

THE MOTHER OF NAPOLEON THE GREAT.



To the mother of Napoleon the Great history has been neglectful, if not absolutely unkind. Biographers of her distinguished son make little mention of her, and books treating of the Consulate and the Empire almost entirely ignore her influence on the affairs of her family. Yet no woman in history was ever so overwhelmed by the fickleness of fortune or had to endure greater trials or was ever more truly forced to drink the cup of sorrow to the

dregs, whilst throughout her chequered life her personal courage, patriotism, devotion to her children and serenity under dazzling prospects give her a place in the foremost rank among the women of her day. Over her children her influence was supreme, and Napoleon's conversations abound in tributes to her. "It is to my mother," he says, "I owe all my fortune and all that I have done that is worthy."

Biographers, anxious to throw up the brilliancy of Napoleon's rise to fortune by darkening the background, have described his parentage as humble, and suggested that his mother belonged to a class little removed from the peasantry. This was far from being the case. Maria Letitia Ramolino, the mother of Napoleon, came of an ancient and honourable family. Her parents possessed a moderate fortune, and her father, at one time a captain in the Genoese army, occupied a prominent position in Corsica; her mother was the daughter of a nobleman of Sartène, one of the wildest districts of the island. Of education a hundred years ago, the Corsican girls received little, and Letitia never acquired even its rudiments, whilst to the end of her life she could not speak with any ease the French language, which was almost the natural tongue of her children. Girls received their initiation into life chiefly from intercourse with the servants of the family, and the mother whose rule was the most rigorous and who kept her daughters in the most wholesome fear of her was esteemed to be the most successful in her training. Marriage was therefore soon regarded as the high-road to liberty and the parents on their side were not averse to seeing their daughter marry early. Letitia was only just in her teens when her mother and step-father began to look round for a husband for her. Their choice fell upon Carlo di Bonaparte, a young lawyer of Ajaccio, and on June 2d, 1764, when Letitia was but thirteen, the couple were married.

Corsica was, at the time of Letitia's marriage, in a condition of agitation and unrest. The Genoese Government had sold their rights over the island to the French, and the Corsicans, under the leadership of the patriot Paoli, were resolved to resist the claims of France and maintain their ancient privileges. Paoli had the absolute confidence of the islanders, and Carlo Bonaparte was devoted to him. In order the better to take part in the national struggle, the young lawyer removed to Corte, where he became a member of the council, and was so eloquent in defence of his country's independence that Paoli made him his secretary and entrusted him with several important public commissions.

To Letitia, who was little more than a child, this removal from her native place and the consequent separation from all the friends of her youth was inexpressibly bitter. Yet her ardent spirit put aside a natural grief, whilst she threw herself enthusiastically into the national struggle, not hesitating to share the hardships and privations of camp-life when, later, the Corsicans took the field. On horse or mule-back, often on foot, she followed the little army through deep ravines and tangled woods and thickets, climbed steep rocks where the patriots were hunted like the chamois, and where peril and privation were mere

common everyday experiences. The terrible battle of Ponte Nuovo marked the close of the unequal contest and struck the deathblow to Corsican freedom. Paoli escaped to England, and the Bonapartes, with the island, became completely French.

On the day that peace was proclaimed, the greatest of the Bonapartes was born. He was the second of the eight children born to Letitia before she left Corsica for ever. It was always a matter of rejoicing with her that all her children were Corsican-born, and she never wearied in her efforts to inculcate those sturdy, independent qualities which she believed to be essentially Corsican. She brought them up with great strictness, never overlooking a fault or omitting to meet out its due punishment, and many stories are told of her severity. Perhaps it was the more necessary since the whole duty of training the children was in her hands, and she early learned not to expect assistance from their father. In every particular the characters of husband and wife were widely dissimilar, and only Letitia's strong sense of wifely duty prevented these differences wrecking a family life in which she had always to carry the burdens. In after years when prosperity was her portion, her parsimony was made a subject of ridicule and reproach. The habit originated in days when strict economy was not only a duty but a necessity. Carlo was of an easy, luxurious nature, addicted to wine and pleasure, fond of display and reckless in expenditure. Letitia was careful and hated extravagance, and felt overwhelmed with shame when needless expenditure brought poverty to her door. Looking back in later years, her married life seemed to her one long chapter of work and anxiety and of retrenchments which well-nigh crushed her. It ended in 1785, and she was left without husband, without help, and with the smallest means to provide for the future of her young family. The task was one which might have daunted a braver spirit, but Letitia did not shrink from it. She worked without ceasing, upborne by her love for those for whom she toiled, and her growing conviction that at least one of them would become great.

No mother in history has ever been so closely associated with the fortunes of her sons as Letitia Bonaparte. Her exile from Corsica, which was one of the deepest griefs of her chequered life, was the beginning of the many troubles Napoleon's ambition made her to suffer. He appears to have wished to play a leading part in the history of his native land, just as he later planned to take a prominent place in the world's history. When the French Revolution broke out he was spending a vacation with his mother and was ripe for stirring deeds. As soon as he heard that Paoli, roused by the state of France, had landed in Corsica and was calling on his countrymen to claim that freedom for which France had risen *en masse*, Napoleon determined to join him. Unhindered by the fact that he held a commission in the French army, he agitated to get himself elected a lieutenant-colonel in the National Volunteers of Ajaccio, and attacked the French guard. His attempt to seize the town in this unauthorised fashion failed and brought down on him the censure of Paoli, whose policy was a moderate one and who suspected the purity of Napoleon's motives. His battalion was disbanded, and he was obliged to return to France to seek service again in the French army. His return to Corsica in the following year was in another character. The French Government, to whom Napoleon, in his resentment, had denounced the Corsican leader, determined to crush Paoli, and Napoleon now threw all his energies into the French side of the struggle. The islanders rallied round their popular leader and were for the time successful in holding their own against the stronger power. Napoleon's share in the affair was soon known, and the whole Bonaparte family became objects of hatred and persecution, while Paoli was the more deeply wounded since he had relied firmly on the loyalty of the sons of his old friend, Carlo di Bonaparte. He ordered the confiscation of their property, and declared them outlaws,

even, in his fury, insisting that the brothers should be brought before him dead or alive. To Letitia and her daughters, to whom, for Carlo's sake, he wished well, he sent urgent messages, warning them to cease to offer him resistance, since it could only bring ruin upon them.

Letitia's reception of this warning was characteristic of the woman, who throughout her life clung to those of her children who seemed most in danger or distress. She declared that nothing should hinder her from sharing the fortunes of her sons and that the principles for which they suffered were also her own. Now, as ever, she took the conduct of her family's fortunes into her own hands. At her command her sons, disguised, left her and their sisters at Ajaccio and escaped to France, where she promised to join them as soon as possible. She hoped, by remaining in the town, to save some of her property and make some slight provision for the future. She soon saw that these hopes were vain.

The hatred of the Paolists was unrestrained, and her life was in momentary danger. With the help of some mountaineers who were devoted to her sons, she made her escape in the night with her younger children, and for two days wandered in the mountains, scarcely daring to rest lest her pursuers should overtake her. Sometimes the soldiers passed so close to the hiding-place of the fugitives, that their conversation was audible, and Letitia learned in this way that her home was to be plundered and then set on fire. Bitter it must have been to the heroic mother to hear of the destruction of the peaceful home she had built up with so much labour and economy, and to realise that she was cast on the world homeless and penniless, with the future of her children still an unsolved problem.

She managed to escape to Toulon and to join her sons, but years of penury were before her. At one time they were exposed to absolute want with only one sack of straw to lie on and without food to still the pangs of hunger. Yet Letitia struggled and hoped on until her sons were old enough to add something to the family income and give her comparative ease. In privation or in ease one absorbing interest the family had in common—Napoleon's extraordinary progress. The steps of his advancement are matters of history—too well known to need recording. He carried his family with him to undreamed-of heights of prosperity, dazzling and delightful, coming, as they did, so quickly after the arduous days of exile. To Letitia, her son's eminence was not an unmixed joy. Long before anyone else, she heard the rumblings of the storm which was to burst in all its fury after the battle of Leipzig, shattering the fortunes of all her family.

During the ten years of the Empire, when, as "Madame Mère" she took precedence of princes, she never ceased to anticipate a day when calamity might place her in a very different position. She never forgot that she was the Emperor's mother, and claimed the rights that position gave her, but she felt they were only temporary. She never failed to uphold the dignity of her son and to impress on his brothers and sisters their obligation to obey him in all things, but she understood his character thoroughly, and knew how likely he was to sweep away all he had gained by overweening ambition. Her powerful mind grasped sooner than anyone else did that the French were wearying of the incessant warfare Napoleon waged, and that, at the time of his greatest prosperity, the sovereigns of Europe were banding themselves together to crush him. She saw the downfall of his fortunes, and knew that she must share them.

She was not a political woman, and her interests in the stirring events of the day were almost entirely personal ones. She shared the downfall of Napoleon because he was her son, and it was always her habit to cling most closely to the one who seemed in danger or difficulty. When, in the beginning of May, Napoleon abdicated and went to Elba, she at once applied for permission to join him. He was alone; his brothers, deprived of the kingdoms with which he had invested them, were separated, and too resentful at their ill fortune to feel kindly to one who appeared to be the author of their downfall. To Marie Louise and his little son—the King of Rome—he had bidden good-bye for ever; his sisters were married;

Letitia alone was able to obey the dictates of her heart and follow him into retirement.

Perhaps no period of her life after she left Corsica was so happy as the months she spent in Elba. Napoleon's ambition seemed for the time to be sleeping, and he interested himself in the local affairs of the island, improving and laying out his property as though born to be a simple country gentleman. Letitia received the homage of a queen, and lived in comfort in a well-appointed house, which was shared later by her daughter Pauline. Her intercourse with her son was closer than it had ever been; not a day passed without their meeting, and she could, in a hundred ways, prove her love and devotion to him. For the first time she was popular, and received the visits of the citizens and officers with pleasure. It was still a matter of complaint that she favoured Corsicans and chose them for her most intimate friends; but to make this a matter for reproach seems idle—it was only the natural outcome of a character which was before all else faithful and patriotic.

Letitia would, no doubt, have been content to pass the rest of her days on Elba, but she soon became convinced that Napoleon could not remain there. She felt no surprise when he revealed to her his intention of making his escape and returning to Paris, and, like the Spartan mothers of old, she bade him go, though she felt no confidence in his success.

"Let me forget for a moment that I am your mother," she said when her son begged for her advice. Then, after reflection, she said firmly, "Go, my son. Follow your fate, for it cannot be the will of Heaven that you should die by poison, or during a life of inactivity, but sword in hand. It is probable that the plan will fail and death be the consequence of an unfortunate attempt. Let us hope that God, Who has protected you in the midst of so many battles, will watch over you now."

Napoleon re-conquered his country without bloodshed, and "Madame Mère" occupied a chair near him at the magnificent pageant which celebrated his return. But not all the brilliance of the scene, the joy on every face, or the plaudits of the crowd could remove from her still beautiful countenance its expression of deep sadness, or sweep away her gloomy forebodings.

Napoleon set out to join his army on June 12th, and to the anxious mother it seemed but a step towards his inevitable overthrow. The Battle of Waterloo decided the fate of the Emperor; the Bonapartes had a second time to seek safety in flight, and it was not until Letitia had reached Rome, where she was to spend the remainder of her life, that she heard her son had not escaped to America as she hoped, but was a prisoner in the hands of the English, bound for St. Helena. She entreated to be allowed to join him as she had done when he retired to Elba, but though she renewed her petition every year as long as the Emperor lived, she met with cold and persistent refusal. Though her other children were tenderly loved and she was in sorrow for them because they too were in exile and poverty, Letitia's thoughts were always with the one she considered the most unfortunate, and until his death she was unwearying in her efforts to relieve his pecuniary difficulties, to arrange for better medical attentions in his illnesses, and to temper the pangs of a solitude she was not permitted to share.

Her family reaped now the benefits of that parsimony she had practised so persistently during the extravagant days of the Empire. She had been wont to warn her children then that the day would come when they would come to her to beg, and that she was but laying up for that time. Her greatest grief during Napoleon's last years was that she could not lavish upon him the money which she had hoarded. She survived him fifteen years, living all that time in the dark, gloomy house at the corner of the Piazza di Venezia, to which she had gone when the downfall of the Empire scattered the family. The chief interest of her days was in talking of the Emperor to anyone who would listen, and in fingering the relics which had been brought to her from St. Helena. The news that orders had been issued to replace his statue on the Vendôme Column gave

her a day of rare happiness, and she never failed to ask visitors if they had seen it, half distrusting lest the news had been only "an attempt on her companion's part to give pleasure to a blind and crippled old woman."

She died on February 2nd, 1836, of gradual decay, having outlived nearly all her loved ones, but affirming to the last that, in spite of all her troubles and trials, she would not exchange her lot with the greatest queen on earth. Her glory was to have been the mother of Napoleon, and his pleasure to testify to her incomparable worth. In one of his last conversations on St. Helena, he spoke to his

confessor of her life and devotion. "She has always loved me," he said, "and has been a remarkable woman all her life, a mother beyond all praise, and endowed with almost superhuman courage and strength."

"During her twenty years of exile, her every action seemed a fitting frame to the greatness of her son," wrote one who knew her in her closing years. "His genius caused her no astonishment, for she looked upon it as part of herself. And though she chose to live a retired life, she was none the less a woman of rare ability and exalted character."

ISABEL SUART ROBSON.

A SCOTS THISTLE.

By LESLIE KEITH, Author of "Lisbeth," "Cynthia's Brother," etc.

CHAPTER XXII.



BETH went alone on the day after her arrival to the dingy street in Shepherd's Bush where Claire lodged. She had intended to go on the same day, but the morning was taken up with the tumultuous welcome of the King family, and in the afternoon she yielded to persuasion on hearing that Claire was no worse, and allowed herself to rest.

Isabel took all the children out that the house might be quiet, and Beth slept as soundly in the little room at the top of the house, which was still "the boys' room," as ever she had slept under the eaves at home.

At tea-time, she awoke to find Isabel standing by her bed, a clean pinafores child in either hand. Friday's weird little face looked a shade fuller than before—less like a wax transparency, and she was still, as was soon to be discovered, enchantingly naughty. Paula, grown a great lank girl, found life darkened without her twin, who had gone to school in the country. The home was a little the poorer, in that several of the children had left it, but a small increase of material prosperity was perceptible in a new stair-carpet and fresh linoleum in the hall.

"Father couldn't give us much this year," Isabel explained, when the carpet had been particularly recommended to her notice by the children and duly admired, "so we thought we'd begin with the entrance and work up and down by degrees. A nice hall is like a good manner—it has everything to do with a first impression."

Beth entered enthusiastically into it all, felt the quality and heard the price. She was taken into the drawing-room to see the little treasures from foreign countries the big boys had sent home; the Chinese junk; the little mandarin who waggled his head and thrust out a red tongue at the visitor; the beautiful trees of coral from the still Pacific deeps; and the Benares brass from India.

"Castor is going to send things, too," said Pollux with jealous pride. "Gold things; he's going to discover a mine."

"There's a gold-mine in the house already, Paula," said Beth mysteriously.

"I'm sure there isn't!" Paula shook her lank locks

sceptically. "We've done treasure-seeking enough to find it if there was."

"I've got a yellow shilling of my very own," said Friday's bairn, pulling Beth out of the room by the skirt. "Come and see where it's hid."

"Beth must have tea first," Isabel decided. "Listen—there's father's key."

The children scampered away, Sunday's bairn arriving last on two fat short legs. Then came a rush of voices and sounds of kissing. Mr. King was a very shy and silent man, whose emotions did not easily get to the surface where strangers were concerned, but his handshake said everything in the way of welcome. Beth felt herself very happy in this circle of friendship. The simple ways, the bright and gay acceptance of very restricted means, the fun and the family jokes all went home to her and found a response in her heart.

At bed-time Isabel appeared in dressing-jacket, hair-brush in hand, and Mrs. King presently knocked to ask if she might join them. These two kind women wanted to prepare her in some measure for her visit to Claire.

"You must look to find her very changed, Beth, very different from the gay pretty girl you remember. She will not tell you much. There is a stage in disappointment and sorrow when it isn't any longer possible to say anything. I'm afraid poor Claire has reached it."

"Does mamma know?" Beth asked in a low voice.

"Jane has not written—yet—"

"Oh, surely if she knew—and father—he always liked Claire!"

"I'm afraid her marriage cut her off completely. It was a bitter blow to her mother's love—and ambition. Claire felt that herself, and rejected any overtures that were made. Jane never ceased in her efforts to win her sister back, but even she had to own that she failed. She told me once that she was charged with a message from your father, Beth, but I'm afraid she was never able to deliver it."

"I'm glad he sent it," said Beth in a whisper. All that she herself had been made to suffer in the way of humiliation at Claire's hands was clean forgotten in the immensity of her young pity for this wrecked life.

"Uncle told me I was to help—with his purse, if it could be done—if Jane wouldn't think it—intrusive."

"Yes, trust Jane; it would be happier for her if she were less reserved, but the right feeling is there, it is only the expression of it that is difficult. And, dear"—Mrs. King laid a hand very lightly on Beth's curls—"if you could tell yourself that Claire really loved her husband it would make allowance for her easier. For to give everything, as Claire has done, and to find it