

THE STORY OF
NAPOLEON

by L. DU GARDE PEACH, M.A., Ph.D., D.Litt.
with illustrations by JOHN KENNEY

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Ladybird Books Ltd Loughborough



A Ladybird Book
Series 561

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This is his story.

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NAPOLÉON BONAPARTE.

Napoleon Bonaparte was one of the two greatest soldiers the world has ever known. The other was Alexander the Great, who died more than 2,000 years before Napoleon was born, and about whom you may read in another book in this series. As well as being a great general, Napoleon made many of the laws under which France is governed today.

Napoleon had more energy, more intelligence and a better brain than any other man in Europe. He was also able to work for twenty hours a day, with only four hours sleep.

All this, combined with his ability to decide instantly and correctly what to do either in a battle or a council chamber, enabled him, a poor boy from Corsica, to become Emperor of France and master of Europe at the age of thirty-five.

In 1768 the island of Corsica became part of France, and a year later Charles and Letizia Buonaparte had a son, their second, whom they christened Napoleone. These names are Italian, because Corsica previously belonged to Italy. Napoleon later changed the spelling to the French form which we know today, and by which he will always be known to history.

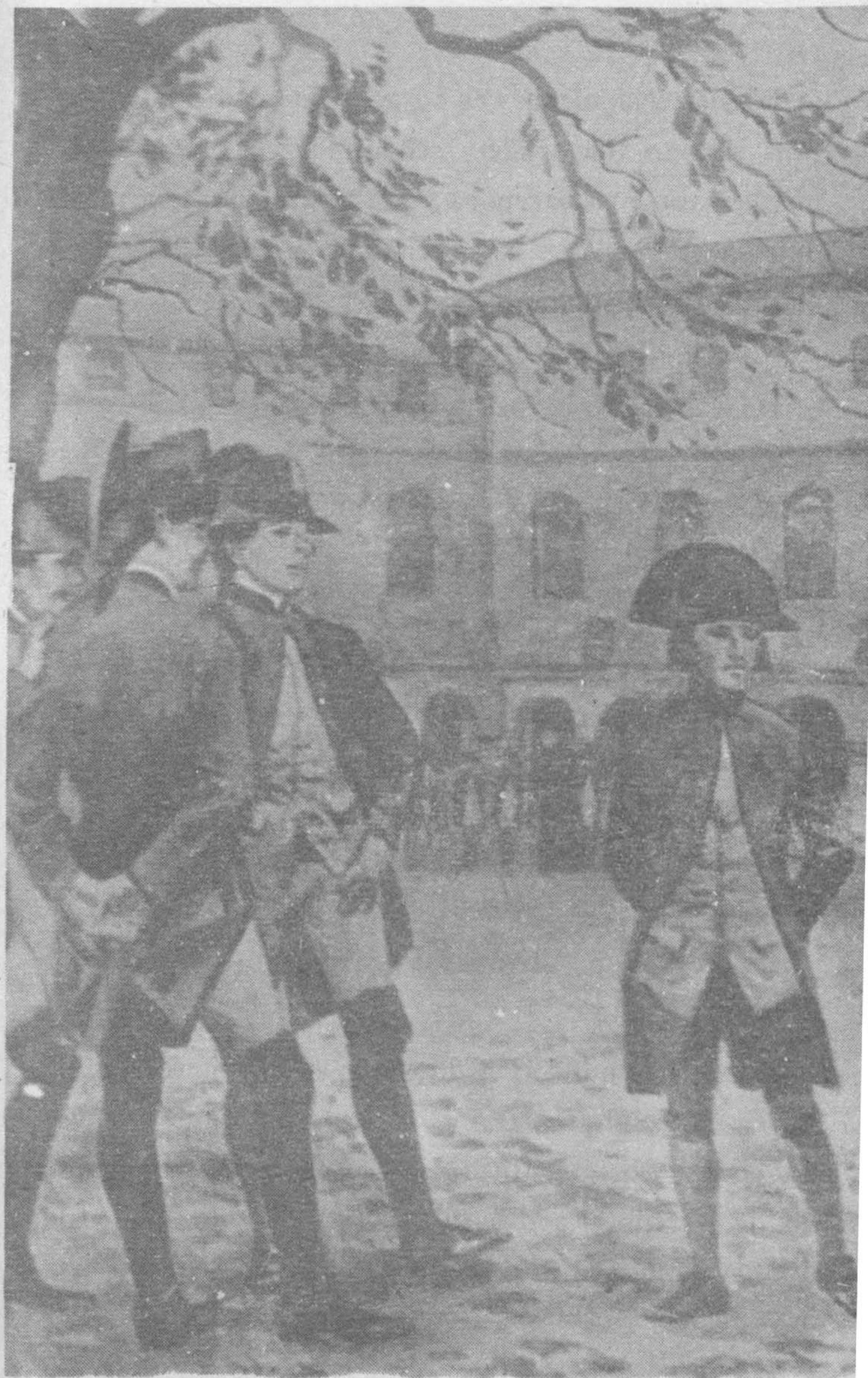


We know very little about Napoleon's childhood. Corsica was a small island, and the Corsican people were mostly untaught peasants in revolt against their new French masters. Napoleon's father and, later, Napoleon himself were involved in a rebellion which failed. For a time they were obliged to leave the island.

Charles Buonaparte was related to a family which had belonged to the nobility of Tuscany, in Italy. A friend of the family, Count de Marboeuf, was able to help him to get a grant to send the young Napoleon to a military school at Brienne, in France.

He did not have a very happy time at school. He has been described as gloomy and not good at games. In addition, he spoke French with a strong Corsican accent, and was despised by the boys from rich French families because he was poor.

Napoleon was not a brilliant scholar. He was good at mathematics, and he liked history and geography. But he had a wonderful memory, and all his life he was always able to remember everything he read or heard. When it came to designing fortifications, or planning military exercises, he was far better than any of the other boys.



Because Napoleon was so good at mathematics he was sent to the artillery school in Paris, where his mathematics master reported that he was one of the most intelligent pupils he had ever had. In everything else, he failed to distinguish himself.

He was posted to the La Fère regiment of artillery as a sub-lieutenant, and this was the beginning of his wonderful career as the greatest military commander of his time.

Napoleon was now sixteen, and the year was 1785. In those days, cannon were nothing like the accurate long-range guns of today. They fired solid cannon balls, and also what was called grape-shot. This was like modern shrapnel, and consisted of a lot of small balls about the size of golf balls, which scattered and could therefore kill or wound a lot of people at one shot.

Although soldiers in those days wore wonderful uniforms, Sub-Lieutenant Bonaparte cannot have looked very distinguished. He was short, very thin and far from strong, and with a sallow complexion saved by handsome features and brilliant eyes.



Napoleon still thought of himself as a Corsican, rather than a Frenchman. But he was now a captain in the French army, and he was sent to put down a rising in Corsica led by a patriotic Corsican named Paoli. This meant a final break with Corsica, and Napoleon was obliged to remove his mother and her family to France.

Madame Bonaparte was a woman of strong character and determination. With her young children she managed to evade the followers of Paoli who tried to capture her.

The refugees had lost everything, and had only Napoleon's pay on which to live. But at this point his elder brother Joseph married the daughter of a rich merchant, somewhat against her father's wishes. If he had known that she would one day be the Queen of Spain, he might not have objected so strongly.

Napoleon wished to marry another daughter, but this time the father refused. When, only eleven years later, Napoleon became Emperor of France, he was probably sorry that he had turned down the young captain of artillery. This daughter later married one of Napoleon's generals, Bernadotte, and became Queen of Sweden. Bernadotte retained his throne, and his descendant is King of Sweden today.



The French Revolution had broken out in 1789, and France became a Republic three years later. The King had been murdered and the armies of all the European countries were gathering to avenge his death.

Some parts of France were still against the new Government. One of these was the port of Toulon, where the citizens had called in the assistance of some English warships. These were anchored in the harbour.

The French generals were unable to decide how to attack the town. They were not prepared to listen to the advice of a young captain of artillery. It was not until they were replaced by a general with more experience, that Napoleon was given the opportunity which changed his life, and was to affect all Europe.

Captain Bonaparte, by which name the future Emperor was then of course known, was put in command of the artillery. He had from the first insisted that the guns should be mounted on a promontory which commanded the harbour. This was now done, and Napoleon set up braziers to make the cannon balls red hot. When these started falling amongst them, the English ships left the harbour. Without their help, Toulon surrendered.



On the fall of Toulon, Napoleon was promoted to Brigadier. This was rapid promotion for a young man of only twenty-four. Many older soldiers were jealous of him, and many of the politicians distrusted him. But he was too useful an officer to be neglected.

Napoleon was next sent to the French army opposing the Austrians in northern Italy. The French generals were again incompetent, and when Napoleon arrived they at first refused to listen to him. When they did, there was an immediate change.

At the military school the young Napoleon had read a book on military tactics which he had never forgotten. It laid down the rules for anyone commanding an army: to choose a point of attack, and at that point to be stronger than the enemy, and secondly always to try to surprise the enemy by moving swiftly from one place to another.

By always remembering these two rules, Napoleon won one campaign after another, until it seemed he was invincible. Added to swiftness of movement, Napoleon possessed the ability to look at a map and at once to know how and where to move his soldiers to surprise the enemy.