



Historical Association  
The voice for history

# Write your own Historical Fiction 2023

By Catherine Du

## Le Petit Corporal broke some rules

“Pauline! Come on, wake up! We are NOT going to be late for Napoleon Bonaparte, the First Consul of French and Josephine de Beauharnais’ coronation. NOT.”

My sister, Janelle who was really fond of this event, woke up two hours before her normal routine, just to get ready. By ready, I mean absolute perfection in every aspect of fashion. Janelle strolled up to my face, then articulated very slowly, making sure I heard her word by word.

“If you make me one second late,” she threw off one of her gloves and pulverised it in her hand with so much force she could have crushed a mirror, then waved it in front of my eyes and warned, “this will be you.”

I gulped and climbed out of bed, eyeing my sister cautiously. She was dressed in a white high-waist silk gown with a pale pink satin layer on top. Her gown had a remarkably long tail weaved in hems. On her waist, a white ribbon was tied neatly. Rubies and diamond adorned her strawberry-blonde hair. She tossed a gown embroidered with gold flower patterns and tiny turquoise ruffles onto my lap.

Janelle strolled towards the door but suddenly stopped, about to pull the door knob. She jerked her head towards me and scowled, “wear that dress and be quick.”

I waited for that door to slam in my face before I started to get ready. I stepped into my elegant dress and braided my hair, which I twisted into a bun. Then, I gently pulled out a small sack from under my pillow. Inside, it contained my most precious, valuable item: my diamond necklace. I was still in the middle of pondering whether or not I should wear it when my thoughts were shattered by a sharp, stern voice.

“Come ON! Pauline!”

Without a second thought, I tossed the necklace over my neck, slipped into my violet flats and dashed outside. Only just in time. A luxurious carriage pulled towards the steps and I was so in awe I didn’t realise my sister behind me. She put a hand on my shoulder so suddenly that it made me yelp a bit too loudly, a very unladylike thing, Aunt Camille always says.

“I know, right? It is fabulous. Please don’t tell me you expect us to arrive on foot to the future emperor’s coronation,” Janelle whispered, “oh my! What is wrong with your hair? So plain! The necklace looks glamorous, but, oh no, the hair...” Janelle pulled out a few ruby pins from her hair and stuffed them in my bun.

“There.” My sister exclaimed.

The moment we arrived at the steps of the church, I was speechless. The church towered above me, dazzling stones and delicately painted wood. But part of my speechlessness was because the coronation site is the Norte-Dame Cathedral, not the Reims Cathedral. Napoleon just broke the whole tradition, but has may as well just started a brand new one. The entrance were lined with twelve intricately carved statues, the twelve apostles. Snow drifted down from the sky, gently covering the tips and shoulders of the statues. I wondered

how much dedication and hard work the craftsman had put into this piece of work. A few minutes must have past, and I just stared at the statues, admiring the skill.

“Pauline! I know these are fantastic, but the coronation is about to start.” My sister reminded me, then pulled me through the opening archway.

She lead me through the crowd of chattering people and pulled me up the staircase, leading to the second floor. Behind and around me, musicians played elegant and soothing pieces of music to very joyous, jolly rhythms. I glanced around and saw paintings, mosaics, statues and stained glass windows showcasing various famous figures. Janelle and I squeezed through the crowd like two cats trying to crawl into a mouse hole, receiving several unapproved looks from a few people. I muttered a few apologies but I guarantee they even heard me from over the discussions and music.

Finally, Janelle stopped by a small balcony overlooking the aisle where Napoleon and his second wife Josephine will walk across. She gestured for me too stand next to her and stared below in trance.

After a few moments, I heard the sound of lots of hooves trotting across the pavement outside of the church. Then, I caught several voices outside hushing and shouting. Suddenly, the gates swung open and the Pope marched in followed closely by two generals. He wore a long, cultivated white robe with green and yellow streaks running down the sleeves, shoulders and neck. On his hand, he clutched a sceptre with an intricately carved out eagle perched at the every top. When he walked, the Pope made sure that his hand held the sceptre straight, and swung it vertically in a casual way. The Pope strode in to the sound of Le Sueur’s motet, then took a seat on the throne arranged by the choir’s left hand side, near the high altar.

People gradually started to fill in the church, squeezing me towards the edge of the barrier. When most of the people settled down, five graceful women sauntered through the majestic entrance, leaving everyone around me stunned. Each of them had a very sophisticated tiara in their hair, radiating power and beauty. Those women are very famous throughout the French Empire, being Napoleon’s three sisters and Napoleon’s sister-in-law. The women had jewellery dangling from their ear lobes, wrists and neck, entwined and clipped in their hair, and decorated on their gowns. Followed closely behind them came well known generals (carrying cushions and baskets), including Napoleon’s brother, who was wearing a black high-hat with a grey feather stuck to it’s side. The Marshals of France trudged in after, closing in the parade of the Imperial family and generals.

When everyone was settled, all gazes were upon the people who had just entered, but, that will quickly change. At around 1 p.m, the gates swung open once again. This time, no one entered, but in the faraway distance, a carriage, more luxurious than any I have ever seen, ascended towards the church. Men wearing suites and blazers with dozens of badges drooping down rode on horse back, accompanying the carriage. As the carriage moved closer I tried to make out the shape of who was sitting in it, but the curtains were half closed. The beams of sunlight reflected on the sides of the sumptuous ride, making it hard to admire it without blinding my eyes. Citizens living on either side of the road poked their heads from the windows and shouted their congrats, tributes, ovations and cheers. A hand emerged from the side of the carriage and waved, then quickly disappeared as if someone yanked it back.

When the carriage almost reached the steps of the church, the men on horseback did a small gallop and slid of their horses. Then, they walked in a well-practised formation and stood on either sides of the carriage, ready to open the doors.

Everyone watched eagerly as a foot stepped out of the carriage. When she stood up, I was immersed by her beauty. Her delicate skin, which was very pale, long, silky hair and a sweet smile that lit up the atmosphere around her. The woman was none other than the one and only Josephine de Beauharnais. I secretly admired

her over Napoleon Bonaparte, and excitement washed over me as I saw her in person. The people around me held their breaths, totally mesmerised, and I was too. Her milky-white silk gown was adorned with tiny gold patterns and had a well-trimmed edge. On her head, a diamond tiara was adjusted between her twirls of hair and two gleaming diamonds drooped from her ears. From just above her waist, a scarlet, crimson velvet, furry cloak known as the coronation robes draped down, being held and taken care of by two fancily dressed women who followed close behind her footsteps. Then, another person emerged from the carriage: Napoleon Bonaparte, also known as the First Consul and the Le Petit Corporal. He too, was in his coronation robes, but in Roman style. The robe descended from his shoulders and all the way to the floor, only leaving a small gap at the front to allow him to walk without tripping. His shoes were covered in golden bee like patterns and so was his satin tunic. On his head, adorned with a golden wreath, a symbol of power and control, glittered and contrasted beautifully with the beams of sunlight. He carried a lot of regalia, including the hand of justice, sceptre, crown and sword.

Napoleon held his nose high into the air and joined Josephine by her side. They then walked side-by-side towards the entrance of the church, where they got sprinkled by holy water. As the Imperial couple walked down the aisle, the choir sang another elegant tune as a man led them to a set of low thrones placed in front of the high altar in the centre of the choir. The sound of the pure voices filled every corner of the room, moving the hearts of everyone in the audience.

The crowning ceremony has officially begun. Napoleon stood up and gave all the regalia he was wearing or carrying to the hands of the generals who had walked in with the baskets and cushions. During this process, the choir sang another piece of music, one that I didn't recognise. Then, Josephine also got up from her low throne and stood next to Napoleon.

After the song produced from the choir ended, the Pope received Napoleon's religious oaths and the Imperial couple knelt down, to be blessed by the Pope, who was bent down slightly with his eyes closed and resting his palms together. Pope Pius VII then stood up and made space for Napoleon and Josephine to make their way up the high altar where they received some sort of sacred unction on the hands and forehead. No one in the audience dared to speak or move a muscle, for this was a very sacred part of the coronation. The chorale sang again, and then when the blessing ended, they changed to a new song, in which no action happened. This signalled that the mass proper was about to begin.

The ornaments being carried by another group of generals were blessed and taken out delicately. The Pope cautiously handled the religious object and handed them to the Imperial couple, except for a sphere, which I assume was the globe, and gave it to a man dressed formally. Pius VII turned towards the Imperial couple and recited a prayer taken from the Reims ceremonial, then waited for Napoleon to take off his golden wreath. After Napoleon was done, Pius lifted the crown embroidered with jewels and diamonds from a velvet cushion and slowly levelled it onto Napoleon's head. Just as the crown was in front of his forehead, about to touch his hair, Napoleon made a move that no one in that room, or no person in history would ever think of. First, he lifted his head slightly and looked at the Pope, nodded slightly and hinted him to stop the procession. Then, Napoleon slowly took his hands from within his robes and held the crown firmly within his hands. Pope Pius VII stared at him in shock and confusion, having absolutely no idea what Napoleon was up to. Just as the Pope was in some sort of trance, Napoleon slipped the crown out of the Pope's hands and placed it upon his own head. Gasps rose from the church and looks of dismay and horror appeared on several general's faces. But, Napoleon acted as if he had done nothing wrong and still lifted his head high up in confidence, though he, yet again, broke another tradition during the ceremony: crowning himself. In my opinion, I think he had done that just to humiliate the Pope, since there were some rumours being spread around about the bumpy relationship between the two. This information actually travelled around quite fast around the French Empire.

This act made everyone silent down and not dare to speak. As if on cue, Josephine knelt down before Napoleon, and waited to be crowned. The soon-to-become Emperor picked up a small crown that was surmounted with a cross from a cushion carried by one general, then made it as if to place it on his head before placing it on Josephine's head. Josephine clasped her palms together and closed her eyes, showing that she was praying.

When Josephine stood up again, the Imperial couple was led by a procession of people, which included the Pope, the generals, the Grands Dignitaries, princes, princesses, ladies-in-waiting and other members, to the Grand throne. Throughout this, everyone's eyes were moving with the crowd below, eagerly waiting to see Napoleon sit on the throne. He walked up grandly to the thrones and confidently sat on his, before Josephine gently sat next to him on another throne, slightly lowering her head. The Pope blessed Napoleon one last time and kissed him on the cheek, before being accompanied back to his seat. Before the Pope sat down, he turned towards the Imperial Couple and shouted triumphantly, "Vivat Imperator in aeternum!" Shortly after, the choir sang 'Vivat', a song I recognised before, since I think I heard it somewhere...

After the song ended, Napoleon stood up from his seat and pronounced another oath while one of his hands was placed on a very antique looking book held by Cardinal Fesch. At last, the herald exclaimed, "the most glorious, the most august emperor Napoleon, emperor of the French, is crowned and enthroned emperor, Long live the Emperor!"

Sounds of celebration and joy echoed in and out of the church, citizens were shouting "Vive l'Empereur" everywhere and cannons outside of the cathedral fired, officially confirming that the Emperor has been coronated!

When all the cries stopped, Napoleon and Josephine waved and made their way out of the church, followed by all the generals and members of the imperial family. After all the important people were dismissed, and boarded their carriages, we were free to go. Janelle pulled my hand, and together, we darted outside to see the people celebrating on the streets. Some were dancing joyously, while others cheered and paid tribute. I saw Mum and Dad not far away, and ran into their arms.

"Did you see how Napoleon crowned himself? Did you see the look on the Pope's face?" I asked them excitedly. "The new Emperor already broke so many traditions! I have a very giddy feeling that this is only the start!"

Janelle also started giggling and pulled the family together. "Let's go home. And on the way, we can look at what the citizens did to the streets, shall we?"

Back on the carriage, the iconic moments of the coronation continuously flashed in my mind. I couldn't help myself but think of the coronation over and over again. I wondered how the French Empire will expand under Napoleon's orders, and how might he treat the people. On the journey back home, I let myself poke my head through the open windows to see the jolly festive going on outside. I swore to myself, that this day will be remembered in my mind crystal clear, forever.

## Epilogue

"Year 8, today we are going to learn about... Drum roll please... Napoleon Bonaparte!"

Cheers filled the classroom as the teacher announced this term's new topic. Jonathan beamed and had a smile painted on his face that extended from ear to ear.

“Woo hoo! I know right? Exciting... Napoleon was known for having broken two, or even three traditions during his coronation, and that angered some certain people. Today in class, we will learn about who was angered and who was humiliated. Did I tell you guys about that there is this theory about Napoleon breaking of the traditions to humiliate someone? Well, let’s not chit chat anymore and start this thrilling lesson!”

**THE END**