

THE ASPASIA OF THE "FIRST EMPIRE."

The death of the Countess Leon, Countess de Luxembourg, once the glass of evil fashion and the mould of immortal form, has been regarded as an event during the week, perhaps for want of a better. The history of the lady would be possessed of no greater element of interest than that already usurped by one of two of the sisterhood, were it not that she enjoyed the additional privilege of having been proclaimed "The second Empress of the first empire!" Denelle Leonie Laplaigne, who has just died in obscurity, was once, indeed, the second lady in the land. Her story belongs to its own time, and has sought to do with ours, and must, therefore, be judged according to the standard by which we are wont to measure the heroines of the novels of that day.

The great Napoleon had his little moments like ordinary mortals, and in one of these he consented to honor the establishment he had founded at St. Denis for the daughters of the members of the Legion of Honor, and of which he had just made the highly respectable Madame Campan the lady President. The visit was made upon a solemn occasion. The hero had just returned from one of his great campaigns, and all honor was to be exhibited toward the victor. And when he entered the great gates and beheld the immense colonnade all lined with fair young girls attired all in white, each holding a wreath of laurel to be thrown at his feet, instead of the frowny old monks, armed with their brown old breviaries, for whom all this rare marble and chiselled stone had been invested in the origin, it cannot create wonder that his heart should have been moved, and that it should have been opened to the first soft impression which offered. This was soon produced, for at the end of the colonnade there stood the fairest girl of all, chosen by cunning old Campan for her grace and beauty, holding in her uplifted hands a crown of fresh green laurel just cut from the bushes in the garden. This crown was to be dropped upon the bust of the great man, all gilt, as he drew near; but whether the fair girl had not sufficiently well rehearsed her part, or whether she had rehearsed it too well, is not known; but instead of performing the movement according to the programme, the beautiful Leonie remained, as if transfixed, with her arms extended, showing their beautiful rounded form to the best advantage, and her complexion displaying the most dazzling tints beneath the fresh green laurel wreath. Little recked the hero at that moment of all the homage to his fame and glory to be exhibited by the girls of Saint Denis. He gazed upon the beautiful Leonie for a moment, while she sank at his feet, as if in confusion at the complete fiasco she had made of the scene prepared beforehand. Madame Campan's tact and cleverness, besides her entire devotion to the Bonapartes, sharpened her sagacity; and soon after the lovely Leonie Laplaigne had disappeared from St. Denis, and was transplanted to the genial regions of the Chaussee d'Antin.

The functions of the new favorite were not confined to the mere task of pleasing her master, but she was deemed a fitting instrument to assist in the great work then going forward. She must be employed to receive the secondary class of diplomats, whose presence would not be desirable at the Tuilleries, and who, nevertheless, must not be permitted to clamor for amusement. Let the Countess Leonie, therefore, be permitted to spend as much as ever she may choose upon her suppers and receptions. Remember that they are given by me, and are intended to represent a far greater value than ten fold their cost. And thus was Leonie Laplaigne placed in a position of the most dazzling brilliancy—more responsible than that of the Empress herself, her diamonds most brilliant, and her attractions to her salon much greater. She had given birth to a son, which circumstance to a woman of any ambition or genius would have opened a new horizon; but Leonie was unfortunately weak and frivolous, caring for nothing but the passing moment, and was through her career of mad extravagance without one thought of the morrow, until the downfall of her Imperial lover drove her into obscurity, into which she sank deeper and deeper still, until we find her dying of actual privation—self-imposed. It is true, for the Second Empire which found her in want had generously accorded her a pension sufficient for her maintenance. But the lesson taught by adversity had acted upon her weak mind with such intensity that the dread of starvation had seized upon her imagination and become the *idea fixe* in which she indulged. After the reckless expenditure of her youth the abject poverty of her old age conveyed a moral which possesses some value.

Her son, known by the name of Count Leon, shares with Count Walewski the honor of being the acknowledged offspring of the great Napoleon. The likeness he bears to his Imperial father is so striking, that he has more than once been accosted in the street by artists who, presuming upon his ragged appearance, having imagined that he would be happy to earn a living by a model for the battle pieces always in hand for the Government. It is not long since intrigues of the Tuilleries were anxious to set up a rival against the intrigues of the Palais Royal, but they found the Count impracticable. He had quarreled with the dynasty in 1852, had set himself up as a Republican candidate for the election at St. Denis, where he resides, and had hinted in his *profession de foi* at the possibility of being named as President of the Republic. Of course at this pretension the embryo Emperor expressed himself thoroughly disgusted, and, declining all further communication with his degenerate cousin, left him to the obscure fate for which it is but too apparent he was intended. The Count, turned misanthrope, lives in a village on the banks of the Canal de l'Oureg, near St. Denis, in a mud hut, like a dethroned monarch of olden time. The gentleman who waited on him to make propositions on the part of the cabal at the Tuilleries on the occasion above alluded to, express themselves greatly shocked at the state of destitution visible in the household arrangements of Napoleon's son; but their condolences were received with defiance by the Imperial Timon, and they were bidden to wait until the host had finished frying the fish for his breakfast, in such very

gruff terms that they scarce had courage enough to fulfill their errand. Perhaps Count Leon had been waiting all these years for this one delicious moment, for it is certain that when the gentlemen unfolded the errand with which they were charged he started forth into a burst of such rude eloquence, so completely in accordance with the wild scene, the low-roofed peasant's hut, the stagnant waters, the denuded state of the whole dwelling, that they rushed from the place, not in fear of the gridiron with which the host pursued them to the gate, but in actual dismay at the sight of all the passion so long pent up in the man's bosom, and which found its vent on this occasion. Nevertheless Count Leon is the Emperor's cousin. His mother was friendly with Queen Hortense, and much of their gay youth was spent together. Overtures have been made to assume the charge of the children of whom no less than five figure in the invitations to the funeral of their grandmother, the Countess de Luxembourg. But the refusal has always been more sharp and peremptory than even that returned to the offers of assistance to himself. "I am a *proletaire*, and so shall my children remain," is all the answer obtained from the obstinate misanthrope; and he goes on feeding the family with the result of his shooting and fishing, while his wife cooks, washes, makes and mends, in order to keep the children decent enough to attend school. Count Leon has been regarded as one of the great thorns in the Emperor's side. His authenticated birth might have rendered him invaluable as an ally against the enemy always supposed to be lying in wait at the Palais Royal, to pounce upon a better lodging place at the Tuilleries. But Timon's grim reception of the idea has completely put it to flight, all the more that the peasants and country folks who remain about St. Denis are not averse to the possibility of their comrade and fellow laborer, Count Leon, becoming one day President of the French Republic after all.

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