

THE PETITPAON ERA
or
WORLD PEACE

I

In the indecisive pallor of dawn, formidable detonations burst forth at multiple points in Paris.

“It’s cannon-fire!” shouted multiple cries from hastily-opened windows, in tones of anguish or joy, in accordance with whether those proffering them were enthusiastic about war or horrified by it.

However, the prospect that some of them were hoping for, and which frightened others, vanished instantaneously; the windows closed again, violently slammed by the bellicose, disappointed by the false alarm, and carefully replaced by the placid, secretly grateful for the brutality of the awakening, which brought a more intense sensation to their quietude.

The artillery salvos, perfectly innocent, simply announced the anniversary of a great event.

A year ago, to the day, the Earth had followed France in the path laboriously prepared by several phases of the Republican government.

The giant charm of the three words *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*, once inscribed, in hours of provocative delirium on the front of monuments, had transformed human nature in its intimate essence; it was a veritable new era that had risen over the world.

International treaties, solemnly agreed, had assured, without it costing the parties present the slightest drop of blood, the solution of differences emerging between nations.

A few emperors or kings, by divine right or brute force, still seated on the worm-eaten thrones of their fathers, had not renounced military ostentation, however, and even France, the glorious heroine of the sublime action universally revered under the name of the Great Revolution, had accepted as preemptory the reason of a moral and economic order invoked in favor of the maintenance of permanent armies.

In every country, in fact, the prestige of the uniform was still so powerful over great ladies and pert young women that the sudden suppression of generals, officers, sergeants, corporals and soldiers would have caused excessively profound perturbations in social mechanics.

An ecumenical congress, in which every temporal power capable of establishing regular jurisdiction over a minimum of a hundred and fifty subjects was represented, had been held in Paris, and, as much out of gratitude for a hostess overflowing with charms as deference to the country that had taken the initiative of the assembly, the members of the congress had unanimously placed exclusively in French hands the care of finding the means to abolish war, while conserving for warriors the integrality of their natural attributions.

The problem was arduous; after the accumulation by the hundreds of unrealizable projects in which the most various cerebral originalities had been given free rein, the President of the Republic had put forward an idea whose simplicity was pure genius.

Before having climbed, one by one, the steps leading to the supreme magistracy, Bernard Petitpaon had been in the theater.¹ The “Or de Perpignan” had generously employed the son of the people to form

¹ The literal meaning of *petitpaon* is “little peacock,” and that might be the author’s intended implication in attributing it to his dubious hero; it is, however, worth noting that the term is most familiar in French with reference to the “*petit paon de nuit*”: the heathland moth *Saturnia pavonia*, known in England as the Emperor Moth, or sometimes as the Small Emperor.

its larynx.² Previously equipped with all the laurels of which the Conservatoire de Musique et de Déclamation can provide for the glory of its most illustrious pupils, Bernard Petitpaon, favored by a renewal of Antique form, had triumphantly baritoned on the greatest stages in the two hemispheres. Then, yielding to the pleas of a southern Minister glad to mark his succession to the Ministry of Fine Arts by a nomination satisfying both his compatriotic duties and the esthetic interests of France, he had descended from his singer's pedestal to preside over the artistic and commercial destiny of the Lyrique Grand-Mondial.

Bernard Petitpaon knew that the functions of director of the Lyrique Grand-Mondial did not consist solely of mounting, in the best possible frame, lyric productions of more or less appreciated vintage. He was aware of the tradition that made ballet the soul of the House, and he dreamed of fusing the soul in question with the soul of France.

With that aim, while conserving for the subscribers a legitimate respect for their fortunes and titles, he opened wide the Eden of the wings to everyone connected with the public powers: ministers, senators, députés, functionaries and influential journalists, stars of all shades and all shapes, invited by him, came into conjunction with the variously colored stars of song and dance.

With a satisfied Olympian eye, Petitpaon attentively followed the variations of curves of tenderness established between the members of his troupe and those of the governmental troupe. An ostentatious handshake, given at the right moment to a cavalier disdained by his lady, immediately re-heightened the fellow's prestige, and Petitpaon, like a cockerel voluntarily descending from the breach, watched the joys of false marriages of which he was the parent blossoming gratefully around him.

One evening, a young député from the Midi to whose heart he had rendered many services, confided in him, in a fit of sincere admiration: "What damage a man like you could do in politics!"

"Yes, that's true!" Petitpaon cried, without making any attempt to put the slightest hint of modesty into his brazen voice. "The fact is that my thoughts have never settled upon a personal political view—but it's an idea, my boy. Thank you! We'll talk about it again."

Bernard Petitpaon did talk about it again, and waited impatiently for the general elections to take, from the young député who had shown him the road to Damascus, his own seat.

Petitpaon entered parliament, the aureole with which the profane are pleased to ornament actors worn with swagger but without any arrogance, and the former director of the Lyrique Grand-Mondial was seen in the corridors of the Chambre, untiringly shaking the hands extended to him; his lowered voice, still thunderous, posed a question that always made the other blush slightly: "Still obliging, the girl?"

The time that public affairs left him, he loved to consecrate to irregular hearths for which he had provided the first spark, and whose flickering flames he reanimated with a tutelary breath, like a vestal.

The amicable frankness of his relations was soon translated, during a Cabinet reshuffle, into the portfolio of Agriculture, which a delegation of different groups in the two Assemblies begged him to accept.

"Agriculture lacks arms? I shall put mine at its service! It's quite natural," Petitpaon had replied, without the slightest hesitation, adding: "Besides which, I once guided a plow! It was in *Cincinnatus*, the opera by Pistonnet."³

Never had France possessed a minister endowed with a similar vocal power. In the four corners of the land, great cities and small towns inconvenienced by inaugurations, agricultural shows and scholarly or patriotic fêtes competed for the sonorous Excellency.

² The phrase "*Or de Perpignan*" [Perpignan gold] is nowadays used more generally in a metaphorical sense, but its original use seems to have been closely connected with the famous Masonic lodge once possessed by the town, which was reputed to be a significant hotbed of Enlightenment thought in the twilight years of the *ancien régime*.

³ Cincinnatus was a Roman military leader and statesman who was recalled in a time of crisis to serve as dictator after retiring to work on his farm, having fallen from favor. He created a startling precedent by resigning his dictatorship once the crisis was over, and thus became an emblem of civic virtue. The opera and its supposed composer are fictitious.

Bernard Petitpaon never declined an invitation; he spent his life under triumphal arches of cardboard and verdure, on stages embellished with tricolor flags and notable indigenes, in decorative corteges of gendarmes, soldiers and foremen; he presided over countless banquets, celebrating with ardor and conviction the benefits of peace, the grandeur of war, the pleasure of being young, the glory of being old and the joy of being French for everyone who is not a foreigner.

Unfailingly, he declared the absolute superiority of the people, livestock and products of the region where he happened to be, and among the citizens there were surges of enthusiasm; as for the women, those of the people, who left to bluestockinged ladies the literature and perverse idea of Pasiphaean love, they compared his male organ to that of a bull.

In the same way that he had resisted the intoxication of his artistic success, Bernard Petitpaon did not allow himself to get drunk on an enormous popularity of excellent quality.

One day, in Perpignan, his cradle, between two members of the Académie des Beaux-Arts, his compatriots and friends, he was occupying the place of honor at a banquet organized to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the foundation of the Syndicate of Turnip Farmers when a coded telegram brought him the news that a coronary embolism had just abruptly robbed the Republic of its President.

An instinctive sign of the cross escaped the right hand of the Minister of Agriculture, who rose to his feet in order to ask the official representatives of the cruciferous vegetable for permission to retire, as a sign of mourning. Forced to give further explanations, an immense clamor responded to him:

“The President is dead! Long live the President!”

Slightly pale for the first time in his life, Petitpaon was not sure that he understood. The chorus of turnip-merchants made it more precise with loud cries of: “Long live Petitpaon! Petitpaon for the Élysée.”

The Grandmaster of Agriculture caused a few tears of emotion to roll down his cheeks, took out his watch and ran to leap on to a train departing for Paris.

Mitrouffe, the President of the Council, who thought himself the natural designate of a vote of the National Assembly, summoned his colleagues in order to render his candidature official. Favored with a mediocre exterior and excellent health; full of illusions regarding his physique, he began by declaring that, in his opinion, France needed a decorative man.

By means of a rapid glance in a mirror, Bernard Petitpaon assured himself that he was, in every respect, the man of that dream.

Mitrouffe continued to enumerate the qualities indispensable to a good President of the Republic, and, throwing into the balance the renown of his invincible health, he desired above all that the man chosen to receive the grantees of this world should be endowed with a good constitution.

“Like that of 1875!”⁴ approved the Minister of Agriculture, toward whom the Cabinet’s ten pairs of eyes turned.

A few seconds of solemn silence went by—a silence that it was Bernard Petitpaon’s prerogative to break with the simple words: “I am the man that France needs.”

Forty-eight hours later, Bernard Petitpaon returned from Versailles in the traditional landau hitched to four horses, two of them mounted by postillions, escorted by artillerymen.

After having accompanied to the Panthéon the mortal remains of his predecessor, the President of the Republic devoted himself body and soul to his duties. He doubled his domestic staff, had the ceremonial carriages repainted, ordered the purchase of horses so large that it was necessary to raise the stable doors in order to let them through, recommended the Service du Protocole to mount guard with jealous care, and demanded that the courtyard of the Élysée be swept every day and washed in the summer.

With a sumptuous ease, Bernard Petitpaon received kings, emperors, a shah, Indian princes and potentates of various colors and extractions, sometimes of vigorous strength, from distant islands and mysterious continents.

⁴ The three fundamental acts establishing the Third Republic in France, which became known as the Constitutional Laws, although they did not constitute a formal Constitution, were passed by the National Assembly in 1875. They were eventually replaced by the Constitution of 1946.

However, a man of Petitpaon's scope could not restrict his functions as the first magistrate of the Republic to foreign affairs alone. He had adopted as his motto: "I think, therefore I act!" and often, in the company of his intimates, he slapped his forehead, saying: "I feel that there's something there!"

The question of world peace came up, bristling with reefs, complicated by difficulties of every sort; diplomats and thinkers of all countries had lost therein the strength of the sturdiest legs, or what remained of their gray matter, when, a new Minerva of whom Petitpaon would have been the Jupiter, peace emerged fully formed from the presidential brain.

Every profession exercised for some time leaves its indelible mark on the body and the mind; in the great circumstances of life, men often seek points of reference and analogical relations in their métier to judge all things. Bernard Petitpaon instinctively thought of what had come of peace and war in the theater. He remembered the evenings when, sword in hand, he had engaged in frantic battles; he recalled the boards of the stage strewn with the dead and wounded; he added up the total of the Philistines that he had slain with the homicidal jawbone of an ass, at the rate of a thousand a time for more than three hundred performances.

However, those horrible carnages had never shed veritable blood. The curtain had scarcely fallen than the dead rose up again, the best places in the distribution of roles responding with bows to the applause, the simple spear-carriers returning to their dressing-rooms to take off their costumes, ready to be killed again tomorrow of the script demanded it.

The President asked himself why it was not the same in what is conventionally called "real life." The response came so rapidly that he only just had time to convene the government.

The Cabinet then had at its head General Croppeton, senator and Minister of War. He it was, therefore, in his double capacity as President of the Council and head of the department most directly interested in the question, that Petitpaon addressed.

"My dear Croppeton, could you give us an exact definition of war?"

Before replying, the general introduced into his mouth almost the entirety of his moustache and beard. A few minutes later, the attributes of his virility reemerged, mingled with fragments of phrases: "War is...is... War is a...a...a necessity. War is..."

"The shame of humanity!" put in the curt and passionate voice of the Minister of Commerce, Pierre Phosphène, who represented the color red in the spectrum of the Council.

"It seems to me that that affirmation, although it does you great honor to proclaim it, might perhaps be qualified as exaggerated," conciliated Arthème Flopinte, the Garde des Sceaux and tutor of Themis.

"It's certainly exaggerated!" agreed Henri Verbuis, Minister of Foreign Affairs.

"It is, however, sustainable," hazarded Charles Mirandet, Minister of the Interior.

"What do you think, Admiral Théhyx?" asked Bernard Petitpaon

"Oh, me, I only think about water. I like that more than anything else, except above my head. I fight when I have to, but I don't insist on doing any more than that."

"Of course—me neither!" added General Croppeton. "Do you think it's agreeable to get yourself killed or crippled for reasons that, three-quarters of the time, no one knows? In spite of everything, though, soldiers ought to love war as children love their mother!"

"She's a fine one, your mother!" howled Pierre Phosphène.

"In any case, I'll ask you not to insult her, Monsieur Mercury!⁵ Do I call you a thief under the pretext, however plausible it might be, that you're the Grandmaster of Commerce? It seems to me, however, that the difference between theft and commerce is merely one of terms!"

"Messieurs, please!" Bernard intervened. "Neither wolves nor ministers should devour one another!"

"That's fair," opined the holder of the national scales.

"So, it's a matter of establishing a plan that permits, as the general so aptly puts it, soldiers to continue to love their mother, and which, at the same time, safeguards the most elementary rights of humanity, to borrow from our colleague Phosphène the key term from his own phrase."

"Choose between barbarity and civilization," snapped the aggressive henchman of Mercury.

⁵ The Roman god Mercury was, among other ministerial functions, the god of the marketplace.

“That intransigence is entirely to your glory,” said Petitpaon, soothingly, “but my dear minister, it’s necessary not to get hung up on words. What are barbarity and civilization if not two sisters—I don’t say twins, since their respective births were separated by an abyss of time, but two sisters—of whom, the elder, is brunette, tragic and strong, while the younger is blonde, delicate and frail. Let’s make a bouquet of them!”

“A bouquet of women!” giggled Abbé Mortol, responsible for agricultural, postal, telegraphic and religious manifestation, hysterically.

“And let’s present the world with a favor in the colors of France!” concluded President Petitpaon.

“It would be a nice gesture!” the four individuals holding the portfolios of Education, Public Works, Finance and the Colonies sighed, admiringly.

“Well, let’s make it! It’s as easy as convincing an egg to stand on end—which contributed as much to the glory of Christopher Columbus as the discovery of America. I declare first of all, that my plan will not involve the slightest prejudice to the soldiers of the armies of land and sea.”

“On their behalf, we thank you,” said General Croppeton and Admiral Théhyx, in unison.

“As for economic interests, collective and individual, they too will be scrupulously safeguarded.”

“That’s admirable!” baaed the eleven voices of the ministerial chapter, simultaneously.

“You’ve said it!” agreed Bernard Petitpaon. “Now listen.”

And in his voice, marvelously adapted to all the degrees of the sonic scale, he read the revelatory monument, inscribed on the back of a visiting card with which he was playing negligently.

“Article One. War is and will remain the argument that nations can and ought to invoke with respect to one another.

“Article Two. Each of them will retain sovereign rule, in number and in specialties, of its manpower as well as the nature and quality of its armaments.

“Article Three. The laws and regulations relative to the exercise of war, whether continental or maritime, will remain in force.

“Article Four. With respect to everything concerning the persons of the belligerents, war will consist purely and simply of theoretical effects.”

The Excellencies applauded, while darting anxious glances at Bernard Petitpaon, who concluded his reading with an “And that’s it!” proclaiming the great simplicity of the resolutions that he had just proposed.

“You must be content, Monsieur Phosphène,” General Croppeton said, going on the attack.

“I don’t know!” confessed the Minister of Commerce, scratching his head in order to launch his riposte. “And you?”

“Me, I find the ideas ripened in the wise and profound brain of our dear and esteemed President are a trifle green for us.”

“Who are blues!” concluded the black-clad man of Agriculture, Posts, Telegraphs and Religion.⁶

“The first three articles are very clear, but the fourth seems to me to be a trifle obscure,” General Croppeton added.

“It is, however, light itself!” said Petitpaon, with a smile.

“I confess that I don’t understand.”

“The most elementary politeness would force me to say I’m astonished by that, if I were convinced that there really were grounds for astonishment. It’s my duty to give you a few clarifications. Thus, as all of you have so admirably understood, I am changing absolutely nothing in what is the very essence of war. As in the heroic centuries, the most glorious epics will unroll their sublime pages; the fields of battle will still...”

“Be fields of carnage—abattoirs!” interjected the brilliant Phosphène

⁶ I have translated “vertes” and “bleues” literally to conserve the wordplay although both are intended metaphorically and both meanings would be gathered under the metaphorical means of “green” in English—the General means it in the sense of unripe or sour, the Abbé in the distinctively French sense of a new or raw recruit.

Bernard Petitpaon winked maliciously. "That's where my article four comes in. I have said that was will be restricted to theoretical effects. Thus, not a drop of blood should redden the international arenas. Let's take an example. Two very extensive enemy armies confront one another, animated by the most ardent patriotic zeal, amply provided with the most improved accessories of combat. Men and horses are ready to rush upon one another at a signal from their leaders, the cannon to roar, scattering amid the crackle of rifle fire and the clash of steel flesh torn from human bodies..."

"I've seen that," General Croppeton testified, courageously.

"The soldiers deploy their standards, utter their rallying cries, and would fight like lions if their officers were not there to demand respect for a discipline that is strictly necessary to arrive at the result that I hope to attain, of supposed steel."

"You talk like a soldier!" sanctioned the Ministers of War and Marine, in chorus.

"I hope so!" Petitpaon granted. "However, I intend to remain a civilian, just as I emerged from my mother's womb. But I shall close this parenthesis..."

"We'll open our ears!" affirmed the scene-setter of Justice.

"Thank you. So, on either side, the belligerents maneuver in accordance with the norms of the strategy most appropriate to the circumstances; all ruses are permissible; brilliant actions retain their place; the field of honor is open!"

"Glory to those who, falling as heroes, die for their fatherland!" cried General Croppeton.

"Exactly!" approved Petitpaon. "But henceforth, the heroes will be content to fall; they will no longer die."

"That won't change them!" Pierre Phosphène groaned.

"Possibly! But at any rate, they'll no longer die," the Head of State went on. "Steel is free to clash, throwing off sparks, but as soon as it encounters a breast it must stop its homicidal momentum dead; the human target will merely be brushed by the tip of the bayonet or the cutting edge of the blade. The dead will be conserved alive, thanks to my system, and the wounded perfectly intact.

"And what of the rifles? And the cannon?" Phosphène shot, aggressively.

"They will fulfill their function!" Petitpaon declared.

"But then...?" said Croppeton and Théhyx, anxiously.

"Then?" the Head of State continued. "Listen: I've told you that it's necessary for my war to conform rigorously to ordinary warfare. Thus, it will have the virtue of international conventions; the engines will be carefully cataloged according to their exact power of destruction. The munitions of all sorts that accompany them will be submitted to very rigorous expertise, as well as a severe accountancy immediately after each war. You understand that it's necessary to render to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to conserve for the soldiers of all nations their true value."

"They'll fire in the air?" suggested Phosphène.

"So that the shells, bullets and machine-gun fire fall back on your heads?" mocked Bernard Petitpaon. "You can't think so, my dear Minister."

"Every instrument of ballistics, like its steel sisters, will only make a mark on its victims?" asked Admiral Théhyx.

"That would evidently be one means," Petitpaon granted, "but its realization seems to me to be very complicated. My presidential sagacity has found something else: cartridges and shells will be absolutely identical to those in use today, and the cost will be the same; it will merely be necessary to enjoin pyrotechnical artificers to place the projectiles behinds the explosive material instead of in front of it. Thus, one will continue to enjoy the odor of powder and the noise of the detonations will remain essentially similar."

"Artillerymen can continue to go deaf?" asked Charles Miraudel.

"If they so please!" concluded the wily Petitpaon, with a smile. "It's now a matter of passing on to the military personnel. It's essential that the most senior general and the humblest private soldier are absolutely equal before the rifles, as they are before death. After each engagement, on the sight of the expenditure on either side of men and munitions, arbiters will establish the outcome of the day and will

calculate, in accordance with ready-reckoners approved by all the countries in the world, the number of dead and wounded.”

“So there will still be some?” queried Pierre Phosphène.

“More than ever,” Petitpaon replied. “But the physicians will have no need to finish off the wounded, and the dead will continue to live in perfect tranquility.”

“I no longer understand,” confessed General Croppeton and Admiral Théhyx, simultaneously.

“It doesn’t matter—you’ll surely understand soon. A capital problem arises here; it’s a matter, in fact, of knowing to whom we should address ourselves in order to individualize the dead and the wounded with all the guarantees of impartiality that such a delicate operation requires.”

“One could appoint a committee,” ventured Charles Miraudel.

“I thought of that,” Petitpaon went on, “but all men have their weaknesses, and it would be highly probable that bias, deriving from political issues or personal ones, would intervene in the question of life or death with regard to a greater or lesser number of citizens enjoying the same rights and subject to similar duties. I deem that it is necessary, above all, to avoid having the lists of dead and wounded drawn up by human hands.”

“If, in his infinite bounty, God would...” Abbé Mortol put in.

“Oh, you can rest easy—he wouldn’t!” Pierre Phosphène interjected, brutally.

“What do you know about it?” replied the man of God.

“Now, now! Don’t start arguing about God in a debate that doesn’t concern him, and in which I, Bernard Petitpaon, have anticipated everything. Is it not to chance, that motor as powerful as it is marvelous, that we ought to address ourselves? Lots will be drawn. Slips will be put into a secret urn bearing the serial numbers of all the officers, superior or subaltern, as well as all the sergeants, corporals and private soldiers of the armies at odds; after the battle, and the verdict of the arbiters, the urn will be brought to the front of the troops; the youngest canteen-waitress in the service of either camp will plunge her innocent hand into the urn...”

“It’s desirable that the waitress should be a virgin,” observed Abbé Mortol, prudishly.

“If you wish!” Petitpaon granted. “So, a virgin waitress plunges her hand into the urn; the emerging numbers first designate the dead, then the wounded!”

“It’s absolutely the same as ancient warfare!” the General and the Admiral proclaimed, in unison.

“The bullets and cannonballs won’t choose,” Croppeton continued.

“It’s a matter of chance!” Théhyx concluded. “Once, a shell carried away my helmet and a lock of hair, and without the luck of...a hanged man, I’d have been killed!”

That indirect allusion to the compensation that fortune had reserved for the Admiral—whose conjugal misfortunes were notorious—made the assembled legislators smile.

“What will become of the dead and wounded?” asked the steward of the Treasury, Thunasol.

“For the dead, it’s quite simple,” Petitpaon explained. “They’re erased from the registers of civil status. They’ll no longer exist, and if people talk about them, it will only be in the past tense. For the wounded, it’s more complicated, for they’ll continue to have the right to take part in the social body to a greater or lesser degree, according to the seriousness of their supposed wounds. Thus, a one-armed man...”

“Will no longer be able to make use of the arm he lacks. That’s obvious!” put in Croppeton.

“And quite natural,” added Admiral Théhyx.

“Will prisoners be taken?” asked General Croppeton.

“Why? There’s absolutely no need. As ardent pioneers of progress, everything that has no intrinsic purpose ought to receive no mercy from us!” said Petitpaon. “But I can’t emphasize too strongly that our new *modus belli* should be considered purely from a public and official angle. The private lives of the dead and wounded, like those of the living, should not be afflicted in any way by the slightest inquisitorial or vexatious imposition.

“Long live liberty!” proclaimed Pierre Phosphène.

“You said it!” sanctioned the President. “We cannot repeat that phrase too frequently, synthetic as it is of all the individual aspirations summoned to melt, for the good of all, into the bosom of common constraint.”

Unanimous applause saluted that brief and significant proclamation. Bernard Petitpaon returned the salute by applauding himself with the ardor of a Roman of the great epoch.

“My dear Verbuis, in your capacity as Minister of Foreign Affairs, it will be up to you to open fire for the realization of this project by skillfully explaining the fundamental points—on which we’re all agreed—to the representatives of the Powers...”

“I request the floor!” interjected Abbé Mortol, lowering his eyes.

“You have it! You have it, my dear Abbé,” granted Petitpaon, promptly.

“The reason with which the Lord had deigned to endow his humble creature causes me to feel the immense weight of the change that will be produced in bodies and souls by the application of purely figurative war. It is for me an unavoidable case of conscience to consult, before forming an opinion on the subject, His Eminence Cardinal Pecari, of whom I am temporarily, as Minister of Religion, the temporal superior, but who nevertheless remains, in his capacity as Archbishop of Paris, my spiritual superior...”

“Act to the advantage of the salvation of your soul!” approved President Petitpaon, rising from his armchair to signify the end of the session.