

**CHAMBERS'S
PAPERS FOR THE
PEOPLE; VOL. I**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649415670

Chambers's Papers for the People; Vol. I by Anonymous

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VOL. I.



PHILADELPHIA:
PUBLISHED BY J. W. MOORE.
1851.

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CHAMBERS'S PAPERS FOR THE PEOPLE.

THE BONAPARTE FAMILY.

DURING the dark period of the Middle Ages, a family of eminence, enjoying the rank of nobility, flourished in Tuscany, whence its branches spread into other of the minor states of Italy. A Grecian origin has been ascribed by genealogists to this family, whose name, on settling in Italy, was changed from *Calomeros* into the synonyme *Bonaparte*, by which it was subsequently known. Such is the doubtful origin of the Bonaparte family; of whom it is only distinctly known that they occupied a respectable place among the lesser Italian nobility, until dispersed by that long and disastrous civil war which ensued on the struggle between secular powers, and which is typified in the ferocious antagonism of the Guelfs and Ghibellines. The Bonapartes, like many other families of greater name and eminence, were now scattered and extinguished in the homes of their birth or adoption; and whilst a remnant still lingered in the basin of the Apennines, the last relic of which survived at the close of the eighteenth century in the person of an old ecclesiastic, a wealthy canon of the Abbey of San-Miniato, the chief of the stock took refuge in the small island of Corsica, and settled at Ajaccio, among whose rude nobility his descendants were enrolled, and even admitted to all the privileges then accorded to that jealous distinction. At that period, Corsica was under the tutelary sovereignty of the republic of Genoa, but in 1768 it and its small dependencies passed under the dominion of the crown of France, despite the heroic efforts of the celebrated Paoli to preserve the independence of its sterile mountains.

After its final subjugation, Corsica was assimilated in its internal administration to the other provinces of France, and had provincial states, composed of the three orders of nobility, clergy, and commonalty or third estate. It

likewise preserved a supreme magistracy of twelve nobles, in whom the government of the country was vested; and to this high tribunal Charles Bonaparte was attached as assessor, a place preparatory to his elevation into the council. This Charles was the only son of Joseph Bonaparte, the eldest of three brothers, the two other of whom died without male issue. He inherited the family property, which was not very considerable, consisting of a house in Ajaccio, and a small estate on the shore of the island, where a dilapidated villa served as a summer residence. As is usual in southern climates, he married at the early age of nineteen, and won for his wife, from numerous competitors, the reigning beauty of the world of Corsica, the young Letitia Ramolino, who was remarkable, not only for her personal charms, but also for the courage and fortitude of her character. In 1779, the noblesse elected him the deputy of their order to the court of Versailles, and in this capacity he was obliged to make frequent journeys into France, which, notwithstanding the liberal grants he received from the government of Louis XVI., appear to have reduced his fortune within the narrowest limits; for upon his death at Montpellier, in 1785, whither he had repaired in the vain hope of being relieved from the malady which afflicted him—cancer in the stomach, a disease often hereditary in families—he left his widow in very straitened circumstances, and dependent in a great measure for the support and education of her children, on their uncle, the Archdeacon Lucien, who was head of the chapter of Ajaccio, and who cheerfully undertook to perform the part of father to the bereaved orphans.

These were no fewer than eight in number, the survivors of thirteen whom the fruitful Letitia had borne to her husband, although, at the time of his death, she had not completed her thirty-fifth year. Five were sons, and three daughters, the eldest of whom, Joseph, was seventeen years old, and the youngest, Jerome, only two months. The second son was Napoleon, the third Lucien, and the fourth Louis; the three daughters were Marianna Eliza, Pauline, and Caroline, also called Annonciada, who was nearly three years old at the death of her father. In his visits to France, Charles Bonaparte had taken with him his two eldest sons for the benefit of their education; Joseph being placed in a school at Autun, with the view of following the ecclesiastical profession under the patronage of Marbœuf, Archbishop of Lyons, brother of the governor of Corsica, who, as a friend of the family, was on his part instrumental in procuring the introduction of Napoleon into the military school of Brienne, whence he was afterwards removed to that of Paris. This second son was always a favourite with his father, who delighted to regard him as the future hero of his race; and the young Napoleon himself was fondly attached to an indulgent parent, whose loss he long deplored, regretting, above all, that the mournful consolation of attending his deathbed had been denied to him, which fell, on the contrary, to the lot of Joseph and the Abbé Fesch, a half-brother of their mother. In the succeeding years, Lucien likewise received his education at Brienne and at Aix in Provence; and when the mighty era of 1789 dawned, all the sons were assembled in Corsica, where the cause of the Revolution was from the first embraced by its inhabitants with the greatest ardour. The young Bonapartes were among its most eager partisans; and Lucien, in particular, who was only sixteen years of age, distinguished himself as an orator in the popular clubs of the island. Joseph had abjured the priestly calling, and, having entered into the civil service of the department, was enabled to assist his mother in the

management and maintenance of the family. Napoleon held a commission from the king of France as a lieutenant of artillery, and was remarkable chiefly for his love of solitude and the laborious studies in which he passed his time. Already he had ceased to look upon Corsica as his country; its incorporation with France opened to him a wider theatre for the play of his aspiring spirit, and he readily merged paternal patriotism in the greater call to partake the dangers and the glories of the new competition about to arise from the crash of feudalism.

It was very different with the old patriot of the island—Paoli. As a venerated champion of freedom, the National Assembly of France had invited him to return from his long exile in England; and in 1792 he reappeared among his countrymen, with all the lustre of a name endeared to them by his services and his sufferings. He was hailed with a boundless enthusiasm, especially by the mountaineers, who revered him as their tutelary chief; but even in Ajaccio he was received with triumph, and Lucien Bonaparte records with exultation that he pronounced a discourse before him which drew tears from the honoured veteran by its touching pathos. So lively, indeed, was the impression made upon him by this fervent orator, that Paoli took him to his residence of Rostino, and kept him near his person for many months, during which he sought to instil into the mind of his pupil, as the latter himself relates with grief, that England was the only land of real freedom, and the British constitution far superior to any the legislators of France were likely to invent. Notwithstanding this veneration for the patriotic sage, Lucien was too zealous for the credit of France and the virtue of republicanism to admit the force of this doctrine, and he began to entertain suspicions of the orthodoxy of Paoli in the precepts of the revolutionary code. This first alarm soon mounted into certainty when the execution of Louis XVI. aroused the indignation of the virtuous patriot, and stirred him to an open denunciation of the sanguinary monsters who were disgracing the sacred cause of liberty. Paoli declared he would no longer belong to France, neither he nor his brave mountaineers; and he called upon the sons of his old companion in the war of the independence, Charles Bonaparte, to join him in a fresh struggle against a more terrible tyranny than had ever yet oppressed the island. But to this appeal the Bonapartes were deaf, for their ambition lay in the very opposite direction; and Paoli, having summoned around him an army of mountaineers, prepared to march on Ajaccio, which was the only town that had refused, at his command, to lower the tricolour flag. His rage was principally directed against the Bonapartes, if we are to credit Lucien, and he ordered them to be taken *dead or alive*. Joseph and Napoleon were both absent at this critical moment; Lucien, too, had proceeded to France as the head of a deputation to crave succours from the Jacobins; but the heroic Letitia, who had in earlier days fought by the side of her husband, was fully equal to the task of providing for the safety of her numerous progeny. In the dead of night, she was aroused by intelligence of the approach of her exasperated enemy, who was intent, above all, to seize her person, as a hostage for the submission of her sons; and, escorted by a village chieftain named Costa, she hastened from the city, to seek refuge in the fastnesses of the hills and forests. Amidst a small band of faithful followers, she marched with her young children, under the shade of darkness, and, before daylight, reached a secluded spot on the seashore, whence from an elevation she could see her house in flames. Un-

daunted by the sad spectacle, she exclaimed, "Never mind, we will build it up again much better: *Vive la France!*" After a concealment of two days and nights in the recesses of the woods, the fugitives were at length gladdened by the sight of a French frigate, on board of which were Joseph and Napoleon, with the deputies of the Convention, on a mission to Corsica. In this vessel the whole party at once embarked, and as no hope remained of finding security in Corsica, it was straightway steered for France. Marseilles was its port of destination, and there it accordingly landed the family of exiles, destitute of every vestige of property, but unbroken, it would seem, in courage and health. Madame Bonaparte had occasion for the exercise of all her fortitude in these trying circumstances, for she was reduced to almost extreme poverty, and was fain to receive with thankfulness the rations of bread distributed by the municipality to refugee patriots. Joseph speedily received an appointment as a commissary of war; and he and Napoleon contributed to the support of the family from their scanty allowances; but, during the first years of their residence in France, these obscure exiles, who even spoke the language of their adopted country with difficulty, suffered all the inconveniences of a sordid penury.

It was in the early period of the Reign of Terror that Letitia Bonaparte and her children took up their abode in France, which was a prey to all the horrors of civil war, as well as to the dangers of a foreign invasion. The principal cities of the Republic had revolted against the central authority of Paris and the bloody domination of the Jacobins, and among the rest, Marseilles was distinguished in the great Federalist movement. But the reduction of Lyons, and the terrible vengeance inflicted on it, restored the supremacy of the redoubtable Committee of Public Safety, which consolidated its rule with relentless fury unparelled in the annals of barbarism. Many thousands of the inhabitants of Marseilles fled in absolute terror on the approach of the Jacobin forces, and sought protection in Toulon, which had not only cast off the yoke of the convention, but called in the aid of the British and Spanish fleets to uphold the desperate cause of royalty. In this general flight, however, the Bonapartes did not participate, since they in truth belonged to the triumphant faction. This was a connection which may principally be ascribed to Lucien, who was by far the most hot-headed of the family, and who, by dint of inflammatory harangues, had recommended himself to an administrative appointment at St. Maximin, a small town a few leagues distant from Marseilles. Here he assumed the name of *Brutus*, and, in conjunction with a renegade monk, who styled himself *Epaminondas*, exercised a petty dictatorship, filling the prisons with unfortunate victims, as suspected royalists and aristocrats. But it is his boast that, with unlimited power in his hands, and at so youthful an age, he shed no blood, notwithstanding the influence of the examples around him. He even opposed the mandate of the commissioners, sent by the convention to restore its authority at Marseilles, for the removal of his prisoners to be tried or rather guillotined at Orange—an act of boldness which exposed him to the anger of the commissioners, who were Barras and Fréron, but which failed to save him from the fatal imputation of being a *Terrorist* when the day of reaction arrived. Yet, in this revolutionary career of his, Lucien was of advantage to the fortunes of the family, since Joseph, who continued to reside at Marseilles, with his mother, was of too mild and unobtrusive a character to gain credit with the powers of Jacobinism, whilst Napoleon was as yet an unknown subal-