
Palo Alto's "Mysterious Frenchman"

By MIRIAM ALLEN DEFORD

NO TALE in California history has had stranger diversities than the one about the man who sold to Leland Stanford the land on which he built his university. Why Peter Coutts—or Paulin Caperon, to give him his right name—came to California, why he built his tower and his tunnels in Mayfield, Santa Clara County, what happened to make him sell out and return to France, why he put the property in the name of his children's governess, Eugénie Clogenson, and who she herself "really" was (including a wild guess that she was the Empress Eugénie, incognita)*—all this has been told over and over again, and nearly always inaccurately. Largely this was the fault of Caperon, as he enjoyed mystifying his neighbors. The true story, as interesting, if not so romantic, as the fantasies which have been popular around "the Farm" since its founding, can now be told in detail, the source of information being Marguerite Jeanne Eugénie Caperon (Mrs. Charles E. Berlin), Caperon's own granddaughter and great-niece of Mlle. Clogenson, through marriage of the latter's niece, Ernestine Germaine Clogenson, to Paulin Caperon's son Albert.

Her grandfather, Mrs. Berlin insists, was not "an absconding paymaster of the French army," his tower and tunnels were not built "to withstand a siege by his enemies," and her great-aunt was not an empress. In fact, Caperon would have been the last man on earth to harbor the Empress Eugénie, for he was a voluntary exile because of his bitter opposition to the policy of the Third Empire.

Jean-Baptiste Paulin Caperon was born near Bordeaux, the son of one of Napoleon's officers. His mother, a woman of great acumen and energy, not only ran the estate, which produced fine wine from its own vineyards, but also established on her adjoining property a mulberry plantation for which she received, from an agricultural society in the department of the Gironde, a prize for assistance to the silk industry. In 1848, when the young man, an ardent republican, was twenty-six,

*E. g., *Westways*, XXXIII (Sept. 1941).

both parents were killed in a carriage accident, leaving him independently wealthy and free for the two pursuits nearest to his heart—republican polemics and book-collecting. A classical scholar, Paulin also spoke, read, and wrote at least six languages, including Arabic. He became a disciple of the republican publicist, Emile de Girardin, whom he followed to London; by 1860 he was back in France.

There he married Marie Elise Alexandrine Marissal, a wealthy orphan and ward of her aunt, Mme. Brisard, who continued to live with the young couple. Caperon bought a chateau near his native Bordeaux, a villa at le Pecq, and rented an apartment in Paris, where both his children were born—Albert Jean-Baptiste Nicholas, Mrs. Berlin's father, in 1864, and Marguerite Jeanne in 1870—and where he founded a private bank, adding considerably to his already-large fortune. But he did not forsake his republican ideas, and in 1872 he became republican candidate for deputy from the department of the Gironde. The royalists fought him bitterly; he was defeated, but he continued to be embroiled in political disputes. A serious heart ailment had kept him from military service, and, ever since the birth of their daughter, his wife had been an invalid. In 1873, on the advice of his physician, he liquidated his bank. Every client was paid in full, but one transaction turned up later to alter his entire history. It was at this point that Paulin Caperon decided to leave France. First he went to Belgium, leaving his family in the care of the governess, the aforementioned Eugénie Clogenson, whom everybody called "Tante Ninie." Born in 1848, at Saint-Leger sur Sarthe, Normandy, she was the daughter of a linen weaver and a competent teacher when Caperon employed her in 1871.

In Brussels, Caperon met the widow of a distant cousin named Coutts, descendant of a Huguenot family which, for generations, had lived in Switzerland. It seemed wise to Caperon, in the face of the vicious attacks being made upon him by his political enemies, to take another name in the new life he was contemplating. The name he selected for his passport was that of Peter Coutts, his late cousin, whose initials, it will be seen, were the same as his own. His wife and children continued to be known as Caperon in their identity papers.

He took ship to New Orleans, listened there to stories of the wonderful climate of California, and determined to visit it with a view to settling in the west. When he reached San Francisco, he decided to bring his family from France and live in the bay city until he could find a farm to suit him. Meanwhile, Mme. Caperon, the two children and

Mme. Brisard embarked, under the charge of Mlle. Clogenson, in an English ship. The voyage was an ordeal for "Tante Ninie": none of the party spoke English, and she was the only one of them who was not seasick throughout. But she got them all safely across, together with more than a million francs in cash, and landed them in San Francisco.† The furniture of the Paris apartment was sent to Brussels, in the care of Caperon's faithful private secretary, M. Artigues; also, most of the book collection, though part of the library was packed in special trunks and came with the family.

Once established, Paulin Caperon, now "Peter Coutts," ranged the country near San Francisco until he happened upon Mayfield, as the present Palo Alto was then called. Here was exactly what he was looking for. He bought 1,242 acres half a mile southwest of the town, and turned it into a dairy farm. His herd of Ayrshire and Holstein cattle was considered the finest in California at that time. He built a summer cottage, "Escondite," a small-scale replica of the Petit Trianon at Versailles, but kept the San Francisco house for winter residence. Matadero Ranch, or Ayrshire Farm, as it was variously named, was the home of the Coutts-Caperon family from 1874 to 1880.

It was a happy life. Mme. Caperon was a fine musician, and was well enough to spend much time at her piano. Little Marguerite had a beautiful childish singing voice, and she and her governess studied and sang together. Albert became a student at Santa Clara University. The farm prospered, and Paulin began to have more leisure for the intellectual pursuits he loved. He planned to have the rest of his books sent from Brussels; and, to accommodate them and the library already in Mayfield, he had a large room built in the lower part of a tower whose upper portion housed the water tank. This was the real origin and purpose of the famous tower, which fantastic stories turned into a fortification. Paulin spent many hours in the lower portion, reading and studying.

There was an artificial lake or reservoir on the ranch which bred mosquitoes, and whose water was subject to undue evaporation and to pollution. To safeguard his family's and employees' health, Caperon had tunnels dug which distributed the water throughout the farm. And these are the famous tunnels which were rumored to be means of "escape"—to or from what, nobody ever reasoned out. The crumbling brick bridge over the lake still stands, but the former reservoir is now

†According to Mrs. Berlin, he bought a house at "205, 305, or 505 California Street."

a hayfield. The tunnels and tower still exist in part, and the cottage itself is still used by Stanford University.

In all probability the Coutts-Caperons would have spent the remainder of their lives on the San Francisco peninsula. But one day an enterprising newspaper reporter from San Francisco called on Peter Coutts, and offered to "keep quiet" in return for a considerable sum of money. Coutts, who loved a prank and had deliberately allowed his neighbors to circulate their absurd guesses about him and his ranch, laughed outright and asked what it was all about. It was no joke, said the blackmailer; Coutts' own cook had been talking and had reported that "Coutts" was not the dairy rancher's right name; that he had left France under a financial cloud. (The story about the absconding paymaster of the French army — as we have seen, Paulin Caperon was never in the army at all, because of his bad heart — was a later invention.) Now the reporter began to hint about Coutts having diverted funds from a Swiss bank. Paulin Caperon stopped laughing and got angry.

The Swiss bank story went back to the days when he had owned his private bank in Paris. The *Credit Foncier Suisse*, headed by an ex-president of the Swiss Confederation, was one of his bank's correspondents. The ex-president was no financier, and before long the *Credit Foncier* went bankrupt. But while it was still in business, it had ordered Caperon's bank to buy for it five million francs' worth of stock in a railroad in Alsace. With the Franco-Prussian War, this stock became worthless. Caperon had advised against the purchase, and had made it reluctantly; he was in no way responsible for the Swiss bank's loss.

He went at once to the French consul in San Francisco, and received another shock. Unknown to him, an officer of the consulate had been corresponding about him with various officials in France. Not only, he learned, was the *Credit Foncier*, now bankrupt, claiming that he was responsible for its 5,000,000-franc deficit, but his political enemies had also continued their activities against him. By the action of a deputy from the Department of the Gironde, his enormous French properties had been confiscated by the government.

By 1880, after ten years of conflict, the liberal republicans with whom Paulin Caperon had been associated had finally gained the upper hand, and the Third Republic was firmly established, with no further danger of a royalist coup. There was no longer any political reason why Caperon should remain in exile, and, valuable as his California property was, the confiscated estate in France was worth considerably more.

There was no question that he must return and fight for restoration of his fortune. Early in 1880, the whole family left California. They did not depart through the mysterious tunnels, but in the private car of the president of the Southern Pacific Railroad.

Because of possible confusion resulting from his real and his assumed identity, the invalidism of his wife, and the advanced age of her aunt, together with his own heart malady and the necessity, therefore, of having his family's interests in reliable hands, Caperon had placed the deeds to the Mayfield property in Mlle. Clogenson's name. A short time after the Caperon-Coutts family's departure from California, the property was sold to Leland Stanford. The fine cattle and blooded horses went for almost nothing, and most of the furniture and equipment was given away. Senator Stanford used the site as a stock farm until 1885, when he founded the university in memory of his son.

Using his own name again, and with his own papers, Caperon took his family to London, from which vantage point he began the fight to recover his property. It took him more than two years, and he did not return to France until 1883. Eventually he got back his entire estate. To forestall any possible later claim by the Swiss bank, he paid 10,000 francs to the bankruptcy assignee, though actually he did not owe a sou.

The Caperons of his and his children's generations never left France again. At first they lived in Paris, but when the daughter, Marguerite Jeanne, became ill from tuberculosis, they went first to Arachon and then to Evian les Bains for her health. There, at fifteen years of age, she died, and Caperon's just-finished chateau was never lived in. Heart-broken, he could not endure either the place where she had died or the house in which she had lived in Paris. He bought another house in Paris for his wife and son, but for the most part he himself lived alone with two servants in an apartment in Bordeaux, going almost daily to visit his daughter's grave. And in Bordeaux, Paulin Caperon died, in September 1889, at the age of seventy-seven. With him were his wife, his son, and Mlle. Clogenson.

Mlle. Clogenson had returned from California with the family and had remained with them until their daughter's death. Then she went back to her native village and devoted the rest of her life to her own parents—the father living to be ninety-seven; the mother, ninety-three. When Mrs. Berlin was born, Eugénie Clogenson was her godmother, and named her for herself and for the young tuberculosis victim. Mrs. Berlin says that when she saw Mlle. Clogenson shortly before the latter's

death in 1940, she still read without glasses, had only a few gray hairs, and was as keen of mind as ever. "She still looked," says Mrs. Berlin, "neat and trim, like the grand lady she was."

Albert Caperon and his wife, Eugénie Clogenson's niece, had two daughters: the younger, Mme. Camille Dromain, died in Paris during the German occupation; the elder, Marguerite (quoted above) was married to a barrister in the court of appeals in Paris, named Biget, who was killed in World War I. In 1919 she married Charles E. Berlin, a Pennsylvanian, a lieutenant in the American expeditionary force, who had been gassed in the war. They came to Los Angeles to live, but in 1925 they returned to Paris, where his death occurred. Mr. Berlin had adopted his wife's son by her first marriage, the young man taking his stepfather's name. At the start of World War II, Pierre Biget-Berlin was impressed into the French army, though his mother had been naturalized, during his minority, as an American citizen. He was captured and spent five years in a concentration camp in Germany. When he was freed, the Red Cross helped mother and son to reach America. For several years, Pierre practiced as a landscape architect in San Mateo, but his prison experiences had injured his health, and he joined his mother on her Oregon ranch. Now Mrs. Berlin has sold this ranch and returned to California. She is living only a few miles from the place where the "mysterious Frenchman" once dwelt as a gentleman farmer and puzzled his rural neighbors.