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Curious and Unpublished Anecdotes about the life of Empress Josephine

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CURIOUS AND UNPUBLISHED

ANECDOTES

ABOUT THE LIFE OF

EMPRESS JOSEPHINE

ON THE SUBJECTS OF

THE DEATH OF HER FIRST HUSBAND BEAUHARNAIS

AND THE EXPEDITION THAT

BONAPARTE PREPARED IN EGYPT;

FOLLOWED BY A LETTER FROM

NAPOLEON

Written to her days before his departure from Fontainebleau.

Translated by Emily Delehanty and Kristen Gayer

Translators' introduction: The following anecdotes capture specific moments in the life of Empress Josephine (23 June 1763 – 29 May 1814). These snapshots are recorded through the perspective of an unknown author with a tone of admiration and adoration for Empress Josephine. This author depicts Josephine's never ending kindness in spite of injustices done to her. He does not, however, deem this same praise worthy of her second husband, Napoleon Bonaparte (15 August 1769 – 5 May 1821). In this text, the untouchable Josephine is the only redeeming quality of Napoleon's reign (1804 – 1815). She is presented in the most favorable of lights, with the author strongly communicating an emphasis on her generous and charitable nature, her undying devotion to Napoleon, and the tragic loss suffered by humanity as a result of her death. Although the author assures the public to trust in these "authentic" accounts of history, one cannot be certain that these dotting anecdotes were truly written from an unbiased standpoint.

If there is any small consolation for humanity, it is above all to see a sensitive and well-intentioned person beside a tyrant, her hand adroitly stopping thunder, and sometimes gaining favor. Such was the loving and generous princess that the Heavens have just taken from us, as if to make us understand that we now need a model of charity on the throne.

The name that Josephine deserves, "Mother of the Poor," the tears shed on her tomb, the sweet and noble memories attached to her legacy, show how her beautiful soul, long afflicted by misfortune, knew how to share charms and good deeds, especially to those who had surrounded her during her prosperity...it is therein, that her character showed entirely!...

But she did not wait for this glorious period of her life to give frequent examples of her generosity and philanthropy!...

History will take care, no doubt, to one day shed light on these examples... Allow us to further contribute the following two anecdotes to its findings, anecdotes whose authenticity many people could ensure.

In 1794, Viscount of Beauharnais and his wife Josephine were detained in the Carmelite prison¹; the majority of the prisoners had banded together to buy the Evening Newspaper. It was there that they had the sorrow of finding among the victims of the infamous Revolutionary Court², names which were dear to them. Particularly, they saw those of their companions in misfortune, who had sat the previous evening at their table, and died the next day a few hours before the paper was read.

The day when the unfortunate Beauharnais perished, this news was known the same night. Since ordinarily his wife read the newspaper, nobody wanted, under diverse pretexts, to give it to her. However, with a new motive for her curiosity, she managed to obtain it.

Hardly had she seen the name of her husband in the fatal list, when suddenly she vomited such a considerable amount of blood that she flooded her room and remained nearly inanimate.

In this house was an individual named Wistrick, a German cobbler, a Paris dweller, and administrator of the prisons. Several prisoners go to make him aware of Madame Beauharnais' state, and share with him the urgency of calling a doctor. The cobbler responds coldly, "Why take such great interest in this woman? Today it was her husband's turn, it will be hers tomorrow."

Some days after came the fall of Robespierre³ and the torture of this barbaric prison administrator. People hurried to tell to Josephine the stroke of inhumanity he had committed against her.

"The poor one!", she says, "...I would have given the world to save him."

¹ TR. Prison where Josephine and Beauharnais were held for 3 months in 1794, until he was executed and she was released. Source: Encyclopedia Britannica.

² TR. Directory Government: 1795-1799. Court instituted during the French Revolution for the purpose of trying political offenders. Source: Encyclopedia Britannica.

³ TR. Leader of the "Reign of Terror" regime (1793-1794), the same one responsible for the execution of Beauharnais. The fall refers to his overthrow in 1794. Source: Encyclopedia Britannica.

After the treaty of Campo-Formio⁴, as chief General of the Italian army, Bonaparte was already meditating his future rise to power, and cutting up the terrestrial globe in his own way. He resolved to send to Greece, and particularly into Moree, two emissaries, in charge of molding the minds of the inhabitants of the country, or rather to gain their favorable disposition. They were two Corsicans, whose address and fidelity were perfectly known to him.

For this expedition, Bonaparte gave them an advance of two hundred gold coins, taken from his own funds, pending the Directory⁵ had assigned funds for this purpose. To this effect, he gave them a promissory note and invited his wife to dispense the sum.

Madame Bonaparte received the note, gave the sum, and, without stopping to draw out of the purse, added to these two hundred gold coins, two hundred more.

"What are you doing, Madame?," one of the emissaries asked her, "The advance is only two hundred gold coins." "Let me do it," replied the good Josephine, "the first two hundred is for you, the rest for those less-fortunate whom you might find on your way."

With this natural disposition, what good could she not do on the throne! And what good would she not still have done in her retirement, if a premature death had not taken her too early from the unfortunate people!....

Several minutes before her death, she said, "I dried many tears and I do not remember having made others spill any."

Thus, her last sigh was the sweet reward of a satisfied soul, which retires in peace here below, and goes, with the security of a pure conscience to present the vast and consoling sum of her good works to the Eternal and Sovereign Judge of our actions.

The funeral of Empress Josephine was as extraordinary as her elevation. Among the top dignitaries who composed the procession were the Russian Emperor, the Prussian King & Baron Sacken⁶.

The funeral was celebrated by Bishop de Baral, the Archbishop of Tours, and the body was deposited in a vault that had been prepared under the nave of the Eglise de Ruelle.

More than eight thousand locals assembled to pay their last respects to the memory of the princess justly named "Mother of the Poor": a glorious title that she shared with a son and a daughter, worthy heirs of her domestic virtues, whose known feelings might slightly appease our tears, if one can be consoled of an irreparable loss.

⁴ TR. Campo Formio, October 17, 1797. A treaty signed in Italy between France and Austria after the first Napoleon coalition and victory. Source: Encyclopedia Britannica

⁵ TR. French Revolutionary Government in place from November of 1795 to November of 1799. Source: Encyclopedia Britannica.

⁶ TR. Baron von Osten-Sacken (1752-1837). Russian baron who led the Russian army against the invasion of Napoleon (24 June – 14 December 1812) and later was appointed governor-general of Paris. Source: Encyclopedia Britannica.

Here is an excerpt of a letter that Bonaparte wrote her from Fontainebleau⁷, and which, fortunately for her sensitive and compassionate soul, was intercepted by a Cossack between that city and Malmaison⁸:

"My very dear and honored Josephine,

All is finished for me: the cloud of prestige has dissipated entirely; all that remains for me is the shame of having tempted an illegal thing!..... Victory, which for two years has been so unfaithful to me, in ruling highly in favor of my enemies, has proven to me that it was indeed the most capricious and treacherous tease in the world. Oh! if only I had taken your advice!...instead of being despised by the universe, by now I would be the greatest man..... Oh! yes, Josephine, I owe you this testimony of your frankness. You have done everything to steer me towards the true goal.....but, such was my destiny, that it was necessary that I listened only to the base flatterers who surrounded me, and who plunged me into the horrible precipice that I am in!....They abandoned me, the cowards!....And you, my dear Josephine, whose tenderness I've known so little....what are you doing?....You are sobbing for my troubles, I am sure of it...You are separating yourself from all feelings of pride, to only follow those of love itself... You are forgetting the ungrateful one who ignored your advice, to see only the unfortunate one who is the victim of it!....Why can't I, alas, go back in time and still see myself that fateful day, always present in my memory, when you fell to your knees to ask of me the life of a prince⁹....but this is too much....my mind is troubled....my organs are weakening....my hand is trembling....my tears are flooding the page.....

Farewell, my good and too unhappy Josephine....I am leaving, but my heart stays with you, and the only favor I ask from the merciful God is to reunite me with you in the land of the dead....

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⁷ TR. Castle located South outside of Paris that Napoleon enjoyed frequenting. Source: Napoleon.org

⁸ TR. Private home of Napoleon and Josephine from 1797 to 1815. Source: Tarbell, [A Life of Napoleon Bonaparte](#).

⁹The Duke of Enghein = Josephine and her daughter, along with the mother of Bonaparte fell to their knees, asking for the grace of the prince, which was not given to them. It was at this moment that Lucien broke his watch while he prophesied that the same would happen to the power Napoleon had built.

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