
Napoleon's
Secret Daughter
Arthur Bernède
"This child of Bonaparte's youth and passion cries out her hatred for the man who gave her life" (*Le Petit Parisien*, 1922).

Napoleon's Secret Daughter

Arthur Bernède



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NAPOLEON'S SECRET DAUGHTER

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Contents

Copyright iv
Note ix

1 The Man with the Black Collar 1
2 The Woman in White 6
3 The Hôtel de Metz 9
4 The Beautiful Toinon 13
5 Fouché 17
6 In Prison 22
7 General Malet 28
8 An Unexpected Messenger 33
9 The Emperor and the Soldier 39
10 The Crimson Curtain 44
11 The Eaglette 49
12 The Miniature by Madame Vigée-Lebrun 54
13 The Secret Police Archives 58
14 The Print Dealer's Shop 62
15 The Club of the Philadelphes 68
16 "I Love You!" 74
17 The Emperor Rises 79
18 The Little Gate of Les Sablons 84

PROOF

19	The Emperor's Two Policemen	91
20	"If Only I Had a Son"	96
21	"I'll Save Him!"	101
22	The Prisoner's Rescue	105
23	I'll Be the One to Kill Him!	110
24	Fishing in Troubled Waters	115
25	The Dragnet	124
26	The Secret Note	129
27	"I Am the Emperor!"	138
28	Into the Unknown	144
29	Some Loss is Inevitable	151
30	At the Château of Saint-Leu	156
31	The Game of Blind Man's Bluff	163
32	The Battle	167
33	Towards Divorce	176
34	She and He	180
35	A Page from History	186
36	Grippe-Sols, Policeman	192
37	Betrayal!	198
38	The Man in Black Proposes and Fouché Disposes	203
39	Napoleon's Field Chest	208
40	Cast Out!	218
41	At Malmaison	226
42	The Two Empresses	234
43	By Clemency and By Love	239
44	Dr. Dubuisson's Sanatorium	244
45	Towards the Coup	249
46	The First Act of the Drama	253

47 The Second Act 259
48 The Supreme Pact 266
49 A Double Farewell 272
50 A Glimmer of Hope 279
51 The Clemency of Augustus 284
52 The Execution 291
53 Napoleon's Fury 295
54 We're Even! 299
55 The Sleepwalker 303
56 Parricide 308
57 The Great Tragic Poet Corneille Intervenes 315
Epilogue 322

About the Author 323
Glossary 326

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Note

Napoleon's Secret Daughter is the first English translation of Arthur Bernède's highly popular novel, *L'Aiglonne* (published in 1922).

The various historical names, places and terms used are set in **bold**, and their explanations are found in the Glossary.

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6

In Prison

It was two o'clock in the morning.

In the old hall of the Parliament of Paris—now the **Revolutionary Tribunal**—the final session was drawing to a close.

Between two armed grenadiers stood Marie-Thérèse de Navailles. Motionless, she listened as Citizen **Fouquier-Tinville**, former prosecutor at the Châtelet and now deputy public accuser, delivered his charge.

Sometimes he addressed the three judges seated behind a green-draped table on the raised platform, stiff in their pretense of impartial justice. Sometimes he turned toward the jury bench—a row of sober-faced workers and tradesmen, all proud of their civic virtue—and, in his sharp, monotonous voice, laid out the case against the accused.

At last, his voice fell silent, heavy and metallic. "Against the so-called Marquise de Navailles, guilty of conspiring with the enemies of the Nation, I demand the penalty of death!"

A faint murmur rippled from the upper gallery, where those who haunted such grim performances leaned forward for the final act.

"Have you anything to add to your defense?" asked the presiding judge.

"No," said Marie-Thérèse clearly. She knew her fate and had not even sought counsel.

Yet she had every reason to cling to life. During her imprisonment at the Abbaye—where she had miraculously survived the September massacres—she had felt, day by day, the first stirrings of motherhood.

At first came the trembling joy every woman feels when she realizes she carries within her the living sign of a love returned. But soon that joy turned to despair. To claim her condition would earn her a stay of execution, yes—a brief reprieve granted by the Convention's decree. But to do so would mean confessing a sin, one she now faced with all the anguish of a Christian soul.

So, she kept silent. Peace at last filled her conscience, and she waited calmly for the sentence.

The jury did not deliberate long. Within minutes, she heard the words that condemned her to die—this very day—by the blade that had already taken the King three months earlier on the **Place de la Révolution**.

She neither protested nor wept. Quiet and upright, she was led away to the registry at the **Conciergerie**, then to a vaulted chamber known as the Hall of the Condemned—a dark antechamber of death.

On the straw lay three men asleep: a royal counselor, a gentleman of the King's chamber, and a stable-hand, now equals in their final rest. Nearby, a young man wrote feverishly to his fiancée. Two women, mother and daughter, knelt weeping on the cold slabs. An old priest murmured prayers in a trembling voice.

Marie-Thérèse sat on the stone steps by a glass door that opened onto the **Cour de Mai**. Through the dust-gray panes she could just make out the outline of a guard on watch.

From her bodice she drew a small volume—her cherished Corneille, the gift of Bonaparte himself. During the long months of captivity, she had read it again and again. Now she turned its pages until she found the verses from *Polyeucte*, those lines that rise with faith toward heaven: *Your blessings do not fade; and death, awaited with joy, is but a gentle crossing toward eternal peace.*

Her eyes blurred. The words began to dance and dissolve into mist. The book in her hands vanished. In its place appeared his face—Bonaparte's—alive, fierce, and tender, his voice burning in her memory: "You have no right to destroy the life within you. It belongs to me as much as to you. I want it to live!"

A feverish dizziness swept over her. The words repeated, unrelenting: I want it! I want it!

Then darkness. She collapsed.

When she awoke, the executioner stood over her.

"Up, citizeness," one of his aides barked.

Another approached, scissors in hand, ready to cut her long hair.

She sprang to her feet. Through the open doorway she saw the cart waiting in the courtyard—a few condemned already aboard, heads shorn, hands bound, garments loose at the neck.

A cry tore from her—a cry not of terror, but of a mother who suddenly felt her child stir inside her, pleading to live.

"Don't kill me yet!" she cried. "I am going to be a mother!"

* * *

Days later, in a narrow cell of the Conciergerie, a woman sat on a rough cot, nursing a newborn child. She gazed at the fragile creature in her arms, tears streaking her wasted face.

She knew she had not been granted mercy, only delay. Sooner or later—perhaps within hours—the executioner would return.

Torn by fear, she whispered to herself: "If I lacked the courage to resist the voice of the life within me, why did I not let her go when she was born? Why did I keep her, binding myself to her with all my heart, only to lose her now forever?"

Her sobs broke loose. "My daughter… my love… my dearest little one…"

Despairing, she thought, *What will become of her?*

A few days earlier, a commissioner of the Commune had visited her—stern, but not unkind. He'd said, "Don't worry, citizeness. The Nation will raise your child."

The words had chilled her blood. *The Nation!* What hope could that name hold for a lady of the Queen's household, a noble from a world swept away? The Nation—those same men who had paraded the severed heads of her guards, who had toppled both throne and altar!

"Oh, if only someone could take you, my little one," she murmured, "carry you far away—to **Brittany,** to the **Vendée**—and give you to some good peasant woman who still honors her master and believes in her God. But I may not even dream of it. You aren't mine anymore. You belong to the Nation—to the assassins who killed my King—and who will soon kill me."

"Lord," she sobbed, "take my life—but spare my child."

The clatter of bolts and the scrape of a key broke through her prayer.

The door burst open. The head jailer entered with several guards, led by an officer whose bearing was proud and open.

She understood at once.

They had come for her. The hour had struck.

And from their ranks stepped a man with a pale, scarred face and cold, glittering eyes—Fouquier-Tinville. Her accuser.

Holding her baby tight, she stood, trembling but defiant.

"Citizenness," he declared solemnly, "the term granted you has expired. It is time to atone for your crime."

"And my child?" she asked.

"In accordance with the decree of the twelfth Prairial, Year I of the Republic, your daughter—and all infants born to prisoners—will be sent to the Hospice of Foundlings. There she will be raised at the expense of the State."

"No! You shall not take her!" she cried. "Kill us both if you must—but she will not live among you! She is mine!"

Fouquier stepped forward, but Marie-Thérèse flared with wild strength.

"Back, monster! Back, you human tiger! You may have my head, but never the soul of my child!"

She turned to the soldiers. "For pity's sake—is there not one among you who will show mercy?"

Then the commanding officer stepped forward. "Give me the child," he said briskly.

Everyone froze. Fouquier glared. "What's this?"

"I mean," said the officer, "that I'll take her. I adopt her."

His tone was gruff, but his eyes were steady, sincere.

"Citizen officer—" began the prosecutor.

"Citizen deputy," interrupted the soldier sharply. "Adjutant Claude-François **Malet** has proved often enough his devotion to the Nation. It can trust him to raise this child of an aristocrat. I'll make her a good patriot."

He looked towards Marie-Thérèse, whose eyes were empty now of tears, and added, almost tenderly: "…and a true Frenchwoman."

Marie-Thérèse hesitated—then, seeing his honest face, thrust the child toward him.

"Then take her!"

Malet's strong hands trembled slightly as he received the tiny bundle.

"I give her to you," she said. "But swear, by your honor, that my daughter will bear no name but your own."

"I swear it," he answered firmly.

"Thank you."

She reached beneath her mattress and drew out a small book. "Promise me one thing more—teach her to read from this."

Fouquier narrowed his eyes. "What book is that?"

"Corneille," she replied proudly.

"Corneille!" he spat. "A royalist!"

"A poet," said Malet evenly. "The kind the Republic needs."

"Guards, do your duty!" Fouquier thundered.

The soldiers surrounded her. She leaned toward her child once more and pressed a long kiss to her tiny brow—a kiss that carried all her love and farewell.

"Goodbye, my beloved," she whispered. "I will pray for you."

Then she looked up—and saw tears glint in the eyes of the rough Republican officer.

Her face softened. Peace returned to her.

Marie-Thérèse de Navailles could die unafraid.

Her honor was safe.

And the orphan—had found a father.