



FRANCE FROM BEHIND THE VEIL

(ANNOTATED)

CATHERINE RADZIWILL

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Enriched Edition. An Account of Fifty Years of Social and Political Life by a Russian Princess

Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Greta Somerwick

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CHAPTER I

Last Days of the Empire: Napoleon and Eugénie

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Towards the end of the year 1868 I arrived in Paris. I had often before been in the great city, but had never occupied any official position there. Now, however, having been appointed secretary to our (Russian) embassy, I consequently enjoyed special privileges, not the least being opportunity to watch quite closely the actors in what was to prove one of the greatest dramas of modern history. I had many acquaintances in Paris, but these belonged principally to the circle known still by the name of Faubourg St. Germain, for I had never frequented the Imperialistic world. Consequently I found myself thrown in quite a different *milieu*, and had to forgo a great many of my former friends, who would not have cared to receive in their houses one who now belonged to the intimate coterie of the Tuileries. In a certain sense I felt sorry; but on the other hand I discovered that the society in which I now found myself was far more pleasant, and certainly far more amusing, than my former circle. To a young man such as I was at that time, this last consideration, of course, was most attractive.

Paris, during that autumn of the year 1868, was extremely congenial; indeed, it has never been so brilliant since the Napoleonic Eagle disappeared. The Sovereigns liked to surround themselves with nice people, and sought popularity among the different classes of society; they gave splendid receptions, and did their best to create around them an atmosphere of luxury and enjoyment. They frequented the many theatres for which Paris was famed, were present at the races, and in general showed themselves wherever they found opportunity to appear in

public. During the summer and autumn months the Imperial hospitality was exercised with profusion and generosity, either at Compiègne or at Fontainebleau, and it was only at St. Cloud or at Biarritz that the Emperor and his lovely Consort led a relatively retired life, while they enjoyed a short and well-earned holiday.

As is usual in such cases, the Imperialistic society followed the lead given to it from above, and pleasure followed upon pleasure, festivity crowded upon festivity during these feverish months which preceded the Franco-Prussian War^[1]. In 1868 the clouds that had obscured the Imperial sky at the time of the ill-fated Mexican Expedition had passed away, and the splendours which attended the inauguration of the Suez Canal^[2] were already looming on the horizon.

The political situation as yet seemed untroubled; indeed, though the Emperor sometimes appeared sad and anxious, no one among all those who surrounded him shared the apprehensions which his keen political glance had already foreseen as inevitable. The Empress, too, appeared as if she wanted to make the most of her already disappearing youth, and to gather her roses whilst she still could do so, with all the buoyancy of her departed girlish days.

The leading spirit of all the entertainments given at the Tuileries, the Princess Pauline Metternich, was always alert for some new form of amusement wherewith to enliven the house parties of Compiègne, or the solemnity of the evening parties given in the old home of the Kings of France—that home from which Louis XVI. and Marie Antoinette had gone to the scaffold, and to which their memory clung in spite of all those who had inhabited it since the day they started upon their tragic journey to Varennes.

The fair Eugénie had a special reverence for the memory of the beautiful Austrian Archduchess whose destiny it had been to die by the hand of the executioner within a few steps of the grand old palace that had been hers. With all the impressionability of her Spanish nature she used to say that she was sure a like fate awaited her, and so prepared herself to die as had died the unfortunate Princess whose place she had taken. Eugénie often spoke of what she would do when that day should come, and sometimes amused her friends with her conviction that she, too, was destined to endure tragic misfortunes and calamities. Her presentiments were fulfilled; but, alas! she did not bear them with true dignity.

At the time of which I am speaking—October, 1868—Napoleon III. had just completed his sixtieth year. In spite of the agonies occasioned by the painful disease from which he was suffering, he retained his good looks, and notwithstanding his small height and the largeness of his head, which, compared with the size of his body, would have been ridiculous in any other person, he presented a most dignified appearance, and bore himself like a Sovereign born to the purple would have done. When he chose, the expression of his face was charming, and the eyes, which he always kept half closed, had a dreamy, far-away, mysterious look that gave them a peculiar charm. He spoke slowly, as if carefully weighing every word he uttered; but what surprised one when talking with him for the first time was a German accent in speaking French—a habit retained from his early days spent in Switzerland—from which he could not rid himself, in spite of all his efforts, as well as those of M. Mocquard, his faithful secretary and friend, who, so long as he lived, gave him lessons in elocution. I believe that the slowness with which Napoleon III. expressed himself must be attributed to that circumstance more than anything else. But it is a fact that

sometimes it had the effect of irritating those with whom he was engaged in conversation; they never knew what he was going to say next, and oftentimes gathered the impression that some ulterior motive actuated his speech.

With ladies the Emperor was always charming, and his manner with them had a tinge of chivalry that savoured of olden times, and generally succeeded in winning for him all that he wanted. His love intrigues were numerous, and his wife was not always wrong when she complained, though not improbably she would have done better to notice and talk of them less than she did. In general the Empress was much too fond of communicating her feelings and impressions to those whom she considered her friends without the slightest reason for thinking them to be such. Her many intimacies with ladies who bore her no real sympathy, such as Princess Metternich, for instance, did her much harm and caused her many annoyances which she could well have avoided had she shown herself more careful in what she did or said. She never realised that community in amusement does not constitute community of feelings, and that whilst one may like the society of some people because one enjoys their good dinners, or spends one's time pleasantly in their company, it does not mean that one really cares for them, or trusts them.

Napoleon III. had been a very clever politician. I use the words "had been" intentionally, because, unhappily, it is certain that toward the end of his reign he had lost some of his former sharpness. Neither did he see so plainly the dangers of his situation, nor realise that he could not act as freely as he had done at the time of the *coup d'état* of December, 1852, and during the Crimean and Italian campaigns.

He felt himself weakened, in part through the mistakes of his early youth, as well as by his associations, which were beginning to tell upon him, and of which he had a nervous dread of being reminded. As an example of this the following anecdote is typical. A Russian lady, the Countess K——, who used to frequent the Tuileries, met one day an Italian statesman, whose name I won't mention as he is still living. This gentleman suddenly asked whether it would not amuse her to frighten the Emperor. She was young and giddy, and accepted with enthusiasm. He then told her that at the next fancy ball that was going to take place at the Naval Office, the Sovereigns were to attend as the guests of the Marquis and the Marquise de Chasseloup Laubat. The lady was to approach Napoleon and to whisper in his ear the name of an Italian then in Paris, and to remind Napoleon of an interview he had had with him in a small inn near Perugia. No explanations were given to the lady, and she never asked for any, but when the ball took place she managed to approach the Emperor, who was present in a domino, and to murmur in his ear the phrase given her, without, it must be owned, attaching any special importance to it. Napoleon's face became white, and, seizing her hand, he asked her, in an agitated voice, to tell him from whom she had obtained this information. The Countess was terrified, and replied that a domino had whispered it to her during the ball. The Emperor plied her with questions, but to no purpose, as his extreme emotion had put her on her guard. Two days later, to her surprise, she was invited to dine at the Tuileries. When the meal was over, the Empress, who had been unusually gracious, called her to her side, and taking care no one should hear them, asked her to explain from whom she had heard the incident to which she had alluded during her conversation with the Emperor, at the ball of Madame de Chasseloup Laubat. The Countess, though taken quite unawares, persisted in her assurance that she did not know the domino who had imparted it to

her; that she was now very sorry for heedlessly repeating words to which she had attached no importance. Eugénie pressed her again and again, and at last exclaimed with impatience, as she rose from her chair: "People like to be asked to the Tuileries, but do not seem to consider that it is a grievous want of tact to hold converse with the enemies of the Sovereign whilst doing so." "And," added the Countess when she related to me this anecdote, "from that moment I was watched at every step by the secret police, and to this day I do not know why I was chosen as the instrument to deal such a blow to Napoleon III."

I have related this anecdote to prove how very much the Emperor dreaded all that related to his first steps in political life, under the patronage of the Carbonari and other secret associations that were working towards the unification of Italy. He did not feel himself a free agent in that respect; no one knew exactly why, because he never expressed himself on the subject—but it is certain that some of the most unexpected things he did had their source in this mysterious influence which made him appear to be more or less averse to thwarting the desires of his former Italian friends.

Napoleon was not brilliant by any means; but he was certainly clever, though sometimes lacking in initiative. It is not likely that he would ever have had the courage either to escape from Ham, or to overthrow the second Republic, had he not been emboldened in the first of these attempts by Conneau, and in the second by Morny and Fleury, together with the active Maupat. He lived under the spell of the Napoleonic tradition, and being before everything else a fatalist, he thought himself destined to ascend the throne which his uncle had conquered. He never fought against destiny, and so acquired an apathy which totally unfitted him for any unexpected struggle. At Sedan he surrendered with hardly a murmur, as, though he well knew the step to

be a fatal one, he had tolerated MacMahon's fatal occupation of that fortress. He had lost all faith in his future, and he had given up the game long before he handed his sword to the conqueror.

The Emperor's was essentially a kind nature. During the eighteen years of his reign he did an enormous amount of good, and certainly France owes to him a good deal of her present prosperity. He thought about his people's welfare more than had any previous Sovereign; the economic question was one to which he had given his most earnest attention. He wanted his country to be strong, rich, an example to others in its energetic progress along the path of material and intellectual development. He was a lover of art; he was a keen student, an admirer of literature; and he appreciated clever men. Catholic in his tastes, he had the rare faculty of forgetting the wrongs done to him, in the remembrance of the many proofs of affection he had experienced. Gifted with a sweet and sunny temperament, he had been brought up in the school of adversity. Amidst all the grandeur that he enjoyed later on, he never forgot the lesson; and when misfortune once more assailed him, he was never heard to murmur, or to reproach those whose incapacity had destroyed his life's work.

Socially, Napoleon never forgot that the first duty of a monarch is ever to appear to be amiable. Whenever he swerved from that axiom it was always for some very good reason. He had great tact, and possessed to perfection the art of invariably saying the right thing in the right place. Yet he knew very well how to differentiate between persons, and to accord the exact shade of behaviour towards an Ambassador or to an Attaché, to a simple tourist, or to a foreign personage entrusted with a mission of some kind.

He was entirely interesting in all his remarks, and always conversant with the subject about which he spoke^[19]. Though he had pretensions to scientific and historical knowledge, he was not at all a well-read man in the strict sense; but he had a wonderful faculty of assimilating all that he read, and after having quickly run through a book, was at once acquainted with its principal points or defects. Sceptical in his appreciations, and perhaps in his beliefs, he had the utmost respect for the convictions of his fellow creatures, and though by no means a religious man, revered religion deeply. His faults and errors, in the political sense, proceeded more from the influence of his immediate entourage than from his own appreciation of right and wrong. In many things he deserves to be pitied, and in many of his mistakes he was the scapegoat of those who threw their blame upon his shoulders—a blame that either from indifference or from disdain he accepted without a murmur.

Paradoxical as it may seem to say so, he knew humanity, but not the people with whom he lived. He never expected gratitude, and yet he believed that the men upon whom he had showered any amount of benefits would feel grateful to him. To the last hour of his life he thought that his dynasty had some chance to recover the throne; and he remained convinced of the fidelity of his partisans in spite of the many proofs that he had to the contrary. His many illusions proceeded from the kindness of his nature, a kindness that never failed him, either in prosperity or in disaster.

I was introduced to Napoleon III. at Compiègne. I had been invited there, together with the Russian Ambassador, in the course of the month of November that had followed upon my appointment in Paris. We assembled before dinner in what was called the Salle des Gardes, a long apartment panelled in white, to which a profusion of flowers, scattered

everywhere, gave a homely look. We were a very numerous company, and it was on that evening I became acquainted with many leading stars in the Imperial firmament. We did not have to wait long before a door was opened and an *huissier* called out in a loud voice: "L'Empereur!"

The Sovereigns entered the room, the Empress slightly in front, Napoleon following her with the Princess Clotilde on his arm. He began at once to talk with the members of the Corps Diplomatique, whilst his Consort approached the ladies gathered together at one end of the vast hall. When my Ambassador presented me, Napoleon asked me whether I was the son "of the lovely Countess Vassili" he had known in London, and when I replied to him in the affirmative he at once began to talk about my mother, and the many opportunities he had had to meet her. "I am glad to see you here," he added, "and I hope you will enjoy your stay in France."

The Empress on that day, when I beheld her for the first time, did not strike me as so absolutely beautiful as I had been led to expect. Later on I found out that her greatest attraction was in the varying charm of her expressive face. The features were quite lovely in their regularity, but a certain heaviness in the chin robbed them of what otherwise would have been absolute perfection. The mouth had a curve which told that on occasion the Empress could be very hard and disdainful, but the eyes and the hair were glorious, the figure splendid, and she had an inimitable grace in her every movement. With the exception of the Empress Marie Feodorovna of Russia, I have never seen anyone bow like Eugénie, with that sweeping movement of her whole body and head, that seemed to be addressed to each person present in particular and to all in general. On that particular evening she was a splendid vision in evening dress. Her white shoulders shone above the low bodice of

her gown, and many jewels adorned her beautiful person. But though she excited admiration she did not at first appeal either to the senses or to the imagination of men. At least, so it seemed to me, whatever might have been said to the contrary. Later on, however, when one had opportunity to see her more frequently, and especially to talk with her, her personality grew upon one with an especial charm that has never been equalled by any other woman. She was not brilliant; she held strong opinions; she was very much impressed by her position, though, it must be owned, not in the least dazzled by her extraordinary success; she was impulsive; she was not overwhelmingly tactful; had much knowledge of the world, but little knowledge of mankind; she wounded sometimes when she had no intention of doing so; she was romantic, though unsentimental; there were the strangest contradictions in her nature, the strangest mixtures of good and bad; but with all her defects she completely subjugated those who got to know her, whatever might have been the first impression. Her glances had something of Spanish softness blended with French coquetry. In a word, she was a most attractive woman—one of the most attractive that has ever lived—but she certainly was not an ideal Sovereign.



EMPRESS EUGÉNIE

When Eugénie married she was already twenty-seven, and therefore it was not easy for her to become used to the various duties and obligations of her new position. She was a thorough woman of the world, which rendered her especially charming when at Compiègne or at Fontainebleau, where etiquette was not so strict as at the Tuileries. At those moments she was positively bewitching, but when she thought it necessary to assume her Imperial manner she lost her womanly charm.

There have been many beautiful moments in Eugénie's life; such, for instance, as her famous visit to Amiens at the time

the cholera was raging there, and when, with a truly royal indifference, she exposed herself to very real and serious danger. She was charitable, and preferred not to boast of her charities; but, not possessing the Emperor's disposition, she resented injuries done to her. She was impetuous in all that she did, thought, or felt; certainly bigoted and superstitious, as Spaniards generally are. She was not courageous, though brave, because these are two very different things. She would not have minded being murdered in state, and the memory of the deed being handed down to posterity; but she could not find the resolution to face an intricate situation, nor to remain silent and firm at a difficult moment. Her nature was essentially restless; she could never wait with patience for what the future might hold. Her attitude on the 4th of September was characteristic, and it was in accordance with her nature that she tried to explain the abandonment of her position as Regent by the word "necessity," when, in reality, it was the shrinking of a lonely woman, with no one near her to tell her what she ought to do, or to show her how to resist the demands of the mob.

But once more I must say she exercised a wonderful fascination on all those whom she entertained. There was something remarkable in the influence she exercised. In her presence one forgot all save her extraordinary charm.

In her private life Eugénie de Montijo, in spite of all that has been said and written on that subject, has always been irreproachable. Amid all the gaieties of the Court over which she presided she remained pure and chaste, and redeemed the many frailties of her outward demeanour by the dignity and blamelessness of her existence as a wife and mother. She bitterly resented the indiscretions of the Emperor, but she kept herself aloof from everything that could have been construed as a desire on her part to retaliate. Perhaps her

temperament helped her; but it is certain that as a wife she was blameless, and that she showed herself an enlightened mother, trying to bring up her son above the flatteries that usually surround children born in such a high position, teaching him to obey, to be grateful to those who took care of him, and loving him quite as well and more wisely than the Emperor, who was perhaps too indulgent in matters which concerned his only son. That the Prince Imperial remained an only child was a source of deep grief to Napoleon III.

When first I saw Eugénie, her whole appearance was fairy-like; in spite of her forty years, she eclipsed all other women. Her slight, graceful figure was almost girlish in its suppleness, and she is the only woman I have ever seen who, though in middle life, did not prompt one to utter the usual remark when lovely members of the fair sex have attained her age: "How beautiful she must have been when she was young!"

CHAPTER II

The Surroundings and Friends of the Sovereigns

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When Napoleon III. married, he tried to establish his Court on the same footing as that of his uncle after the latter's union with Marie Louise, and fearing that, in spite of his affection, his young wife would find it hard to get used to her exalted position, he surrounded her with the trammels of a severe etiquette. From this, however, she gradually emancipated herself, especially during the time when she acted as Regent for the Emperor, at the period of the war of 1859 with Austria[3].

This emancipation was in itself a curious phase. In her way Eugénie was just as anxious as the Emperor to order her household upon the same lines as those of the other great Courts of Europe. Especially with that of Windsor she had been deeply impressed, when with the Emperor she visited Queen Victoria. But she was not endowed by nature with that reserved dignity which is a necessity to regal rank, and the result stultified her efforts. The Empress, when a girl, had enjoyed far more liberty than girls had at the time of which I am writing. This lack of control led her sometimes to forget her rank as Empress, and she found herself drifting into her old habits of saying everything that occurred to her, or of allowing her sympathies and her antipathies to be seen by a public always eager and ready to criticise.

She had but few friends, and after the death of her sister, the Duchesse d'Albe, she felt very isolated[2q], and in need of one into whose ear she might confide her sorrows and her joys. She did not get on with the members of the Imperial

Family, and she had been very much hurt at the attitude taken up in regard to her by the Princess Clotilde^[4]. Eugénie had received the Princess with open arms, but had met with repulse from the very first moment Clotilde arrived in France. Then, again, Eugénie's relations with Prince Napoleon became of the worst, perhaps owing to the fact that there had been a day, before her marriage with the Emperor, when those relations were very near. The antagonism towards her which the only cousin of her husband chose to adopt, wounded her to the quick, and instead of trying to overcome it with tact and apparent indifference, she did her best to accentuate his animosity, until open warfare resulted, and the strained situation became a general topic of gossip.

With Princess Mathilde, the sister of the Prince, the Empress was, also, not on intimate terms, although apparently they bore one another affection. The Princess was perhaps the most remarkable among the many fascinating women with whom the Second Empire will remain associated. Surpassingly beautiful in her youth, she retained her good looks, and notwithstanding her *embonpoint*, possessed a personality of great dignity. She was certainly a *grande dame*, despite her numerous frailties.

She was clever, kind, brilliant in more senses than one; very talented, she liked to surround herself with clever people, who, in their turn, were glad to have her appreciation. There had been a time when the question of a marriage between her and her cousin, Prince Louis Napoleon, had been discussed, but the latter's chances were so uncertain, that neither Mathilde nor her father had had the courage to run the risk of uniting her destiny with that of the Pretender.

The Princess married M. Demidoff, and very soon regretted it; so deeply that she tried to break the bonds. Thanks to the

intervention of the Emperor Nicholas of Russia, a separation was arranged under very favourable terms for Madame Demidoff, who, by permission of the government of Louis Philippe, settled in Paris. She did not mix with politics, and only tried to create for herself a pleasant circle of acquaintances and friends. Unfortunately, she possessed in addition to a superior and cultivated mind, a very ardent temperament, and gossip soon became busy with her name, especially after her liaison with Count de Nieuwekerke became a recognised fact.

When the Revolution of 1848 brought back to France the heir to the Bonaparte traditions, the Princess Mathilde at once hastened to his side, and showed herself to be the best of friends. It was the Princess Mathilde who presided at his first entertainment at Compiègne, as well as at the Elysée, where he was residing when in the capital, and it was at her house that the Prince President, as he was called, met for the first time the lovely Spaniard who was later to become his wife.

The Princess Mathilde did not like the marriage, in view of the fact that she might have occupied the place which this stranger took, as it were by storm; she would hardly have been human had she done so. But she was far too clever to show her disapproval, and it is related that when the question arose as to who should carry the train of the new Empress, Mathilde at once declared that she would do so if the Emperor asked her, much to the astonishment and perhaps to the scandal of those who heard her. She bore no malice, and thought herself far too great a lady to imagine that by whatever she might do she would fall in the estimation of others, or that it would be derogatory to her position.

But though she consented to receive the future wife of her cousin when first she entered the Tuileries, and though she tried hard to establish friendly relations with her, all her efforts failed, partly because the young Empress felt afraid of the brilliant Princess, and of her sharp tongue and brusque manners, partly, also, because Mathilde did not care for the people who formed the entourage of the Sovereign, and never felt at her ease at the many entertainments given by Eugénie. She thought them either too dull or too boisterous.

Mathilde was never so happy as when in her own house in the Rue de Courcelles, where all that was distinguished in France considered it an honour to be admitted, and where she could live the life of a private lady of high rank. She was too frank to conceal what she felt, and too honest to flatter the Empress, or to find charming what she considered to be the reverse. Though she disapproved of many things that her brother, Prince Napoleon, did, she did not care to blame him publicly, and thus she maintained a neutral attitude in regard to both. Eugénie's airy disposition and love of amusement in any shape or form prevented her from finding pleasure in the company of the Princess Mathilde, whom she thought exceedingly dull, and whom she accused of fomenting the accusations which her enemies showered upon her. So long as the Empire lasted there was no sympathy between the Empress and her husband's cousin, and it was only later, when both ladies had realised the emptiness of worldly things, that their relations became intimate and affectionate, so much so that when Mathilde Bonaparte died, it was Eugénie who watched beside her, and whose hands were the last she pressed before expiring.

The best friend that the Empress Eugénie had among the members of the Imperial Family was the Princess Anna Murat, who married the Duke of Mouchy, to the horror of all

the Noailles family, and the chagrin of the Faubourg St. Germain generally. Princess Anna was one of the loveliest women of her time, though perhaps not one of the brightest. Still, she had a warm heart, a kindly disposition, and a sincere attachment for the Empress. She had very nice dignified manners, if sometimes stiff, and was perhaps the only really *grande dame*, with the exception of the Princess Mathilde, among the many ladies with whom Eugénie liked to surround herself.

Very much might be said about the ladies of the Court. There were lovely women, such as the Countess Valovska, née Anna Ricci, the dark Florentine, whose smiles won her so many hearts, including that of Napoleon III.; others were clever like Pauline Metternich, and some were both lovely and clever, Mélanie Pourtalès for instance, that star of the Empire who condescended later to shine in the Republican firmament, and who to this day is one of the celebrities of Paris, in spite of her seventy odd years. There was the Duchesse de Persigny, and the Duchesse de Cadore, and the Baroness de Rothschild, and many others, but among them all the Empress could not boast of a real friend, always with the exception of the Duchesse de Mouchy, who owed her far too much ever to dare criticise anything she did.

I have mentioned the Princess Metternich. Among all those to whose fatal influence the Second Empire owed its fall she holds one of the first and foremost places. She it was who sapped its foundations and lowered its dignity; she it was who with a rude hand pulled back the veil which, until she appeared at Compiègne and at the Tuileries, had still been drawn between the general public and the Imperial Court. Young and ugly, but clever and gifted with what the French call *brio*, she lived but for one thing, and that was amusement in any shape or form. She had no respect for the society in which she found herself, and brought to Paris

an atmosphere of carelessness such as we sometimes display when we find ourselves travelling in a country where we are unknown, and where we can do what we like without fear of the *qu'en dira-t-on*, or, as they say in England, "Mrs. Grundy." After some experience of the strict etiquette of the Austrian Hofburg, she felt delighted to be able to dispense with it, and treated the Empress with disdain, making use of her in order to attain her own ends, and ruling the Tuileries like some of the present great ladies in pecuniary straits rule the houses of the American or South African millionaires whom—for a consideration—they introduce into society. The behaviour of the Princess Metternich can be characterised by her remark to a lady who, at Compiègne, reproved her for trying to induce the Empress to appear in public in a short gown, a thing that was not considered to be proper at the time of which I am writing. The friend asked her at the same time whether she would have advised the Empress Elizabeth to do such a thing; she replied vehemently: "No, certainly not, I would not do such a thing, but then my Empress is a real one."

Pauline Metternich never liked Eugénie; she secretly envied her for her beauty. She encouraged her in every false or mistaken step the Empress unwittingly took. She brought a shade of vulgarity into all the entertainments over which she presided and which she organised. She smoked big cigars without minding in the least whether it pleased the Empress or not, and she allowed herself every kind of liberty, sure of immunity, and careless as to what people thought about her. She showed herself the most ungrateful of beings, forsaking her friend when the latter was precipitated into obscurity and misfortune, never once giving her a thought. Pauline Metternich was a perfect type of an opportunist without a memory, and after having danced, eaten, smoked, enjoyed herself at the Tuileries where she always was a favoured guest, she never once

sent a message of sympathy to the discarded Sovereign, whose acquaintance she probably thought irksome and inconvenient. Once in a moment of expansion, so the story goes, she gave way to a remark which deserves to pass to posterity concerning those years during which she was the leading spirit at all the entertainments given at the Tuileries, and which I cannot help reproducing here: A diplomat who had known her in Paris asked her whether she did not regret the Second Empire, and received a characteristic reply: "Regret it? Why? It was very amusing, very vulgar, and it could not last; we all knew it, and we all made hay whilst the sun shone."

Countess Mélanie Pourtalès, in that respect, was far superior to Princess Metternich; she at least had the decency to remain faithful to her former sympathies and to her Bonapartist leanings. To this day she sees the Empress when the latter visits Paris, and she never indulges in one word of blame concerning that far away time when she also was one of the queens of the Tuileries.

Mélanie de Bussièrès is one of the marvels of last century. As beautiful as a dream, she had an angelic face, lovely innocent eyes, which used to look at the world with the guilelessness of a child, and a Madonna-like expression that reminded one of a long white lily drooping on its stem. She was intelligent, too, had an enormous amount of tact, and succeeded, whilst denying herself none of her caprices, in keeping unimpaired her place in Parisian society, of retaining as her friends all those to whom the world had given another name, and of acquiring a position such as few women have ever had before her. Always kind, rarely malicious, smiling alike on friends and foes, she contrived to disarm the latter, and never to estrange the former. Though very much envied, yet she was liked, and she inspired with enthusiasm all those with whom she was brought into

leading figure in the early Third Republic and served as Prime Minister briefly in 1881–1882.

[37](#) This is Renan's multi-volume work usually known in English as *The Origins of Christianity*. It was influential and controversial because it treated early Christianity as a subject of historical and critical study.

[38](#) Renan's 1863 book *The Life of Jesus* presented Jesus in a historical, non-doctrinal way. It sparked major criticism from religious authorities and many readers.

[39](#) This refers to the 16 May 1877 political crisis in the French Third Republic, when President Marshal MacMahon dismissed his republican prime minister Jules Simon and dissolved the Chamber of Deputies. It became a major confrontation between monarchists/conservatives and republicans.

[40](#) Henri, Count of Chambord, was the Bourbon claimant to the French throne after the fall of the monarchy in 1870. His refusal to accept the republican tricolor flag helped derail plans for a royal restoration.

[41](#) A historic café in Paris that, by the 19th century, was known as a meeting place for writers and political radicals. The passage uses it to situate Gambetta among young opponents of the Empire.

[42](#) A French term meaning "revenge" or "retaliation," often used in this period for the idea of recovering from France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian War. Here it refers to the desire to reverse the loss of 1870, especially against Germany.

[43](#) Georges Ernest Boulanger (1837–1891) was a French army general and politician whose popularity in the late

1880s briefly raised fears of a coup or authoritarian takeover. His movement, known as Boulangism, collapsed after he fled France rather than seize power.

[44](#) The Franco-German War (1870-1871) was the conflict in which Prussia and its German allies defeated France. Its outcome led to the loss of Alsace-Lorraine and influenced French politics for decades, including revanchist sentiment mentioned in the chapter.

[45](#) A French expression meaning bribes or kickbacks, literally “bottles of wine.” Here it refers to corrupt payments allegedly associated with political dealings.

[46](#) Ferdinand de Lesseps (1805-1894) was the French diplomat and engineer best known for organizing the Suez Canal project. In this chapter he is presented as a leading figure in the failed Panama Canal enterprise.

[47](#) Sadi Carnot was President of the French Republic from 1887 until his assassination in 1894. His murder by the Italian anarchist Sante Geronimo Caserio shocked France and helped trigger a presidential succession.

[48](#) This refers to the assassination of President Sadi Carnot by Sante Caserio in Lyon on 24 June 1894. Caserio was an Italian anarchist who attacked Carnot with a knife during a public appearance.

[49](#) This refers to the 1891 visit of the French navy to Kronstadt, the Russian naval base near St. Petersburg. The visit was an important step in the Franco-Russian rapprochement that later became the Franco-Russian Alliance.

[50](#) Félix Faure was President of France from 1895 to 1899, during the period when the Franco-Russian alliance was

developing. He is also remembered for the controversy surrounding his death in 1899.

[51](#) Nicholas II was the last Emperor (Tsar) of Russia, reigning from 1894 until his abdication in 1917. In this chapter, his 1896 visit to Paris is presented as a major diplomatic and symbolic event.

[52](#) The Quai d'Orsay is the riverside location in Paris where France's Ministry of Foreign Affairs is based. By extension, the phrase often refers to French diplomatic policy or the Foreign Ministry itself.

[53](#) Here "the Academy" means the Académie française, the elite body that oversees the French language and admits a limited number of members. Membership has long been a major literary and social honor in France.

[54](#) A major corruption scandal in the 1890s involving the failed French Panama Canal company and alleged bribery of politicians and journalists. It badly damaged public trust in the Third Republic.

[55](#) A political and legal crisis in France beginning in 1894 after Captain Alfred Dreyfus was wrongly convicted of treason. It split French society for years over issues of anti-Semitism, justice, and the army's authority.

[56](#) A penal colony off the coast of French Guiana, used by France to imprison some convicts and political prisoners. Captain Alfred Dreyfus was exiled there after his conviction in the first court-martial.

[57](#) A formal military degradation ceremony in which an officer was stripped of rank and insignia before punishment or dismissal. In Dreyfus's case, it referred to the public humiliation that followed his conviction.

[58](#) This refers to the public controversy surrounding the Dreyfus Affair in France, especially intense in the 1890s and early 1900s. It divided political opinion, the press, and society over the wrongful conviction of Captain Alfred Dreyfus.

[59](#) Marie-Thérèse Geoffrin (1699-1777) was a famous Paris salonnière of the eighteenth century. Her salon became a model for educated social and literary gatherings in French cultural history.

[60](#) A structured hoop skirt worn over petticoats, popular in women's fashion in the mid-19th century. The author uses its disappearance as a marker of changing social manners.

[61](#) The political regime of Napoleon III in France, lasting from 1852 to 1870. In the chapter, it serves as a reference point for an earlier social world the author sees as more refined.

[62](#) A major French financial scandal of the 1890s involving the failed Panama Canal company and alleged corruption and bribery. It became a symbol of financial dishonesty and political scandal in the Third Republic.

[63](#) A major political and legal scandal in France (1894-1906) centered on the wrongful conviction of Captain Alfred Dreyfus for treason. It deeply divided French society over issues including justice, nationalism, and antisemitism.

[64](#) The lower house of the French parliament under the Third Republic (1870-1940). It was one of the main elected chambers where governments were debated and formed.

[65](#) Arthur Meyer (1844-1924) was a French journalist and publisher, best known as the longtime director of the