

HONORÉ DE BALZAC

THE NAPOLEON OF THE
PEOPLE

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THE NAPOLEON OF THE PEOPLE

Napoleon, you see, my friends, was born in Corsica, which is a French island warmed by the Italian sun; it is like a furnace there, everything is scorched up, and they keep on killing each other from father to son for generations all about nothing at all – 'tis a notion they have. To begin at the beginning, there was something extraordinary about the thing from the first; it occurred to his mother, who was the handsomest woman of her time, and a shrewd soul, to dedicate him to God, so that he should escape all the dangers of infancy and of his after life; for she had dreamed that the world was on fire on the day he was born. It was a prophecy! So she asked God to protect him, on condition that Napoleon should re-establish His holy religion, which had been thrown to the ground just then. That was the agreement; we shall see what came of it.

Now, do you follow me carefully, and tell me whether what you are about to hear is natural.

It is certain sure that only a man who had had imagination enough to make a mysterious compact would be capable of going further than anybody else, and of passing through volleys of

grape-shot and showers of bullets which carried us off like flies, but which had a respect for his head. I myself had particular proof of that at Eylau. I see him yet; he climbs a hillock, takes his field-glass, looks along our lines, and says, "That is going on all right." One of the deep fellows, with a bunch of feathers in his cap, used to plague him a good deal from all accounts, following him about everywhere, even when he was getting his meals. This fellow wants to do something clever, so as soon as the Emperor goes away he takes his place. Oh! swept away in a moment! And this is the last of the bunch of feathers! You understand quite clearly that Napoleon had undertaken to keep his secret to himself. That is why those who accompanied him, and even his especial friends, used to drop like nuts: Duroc, Bessieres, Lannes – men as strong as bars of steel, which he cast into shape for his own ends. And here is a final proof that he was the child of God, created to be the soldier's father; for no one ever saw him as a lieutenant or a captain. He is a commandant straight off! Ah! yes, indeed! He did not look more than four-and-twenty, but he was an old general ever since the taking of Toulon, when he made a beginning by showing the rest that they knew nothing about handling cannon. Next thing he does, he tumbles upon us. A little slip of a general-in-chief of the army of Italy, which had neither bread nor ammunition nor shoes nor clothes – a wretched army as naked as a worm.

"Friends," he said, "here we all are together. Now, get it well into your pates that in a fortnight's time from now you will be the

victors, and dressed in new clothes; you shall all have greatcoats, strong gaiters, and famous pairs of shoes; but, my children, you will have to march on Milan to take them, where all these things are."

So they marched. The French, crushed as flat as a pancake, held up their heads again. There were thirty thousand of us tatterdemalions against eighty thousand swaggerers of Germans – fine tall men and well equipped; I can see them yet. Then Napoleon, who was only Bonaparte in those days, breathed goodness knows what into us, and on we marched night and day. We rap their knuckles at Montenotte; we hurry on to thrash them at Rivoli, Lodi, Arcola, and Millesimo, and we never let them go. The army came to have a liking for winning battles. Then Napoleon hems them in on all sides, these German generals did not know where to hide themselves so as to have a little peace and comfort; he drubs them soundly, cribs ten thousand of their men at a time by surrounding them with fifteen hundred Frenchmen, whom he makes to spring up after his fashion, and at last he takes their cannon, victuals, money, ammunition, and everything they have that is worth taking; he pitches them into the water, beats them on the mountains, snaps at them in the air, gobbles them up on the earth, and thrashes them everywhere.

There are the troops in full feather again! For, look you, the Emperor (who, for that matter, was a wit) soon sent for the inhabitant, and told him that he had come there to deliver him. Whereupon the civilian finds us free quarters and makes much

of us, so do the women, who showed great discernment. To come to a final end; in Ventose '96, which was at that time what the month of March is now, we had been driven up into a corner of the *Pays des Marmottes*; but after the campaign, lo and behold! we were the masters of Italy, just as Napoleon had prophesied. And in the month of March following, in one year and in two campaigns, he brings us within sight of Vienna; we had made a clean sweep of them. We had gobbled down three armies one after another, and taken the conceit out of four Austrian generals; one of them, an old man who had white hair, had been roasted like a rat in the straw before Mantua. The kings were suing for mercy on their knees. Peace had been won. Could a mere mortal have done that? No. God helped him, that is certain. He distributed himself about like the five loaves in the Gospel, commanded on the battlefield all day, and drew up his plans at night. The sentries always saw him coming; he neither ate nor slept. Therefore, recognizing these prodigies, the soldier adopts him for his father. But, forward!

The other folk there in Paris, seeing all this, say among themselves:

"Here is a pilgrim who appears to take his instructions from Heaven above; he is uncommonly likely to lay a hand on France. We must let him loose on Asia or America, and that, perhaps, will keep him quiet."

The same thing was decreed for him as for Jesus Christ; for, as a matter of fact, they give him orders to go on duty down in

Egypt. See his resemblance to the Son of God! That is not all, though. He calls all his fire-eaters about him, all those into whom he had more particularly put the devil, and talks to them in this way:

"My friends, for the time being they are giving us Egypt to stop our mouths. But we will swallow down Egypt in a brace of shakes, just as we swallowed Italy, and private soldiers shall be princes, and shall have broad lands of their own. Forward!"

"Forward, lads!" cry the sergeants.

So we come to Toulon on the way to Egypt. Whereupon the English put to sea with all their fleet. But when we are on board, Napoleon says to us:

"They will not see us: and it is right and proper that you should know henceforward that your general has a star in the sky that guides us and watches over us!"

So said, so done. As we sailed over the sea we took Malta, by way of an orange to quench his thirst for victory, for he was a man who must always be doing something. There we are in Egypt. Well and good. Different orders. The Egyptians, look you, are men who, ever since the world has been the world, have been in the habit of having giants to reign over them, and armies like swarms of ants; because it is a country full of genii and crocodiles, where they have built up pyramids as big as our mountains, the fancy took them to stow their kings under the pyramids, so as to keep them fresh, a thing which mightily pleases them all round out there. Whereupon, as we landed, the

Little Corporal said to us:

"My children, the country which you are about to conquer worships a lot of idols which you must respect, because the Frenchman ought to be on good terms with all the world, and fight people without giving annoyance. Get it well into your heads to let everything alone at first; for we shall have it all by and by! and forward!"

So far so good. But all those people had heard a prophecy of Napoleon, under the name of *Kebir Bonaberdis*; a word which in our lingo means, "The Sultan fires a shot," and they feared him like the devil. So the Grand Turk, Asia, and Africa have recourse to magic, and they send a demon against us, named the Mahdi, who it was thought had come down from heaven on a white charger which, like its master was bullet-proof, and the pair of them lived on the air of that part of the world. There are people who have seen them, but for my part I cannot give you any certain informations about them. They were the divinities of Arabia and of the Mamelukes who wished their troopers to believe that the Mahdi had the power of preventing them from dying in battle. They gave out that he was an angel sent down to wage war on Napoleon, and to get back Solomon's seal, part of their paraphernalia which they pretended our general had stolen. You will readily understand that we made them cry peccavi all the same.

Ah, just tell me now how they came to know about that compact of Napoleon's? Was that natural?

They took it into their heads for certain that he commanded the genii, and that he went from place to place like a bird in the twinkling of an eye; and it is a fact that he was everywhere. At length it came about that he carried off a queen of theirs. She was the private property of a Mameluke, who, although he had several more of them, flatly refused to strike a bargain, though "the other" offered all his treasures for her and diamonds as big as pigeon's eggs. When things had come to that pass, they could not well be settled without a good deal of fighting; and there was fighting enough for everybody and no mistake about it.

Then we are drawn up before Alexandria, and again at Gizeh, and before the Pyramids. We had to march over the sands and in the sun; people whose eyes dazzled used to see water that they could not drink and shade that made them fume. But we made short work of the Mamelukes as usual, and everything goes down before the voice of Napoleon, who seizes Upper and Lower Egypt and Arabia, far and wide, till we came to the capitals of kingdoms which no longer existed, where there were thousands and thousands of statues of all the devils in creation, all done to the life, and another curious thing too, any quantity of lizards. A confounded country where any one could have as many acres of land as he wished for as little as he pleased.

While he was busy inland, where he meant to carry out some wonderful ideas of his, the English burn his fleet for him in Aboukir Bay, for they never could do enough to annoy us. But Napoleon, who was respected East and West, and called "My

Son" by the Pope, and "My dear Father" by Mahomet's cousin, makes up his mind to have his revenge on England, and to take India in exchange for his fleet. He set out to lead us into Asia, by way of the Red Sea, through a country where there were palaces for halting-places, and nothing but gold and diamonds to pay the troops with, when the Mahdi comes to an understanding with the Plague, and sends it among us to make a break in our victories. Halt! Then every man files off to that parade from which no one comes back on his two feet. The dying soldier cannot take Acre, into which he forces an entrance three times with a warrior's impetuous enthusiasm; the Plague was too strong for us; there was not even time to say "Your servant, sir!" to the Plague. Every man was down with it. Napoleon alone was as fresh as a rose; the whole army saw him drinking in the Plague without it doing him any harm whatever.

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