

## THE HOUSE WHERE NAPOLEON WAS BORN.

By CAROLINE HOLLAND.

ONE whole morning at Ajaccio we devoted to sketching in the home of Napoleon Buonaparte. Sitting in those quiet rooms, delicately furnished, with palely tinted walls, the flickering of sunlight through half-opened shutters gave a sense of movement to the air, as though the quivering motes were indeed the dust of the departed, still lingering round the home once so full of life and noise and animation.

For M. Charles Buonaparte (father of the great Napoleon) was a busy lawyer with a large family, eleven children in all. A warm supporter of Paoli, he took an active part in the politics of the day, was lavish in expenditure, and much given to hospitality; a tradition confirmed by the existence of a spacious ballroom with no less than twelve windows (six on either side), and large enough to give importance to the house of any private gentleman.

In this hospitality M. Buonaparte was warmly seconded by his wife, Lætitia Ramolino (the beauty of Ajaccio), afterwards known as Madame Mère. Indeed, in 1790, when her second son, Napoleon, first began to feel the stirrings of ambition, and was trying for what then seemed to him the almost unattainable post of *chef de bataillon*, Madame Lætitia sacrificed half her fortune to procure her favourite this command.

Her house was constantly open to Napoleon's numerous supporters, her table always covered. "Mattresses lay constantly ready in the rooms and passages," says Gregorovius, "to receive his armed adherents during the night." Napoleon was never so excited as at this period; "he could not sleep, he wandered through the rooms, his eyes full of fire, his soul full of passion!" Probably he afterwards approached the Imperial Crown with less emotion than he now felt, when aspiring to the rank of major in the Corsican National Guard.

In other respects, Monsieur and

Madame Buonaparte seem to have brought up their numerous family with a certain primitive severity. The young Napoleon, indeed, contrived to emancipate himself pretty soon, but, until his influence began to be felt in the education of the brothers and sisters, everything went by rule. Sleep, study, refreshment, prayers, pleasure and promenade, each had their appointed hour. In their domestic life, the Buonapartes might be described as a model family, devoted to one another, and a pattern to the town of which they afterwards became the boast.

But to enter the home of Napoleon, we must first discover the front door; and that is not so easy as it might seem, for the said door stands in so dark and dirty a by-street, that we did actually pass it more than once, without perceiving the inscription "Casa Buonaparte" on the lintel so immediately above our heads. Nor would it have been easy to decipher the same but for a slanting ray of sunshine from a brilliant little garden just opposite (an unexpected oasis of light and air and colour in that otherwise foul and breathless alley).

The key obtained from the *concierge*, we mount at once to the first floor. As a rule, the older Corsican houses seem to begin on the first floor. Even in the hotels at Bastia the kitchens are upstairs, the ground floor being given over to pigs, horses, cattle, and the plucking of fowls (with what pleasing results, as regards the front entrance, may be more easily imagined than described).

So far as cleanliness is concerned, the Casa Buonaparte is an honourable exception to the rule, but there are no living rooms on the ground floor, neither lobby nor entrance hall. The model lodging house stairs (stone, with iron rail), start straight from the front door, doubling back to a slip of landing, on either side of which are slightly ornamented double folding-doors.

Beneath the stairs, a closed door



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suggests offices, the house runs back a long way, and underneath the whole there are large cellars or vaults, having side doors opening into the several streets by

history of Europe for the succeeding quarter of a century would have been very different from what it was!

To return to the landing on the stairs.



Room in which Napoleon was born

The folding-doors to the right are thrown open, and (again without lobby or ante-room of any sort) we step at once into a large square drawing-room. Some twenty chairs we counted, and two large sofas (this will give a general idea of its size), in the middle, a round white marble table set in dark wood, over which hung a cut glass chandelier. A large mirror, also framed in plain dark wood, over the marble mantelpiece, and Madame Lætitia's little old-fashioned spinet in the corner by the solitary window; in spite of its formal arrangement, a pleasant and home-like looking room.

The next to be entered (No. 2) is M. Buona-parté's business room, and a very

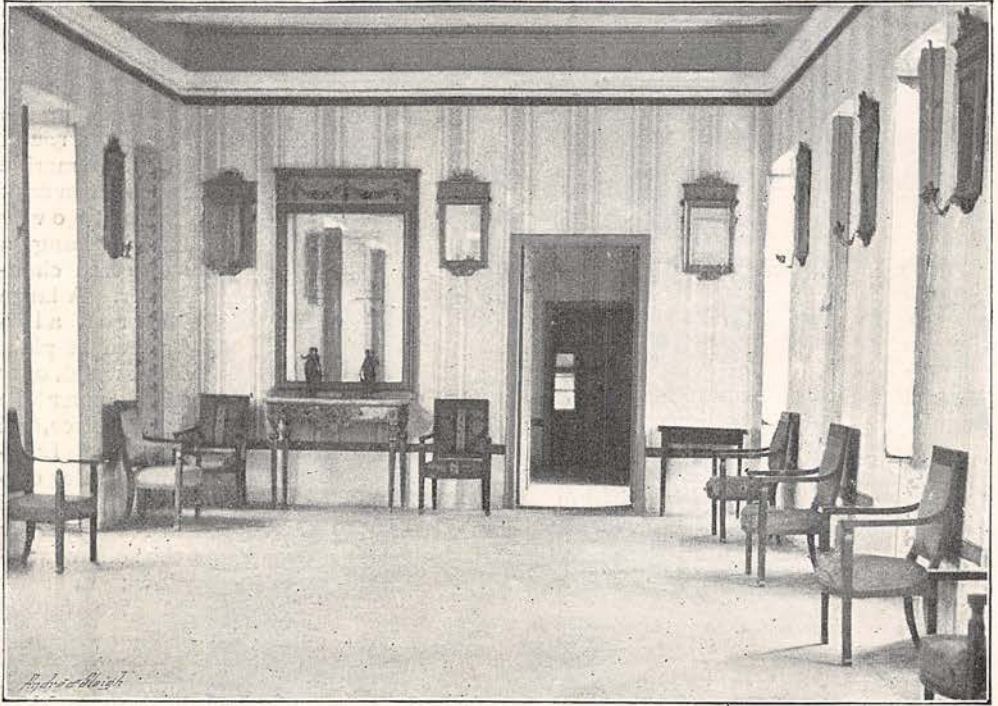
which, on three sides, the house is surrounded. Nor was this varied mode of exit without its special use, as when, in those stormy times, Napoleon having quarrelled with Paoli, the latter sent to arrest him as a traitor to the Corsican cause. It was by a trap-door in the floor of his bedroom that the young Napoleon descended into the cellar, and from thence was able to make his way to a vessel lying in port. Had he been taken, he would in all probability have been shot, and the

pretty taste the lawyer must have had in furniture, for (like several other pieces scattered throughout the house, and probably the spoils of some Italian palace) even his large bureau was made of inlaid woods, and jewelled along the borders and pigeon-holes with elegant little plaques of lapis lazuli and other costly stones. Another large mirror in delicate open-work gilt frame, and an artistic white marble mantelpiece representing Venus at play with Cupid. The floor, like that

of most rooms in Corsica, paved with little hexagonal red tiles, the windows opening upon one end of a terrace (also red-tiled) which runs back, at right angles to the study, along the whole length of the ball-room, serving as an outdoor means of communication with the further rooms beyond. True, the terrace is overlooked by the backs of tall dilapidated old houses with rotten but picturesque wooden balconies, whereon many coloured rags are airing; still it is screened off to the height of six feet by a trellis overgrown with greenery, and no doubt was once

central position on the mantelpiece, carved with Cupids, which adorns Madame Lætitia's chamber. Strange to say, this third and most interesting apartment is a sort of passage-room. Some have it that it was but a temporary arrangement, while her bedroom upstairs was under repair. Certain it is that in this sort of passage-room the great Napoleon was born.

A quaint old family bedstead is the first thing to arrest our attention. It has dragons' feet and tall head and foot boards painted two shades of green. But it was not the bed with the dragons' feet



THE BALL-ROOM IN THE HOUSE OF NAPOLEON'S FATHER AT AJACCIO.

a safe and pleasant playground for the numerous youngsters of the family.

Close to the entrance of the third room hangs a little etching of Napoleon on horseback, a schoolboy performance of the late Prince Imperial. The house now belongs to the Empress Eugénie, and there is something pathetic in the jealous care with which she has sought in every way to link the memory of her son with that of his more illustrious predecessors.

Thus, in the Hôtel de Ville, his image stands opposite that of the curly-headed little King of Rome, and here again, in the Casa Buonaparte, his bust occupies a

that was to receive the future emperor. History reports that Madame Lætitia was attending mass on the feast of the Assumption, and it was while she was actually in the cathedral that the pains of labour came upon her. Her sedan-chair was fortunately in attendance, the lady was carried home and placed on the nearest couch in the passage-room in question. So rapid was the march of events there was no time for further preparation, and thus it came about that on a little spindle-legged Chippendale sofa Napoleon the First was born. (Murray informs us that it was covered with tapestry, representing

scenes from the *Iliad*, but to us it appears too elegant an article for any such classical upholstery. Its present covering is, at any rate, of faded green silk brocade, evidently very old and fast falling into decay.)

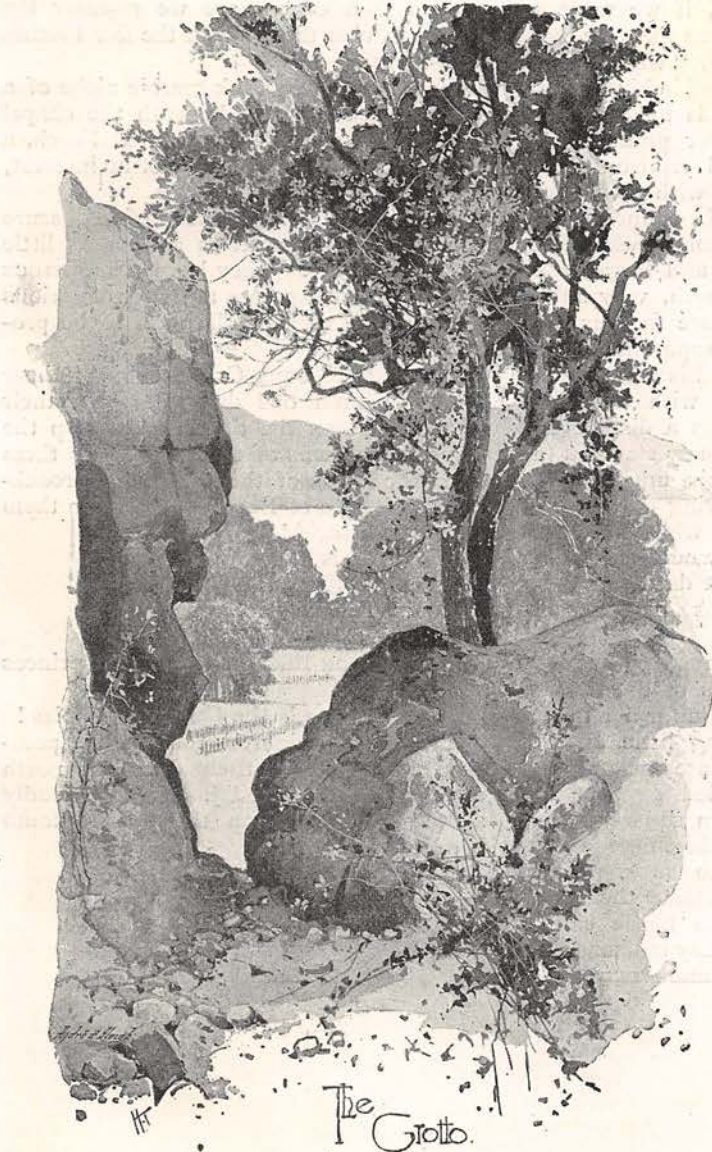
seated in a room engrossed in contemplation of the babe, and the shepherds, with satchels on shoulder, just arrived, are outside and peering in through the windows.

Leaving the dining-room (No. 4) to the right, we turn sharply to the left and enter the ball-room before mentioned. Madame Lætitia was evidently fond of the reflection of her pretty face, for here we counted no less than sixteen mirrors, one large one at either end, the rest narrow slips between the windows. The six windows to the left opened to the ground so as to allow free access to the terrace, and, instead of the usual red tiles, the floor has a sort of *parquet* sufficiently smooth for dancing.

The room beyond was the smoking-room (No. 6), and No. 7 (beyond that again) was the room always reserved for Napoleon when, as a young officer, he returned to the paternal roof. "You are the eldest of the family," afterwards said Cardinal Fesch to his nephew Joseph, "but remember! It is Napoleon who is its *head*." And the fact that to him alone of all the eleven children was accorded a room on this floor, may be taken as some proof of the prominent position he so early assumed in the direction of the family affairs. No mirrors

Next to the historical sofa, the chief object of interest in this room is a very large carving in ivory of exquisite finish, and sent from Egypt by Napoleon as a present to his mother. The subject is the Nativity, and it is treated in a somewhat original manner. Joseph and Mary are

in this chamber. A common wooden bedstead, a shabby little cupboard in the wall, two or three chairs—that is all. But in the floor, close to the foot of the bed, there is still the trap-door by which Napoleon made his escape on the occasion previously referred to.



The Grotto.

The last room of the suite (No. 8) is a little *cabinet de toilette*, and the only object of interest is the sedan-chair, of elegant Louis Quatorze design, in which Madame Lætitia was brought back from the cathedral on the day of Napoleon's birth.

There are many portraits extant of Napoleon's mother, but, if we want to know what his father was like, we must go to the Hôtel de Ville, "where," says Murray, "he is represented in his lawyer's dress." If that be so, it is the first time we ever heard of a lawyer practising in white silk breeches and crimson velvet coat thickly embroidered with gold. Yet that is how he is depicted. A fine-looking man, not strictly handsome, with clear complexion, black hair, and large black beady eyes, a weak mouth, very unlike the firm-cut lips of his more famous son. M. Buonaparte has apparently risen from a golden throne, and is standing by a crimson velvet table, with oratorical arm outstretched towards a distant sea. His eyebrows are extremely elevated (as though in surprise at his unusual surroundings); and considering that he died in comparative obscurity while Napoleon was yet a stripling, it would be rather curious to know at what date and under what circumstances this picture was painted.

We have no space to mention the many other interesting portraits of the Buonaparte family, save to pause for a moment before Canova's charming little bust of the King of Rome, and note how marked, even at that curly-headed age, is the strong full throat and firm square jaw of the father. We will rather take a carriage, and drive out to a somewhat extensive plateau just outside the town, where now, as then, the bugle call is heard, and the soldiers daily muster to go through their military manœuvres.

There, on a little knoll backed by the olive-covered slopes, lie (tumbled Heaven knows whence!) three or four enormous boulders forming a sort of arch or natural grotto, beneath the shade of which the boy Napoleon would lie for hours, watching the troops at drill and dreaming of military glory.

And then once more we re-enter the town, to visit the tomb of the fair Lætitia Ramolino.

She lies in the black marble niche of a dark octagonal vault beneath the chapel erected by her brother, Cardinal Fesch, a dull Pantheon-like building, of no interest, save for the dead it contains.

A pretty girl, aged fourteen, of an obscure provincial town, marries a man as little known to fame. They have a numerous family, and it becomes a matter of serious anxiety how their children are to be provided for.

"And lo!" says Gregorovius, "these same children one day put forth their hands one after the other, and grasp the mightiest crowns of the earth, tear them from the heads of the most unapproachable Majesties of Europe, and wear them before the world!"

Napoleon is Emperor of France.

Joseph is King of Spain.

Louis, King of Holland.

Jerome, King of Westphalia.

Paulina and Eliza are wedded to princes of Italy.

And Caroline is the Queen of Naples!

These almost incredible facts are pompously recorded on the wall to the north of the high altar, and justify the proudly simple inscription on the marble tomb beneath:—

HERE LIES LÆTITIA RAMOLINO,

THE MOTHER OF KINGS.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Mater Regum.