed away, but I knew she'd be smiling in secret even as my marriage vanished before me. Coward, coward, coward! I could have scratched out her eyes and swallowed them whole, no matter the consequences.

The Emperor coughed. Though dressed as ever in his beloved dark green uniform of a colonel in the Chasseurs, he looked short and squat. But then he was never impressive deprived of his General's hat. Wiping the sweat from his palms, he concluded by stating his only motive was the good of the state, and then handed me my own statement of agreement. He had written it himself. "With the permission of my august and dear husband, I declare that having no further hope of children who would satisfy the needs of his policy and the interest of France, I am pleased to offer him the greatest proof of attachment and devotion that could be given...".

I was pleased to offer no such thing, but what choice did I have? *Bon-a-partie est Bon-à-rien!* Understand this. The Council of State, each and every one of them appointed by the Emperor himself, found reason to cast doubt over the civil contract

of marriage. The wording was said to be suspect, and with great convenience, no one could find the wooden-legged Monsieur Lecombe who had conducted the ceremony. Such legal invention hardly surprised me, but the ease with which Cardinal Fesch did away with the religious marriage took my breath away. I'd always known the civil ceremony was insufficient for my purpose. That is why, armed with the Pope's insistence, I had contrived the religious marriage prior to the Coronation. Afterwards, I pursued the Cardinal for two whole days before he surrendered to me the certificate of legality. I had clutched it to my bosom knowing full well the security it bestowed, only to find it bestowed nothing! The Cardinal, though he had conducted the ceremony in person, now saw fit to argue it null and void for want of a parish priest. Cambacérès, a most treacherous lawyer, found no evidence that the Emperor had ever granted his consent (to his own wedding!). The gutless Berthier and Talleyrand, so consummate a Foreign Minister he could lie fluently in five languages, suddenly found they had no recollection of having ever been present. Aspersions were cast that I must have forged their signatures of witness, and there was no higher authority than the Cardinal to whom I could resort with my honest grievances. No doubt anticipating his own actions, my newly freed husband had recently confiscated all the Italian Vatican lands and held the Pope prisoner at Savona. *Bon-a-partie est Bon-à-rien!*

So ended the marriage of Josephine to Napoleon on the 16th of December 1809. I had screamed and cried and faintly protested to no avail save to gain the opinion of crooked doctors that I was over-wrought and unbalanced, accusations that circulate to this day. *What of them?* A forty-six year old obstacle to diplomacy, my life was stripped bare, consoled by nothing save the Elysée for life, the estate of Malmaison in full ownership and three million francs a year. I was not, Cardinal

Fesch assured me, even a divorcée, since I had in fact never been married at all but had lived a decade and more in concubinage. A whore for thirteen years! Well, what of it? Enough had whispered it, let those who must spit it spit it publicly at last. I'll be damned if I mourn a reputation amidst this Empire of liars and cheats.

Oh, I'll want for nothing, I grant you that. Napoleon is never mean. His is a kind of absent-minded cruelty born of self-obsession. And, ever an adornment and never alone mighty, neither am I truly fallen. Besides, not even a corrupt Cardinal can steal away empty rhetoric, and so I retain my title. As I sit in these gardens of Malmaison I am still the Empress Josephine. An Empress mark! Whether as wife or concubine, spinster or *une femme libre*, it is a giddy height of fame for Marie-Josèphe-Rose de Tascher de la Pagerie, the sugar planter's daughter from indolent Martinique, a bird of the islands, ambitious for nothing except an ample sufficiency of leisure and gossip. For twenty-five years the maelstrom has picked me up and turned me in its urgent motion. I have survived near shipwrecks, I have cheated the guillotine, thwarted the plots of assassins and lived a life of love and war in full measure. Passion has been constant in its rage around me, and I, of a calmer ilk, have found my life dictated by it daily. Always, always Napoleon! These gardens of Malmaison I planted myself, but the cedar I sit beneath is his. He brought it from Marengo to be planted in celebration of his great victory, and in time it will grow to dominate all. On Martinique my mother called me Yeyette. When I first came to France I signed myself Marie-Rose. It was Napoleon who decided upon Josephine, and as Josephine I now know myself and shall always be known. But now, since the maelstrom has set me down for good and all, I'll speak for myself as well as any, and I'll spare no reputations.

What makes the desires and ambitions of men so puerile? What makes them so vainglorious and deceitful? Oh, I ask no pity and I know I'll receive none. There's many a wronged woman more wronged than me and with less compensation to boot. But marry Napoleon Bonaparte and you find out soon enough. There's nothing more to men than the impregnation of women, and until a man succeeds in that he succeeds in nothing. What haste! No sooner had Napoleon cast me aside, than Talleyrand had a list prepared of seventeen eligible young women, each from a royal house and all with good pedigrees, swelling breasts and child-bearing hips. Such unfulfilled obsession! Oh, I suffer from none myself. Before I met Napoleon I bore two children by marriage to one Alexander, an idling swine and the first of many to christen me whorish. Alexander believed that I had shown favour to most of the French garrison of Martinique and a good many negroes besides (why else would I have bought some their freedom?), allegations so beyond all reason that even the crusty judges of Châtelet, hardly strangers to whoring themselves, saw fit to grant me a petition of slander. No matter. But consider the facts! Before turning eighteen, I had already provided Alexander with the son Napoleon has abandoned me from not presenting to him! No thanks from Napoleon for incapacities I believe to be his own, and no love or comfort from Alexander before him. How easy men find it to call a woman a whore and how difficult for a woman to seem virtuous. Alexander was no sooner disgracing my name than he was parading his own concubine, that slut Madame de Longpré, in front of my very mother. I was the whore, but Alexander's of course was a grand passion. I've heard de Longpré could milk men dry with silk gloves on, and I'll not contradict a rumour for want of witness. Consumed by weakness, Alexander invested me with all of his own. No more or no less, a mere copulating infant.

Oh, let it be loudly said, I've had affairs myself. But these are only the stuff of loneliness and pleasure, and most, though I'll not say all, I'd have happily exchanged for a husband who'd spend three parts of a year with his wife in preference to his never-ending campaigns and conquests. No sooner had Napoleon married me than he vanished to Italy for ten months, no sooner did he return than he vanished again to Egypt for a whole two years! And his only motive for return that I could see was the coup d'état. Campaigns and battles were the rulers of our marriage, and his successes only made such circumstances worse. He took to travelling forever across his dominions in Italy and Germany and Holland, planting his scheming relatives on thrones far and wide. And then, never trusting them to rule, he took to overseeing the entire duties of each and every one of them! Once, when briefly he was in residence with me at Malmaison, so used was he to sleeping beneath the stars that he abandoned our bed for a tent pitched in the gardens! Though he requested it, I did not join him.

And so in truth, though a few brave men have whispered against it, it comes as no surprise to me that he now seeks the conquest of Russia. Where else is there left for him? He'll not settle for some squabble with the British in Spain. It has insufficient scale. One man astride the continent is what he seeks, and so his new Empress in the Tuileries will sit for months and quite possibly years awaiting his return. The sweet and lonely Austrian seventeen-year-old innocent he has taken for his bride will want for nothing save the presence of her spouse. But then perhaps this Marie-Louise, with too ample an arse to be truly elegant (though I say it myself), is much taken with her aggrandisement, and Napoleon is said to be delirious. Happily presented with the son of his desires at last, one Napoleon-Francis, already the King of Rome! Bah! I'll

believe none of it. That child is an impostor, the produce of some street girl planted in a royal cradle through dire necessity. Or else the child is from some illicit union Marie-Louise has sown and reaped at the court. I favour the first. A street girl's unwanted carries less danger than the illegitimate offspring of a count or duke, or even, Heaven forbid, of one of Napoleon's own marshals! Consider it all! He can disguise to himself his impotence with a forty six year old Empress, but how can the delusion continue when he takes a seventeen year old to his bed? Oh, and I know better than any the duplicity which surrounds him. There are none more desperate for a son than the Emperor. This new marriage (what legality this!) was conducted by proxy, the Emperor in Paris, the bride in Vienna, with her father, the Austrian Emperor himself, leaving her no choice in the matter for fear of French invasion. The pretty union thus completed, I've heard that when Marie-Louise first met her new master, Napoleon immediately took with her to the boudoir where the couple remained a full seven hours. He's a slave to paternity! And Marie-Louise, well! What shock must have confronted her. If stories of her virginity be true, Napoleon is a strange introduction. I'll not believe he abandoned our bed only for want of passion. I could see the changes for myself. There are strange transformations beneath his uniform of that I'm sure.

The greater details escape me, so total became his guarding of his body from my sight. But I lived within the grip of contradiction nonetheless. I refused all doctoring (there is nothing wrong with me!), but still he sent me to take the waters at Aix-les-Bains and Aix-la-Chappelle. When once I humoured his strategic frustrations by suggesting he sought conquest of England only for me to bathe in Bath, he could not even smile! He even insisted I visit the sulphurous springs at Plombières! In the

name of Heaven, sulphur! The very imbibing would have killed any child within me, but I went all the same, for it kept up the pretence that the obstacle to offspring was me, and it follows on, that such a matter was subject to cure. And all the while I witnessed his own withering and pretended, in part for love, that I saw nothing.

Be sure of my witness, for there's more than me privy to the secret. The rumours abound, so multiple did his inconstancy become. Oh, there was no concealment. Napoleon would often brag of his conquests, and of his performance with them (to only the latter was I sceptical). Though he'll never know it, at times it has even been me who has paid his companions of lust to whisper nothing of what they had seen. How ironic the love of a woman for a man! How little a virtuous woman is ever thanked! For I heard at once the scamperings of singers and actresses around the Tuileries at night, and did at once what I saw fit. I have silenced Madame Grassini of the opera and even comforted Mademoiselle George, who woke me with her running and screaming from what she had seen. I even paid for her reinstatement at the Comedie Francaise, for less than satisfied by her visit, Napoleon had insisted she be sacked.

There's a silent conspiracy of women across Europe, I can venture no other explanation. Each and every one of us who have occupied the Emperor's bed must surely know the truth. We are not blind! But as so often, we pretend to be. And it's not the Mademoiselle Georges' I speak of here. There's no blindness there, only an agreement to stay silent for profit. But even now, I still find myself somehow pretending I do not know, and pretending that others who most certainly do know have no knowledge either. Never forget, at the Coronation, Napoleon saw fit to crown

himself, in a single stroke rendering the Pope redundant long before he held him literal prisoner. What a perfect act of self-advancement, and how the self-advancers have come to swarm around him! It is the duplicity of other women that brought me down, women who have found pensions and many other gifts in presenting Napoleon with the male issue of affairs apparently his.

What connivance! I am well aware Napoleon confided his frustrated desire for offspring with his sister Caroline (she mocked great concern as she delighted in telling me). And Caroline, herself concerned at her husband General Murat's barrack liaisons, thus removed the object of his affections, one Eléanore de la Plaigne, by informing this unsurprisingly malleable *femme de boudoir* that she would find more profit with Napoleon himself. The result? Within the year Eléanore was parading the child Léon for all to see, whispering in mock secrecy it was the child of the Emperor whilst a whole idle barracks of officers were eager no doubt to serve her! From this point on, my cards were marked. The next ambitious schemer was Maria Walewska, whose charms were so great Napoleon made no effort of return to see me, nor none to have me visit him for a full year! The wilful Maria had him clutched in Poland. I was powerless and he smitten.

The episode with Eléanore and the offspring Léon had not over concerned me. Though Napoleon sought to keep the matter from me, he made no show of affection for the child, seeming both unconcerned and unconvinced that the boy Léon might be his. But Maria was altogether different. In possession of attractions to make any wife wary, she was also desirous of good service. Locked at eighteen into marriage with a seventy year old count, she was heady with the aphrodisiacs of position Napoleon

presented. And I would wager, even a man of Napoleon's decaying condition must seem virile against a septuagenarian. To make matters worse, it was at this time that Napoleon-Charles, the five year old son of my daughter Hortense and Napoleon's brother Louis, was taken from us. My own attempts to prise the Emperor from Maria were thus relegated as I sought to comfort my daughter in Holland. And all plans I had fostered that the Emperor, who had always looked fondly on Napoleon-Charles, would one day consider him as heir were dashed forever. What fecund Jezebels women can be! Maria took her chance, and amidst this background of death and grief duly presented Napoleon with a male off-spring she swore to be his, one Alexandre-Florian.

This time, Napoleon proudly paraded the child as his own, and upon returning to Paris, had Maria entertained in rooms at the Elysée. I date my own decline to be irreversible from this event. Be it true or no, now Napoleon was convinced of his own true manhood, and thus certain the former obstacle had been myself. What grand self-delusion! This child of a curious eighteen year old Countess could have been anyone's! Why so late in this history of illicit fornication had women suddenly come to bear Napoleon children? Why no children by his earlier dalliances with Désirée Clary or Madame Pernon (and doubtless many more besides!), both being women about whom to this day he considers me ignorant?

I eke out my days of loneliness and betrayal, but I wish only for the good of France! Many is the time the truth has been dismissed for being the work of the bitter or the half-deranged, but I am neither, being only saddened and weary at the practice of delusion and falsehood. Throughout I have held my pride, though icily. Being

never of great subtlety, Napoleon to this very house has sent both Marie-Louise with her screaming King of Rome, and Maria Walewska with the brat Alexandre-Florian. He was, he wrote, certain of the pleasure these visits would bestow on me! And so I remarked to both these mothers of less than half my years how sweetly their infants played, and (how could I not say it?) what great resemblance to the Emperor they both bore. Together we took our *déjeuner* and walked the grounds, never speaking of what we all must know, but smiling sweetly with the teeth of sharks. Seldom can the entertainer of a *crèche* have felt such hatred to its young mothers.

To what standards have both men and women sunk! And crowning it all, at this very time Napoleon's greatest romance, the Grande Armée, is assembling at rendezvous' all over the Continent. The greatest military force in history has commenced its march on Russia. It is said 600,000 men are regimented. 200,000 horses and more are commandeered, cattle too for sustenance, the making of two million pairs of boots have occupied every cobbler in France and many beyond (with what mercantile irony the shoemakers of England have supplied their enemy!). Along with the prostitutes and the cooks, the nurses and engineers and cranking artillery, whole chests of forged Russian currency are to be transported. The harlequinade assembles! Once again, the reluctant conscripts, the heroic Imperial Guard, the idealistic and the naive, the ambitious and the venal, the marshals of many battles and the eager officers in search of loot, promotion and glory all seek to expand the Empire of France. The allies of this vast movement this very week entertain the Emperor's entourage at Dresden, in a display of affectation so grandiose as to deceive only one so sick as Napoleon himself. To Dresden have come the well-born, the wit and the beauty of Europe. The Kings and Queens of Wurtemberg and Saxony, the Emperor

and Empress of Austria, the King of Bavaria with his many duchesses. The Emperor will enter this self-serving Congress last, fanfared and lauded, feared and accompanied by his new Empress Marie-Louise, come thus far (before being despatched back to Paris!) to show the King of Rome to her Austrian parents and the entire assembled diplomatic throng besides. All will declare it! The destiny of Europe resides in this fated and fêted child of the greatest conqueror to ever have lived. What hocus! The Emperor Napoleon marches on Russia a sick and deluded man. As it has ever been, he searches in conquest for the immortality he'll not find in flesh and blood. The unspoken malady still consumes him. God have mercy on any world that must suffer the ambitions of a man so afflicted.