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Edited by D. A. Bingham

Excerpt

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# THE CORRESPONDENCE OF NAPOLEON.

## CHAPTER I.

### YOUTHFUL LETTERS AND ANTECEDENTS.

DURING the Second Empire the French Government determined to publish the "Correspondence of Napoleon I.," and a Committee, presided over by Prince Napoleon, was charged with this duty. At the outset of their labours the Committee thus addressed Napoleon III. :—

"SIRE,—Augustus placed Cæsar among the gods, and dedicated a temple to him: the temple has disappeared, his *Commentaries* remain. Your Majesty, wishing to raise an imperishable monument to the chief of your dynasty, has ordered us to collect and to publish the political, military, and administrative correspondence of Napoleon I. . . .

"Let us at once state that, in conformity with the instructions of your Majesty, we have scrupulously avoided any alteration, amendment, or modification of the originals. In declaring that his public life commenced with the siege of Toulon, Napoleon I. himself determined the starting-point for the Committee. It is at that immortal date the present publication begins."

It is objected that the public life of a man commences from the day he enters the career he has chosen, and that

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Napoleon's public life dates from his first commission in the army in 1785, if not from his entry into the military school of Brienne, at the expense of the country, in 1779. The Committee was no doubt deterred from publishing the early correspondence for several reasons. It would have revealed Napoleon first of all in his character of a Corsican patriot, hating France, ignorant of the language of the people he was destined to govern; then a violent Jacobin and the friend of the Robespierres; an officer guilty of several serious acts of insubordination, which in less troubled times would have cost him his life; who only escaped being brought before a court-martial by a miracle, on the charges of desertion and levying war against the French Government; whose name was five times struck off the Army List, and who was only reinstated on the production of documents filled with inaccurate statements.

The assertion made by the Committee of not tampering with the correspondence is certainly not correct, for many curious letters have been omitted altogether, and others have been revised and corrected. This is not much to be wondered at on the part of a Committee engaged in raising "an imperishable monument." However, since the fall of the Second Empire there has been a great rummaging of the archives of the War Office, and strange matters have been brought to light and rescued from that dust in which Augustin Thierry says the national history is still hidden.

The Committee published twenty-nine 8vo. volumes, reaching from the siege of Toulon, where Napoleon acquired the rank of general, down to the second and final collapse of the First Empire at Waterloo. Before commencing the perusal of the letters we have selected, it will be well to bear in mind the following facts in connection with the most remarkable genius of modern times.

Corsica, after having been some time in the possession of the Genoese, was sold to France under the auspices of Choiseul, "the coachman of Europe," who bought it to counterbalance the loss of Canada. The Corsicans offered

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## NAPOLEON'S BIRTH.

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a stout resistance to the French, but were finally subdued, after an expenditure of much blood and 50,000,000 francs. Paoli, the Corsican leader, had exhibited great skill, courage, and energy in defence of his native island, but in May, 1769, Corsica was definitively annexed to France. Paoli fled to England. Charles Bonaparte, the father of the future emperor, had been one of his warmest partisans, and his wife had shared with him the dangers of the last campaign. Towards the end of May Charles Bonaparte tendered his submission, and was thus brought into contact with the Comte de Marbeuf, the French governor, with whom he was soon on intimate terms.

In 1764 Charles Bonaparte, the last of his race, had married Lætitia Ramolino, the most beautiful girl in the island. In 1765 a son was born, who lived only a few months. In 1766 came a daughter, who also died young; and in 1768 a third child, who was christened Nabulione. The identity of Nabulione is enveloped in mystery. According to Charles Bonaparte, and the official historians of the empire, this child was Joseph. Recent authors reject the idea of two sons having received the name of Nabulione, and declare there was a fraudulent substitution; that Nabulione, or rather Napoleon, was born at Corte in 1768, and Joseph at Ajaccio in 1769. There is a great deal of evidence in support of this theory, and no reliable evidence against it—nothing but the assertion of interested parties. In a letter to Paoli, Napoleon afterwards alluded to the scenes of bloodshed amid which he had been born—scenes which took place in 1768, but which had ceased in 1769. On several other occasions he made allusions and declarations tending to show that he was born in January, 1768, and not on the 15th August, 1769. Joseph, too, made similar admissions, and certainly Napoleon from his childhood behaved like the eldest son. However, according to official history, Napoleon was born on the 15th August, 1769, when Corsica had become French, and as all the early documents concerning the

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family were destroyed and the registers mutilated at Corte, Ajaccio, Bastia, and Marseilles, as soon as Bonaparte attained power, one must accept the official date.

The reason given for a substitution is, that when Charles Bonaparte obtained a foundation at Brienne, Napoleon was just over the age for admission, while Joseph, of a meek and retiring disposition, was unsuited for a military career. Under these circumstances Charles Bonaparte took his eldest son to the Royal Military College, passing him off as his second son.

Charles Bonaparte, after tendering his submission, became a fervent partisan of the French, was appointed one of a committee of twelve gentlemen who administered the island under the French governor, and was afterwards chosen to represent the Corsican nobility in the General States at Versailles.

In 1778, thanks to M. de Marbeuf, he received a free admission for one of his sons into the military school at Brienne, and in the month of December set out for France, accompanied by Joseph, Napoleon, and Fesch, his wife's half-brother. The party repaired first to Autun, where they were kindly received by the bishop, Monsignor de Marbeuf, the brother of the count. It was only ten years later that Talleyrand was appointed to this See.

Joseph, Napoleon, and Fesch were all put to school. Joseph and Fesch were destined for the Church, and Napoleon had to prepare for Brienne. There exists a report of his master, the Abbé Chardon, showing that the latter was very intelligent, and that he learned to speak and write French fairly in three months.

Having shown proof of his nobility for a hundred and forty years, Charles Bonaparte received the necessary papers from the Prince de Montbarey, and took Napoleon to Brienne, where, after passing in French, he left him on the 24th April, 1779, the same year that Josephine Tascher de la Pagerie married Alexander de Beauharnais.

As at Autun, so at Brienne, Napoleon was in the hands

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## NAPOLEON WRITES TO HIS FATHER.

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of the clergy. The head-master was Père Louis ; Père Patrault, ever afterwards held in high esteem by Napoleon, taught mathematics ; Père Dupuy literature ; and the ill-fated Pichegru, who, educated in a monastery, had served in America as a private soldier, gave military instruction—Pichegru, supposed to have been strangled in 1804 at the instigation of his former pupil.

Napoleon had not been long at Brienne when the taunts and arrogance of his young comrades wounded his pride. He was on the foundation ; he owed everything to the royal bounty, and he had no pocket-money. Though only twelve years of age, he not only felt and resented the inferiority of his situation, but he expressed his feelings, with an amount of vigour truly remarkable, in the following letter, which is the earliest preserved specimen of his correspondence :—

“MY FATHER,—If you or my protectors do not give me the means of supporting myself more honourably in the house where I am, let me return home immediately. I am tired of exhibiting indigence, and of seeing the smiles of insolent scholars who are only superior to me by reason of their fortune ; for there is not one capable of feeling the noble sentiments with which I am animated. What ! sir, your son is to be the laughing-stock of some popinjays, who, proud of the pleasures they give themselves, laughingly insult the privations I endure ! No, my father, no ! Should fortune absolutely refuse the amelioration of my lot, remove me from Brienne, and if necessary give me a mechanical profession. By these offers judge of my despair. This letter, believe me, is not dictated by any vain desire to indulge in expensive amusements ; I am not at all fond of them. I simply experience the want of showing that I have the means of procuring them like the rest of my comrades.

“Your respectful and affectionate son,

“BUONAPARTE.

“5th April, 1781.”

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## 6 THE CORRESPONDENCE OF NAPOLEON.

Among the comrades of Bonaparte were de Dampierre, de Comminges, de Castries, and many other sprigs of the nobility, including de Bourrienne, afterwards his secretary, and Phélippeaux, who, with Sir Sydney Smith, successfully defended St. Jean d'Arc, and helped to change his destiny by barring his road to the East.

In April, 1783, Bonaparte, after a dispute with a brother cadet who had railed at him about Corsica and his father, was placed under arrest. He immediately wrote to M. de Marbeuf, the protector of himself and his family, saying:—

“Now, if I am guilty, if I have been justly deprived of my liberty, add to the favours with which you have already honoured me that of withdrawing me from Brienne and depriving me of your protection. It would be a theft to the prejudice of some one more worthy than myself to continue to enjoy that protection. No, sir, I shall never be more worthy of it. I shall never cure myself of an impetuosity, all the more dangerous because I believe the motive sacred. No matter what interest commands, I shall never have the strength of mind to see a man of honour—my father, my respectable father—dragged in the mud! On this subject, sir, I shall always feel too deeply to confine myself to complaining to my chiefs; I shall always remain persuaded that a good son ought to avenge a similar outrage. As for the favours which you have showered upon me, they will be ever present to my mind. I shall say, I acquired an honourable protection, but to take advantage of it required virtues which Heaven has refused me, &c. &c.

“NAPOLEONE BUONAPARTE.”

M. de Marbeuf interceded, Bonaparte was released, passed his examinations with success, was distinguished for application, mathematics, tolerable knowledge of history and geography; was weak in Latin; “*would make an excellent sailor.*” He had acquired a taste for

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## LETTER TO UNCLE FESCH.

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a sea-faring life from having frequented the society of Corsican fishermen and listened with avidity to their marvellous stories, which greatly impressed his romantic imagination. Hence his efficiency in naval matters, and a store of knowledge never forgotten.

On the 15th June, 1784, Bonaparte despatched this long letter to his uncle Fesch, the future cardinal, on family matters:—

“MY DEAR UNCLE,—I write to inform you that my dear father is going to pass through Brienne in order to take Marianne (sister Eliza Bacciochi) to St. Cyr, and to try and re-establish his health. He arrived here on the 21st with Lucien [who was going to be a priest], who knows French, and has forgotten his Italian. . . . I am persuaded that my brother Joseph does not write to you. When he writes to my father it is only a couple of lines. It is true that he treats me better. . . . As for the profession he wishes to adopt, he at first, as you know, chose the Church. He now desires to serve the king, and in this he is wrong for many reasons.

“First : As my dear father remarks, he has not courage enough to affront the perils of an action ; his health is feeble, and will not allow him to support the fatigues of a campaign ; and my brother looks on the military profession only from a garrison point of view. Yes, my dear brother would make a good garrison officer ; he is well-made, light-minded, fit for paying frivolous compliments, and with these talents he will always get on well in society.

“Second : He has received an ecclesiastical education, and it is very late to undo that. Monsignor the Bishop of Autun would have given him a fat living, and he would have been sure to become a bishop. What an advantage for the family ! Monsignor of Autun has done all he could to encourage him to persevere, promising him that he shall never repent. Should he persist in wishing to be a soldier

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I must praise him, provided he has a decided taste for his profession, the finest of all, and the great motive power of human affairs. . . . He wishes to be a military man; that is all very well, but in what corps? Is it in the marine?

“First: He knows nothing of mathematics; it would take him two years to learn. Second: His health is incompatible with the sea. Is it the engineers? He would require four or five years to learn what is necessary, and at the end of that time he would be only a cadet. Besides, I think that working all day long is not in accordance with the levity of his character. The same reasons which apply to the engineers apply to the artillery, with this exception, that he would have to work eighteen months to become a cadet, and eighteen months more to become an officer. Oh! that is not to his taste. Let us see. No doubt he desires to join the infantry. Good; I understand; he wishes to pass the day doing nothing; he wishes to dawdle about all day long. And what is a slender officer of infantry? Three parts of the time a scapegrace. And this is what neither my father, nor you, nor my mother, nor my grand-uncle, the archdeacon desires: for he has already exhibited symptoms of levity and prodigality. Consequently a last effort will be made to induce him to enter the Church, in default of which my dear father will take him back to Corsica, where he will be under his eye, and will try and get him to the bar, &c.

“NAPOLEONE DE BUONAPARTE.

“P.S. Tear up this letter. It is to be hoped Joseph, with his talents, and the feelings with which his education ought to have inspired him, will decide well and become the supporter of our family.”

A curious letter to be written by a younger son, aged fifteen, during his father's lifetime. The paragraph



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## FAMILY AFFAIRS.

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concerning Lucien, who had forgotten his Italian, is interesting from the fact of Lucien having taken refuge in Italy later in life, and having had his children naturalised Italians.

Joseph having stood firm, it was decided that he should go to Metz or Brienne, but for the moment he returned to Ajaccio with his father. On the 12th September, 1784, Napoleon wrote the following reply to a letter conveying this intelligence:—

“MY DEAR FATHER,—As you may imagine, your letter did not cause me great pleasure; but family interests and the state of your health, which are dear to me, oblige me to approve of your prompt return to Corsica. . . . I am delighted that Joseph has accompanied you, provided he can return by the 1st November. He can come here, because Father Patrault, my mathematical master, remains. The principal begs me to assure you that Joseph will be well received. Father Patrault says that if my brother wishes to work we might pass our examination for the artillery together. . . . I hope you will prefer Brienne to Metz for several reasons: First, because that will be a consolation for Joseph, for Lucien, and for myself. Second, because you would be obliged to write to the principal at Metz, and that would occasion delay. Third, because it is not customary at Metz to teach all Joseph must learn in six months for his examination; consequently my brother, who knows nothing of mathematics, would be placed with children, and this would disgust him. These and many other reasons should induce you to send him here. I therefore hope, before the end of October, to embrace Joseph.

“I beg you will send me Boswell and any other histories bearing on my work. You have nothing to fear; I will bring them back to Corsica were it in six years. . . .

“Your very humble and very obedient son,

“DE BUONAPARTE.”

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10 THE CORRESPONDENCE OF NAPOLEON.

For many years Napoleon busied himself with his history of Corsica, which he fondly hoped would gain him fortune and renown. He laboured at it incessantly, but it was destined never to see the light.

The following letter seems to have been written in 1790, and not, as its date would lead one to infer, in 1793, the first year of the Republic. It was addressed to Abbé Raynal, a member of the Academy:—

“SIR,—It will be difficult for you to remember, among the large number of strangers who importune you with their admiration, a person to whom you have shown some kindness. Last year you talked about Corsica with pleasure; condescend, therefore, to cast an eye over this sketch of its history. I present you with the two first letters, and if you accept them I will send the remainder.

“My brother, whom I have recommended to the committee of deputies charged to bring back Paoli to the country, and to receive a lesson of virtue and honour, will hand them to you.

“I am, with respect,

“Your very humble and very obedient servant,

“BUONAPARTE,

“AJACCIO, *the 24th June (sic),*

“*Officer of Artillery.*

“*Year 1st of Liberty.*”

Lucien Bonaparte says, in his *Memoirs*, that the Abbé Raynal sent the two chapters to Mirabeau, who declared they announced a genius of the first order. They appear to form part of the Ashburnham collection. One finds such passages as these in them:—

“A lover of freedom, you take an interest in the fate of Corsica, which you admire; it was called by the character of its inhabitants to enjoy liberty, and by the ‘centrality’ of its position, the number of its ports, and the fertility of its soil, to do a large trade. Then why have the Corsicans never been free, nor traders? Among