

Chapter 15 : Desirée Clary (I) (1777-1810) – ”The Woman We Got in the Bargain”.

Concerning the merchant daughter Desirée Clary the line between fact and fiction is so fluid that even works with scientific claims have features of a romanticized biography:

With the criterion of accounting for their sources there are 13 longer biographies (Hochshild 1889; Armaillé 1897; Bearne 1905; Lindwall 1919; Brander 1923; Forsell 1945; Girod de l'Ain 1960; Kermina 1991; Ulfsäter-Troell 1996: ss. 11-84; Sagrera 2000; Frasseto 2011; Bège 2012; Camous 2015).

Other depictions are either short summaries, special studies or Desirée as a secondary character (d'Abrantès 1831; Deleen 1832: s. 20; Crusenstolpe 1861, 1863 & 1881; NFB 1880; Bloomsfield 1886; Ahnfelt & van Suchtelen 1887: del 1, ss. 287-295; Rochechouard 1889: ss. 478-479; Almén 1893: ss. 74-85; C[appelletti] 1893; V é r a n y 1893; Babst 1904; SBHL 1906; NFB 1907; de Boigne 1907; de Maricourt 1907; Barton 1914, 1921 & 1925; Knagg 1932: ss. 12-38; Lewenhaupt 1937; drottning Hedvig Elisabeth Charlotta 1939 & 1942; Höjer 1939, 1943 & 1960: ss. 519-524; Söderhjelm 1939: ss. 343-380; Nabonne 1940: ss. 350-360; Lande & Gran 1945: ss. 238-239; Nerman m.fl. 1952: ss. 338-341; Lundebeck 1955: ss. 222-237; Girod de l'Ain 1959 & 1974; Oscar II 1960: del 3, ss. 213-245; Ohlmarks 1973: ss. 138-139; Elgklou 1978: ss. 20-...-40; Lagerqvist 1979: ss. 14-35; Baulny & Grosclaude 1986: ss. 29-37; Elgklou 1995: ss. 21-26; Heymovski 1995: s. 36; Kermina 1998; Beckman 2003; Sundberg 2004: ss. 205-208; Lagerqvist 2005; Thuesen 2005; Dahlström 2006: ss. 15-36; Lindqvist 2006: ss. 382-407; Kermina 2007; Potter 2007; Blom 2009: ss. 92-95; Lindqvist 2009; Thuesen 2009; Lindqvist 2010: ss. 13-33; Heed 2010; Rangström 2010: ss. 288-297; Sandin 2011; Norlin 2015: ss. 35-46).

The best-known depiction is Annemarie Selinko's 1952 fictional diary, which was adapted into a 1954 film starring Jeanne Simon. A further film adaptation was *Le destin fabuleux de Désirée Clary* (1942) starring Gaby Morlay. Further novels exist (Kaisenberg 1902; and others).

The narrative below is based on Gabriel Girod de l'Ain's (1960) biography which exploits the French and Swedish archives and on three depictions of Desirée's last years in which she herself ”comes to the fore”: Hochshild (1889), Brander (1923) & Oscar II (1960). To the extent that other sources add something, they are quoted. Desirée's archives are listed but fragmentary.¹ What distinguishes this depiction from previous depictions is mainly the change of perspective so that derogatory judgments are analysed as class prejudices & as personal problems caused by her precarious situation.

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”It has been my destiny to be courted by heroes.”

Desirée Clary

Barnardine Eugénie Desirée Clary was the thirteenth child of a successful merchant François Clary (1725-1794), the ninth child of his wife in the second marriage Françoise-Rose Somis (1737-1815). Desirée was born on November 8, 1777, as the youngest of the siblings. Her

¹ Carlsson 1995: ss. 49-52.

sister Julie was six years older. Until 1789, she attended convent school. She later had a governess. The extent of her education is unclear, but it should have been equivalent to a 7-year primary school. In her teens her lack of education mainly showed in bad spelling and large knowledge gaps. She later supplemented it with drawing, needlework, dance and music. She visited theatre and opera, read novels and biographies, kept abreast of the events of the day, but considered war and politics to be men's work.

The Clary family lived in Marseilles and became directly affected by the fighting between royalists and Jacobins in the area. As far as it is possible to ascertain, the family were turncoats. Desirée's uncle Victor Somis (1745-1836) fought first for the Royalists, then for the Republic. During the so-called "sectional uprising" of 1793 (Marseille was divided into sections) he commanded the royalist side. The uprising was suppressed on August 11. The city turned to the English for help, but these were content to occupy nearby Toulon. On December 19, Victor Somis was defeated there too, but escaped with his life and ended up as one of Napoleon's generals.

On August 25, the troops of the Convention occupied Marseille. All possible opponents were arrested. Desirée's half-brother Étienne Clary (1757-1823), who had applied for a knighthood, was imprisoned from September 17, 1793, to March 10 the following year. As Desirée tells the story, on September 18 or 19 his wife visited the representative of the people, Arbitte, to ask for mercy for her husband. Desirée accompanied her. When the audience was over, the wife was so relieved that her husband at least would escape the guillotine that she forgot about Desirée, who had meanwhile fallen asleep. Desirée was escorted home by the lawyer Joseph Bonaparte, who became something of a friend in the house.²

On February 20, 1794, Desirée's father died after a short illness. The time leading up to Desirée's marriage to General Jean Bernadotte 4.5 years later is full of drama but difficult to describe. Everyone has a version of their own. Joseph's brother Napoleon had in his capacity of artillery captain been instrumental in breaking the siege of Toulon. Seven or eight hundred prisoners were executed. In the spring of 1794 the executions continued in Marseille. About 400 people, many of them friends of the family, were guillotined. The Clarys, however, enjoyed protection from Joseph & Napoleon who courted the sisters and with the father dead took over the rein of the household. They did not behave in a romantic way. According to Desirée, they decided among themselves who should woo whom.³ The dowry was the primary goal. The mother wanted them gone but kept a straight face. August 1, 1794, she was forced to accept Joseph marrying Julie but she managed to prevent Napoleon from marrying Desirée. Her reluctance is understandable when one realizes that after Robespierre July 28, 1794, was guillotined Napoleon was in disgrace, even August 6-20 imprisoned, and no longer of any help to the Clary family.

Napoleon and Desirée met for the first time during a brief visit in January or February 1794. One gets the impression of Desirée fawning. She had made a laurel wreath which she put on his head as a victory reward. Napoleon was flattered and thanked her with the words "Rather a myrtle crown", which it almost was.⁴ They corresponded and emotions grew. On April 21, 1795, they must have professed their love.⁵ How far the relationship advanced is not known.

² Hochschild 1889: ss. 9-11.

³ Hochschild 1889: ss. 12-13.

⁴ Vérany 1893: ss. 54-55.

⁵ Girod de l'Ain 1960: s. 36.

It seems to have stopped at supervised walks.⁶ The same year Napoleon wrote a romance that is supposed to be based on the relationship. “Eugénie Desirée” is described as follows:

Eugénie never looked a man in the eye. She smiled enchantingly and let show the most beautiful of teeth. If you invited her hand, she shyly extended it, but then quickly withdrew. It was as if she was afraid to show it, that milky white colour contrasting with the exquisite blue veins. ... [She] was like the song of the nightingale or a piece of Paësiello, which only caresses sensitive souls, while leaving the rest unmoved.⁷

Perhaps Napoleon felt sentimentally drawn to Desirée's innocence or playacting thereof. Violent men often are. Ahnfelt quotes from Mme de Rémusat memoirs:

The Emperor despises women, which is not the way to learn love. Their physical weakness he considers irrefutable proof of their inferiority, and the influence they have gained in society seems to him an unbearable encroachment, a consequence of the progress of civilization, which has always to some extent been his personal enemy, as Talleyrand expresses it. Bonaparte has therefore throughout his life been embarrassed by the company of educated women, and since that makes him angry, he has always kept them at a distance. One can only guess at his first youth relations.⁸

Napoleon then moved to Paris and after a few months found another. The interpretations of what happened to the relationship differ, but the distance & Desirée's self-preservation may suffice as explanation. The relation was obviously frowned on by her family - her guardians brother Etienne & her mother. Etienne is credited with the remark ”enough Bonaparte in the family”. On January 21, 1796, Napoleon sent a final letter in which he tried to make Desirée obtain her family's consent or he would ”break every bond”. Desirée's reply:

Where shall I begin to describe the terrible situation in which your letter has thrown me? What was your intention? To destroy me? O, you have only done that too well. Yes, you cruel, you have truly made me despair. This phrase “breaking every bond” makes me shudder. I thought I had found a friend for life. But no, I must cease to love You, for I can find no way to obtain consent to our union. Never would my family listen; If they realized my intention, they would force me to accept somebody I had already rejected. This my friend - if I may still call you that - has made me suffer the cruellest of nights, which, however, seems less terrible than the light of day. Nights I can at least cry.⁹

Who Desirée had rejected is unclear. A Swedish merchant Arvedson has been mentioned.¹⁰ From the letters one gets the impression that she liked having secrets, but when push came to pull Napoleon had chosen another and Desirée was insulted but also relieved. In April it was over:

You will no doubt be surprised to receive this letter after my long silence, but I can no longer resist my desire to justify myself in your eyes. But if I no longer own your love or your friendship, may I keep your esteem, that is the only consolation left to me. You were angered that I did not answer your last letter; You're right, it was bad of me, but

⁶ Babst 1904: del 3, ss. 31-32.

⁷ Bonaparte 1929: ss. 93-102; Askenazy 1929; Forsell 1929; Girod de l'Ain 1960: s. 277.

⁸ de Rémusat, 1880: del 1, s. 112; Ahnfelt & Suchtelen 1887: del 1, s. 290.

⁹ Girod de l'Ain 1960: s. 67.

¹⁰ Pingaud 1901: s. 30.

does such a minor neglect deserve such a great rage? Moreover, the reason for the cessation of correspondence was a bit of discord and jealousy. I had been told that you were courting a rich and beautiful lady and by all accounts your wife to be. This news made me angry and became the source of my misfortunes; But tell me frankly, do I really deserve to be treated with so much cruelty? Did you no longer remember our promises? Had I not promised to inform you, if I changed my mind, and retracted? Have I done so? You are the one in the wrong. If you were fair, you would admit it. You have made me unhappy for the rest of my life, and yet I am weak enough to forgive you all.¹¹

More suitors followed. She spent the summer of 1796 in Genoa with her mother where she through the French consul was introduced to General Leonard Duphot, a friend of Napoleon.¹² Desirée seems to have accepted Duphot's courtship, but the following year he was killed during a riot in Rome. According to one report, possibly with Desirée as source, it was the day before their intended wedding, but that seems fiction. Desirée later loved to talk about this and other horrible & nerve wrecking things she had experienced. She could appear as shy but was from childhood primadonna in the opera about her own life.

We now write the summer of 1798. The Clary family was in Paris. One of Napoleon's friends, General Jean-Andoche Junot, proposed but was jilted. During a reception, Desirée was also introduced to General Jean Bernadotte. Jean immediately fell in love with her. Much later in his draft memoirs he wrote "that he could not have made a happier choice. She had both heart and head. She was small and exquisite, lovely but not beautiful".¹³ Desirée seems to have taken a more pragmatic approach. There is a (not so little) dramatized depiction of their first meeting:

When Bernadotte first entered Desirées home, she sat at the table with her family. Bernadotte had at that time an unusually fearsome appearance — as can be found from, for example, the portrait, which accompanies the 1883 work *Les diplomates de la révolution* par Frédéric Masson — long, freely hanging, non-braided hair, with traces of powder, small black pistol-shaped sideburns, long and very thin nose, black intelligent and cunning eyes, whereupon came his victorious face, his hand resting on the saber, his General's uniform lacking gold embroidery except on the collar, and buttoned all the way to the carelessly knotted black scarf above which one glimpsed a stripe of white shirt, the three-coloured panache, which proudly swayed over the gold-braced hat — all this was undoubtedly enough to scare the daylights out of a seventeen-year-old bride to be. Desirée is also supposed to have taken flight when first seeing him, and according to her own account hid in a neighbouring room, from which one vainly sought to lure her out to the celebrated lovers meeting. It was actually the go between marshal Marmont, who made Mademoiselle Clary relent.¹⁴

Much later Desirée described her feelings as "Bernadotte, he was different from the suitors whose offers I rejected, and I consented to become his wife, when it was told to me that he was man a man capable of butting heads with Napoleon."¹⁵ One obstacle was that Jean had no fortune. He was allowed to borrow, and 14 days after he and Desirée had first seen each other, he asked Joseph for her hand in marriage. The proposal also found favour with Mrs.

¹¹ Girod de l'Ain 1960: s. 70.

¹² Bonaparte red. 1823: del 1, ss. 222.

¹³ Memoarutkast av Karl XIV Johan. I: Swederus 1877: s. 494. [Ur Berndt von Schinkels samling.]

¹⁴ Ahnfelt & Suchtelen 1887: del 1, s. 292.

¹⁵ Hochshield 1889: s. 32.

Clary, who handed all the details to Joseph. War time inflation had ravished the family fortune so the dowry was modest, 300 thousand Fr. Her liberties compensated though:

He [Jean Bernadotte] left her the dowry, as well as the later inheritance, to administer on her own. Her fortune was further increased by the large sums, which he annually awarded her from his income and through the wise and thoughtful way, whereby the money was invested. She bought her own hotel [house] in Paris with a garden, and this she still, according to what is said, possessed in 1856. The hotel was then considered to be worth a million francs.¹⁶

Their marriage contract was unusual for the time with a separation clause, which meant that both parties shared in the estate they had brought with them and that in the event of divorce they would regain their part. Not only that, but Desirée was granted full and unconditional rights to "freely dispose of his property, lift and obtain her income and freely trade in all personal matters". Bernadotte also relinquished responsibility for her actions, which this patriarchal society took for granted that a husband otherwise had. In practice, this meant that Desirée de facto had all the rights she could wish for. Bernadotte undertook to ensure their common accommodation and the food, while other household expenses would be shared equally and settled daily to prevent inheritance disputes. If Desirée bought furniture and other items for her own use, they would be marked with her initials so that they were not confused with Bernadotte's. The contract shows that, contrary to the expectations of women at the time, she was assumed to be fully capable of managing her own finances, and when her husband was in the field, she managed the family's assets.¹⁷

On August 17, 1798, they were married in a civil ceremony. Desirée was a Roman Catholic, but did not pay much attention to her religion. They spent the honeymoon in Sceaux a little north of Paris. Jean then travelled extensively, leaving Desirée to handle the "home front". The letters that have been preserved focus a lot on investments. Desirée appears to have ingested business sense in conjunction with mother's milk. Jean's leave in February 1799 was tearful though: "She loved her husband", tells the Duchess of Abrantès. "To a certain extent this may be natural, but this love became for the poor bearnaiser a real scourge. He had nothing in him of a romantic hero and was sometimes extremely troubled by his role. It was tears all the time. Was he out, it was tears because he was absent. Was he on the verge of going out, new tears, and when he returned from a walk or whatever, more tears because in a week he was going to leave her ... but leave her he had."¹⁸ This river of tears seems not only to have been opera. The transition from family girl to housewife was painful. Desirée had difficulty exercising authority & making decisions. When she was not immediately obeyed by the servants, she started screaming at them.

In her memoirs, the Duchess considered Desirée poor queen-material, guided by emotion rather than intellect: A queen, according to d'Abrante's, needed firmness of character, cool and knowledge of this world's evil. Putting well-meaning nobodies like Desirée in charge was dangerous to their environment.¹⁹ Possibly it was a misinterpretation. Desirées may have had her female quirks, but she never seems to

¹⁶ Schönbeck 1878: ss. 20-21.

¹⁷ Johansson 2010: s. 85.

¹⁸ d'Abrantès 1831: del 2, s. 155. I: Girod de l'Ain 1960: s. 89.

¹⁹ d'Abrantès 1831: del 2, s. 154.

have buckled to anyone. She was an upper-class child of the revolution. Irritating, but with integrity.

Desirée had a continued soft spot for Napoleon. On July 6, 1799, she gave birth to a child, Oscar (I), with Napoleon as godfather. He also had the honour of naming the child. The birth is said to have been very painful and her grandson Oscar II speculates that this made her refrain from a continued love life – therefore Jean's many (alleged) mistresses.²⁰ She had done her duty. Perhaps she also wanted to keep her figure. There is a painting from that time where she is lithe enough to wear men's clothes. The Brumaire-days she accompanied Jean in disguise as a boy when he lay low.²¹ June the following year she joined him for three months at a command in Brittany, lived castle life, dressed in officer uniform and followed Jean on horseback even on risky expeditions.²² One gets the feeling that Desirée had a background as a tomboy that is now completely forgotten. The couple corresponded. Jean, like Napoleon, was anxious that she should practice dancing, drawing, conversation etc. but Desirée preferred friends & family life. Jean regarded her as young, immature but pliable. Desirée was annoyed by his paternal advice, but the relationship was good.

In 1803, Jean was for a full year deprived of his command, socialized with the opposition and supervised by the secret police. Much later, Napoleon claimed that Desirée this time had been loose-mouthed and in practice acted as his "family spy".²³ She herself claimed to have had some influence for the good of her husband.²⁴ Maybe so. The opposition was represented by Juliette Récamier, Germaine de Staël and Benjamin Constant, all three of whom were forced into exile during the Empire. Desirée worried about Récamier, who was known for her beauty, but Jean remained faithful.²⁵

In 1804, Jean was appointed Marshal. The honours included money & a stylish house on the rue d'Anjou which Desirée kept until her death. Here she held a salon. As emperor, Napoleon gave magnificent parties, and Desirée attended when she had to. However, she was more comfortable with the small format: "...willingly went to the theatre and to concerts but as much as possible [after 1804] avoided the imperial court soirées, which she found particularly boring. She loved to dance and performed with some success in costume balls... although she was not usually among those noticed because of her short stature."²⁶ 1806 she became princess of the municipality of Ponte-Corvo in central Italy, but she never went there. On June 5, 1807, during a skirmish Jean was shot in the throat, and Desirée spent three weeks in Marienburg while he was recovering. Between 1808 and 1810 she ambulated between Jean's command posts, home, spa resorts, the summer estate, friends & relatives. Jean made a lot of money in Germany and Desirée helped him through her brother Nicolas to invest it. Then came the offer to become Sweden's heir to the throne...

²⁰ Oscar II 1960: del 3, s. 217.

²¹ Höjer 1939: s. 231.

²² Höjer 1939: s. 247.

²³ Girod de l'Ain 1960: s. 97-98. [Uppgifterna är från Napoleon & Paul Barras i deras memoarer.]

²⁴ Brander 1923: ss. 61-84. [Uppgifterna är från Desirée.]

²⁵ Girod de l'Ain 1960: ss. 115-116.

²⁶ Girod de l'Ain 1960: s. 126. [Citatet något redigerat.]