



## **History's Greatest Love Affairs**

### **Show 7: Napoleon and Marie Walewska**

Is love at first sight possible? No, even a blind man is susceptible, so maybe love is some kind of fate after all. Is love the soul and the synapses dancing the paso doble to music spun by an all-seeing but uncaring god? Who can say?

For Marie, love was an obligation and little more. Wed at the age of 18 to Count Walewska, an older nobleman, in order to cement a family alliance, she had gone dutifully to matrimony in the Year of Our Lord 1805 and just as dutifully produced an heir two years later. Things like love and passion were the fanciful subjects of stories, ballad by wandering musicians and other amusements best sampled around a fire on a winter's night. They certainly had no place in a society where marital alliances were the stuff of cold-eyed business or politics – the kind of real world things that could protect a family, a dynasty or an empire.

MUSIC

Marie Walewska's Poland in 1806 was an ancient kingdom eternally buffeted between invaders from the west and the east. Prussians, Russians, Cossacks, Swedes and Mongols had all swept across Poland's plains in waves from Germany's dark forests, neighboring states or the unknown vastness of Asia alike. The broad, flat vistas made the land an inviting highway to invading armies. Poland's newest invader led Europe's most feared military machine across her western border, but was welcomed in Poland as a savior.

### SFX Battle Sounds

He arrived after defeating the armies of Poland's aggressive Prussian neighbors in a stunning and bloody victory in October of that year. In December, the prevailing winds had seemed to blow the conqueror's armies across the plains, from the faraway revolution of France through this ancient land and onward towards Poland's hereditary enemies in Russia to the east.

### SFX MARCHING

The man history would know as Napoleon Bonaparte had stormed through Europe at the head of the armies of the French Revolution, toppling the old monarchies and announcing a new world where ability, not ancestry, would determine the elite. Those monarchies which remained became implacable enemies.

Poland, currently menaced by an invading army of Cossack cavalry sweeping in from Asia, had urgently appealed to the French for protection and a guarantee of their independence as a nation supported by France's military might and its conquering firebrand. The ruling powers hoped to ally themselves with the hero of the hour to avoid bending the knee to the Russian Tsar.

Marie, all of 20 by now and eager for a glimpse of the man the entire continent spoke of, joined a cheering throng who greeted the lion of France as he entered Warsaw. When Napoleon's carriage approached Marie's location, the crowd surged forward to see him and she was

swept off her feet, carried along by the press of the crowd.

## SFX Crowd

She was in danger of being swept underfoot and trampled when she was rescued by a French officer, who then presented her to the man in the carriage with the remark "Sire - Look at the beauty who would brave the crowd to get a glimpse of you."

Napoleon and Marie shared a long and strangely silent stare until she broke the spell by stammering "*Be welcome, a thousand times welcome to our country. Nothing that we could do would express strongly enough either our admiration for you personally or the pleasure we have in seeing you set foot on the land which expects you to reestablish it....*" Smiling wanly, he offered her a bouquet which was sitting on the seat beside him. 'Keep it as a pledge of my good intentions; I hope that we shall see each other in Warsaw and that I shall receive a thank-you from your beautiful mouth.'" His carriage was then spurred on towards his conquering hero's welcome, leaving a dazed Marie to make her way home.

## MUSIC

Marie and her husband, Count Walewska, will shortly see the French general again at a formal ball, where Napoleon's interest in the Countess Walewska is so blatant that it attracts the attention of the hard-eyed men who control Poland. She manages to leave the gala with her marriage and her honor intact, but not for lack of effort on the French conqueror's part.

## MUSIC UNDERSCORE

Marie's conquest of the conqueror becomes the talk of Warsaw literally overnight. Privately, both her closest friends and a group of Polish noblemen implore the Countess to consider their country's plight. Pressed on all sides by invaders, Poland must turn to seduction when the saber proves unequal to the job. She is obviously able to exert influence over the French general. Will she take him as a lover in

order to have the shield of his armies drawn between Poland and the invading Cossacks?

Daily, sometimes hourly, his couriers deliver his letters to Marie. "Ah! grant a few moments' pleasure and happiness to a poor heart that is only waiting to adore you." "I saw no one but you, I admired no one but you, I want no one but you." "What can satisfy the needs of a smitten heart, which longs to throw itself at your feet, but is held back by the weight of serious considerations, paralyzing its keenest desires? Oh, if only you would!..."

She stalls for time. The French emperor's appetites and dalliances are well known. She knows he has a woman in Paris and heard rumors of another in Italy. He is the most powerful man in Europe, with all the license which that status allows and the reputation it courts. Still, if it means saving her poor homeland from the hated Russian Cossacks, shouldn't she consider him? Her husband's feelings in the matter don't occur to her any more than hers occurred to him when he came to claim his child bride and he fades from our story at this point.

## MUSIC

Napoleon Bonaparte, agent of radical reform while serving the French Revolution, has justly earned a reputation as a giver of laws and taker of lives. Now grown into a born-again monarchist who literally crowns himself Emperor of the French, he has swept across Europe's borders into Poland at the head of an Imperial army. He has earned his reputation as a conqueror in both bedroom and battlefield, alternately titillating and terrorizing 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe.

## MUSIC

Marie is young and beautiful, but hardly sophisticated enough to swim in these waters. Her husband, her friends and her family apply pressure to the simple country girl. She has little defense against this

pressure from quarters both near and far while she tries to cope with the fact that the most powerful man in Europe desires her to this degree.

Attending a dinner function at which Bonaparte is present, Marie's attention is drawn by the Emperor, who meets her eyes with an enigmatic gaze. During the mingling of guests at the dance afterwards, she is surrounded by friends, family and complete strangers.

*"He never even saw any of US. His eyes were all for YOU! They flashed fire as he looked at you" said some. "You have conquered his heart," others said, "and you can do what you like with him. The salvation of Poland is in your hands."*

Marie's journal entries make clear that she found patriotism more compelling than the Emperor's personal charm: *"The sacrifice was complete. It was all about harvesting fruit now, achieving this one single equivalence which could excuse my debased position. This was the thought that possessed me. Ruling over my will it did not allow me to fall under the weight of my bad consciousness and sadness."*

She is swayed when Napoleon's aide, General Duroc, delivers a message aimed directly at her heart:

*"There are times when all splendors become oppressive, as I feel but too deeply at the present moment. How can I satisfy the desires of a heart that yearns to cast itself at your feet, when its impulses are checked at every point by considerations of the highest moment? Oh, if you would, you alone might overcome the obstacles that keep us apart. My friend Duroc will make all easy for you. Oh, come, come! Your every wish shall be gratified! Your country will be dearer to me when you take pity on my poor heart. N."*

Touched that a man with the reputation of a conqueror came to her as a supplicant, she gathers her composure along with her pen and sends him the answer he – and those around her – so desperately seek.

## MUSIC

The Emperor's personal life was....complicated. His relationship with Josephine, his first wife and partner in his labors, Marie could do nothing about. Driven by conspiracies, possessed of formidable secrets and appetites but ultimately unable to bear the Emperor an heir, Josephine was eventually divorced by the Emperor. The quest for an heir to what was, by now, an imperial throne became a priority for the French Empire and the Emperor's bedchamber a focus of talk, espionage, self-interest and political maneuvering across the a large part of the planet.

Aristocratic alliances were offered to the Emperor of France, blood ties which were richer prizes than the hand of the wife of a minor house in faraway Poland. Marie, who entered this relationship with Napoleon as a matter of patriotism, ended by falling in love with the master of Europe for his own sake. His ardor, and the fact that she could bring the great general to his knees before her, both made a bid for her favor.

## MUSIC

After ending his marriage to Josephine, a subsequent marriage of state between the Emperor and Archduchess Marie Louise of Austria caused our Marie less distress than might be imagined. Married off herself to one of the richest families in Poland at a young age, familial alliances were an accepted part of Marie's landscape. It was, after all, a marriage of state and need not be one of the heart.

## MUSIC

Marie's relationship with the Emperor tended to follow a familiar pattern with late night visits from a troop of dragoons with an Imperial carriage. A moment for her servant to pack her belongings, a hasty cloak thrown over her shoulders and she was whisked through the night to whatever palace or hunting lodge was closest to the Emperor's route of march with his armies. Beset by enemies on all sides by now, the Emperor and his armies were frequently on the

march and Marie's opportunities to see him were as uncertain as his political fortunes.

Tellingly, Marie made no demands on Napoleon for money or time. In a famous incident, Napoleon had sent her a love letter accompanied by several Moroccan leather cases full of diamonds. She returned the diamonds to him but kept the love letter. Such was her pleasure and such was their relationship – she remained her own woman. She might have been Poland's servant but she would not make herself anyone's employee.

#### MUSIC AND BABY CRYING SFX

Marie eventually bore the Emperor a fine baby boy named Alexander, who was his only son who lived to manhood and who easily became Napoleon's favorite child. Bonaparte settled honors, income and a place in court life upon Marie in Paris while he went about the business of establishing both empire and dynasty.

Napoleon's eventual defeat before the combined armies of four nations at Leipzig in 1813 and his subsequent exile to a remote island did not extinguish the love Marie bore Napoleon. The other women in his life except his sister and mother abandoned him when he fell from power but not Marie Walewska. She even arranged to visit him on his island prison of Elba with their son Alexander. Contemporary sources speculate that the visit was solely about money and position for their son. Given the difficulty involved in making a secretive midnight visit to what was an island prison, we tend to think there was more involved than money. We can only guess at Bonaparte's appreciation for this beautiful and faithful woman who apparently truly loved him under any conditions and in spite of himself.

#### MUSIC

Restlessly, the conqueror in exile paced a path which brought him back to power from his remote island prison in 1814. In less than a tumultuous year's time, Napoleon had returned to France, reclaimed his throne, raised an army and been defeated at the Battle of

Waterloo in 1815. The victorious Duke of Wellington characterized that battle as "the nearest run thing you ever saw in your life." Close-run as the thing might have been, the conqueror had become the conquered for what would be the last time.

## MUSIC

Napoleon was exiled, this time to the distant island of St. Helena. Both Bonaparte and Marie knew that he would not be allowed to live for long – the allied powers could not risk that he might escape again. She sadly waved farewell from dockside when a British warship took him away for what they both knew to be the last time.

## MUSIC UNDERSCORE

Disconsolate, in September of 1816 Marie married a first cousin of Napoleon. Perhaps she sought the closest thing she could find to the man she loved, although that is sheer speculation. When she died in childbirth in 1817, the name "Napoleon" was reportedly the last word upon her lips.

After death, her heart was removed and placed in a crypt in the famous Pierre Lachaise cemetery in Paris while her body was returned to Poland. A patriot and a Pole to the last she might be, she still left her heart as close to Napoleon as she physically could while returning what he hadn't conquered to her native soil.

## MUSIC

Theirs was not a perfect relationship and was beset by all the human frailties two imperfect souls could bring to bear. As a young and still beautiful noblewoman, a heroine in her native country, she might have made different of her life than to be a footnote to the life of another. The fact remains that she apparently loved him, deeply and sincerely, certainly in spite of his many faults, for the rest of her life.

Napoleon Bonaparte, despite whatever complex mix of faults and motivations that drove him, was a man who deeply craved the love



and attention of other people. Marie Walewska's simple lifelong devotion must have had a large place in his thoughts as he reflected on an empire won and lost, while waiting for death in exile. He died – allegedly from poisoning by his jailers - within a year of Marie's passing.

Presumably, if there is any kind of other life for lovers denied in this life, they are riding together across the plains of Poland still – as they have in this edition of History's Greatest Love Affairs.