

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by Sarah Horowitz, professor of history at Washington and Lee University, and author of *The Red Widow*, *The Scandal That Shook Paris* and *The Woman Behind It All*. So why don't we start with the woman, and then we'll get into the scandal.

SH: So *The Red Widow* is about a woman named Marguerite Steinheil, who was born in 1869 in France, and lived most famously in Paris in the 1890s and 1900s, was a kind of very scandalous lady, who, she was married to an artist who was not very successful, and kind of decided to make her way in the world through quite unusual means.

AT: Well, your subtitle references "scandal" singular, but she definitely had more than one, so can you take us through her scandalous life?

AH: So much scandal. I mean, one of the things I find fascinating about her is she was actually kind of the product of a scandal, because her father was from a very wealthy family of industrialists, and then married her mother. And her father was I think like 28, and her mother was 16 when they got married, so there's sort of already, yeah, that, but her mother was also from a kind of working-class family. The family seemed okay with an age gap, but not so great with a class gap, and so her side of family, they were like the black sheeps of this very large extended family of industrialists. And then, so that's kind of scandal one.

Scandal number two is that when she was in her late teens, she fell in love with an army officer who was a friend of her brother's, and her parents seemed fine with the romance, but then I think one of her tutors walked in on her and her beau in some sort of state of doing things that you weren't supposed to do when you're an unmarried couple in the late 19th century. And then her father flipped out and banished her and broke off the relationship, and then her father died a few months later from the stress of like having his favorite child betray him in this way.

So she ends up marrying, she doesn't have very good marital prospects because, her family doesn't have a ton of money, but also there's this scandal that everyone knows about that she was had this romance that she shouldn't have had with this young man. She ends up marrying an artist who's about twice her age, who lives in Paris, and that's kind of the big appeal. So she's like, I can live in Paris. And she moves to Paris to be with him. And then I think within like days of them being married, she's like, I don't like this guy. Like, he's just not for me. And to be fair, he seems like very kind of passive, and maybe a little bit lazy. And she was all hustle, like all energy. He's also having relationships with both men and women, which I think we can sort of understand that she's like not super enthusiastic about. And I think like she finds him kind of boring, but she doesn't want to divorce him because that would be too scandalous, right? Like divorce was seen in this very scandalous thing that, you didn't want to air your dirty laundry in public. So they decide to stay married, and, they basically decide they'll kind of live together, raise their child together, and then like they can have affairs. And what she starts doing is she starts having affairs with prominent men, maybe some women, not super sure about that. And the arrangement she has is that they will buy one of her husband's paintings, and then they get an affair with her. And so it kind of works out because she gets all this money, she gets all his paintings in these kind of elite Parisian spaces. But it also means that she can do sex work without ever having to really deal with the cash part, which was kind of avoiding scandal by doing this thing that is a totally bananas way of, financial arrangement.

And then I would say maybe six or seven years into this, she meets the president of France when she and her husband are on vacation with one of her lovers. And the president is like, visiting some troops and doing official duties, and he's like completely smitten with her. And they have this two year affair from 1897 to 1899. And yeah, I think they see each other, you know, like all the time. And he's like completely kind of overcome by her and tells her all these secrets. And then in February 1899, they're having their usual kind of daily session at the Elysée Palais, which is like the French version of the White House. And he has a stroke. And he calls for help.

And there are different versions of what happens. One is a version that they're both kind of dressed. And she just runs out and kind of runs away in horror while Felix Faure, the president essentially continues to die for the next few hours. But the other, much more salacious version, which is the one that everyone kind of knows, is that the two of them were having sex. And in particular, he was like in the throes of passion. And as part of that was like gripping her hair so tightly that his aides had to cut her out of it. I don't know if this is true. Like I'm pretty skeptical of that part, but that's the rumor that circulated in Paris. And so that's big scandal number one, because suddenly everyone kind of knows who she is. And like everyone knows that the president just like didn't die of overwork and in sort of tragic circumstances.

So that's big scandal number one, which is like following all these other kind of like mini scandals. And then big scandal number two is nine years later. In 1908, her husband and mother are found murdered in their home in Paris. She is tied to the bed. And she's the only survivor, and she's the only witness. And she tells the story that there were these like robed men and a redheaded woman who came in and they had intended to rob the house. But they thought that she was the adolescent daughter. And so they had spared her life and had killed the husband and mother. And had robbed the place. And you know, I think, shall we say, this is a version that no one believes.

AT: Yeah, sorry - they thought she was the "adolescent daughter." But at this point, she would have been like almost 40?

SH: Yes, yes, yes, exactly. Yes, exactly. Right. Yeah. So there's that effect that like not much had actually been stolen from the house. Like the silver had been left intact. There's just like cash lying out. You could actually see photos of the crime scene and everything looks more or less in order, right? There are a lot of cabinets and bedrooms that haven't been ransacked. So there's just a lot of things that aren't really believable about this. But then the police are like, "yes, sure, this is absolutely what happened. We totally believe you. I don't know why anyone would be skeptical." But then everyone knows she has all these really highly placed friends who are in the high civil service, particularly the judiciary in Paris and so everyone's like, "yeah, she's being protected."

AT: So after the president died of "over work," I feel like needs to be our new euphemism, she went back to having affairs with other high-ranking men.

SH: Yes. And she's a little scandalous, right? And I think there's some people who kind of really back away from her. So like some of her relatives are like, "yeah, no, she's like too much for us." But then I think there's also the segment of society that's like, "oh, hey, she's really famous." And either as friends or as clients are sort of attracted to the thrill and the salaciousness. So yeah, she just sort of goes back to her life of having affairs with like industrialists, rumors that like the Prince of Wales has a thing with her. Who knows, but particularly a lot of men in that civil service. So the high government officials and some politicians.

AT: And so a lot of people are like, "yeah, her rich, fancy, important, powerful friends are probably protecting her." And it might have just gone away. But she wouldn't let it go. She Streisand effected herself.

SH: She absolutely, that's the best way of thinking about it. She totally Streisand effected herself. So her problem is that all her friends are like, "you're too scandalous to be around and I can't be around you until you've saved your name." And in particular, her lovers say that. And so she has no money coming in. And she's not wealthy. They're really struggling for money. And so, I think there's also maybe like one lover in particular that she really wants to get back with. It's not super clear, but so she needs to clear her name or she's like a social pariah. And you know, there are like horrible, horrible things that Marguerite Steinheil, who's known as Meg at the time, that Meg does. You know, she's super prejudiced, but she is a lesson for us all in

resilience. And so she's just like, "I'm going to have my name cleared any way I can." And so the murders happen in the end of May 1908. And then by summer, July, there's like really no news. People are just like, "yeah, this case has just kind of like gone away. Like we all know that she was lying, but we can't prove it. We're never going to know." It's like a mystery of Parisian life. But then at the end of October 1908, a journalist, basically arranges to help her reopen the case, because she says "the police are going to find the perpetrators, they're hot on the trails of the perpetrators. An arrest is imminent. Like the perpetrators matched my original description." And so everyone's like so excited because they're like, "ooh, this sordid cases back in the news. Maybe we'll find out what happened." And then the police are like, "yeah, no, that's, that's not what's happening." It's actually like this totally wild goose chase. The police actually found some folks who matched her description and who had, for a costume party, rented robes and never returned them for that night. So she knows this and she's been helping the police identify them, but it turns out that two of them have these incredible rock-solid alibis. Like one of them is in London and another is on the some hiking vacation, around Dijon. And so the police are like, "yeah, no, these guys, they didn't do it. Like, they have alibis." But then she's back in the news, right? And she looks even worse.

She really courts the press. She's talking to them. And she has a journalist look in the wallet of her valet and is like, "I think there might be something suspicious there." Super shady. And so in the wallet, she and the journalist and this friend of theirs find a pearl from a ring that had been stolen on the night of the murders and the valet had been in the house. So suddenly everyone's like, "Oh my gosh, the valet must have done it."

AT: She was trying to present it as though he was still carrying around this stolen piece of jewelry connected to murders months after the fact. (SH: Yes.) That sounds plausible. Sure.

SH: Right. Yes. Exactly. So when he's in jail and then there's another search of the house where journalists go and they find a diamond, a tiny little diamond, right outside his room in the attic. And so people are like, "Oh, he must have done it." Shocking! Twist! But then her jeweler had seen a photograph of the ring in a newspaper and goes to the police was like, "Hey, you might want to know that she actually came to me after the murders with this ring and had me work on it." Twist! The sudden twist! This is all going on like in about a, I would say 36-hour timeframe. So, she essentially then has like a public meltdown in front of some journalists. And they're like at her house. It's totally bananas. Her cook, who she's very close to, tries to commit suicide twice that night. Like there's crying. And so finally these journalists are like, "look lady, no one trusts you anymore. So you have to tell the police what happened. Like you, you just got to be honest." And she goes to the police at like 4 in the morning. I know, right? And she like wakes up the chief of police who must have been sleeping in his office. And he's just like, "seriously lady, you?" Like he's just a clearly so pissed off. And she's like, "well, the valet didn't do it. I planted the evidence on him because the actual perpetrator was my cook son, but I'm so close to my cook. And so I didn't want her to be upset and know that her son was the perpetrator." Yeah, it's totally, it's completely bananas. And the police and then the judge who's leading the investigation, because in France, judges often led investigations. And they're like, "ma'am, we don't believe you. We've actually looked into this guy. He has a really, really like airtight alibi." And they then still arrest him and bring him to the courthouse and like they get in an argument that lasts for like hours. And then finally, the judge, who I think might be her lover is just like, "I am done with you. I cannot handle this anymore. Like, please stop talking. I'm going to arrest you." And they throw her into prison.

AT: Okay, but who hasn't had a lover do that to them? (SH: Yeah,) I mean, yeah, in her case, it does seem statistically more likely.

SH: Yeah, there's some doubt as to whether they were after actually lovers. Some people are like, they were having an affair. And some people just like, he was in love with her, but they weren't having an affair. But clearly, it's a relationship that has a kind of emotional intensity to it. But then he finally is like, "stop, just please

stop.” And so, throws her into jail for basically abetting murder by lying. And then a year after that, she is tried for the murders. So yeah, yeah, she's quite a lady. She makes her way in the world.

AT: It's not actually clear how her mother died. We know her husband was strangled, but did they just not find a definitive cause of death for the mom? And that's why maybe she just had like a heart attack or something when she saw her dead son-in-law murdered?

SH: It's really complicated. And it's a case where we just like don't have great evidence and there are a lot of conflicting accounts. And that's one of the problems with researching this project is it's the same event, they're just conflicting accounts. So, people can actually find the crime scene photographs, and I reprint them in my book. So she's found with a cord around her neck lying on a bed. But the official word that comes out is that she wasn't strangled. The husband clearly was strangled, but that instead, someone tried to gag her and stuffed basically like cotton wadding down her throat to gag her. And when that person did that, they knocked her dentures back and shoved them down into her throat. And so she suffocated, really horrifying. So that's, that's a kind of official version. But then there's some people who were kind of involved in investigating the case who are actually like, “no, we, we think she just died of a heart attack,” right? She just died of fright, that she like saw whatever was happening in the house. And she was not in great health and just died a natural death. But that's not the official version that gets turned out. So we don't actually know. The only thing we know is that she wasn't strangled and that it's very clear that, because she is found with a cord around her neck that the crime scene is faked to some degree.

AT: So she was imprisoned for about a year before she finally went to trial and that had its own scandal attached to the actual trial. And she was even charged with having poisoned the president. But she was acquitted in November 1909.

SH: Yeah. So she's never actually charged with that. There're rumors that she did it. And then the French government, they appoint a judge to investigate that. He's like, “no, it's not true.” But the thing that she's charged with is, she's charged with the murder of her husband and mother. And then the trial, it's like front page news of every newspaper, it's sort of whatever the trial of the century is, right? People are totally obsessed with it. They're buying like souvenirs and like fighting for a place in the courtroom. And it's really kind of a spectacle because here's this person that they had all heard about for a really long time, like a decade as this scandalous lady. And she's suddenly appearing on trial for murder. So she's interrogated for three days by the judge who's kind of hostile and mean to her. And she just, at a certain point, decides to just give him no quarter and to take the courtroom over and like run it like her own show. And again, this is a woman who's kind of terrible in a lot of ways, like super anti-Semitic, super racist. But like her resilience - gotta admire her pluck.

AT: Well, speaking of, the book description for your book opens and closes with similar descriptions of her as quote, “a woman with ambition” and “a woman determined to rise at any cost.” So I feel like you've touched on this in the perhaps more gender-acceptable term of “resilience,” but how do you think that her determination and ambition impacted how her story was told, both at the time and in the decades since? Because she did actually publish her memoir in 1912, which presumably caused a scandal in its own right. But a **lot** was written about her outside of her version of her own story, which given what you've just been telling us about the murder investigation and trial and everything, I'm not sure how much we should trust her own account anymore than we should trust what everybody else was writing about her.

SH: No, her memoirs are completely unreliable. I use them obviously in the book, but with a lot of caution. There's some parts that are just like pure fiction. So one of the things that was really interesting to me was I

think today, there's such hostility towards women in the public eye and ambitious women, but she was really in many ways celebrated at the time. Not really around when she's being arrested, because people are like, "well, lady, I think you might have done this," but more at the time of her trial, when she really becomes a sort of heroine, including interestingly for feminists who are like, "she's proving like women are really articulate." But also just as a kind of general, in the French public. And I think it's interesting because they're sort of okay with the fact that she didn't really obey the standards of morality of her time. And they're kind of even okay with the fact that she might have committed murder and certainly did a lot of lying and framing of innocent people. I think part of it is that she's beautiful or just sort of captivating. And also that her ambitions, she actually wasn't really interested in money. And she wasn't really interested in like fame in and of itself. She's interested in a position in high society. And she's interested in appealing to men. And so I think there's this tradition in France of these kind of famous, captivating women who have a kind of circle of men around them, maybe they're lovers, maybe they're admirers, who are these sort of great icons of French femininity and are really celebrated. So like, Juliette Récamier would be one, for instance, or Madame de Staël. And I think she's sort of seen as fitting in with that. And part of that is that she's not ambitious in the sense of putting forward a political platform. She's ambitious in the sense of, she wants men to love her. And I think there's something about that, kind of confirms French ideas about like femininity and desire that really sort of appeals to a lot of people at the time.

AT: So she's arguably violating social mores. But she's doing it in a way that is gender-appropriate and gender acceptable in that society. Because she's not like, as you said, she's not trying to accumulate wealth, she's not trying to accumulate political power. She just wants to be attractive to men, which is what women are supposed to want. It is interesting, because when we look at sex work more broadly, and maybe it's different because it's France, I know there's a cultural distinction there, but often we see that sex work and women who use sex to get what they want, or in her case, need, because I don't think her husband was going to be doing much to provide for her and her kids. Don't forget, she's a mom. But women who use sex to get what they want and need are often demeaned, ignoring the fact that the men are the ones paying for it. The men are the ones who have created this structure where women don't have a lot of other options. So it's interesting to see how this reflects her story, in terms of "it's not the sex part that we're concerned about. It's that people keep dying around you, ma'am."

SH: Yeah, yeah. And that's what, it's so fascinating to me. And one of the things that was really interesting to me is she's so intent on always maintaining the facade of a kind of respectable bourgeois lady. So she doesn't get divorced, right? The way she structures her sex work is that her husband gets the money. And she's just furthering his career. I think it also helps that she's from a fairly well-known prominent family of industrialists. And there were this kind of cohort of elite sex workers at the time, courtesans, who had very famous lovers. Some of them became fabulously wealthy, but they're generally not married. Maybe they would marry as a way to exit sex work. You know, they decide like, "oh, this client, I'm really into him," or like, "you know what, it's time for me to be done with this." But she's always maintaining this kind of illusion that she's just this bourgeois housewife and so that makes her really acceptable.

Interestingly too, the fact that she doesn't charge a lot because her husband's paintings are terrible. So she doesn't charge that much. And so if she was just like straight up charging for a kind of affair, she would have made a lot more money. But the fact that it's going through her husband gives this sort of, kind of respectability to her. And even the judge at her trial, who's very hostile to her and very kind of moralistic, he says to her, "if you were a professional, you would have made a lot more money." And I think that's the whole point is that she's not a professional, right? Or she is, but he's not seeing her as one. He's just seeing her as like, someone who is really looking after her husband's career. And some of her, those men that she knows are patrons of the arts. And some of them buy paintings, because they have a collection of paintings. And then sometimes she's a lady in need. And you would help out your friends by giving them say jewelry or money discreetly, so that she

really benefits from this kind of very class system of claiming some sort of status in kind of French elite, and really kind of always working to maintain that facade.

AT: Now I want to see her husband's painting to see how bad they were.

SH: They're not great.

AT: But we're also getting into both the class and gendered aspect of not a woman not handling money and that being seen as, you know, lower class and unfeminine and all of these things. But I'm curious, after her husband died, how did she support herself? So we know that she published the book in 1912. So that's three years after she was acquitted. But if he's not producing paintings anymore, and I'm not sure if she ever was able to regain her clientele, how did that work? How did she support herself?

SH: That's a really great question. And we only have kind of hints. So she goes to London after the trial. She's basically too famous. She needs to escape. She lives under a pseudonym. She buys what I think is like a quite large property, but not in a very posh neighborhood. And my guess is that she resumes her affairs. And you can charge for scandal, right? And so my guess is that she continues to be visited by lovers who pay her. She does have boarders who live in her house. And then during World War II, she manufactures food for the troops. But it's also possible that she relies on blackmail. And I think she blackmailed for Felix Faure's family, the French president's family after he died. So, I don't have evidence. I do know that she took some lovers, but I don't have evidence for how she made her money. But, you can sort of make guesses. And then she marries a British lord in 1917. And I think just kind of lives with him in some degree of retirement. He's much younger than her. And then he dies quite suddenly. But from what we know, of completely natural causes (AT: Suuuuure...) It was actually, it's not in her benefit that he dies because a lot of the property goes with the title. And then so then she moves to Hove, which is right by Brighton. And she lived there for the last few decades of her life, I think as a kind of somewhat scandalous lady who sort of hangs out with like other rich people who maybe weren't super, super always on the up and up.

AT: My only context for Brighton is from Jane Austen novels in the context of like, this is where people with sufficient means go to just, you know, party.

SH: Yeah, by the time she lands there, it's a little past its prime, I think. And Noel Coward famously says, it's a place with piers, queers, and racketeers.

AT: That does seem apropos for her.

SH: Yeah, yeah, it's actually perfect. So Noel Coward says that Brighton is a place for piers, queers, racketeers - piers, not in the like, nobility, but in the structure. And I think it's like perfect for her as someone who maybe had relationships with women, but you know, it was at a time when sort of a lot of same-sex relationships could only be in a kind of world of like, a hidden underbelly, right. She's sort of part of a kind of hidden underbelly. And then racketeers, right, like maybe a little bit criminal. So it was this place where kind of high and low met, it was like a pleasure town. She'd go there on vacation, apparently has quite nice weather, and you'd go to the beach, and you'd go, I think there's like a Ferris Wheel, but it was also like a little bit seedy. So I think it's sort of the perfect place for her. But she dies in 1954. She basically refuses to talk to the press, and she's just like, "I'm not telling my story, like, I'm done."

AT: To be fair, she did get plenty of press earlier in her life. I think it's fair.

SH: Yeah, yeah, yeah. No, I can understand how she just didn't want to relive those days, didn't want the attention, just wants to live a quiet life. And she goes to, like, church bazaars. I kind of researched her in the, like, Brighton newspaper society pages, and she shows up at church bazaars and has, like, lunchrooms with her friends who are visiting.

AT: And so they never solved the murder of her mother and husband.

SH: That's right. So it's still unsolved. There are a variety of different theories, basically two theories. The first is that she did it, that she wanted to get rid of her husband, and that her mother's death was either accidental, or in some cases, like, that she used her mother as an alibi, as a kind of like, "well, she wouldn't have killed her mother." So she can't have killed her husband. I don't believe that, she's impulsive, but she's not that impulsive. She's very protective of her mother. She has a very actually kind of quite maternal relationship with her mother. And I just don't think that she would have wanted to hurt her mother. And I also don't think that she would have wanted her mother to see anything like that traumatic. And so I don't think that theory really holds a lot of water. I don't think she wants her, I think she'd be very happy of her husband's guy. But basically, I think there were probably kind of ways she could have slowly poisoned him, or like, pushed him down a staircase. He seems to have a substance abuse problem at the end of his life. So something kind of involving him being in an altered state.

AT: But also, they've been married for about 20 years at this point. Like, if she hasn't killed him by now...

SH: Yeah, yeah, she is clearly looking for a second husband. And there's some lover she raises that with as like, "hey, like, I think we're getting along. Would you marry me?" But, I just think she would have planned it better. And I really don't think she, and she was like very loving towards her mother, who was a not an easy person. And I think she was very protective of her mother. The other theory where there's actually more evidence for it. And I think that it fits the pattern of the evidence that we do have is that she had a lover over that night, that she got into a fight with that lover. And that her husband woke up, the lover was startled, maybe thought that Meg had set a trap for him and strangled her husband. And then the mother died on the spot, potentially of a heart attack. And there's some evidence for that. So there's a doctor who is at the autopsy of her husband and mother who says like, "yeah, that was the story we heard." And then there's, she had a lover who was the ghostwriter of her memoirs who said that that's basically what happened. And then most famously, there's this police officer, Edmond Locard, who, he's actually the inventor of criminalistics. So he's relatively prominent, and I don't really think someone who would have necessarily damaged his name by making up stories. But he didn't investigate the case, but he knew all the people who did. And he says, in a variety of different formats over the course of decades, that that's what happened. And that it was one of her kind of lovers from abroad who was very protected. So there's some thought it was a member of the Russian tsar's family. And so that means that then like the lover has diplomatic immunity, he can't be prosecuted. He's going to be sort of escorted out of the country. But that also means that the French government can never really solve the case. Right, they don't want to offend Russia, their closest ally. And this is the years before World War II. And that she also can never, she can't reveal what happened either. And so they're kind of in a bind where the state wants to cover this up. And she can't say what happened. And she can't prove her innocence. But she's also kind of under this cloud of suspicion. So that's the kind of theory that has always seemed to me to be the more plausible of the two.

AT: Blame the Russians.

SH: Exactly. I mean, there are reasons to be a little skeptical of blaming the Russians. It is true that at the time this theory comes out, the Russian royal family has been deposed. And so don't have any power. It's also true

that the man who's thought to be the most likely suspect does leave Paris the day after, or two days after the murders, which also maybe says something. So yeah, I don't know if it's even circumstantial, but that's many people's working hypothesis of what happened.

AT: Now, just to look a bit more broadly, courtesans in the late 19th century are a much bigger general research area for you. So what is it about these women that you find particularly fascinating?

SH: I was so fascinated by the degree which they're sort of idolized, but also the hostility that they attract. And so, you know, there's so many novels written about them. There's famous paintings about them, Manet's *Olympia* being maybe the most famous. There's so much discourse about them at the time. And they're on the one hand so idolized as these kind of revered figures of femininity. But there's also, because they're sex workers, there's a lot of hostility towards them as great kind of like women who are maybe too capitalist, women who are kind of a threat to the family. And what was interesting also is that we actually have memoirs from courtesans at the time, or in one case we have our diary. And when you read them, you realize they're just like ordinary women, right? They're like trying to make their way in the world. There's one, Liane de Pougy who's quite famous, who is a kind of exact contemporary of Meg. And she's like married when she's 18, he's abusive, she leaves him and flees to Paris, and she has sort of like no options. And so this is her option basically is to be an actress, but she has no acting talent. And to be a courtesan, she becomes quite famous and quite wealthy. And so, the kind of gap between just the degree to which there were revered and the degree to which there were reviled, and then that there are these women who are making choices about the options that they have, often in very difficult circumstances. And I think that's really fascinating to think about the kind of myth and the reality when they got between the two.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast and remember, well-behaved women rarely make history.