

PART ONE

Rise

I

Corsica

'The hero of a tragedy, in order to interest us, should be neither wholly guilty nor wholly innocent . . . All weakness and all contradictions are unhappily in the heart of man, and present a colouring eminently tragic.'

Napoleon, on François-Just-Marie
Raynouard's play *The Templars*

'The reading of history very soon made me feel that I was capable of achieving as much as the men who are placed in the highest ranks of our annals.'

Napoleon to the Marquis de Caulaincourt

Napoleone di Buonaparte, as he signed himself until manhood, was born in Ajaccio, one of the larger towns on the Mediterranean island of Corsica, just before noon on Tuesday, August 15, 1769. 'She was on her way home from church when she felt labour pains,' he would later say of his mother, Letizia, 'and had only time to get into the house, when I was born, not on a bed, but on a heap of tapestry.'¹ The name his parents chose was unusual but not unknown, appearing in Machiavelli's history of Florence, and, more immediately, being the name of one of his great-uncles.

The Buona Parte family were originally landowners living between Florence and Livorno – a Florentine first took the surname in 1261. While the senior line remained in Italy, Francesco Buonaparte emigrated to Corsica in 1529, where for the next two and a half centuries his descendants generally pursued the gentlemanly callings of the law, academia and the Church.² By the time of Napoleon's birth the family occupied that social penumbra encompassing the *haute bourgeoisie* and the very minor nobility.

After he came to power in France, when people attempted to trace his family's descent from the thirteenth-century emperors of Trebizond, Napoleon told them that his dynasty in fact dated back only to the time of his military coup d'état. 'There are genealogists who would date my family from the Flood,' he told the Austrian diplomat Prince Clemens von Metternich, 'and there are people who pretend that I am of plebeian birth. The truth lies between these two. The Bonapartes are a good Corsican family, little known for we have hardly ever left the island, but much better than many of the coxcombs who take it upon themselves to vilify us.'³ On the rare occasions when he discussed his Italian ancestry, he would say he was an heir to the Ancient Romans. 'I am of the race that founds empires,' he once boasted.⁴

The family was far from rich, but it owned enough land for Napoleon's great-uncle Luciano, the archdeacon of Ajaccio, to claim that the Bonapartes never had to buy their wine, bread or olive oil. One can still see the millstone used for grinding flour in the basement of the large, three-storey Casa Bonaparte on the rue Saint-Charles in Ajaccio, where his family had lived since 1682. Napoleon's parents had another home in the countryside, some property in at least three other towns, a flock of sheep and a vineyard and employed a nanny, maid and cook. 'There's no wealth in Corsica,' Napoleon's elder brother Joseph wrote years later, 'and the richer individuals hardly have 20,000 livres of savings; but, because everything is relative, our wealth was one of the most considerable in Ajaccio.' The young Napoleon agreed, adding that 'Luxury is an unwholesome thing in Corsica.'⁵

In 1765, four years before Napoleon's birth, the Scottish lawyer and man of letters James Boswell visited the island and was enchanted with what he found. 'Ajaccio is the prettiest town in Corsica,' he later wrote. 'It hath many very handsome streets, and beautiful gardens, and a palace for the Genoese governor. The inhabitants of this town are the genteel people in the island, having had a good deal of intercourse with the French.' Three years later these people – some 140,000 in total, most of them peasants – were to experience considerably more intercourse with the French, who numbered around 28 million, than most had ever hoped for or wanted.

The Italian city-state of Genoa had nominally ruled Corsica for over two centuries, but rarely tried to extend her control beyond the coastal towns into the mountainous interior, where the Corsicans were fiercely independent. In 1755 Corsica's charismatic nationalist leader, Pasquale Paoli, proclaimed an independent republic, a notion that became a

reality after he won the battle of Pedicoste in 1763. The man the Corsicans nicknamed Il Babbù (Daddy) quickly set about reforming the island's financial, legal and educational systems, built roads, started a printing press and brought something approaching harmony between the island's competing clans of powerful families. The young Napoleon grew up revering Paoli as a lawgiver, reformer and genuinely benevolent dictator.

Genoa had no appetite for the fight that she knew would be required to reassert her authority over Corsica, and reluctantly sold the island to King Louis XV of France for 40 million francs in January 1768. The French foreign minister, the Duc de Choiseul, appointed the Corsican Matteo Buttafuoco to rule the island. Paoli naturally opposed this, so the French sent a force of 30,000 men under the command of the harsh Comte de Vaux with the task of putting down the rebellion and soon replaced Buttafuoco with a Frenchman, the Comte de Marbeuf.

Carlo Bonaparte, Napoleon's father, and his pretty young wife Letizia supported Paoli and were campaigning in the mountains when Letizia became pregnant with Napoleon. Carlo acted as Paoli's private secretary and aide-de-camp, but when Vaux smashed the Corsican forces at the battle of Ponte Nuovo on May 8, 1769, Carlo and the by now heavily pregnant Letizia refused to go into exile with Paoli and 340 other irreconcilables.⁶ Instead, at a meeting between Marbeuf and the Corsican gentry, Carlo took an oath of loyalty to Louis XV, as a result of which he was able to retain his positions of responsibility on the island: assessor of the Ajaccio court of justice and superintendent of the island's forestry school. Within two months of Ponte Nuovo, Carlo had dined with the Comte de Vaux, something that was held against him by his former compatriots whose resistance to French rule continued. Hundreds would die over the next two decades in sporadic anti-French guerrilla actions, although major incidents were rare after the mid-1770s.⁷ 'He became a good Frenchman,' Joseph Bonaparte wrote of their father, 'seeing the huge advantages his country was taking from its union with France.'⁸ Carlo was appointed to represent the Corsican nobility in Paris in 1777, a position that saw him visit Louis XVI at Versailles twice.

It is often alleged that Napoleon, who proclaimed a fierce Corsican nationalism throughout his adolescence, despised his father for switching his loyalties, but there is no proof of this beyond the bitter outpourings of his classmate and private secretary Louis Antoine de Bourrienne, whom he twice had to dismiss for gross peculation. In 1789 Napoleon

did write to Paoli denouncing those Corsicans who had changed sides, but he didn't refer to his by-then-deceased father. He chose to call his son Charles, which he would hardly have done if he had imagined his father as a quisling. The Bonapartes were a thrusting, striving, close-knit family of what Napoleon later called *petits gentilshommes*, and understood that no good would have come of being caught on the wrong side of history.

French rule over Corsica turned out to be relatively light-handed. Marbeuf sought to persuade the island's elite of the benefits of French rule, and Carlo was to be one of the prime beneficiaries. If Paoli was Napoleon's early role model for statesmanship, Carlo personified precisely the kind of non-Frenchman whose willingness to collaborate with France was later vital to the smooth running of the Napoleonic Empire.

Carlo was tall, handsome, popular and a fine horseman. He spoke French well, was familiar with the Enlightenment thought of Locke, Montesquieu, Hume, Rousseau and Hobbes, and wrote Voltairean essays sceptical of organized religion for private distribution.⁹ Napoleon later described him as 'a spendthrift', and he certainly got through more than the patchy income he earned, building up debts for the family.¹⁰ He was a loving father, but weak, often impecunious and somewhat frivolous. Napoleon inherited little from him beyond his debts, his blue-grey eyes, and the disease that would lead them to their early deaths. 'To my mother', he would say, 'I owe my fortune and all I've done that's worthwhile.'¹¹

Maria-Letizia Ramolino, as she had been christened, was an attractive, strong-willed, wholly uneducated woman from a good family – her father was Ajaccio's governor and subsequently Corsica's inspector of roads and bridges. Her marriage to Carlo Buonaparte on June 2, 1764, when he was eighteen, was arranged by their parents. (The burning of Ajaccio's archives during the French Revolution leaves her exact age unclear.) They didn't marry in the cathedral as Carlo regarded himself as a secularized Enlightenment man, although Archdeacon Luciano later altered the church records to record a nuptial Mass there, an early indication of the Bonapartes' willingness to doctor official records.¹² Letizia's dowry was valued at an impressive 175,000 francs, which included 'a kiln and the house adjoining', an apartment, a vineyard and 8 acres of land. This trumped the love that the raffish Carlo is believed to have felt for another woman at the time of his wedding.¹³

Letizia had thirteen children between 1765 and 1786, eight of whom survived infancy, a not untypical ratio for the day; they were eventually to number an emperor, three kings, a queen and two sovereign princesses. Although Napoleon didn't much like it when his mother beat him for being naughty – on one occasion for mimicking his grandmother – corporal punishment was normal practice in those days and he only ever spoke of her with genuine love and admiration. 'My mother was a superb woman, a woman of ability and courage,' he told General Gourgaud, near the end of his life. 'Her tenderness was severe; here was the head of a man on the body of a woman.' This, from Napoleon, was high praise. 'She was a matriarch,' he added. 'She had plenty of brains!'¹⁴ Once he came to power, Napoleon was generous to his mother, buying her the Château de Pont on the Seine and giving her an annual income of 1 million francs, most of which she squirrelled away. When she was teased for her notorious parsimoniousness she replied: 'Who knows, one day I may have to find bread for all these kings I've borne.'¹⁵

Two children died in infancy before Napoleon was born, and the girl who came immediately after him, Maria-Anna, lived to only five. His elder brother, Giuseppe (who later Frenchified his name as Joseph), was born in January 1768. After Napoleon came Luciano (Lucien) in March 1775, a sister Maria-Anna (Elisa) in January 1777, Louis – significantly, the name of the kings of France – in September 1778, Maria-Paola (Pauline) in October 1780, Maria-Annunziata (Caroline) in March 1782, and Girolamo (Jérôme) in November 1784. Letizia stopped having children at thirty-three when Carlo died at thirty-eight, but Napoleon speculated that if his father had lived longer she would have had twenty.¹⁶

One of the features that emerges strongly from Napoleon's correspondence is his deep and constant concern for his family. Whether it was his mother's property on Corsica, the education of his brothers or the marriage prospects of his sisters, he was endlessly seeking to protect and promote the Bonaparte clan. 'You are the only man on earth for whom I have a true and constant love', he once wrote to his brother Joseph.¹⁷ His persistent tendency to promote his family would later significantly damage his own interests.

Napoleon's background as a Corsican of Italian extraction later invited endless abuse from detractors. One of his earliest British biographers, William Burdon, said of his Italian ancestry: 'To this may be

attributed the dark ferocity of his character, which partakes more of Italian treachery than of French openness and vivacity.¹⁸ Similarly, in November 1800 the British journalist William Cobbett described Napoleon as ‘a low-bred upstart from the contemptible island of Corsica!’ When the French senate proposed that Napoleon become emperor in 1804, the Comte Jean-Denis Lanjuinais expostulated: ‘What! Will you submit to give your country a master taken from a race of origin so ignominious that the Romans disdained to employ them as slaves?’¹⁹ Because he was Corsican it was assumed that Napoleon would pursue vendettas, but there is no record of the Bonapartes doing so, and Napoleon was notably lenient towards several people who betrayed him, such as his foreign minister Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand and police minister Joseph Fouché.

Napoleon suffered from a hacking cough as a child that might have been a mild bout of undiagnosed tuberculosis; in his post-mortem his left lung showed evidence of it, long-healed.²⁰ Yet the popular image of a frail introvert hardly squares with his family nickname of ‘Rabulione’, or troublemaker. Given the paucity of trustworthy sources, much of Napoleon’s early childhood must remain conjectural, but there is little doubt that he was a precocious and prodigious reader, drawn at an early age to history and biography. Letizia told a government minister that her son ‘had never partaken of the amusements of children his own age, that he carefully avoided them, that he found himself a little room on the third floor of the house in which he stayed by himself and didn’t come down very often, even to eat with his family. Up there, he read constantly, especially history books.’²¹ Napoleon claimed that he first read Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, an 800-page novel of love and redemption, at the age of nine, and said ‘It turned my head.’²²

‘I do not doubt the very powerful action of his early readings on the inclination and character of his youth,’ his brother Joseph later recalled.²³ He described how, at their primary school, when the students were instructed to sit under either the Roman or the Carthaginian flag, Napoleon insisted that they swap places and utterly refused to join the losing Carthaginians.²⁴ (Though he was eighteen months younger than Joseph, Napoleon was always stronger-willed.) Later in life, Napoleon urged his junior officers ‘to read and re-read the campaigns of Alexander the Great, Hannibal, Julius Caesar, Gustavus Adolfus, Prince Eugene and Frederick the Great. This is the only way to become a great captain.’²⁵

Ancient history provided him with an encyclopaedia of military and political tactics and quotations that he would draw on throughout his life. This inspiration was so profound that when posing for paintings he would sometimes put his hand into his waistcoat in imitation of the toga-wearing Romans.

Napoleon's native language was Corsican, an idiomatic dialect not unlike Genoese. He was taught to read and write in Italian at school and was nearly ten before he learned French, which he always spoke with a heavy Corsican accent, with 'ou' for 'eu' or 'u', inviting all manner of teasing at school and in the army. The architect Pierre Fontaine, who decorated and refurbished many of the Napoleonic palaces, thought it 'incredible in a man of his position' that he should speak with such a thick accent.²⁶ Napoleon was not very proficient in French grammar or spelling, though in the era before standardized spelling this mattered little and he never had any difficulty making himself understood. Throughout his life his handwriting, though strong and decisive, was pretty much a scrawl.

Napoleon's childhood has often been portrayed as a maelstrom of anxieties, but his first nine years in Ajaccio were uncomplicated and happy, surrounded by family, friends and a few domestic servants. In later life he was generous to his illiterate nursemaid, Camilla Illari.²⁷ It was only when he was sent away to France – 'the continent' as Corsicans called it – to become a French officer and gentleman that complications arose.

As part of his active policy of Gallicization of the island's elite, in 1770 Marbeuf issued an edict declaring that all Corsicans who could prove two centuries of nobility would be allowed to enjoy the extensive privileges of the French *noblesse*. Carlo's father, Joseph, had been officially recognized as noble by the Grand Duke of Tuscany, and subsequently obtained recognition from the archbishop of Pisa as 'a patrician of Florence'.²⁸ Although titles had little purchase in Corsica, where there was no feudalism, Carlo applied for the right of the Bonapartes to be recognized as one of the island's seventy-eight noble families, and on September 13, 1771 the Corsican Superior Council, having traced the family back to its Florentine roots, declared its official admission into the *noblesse*.²⁹

Carlo could now legally sign himself 'de Buonaparte' for the first time and sit in the Corsican assembly. He could also apply for royal bursaries for his sons, whom he was hard put to educate on his income.

The French state was willing to provide for the education of up to six hundred sons of indigent French aristocrats, requiring each scholar to prove that he was noble, that he couldn't pay the fees and that he was able to read and write French. The nine-year-old Napoleon already qualified for two of the three stipulations. For the last he was sent to Autun in Burgundy to begin, in January 1779, a rigorous course of French.

The Comte de Marbeuf personally expedited Carlo's application through the French bureaucracy, a fact that later kindled the rumour that he was Letizia's lover, and possibly Napoleon's biological father – a libel sedulously spread by Bourbon and British writers. Just as Napoleon sought to magnify himself throughout his life, so his enemies found ingenious ways to detract from his myth. In 1797, when the first biographies of the twenty-eight-year-old military hero began to appear, a book entitled *Quelques notices sur les premières années du Buonaparte* was translated from an unknown English author by the Chevalier de Bourgoing. It made the claim that Letizia had 'caught the attention' of Marbeuf, and Sir Andrew Douglas, who had been with Napoleon at Autun, but who had not of course known any other members of the Bonaparte family, testified to its accuracy in a brief introduction.³⁰

Napoleon paid little attention to this slur, although he did once point out to the distinguished mathematician and chemist Gaspard Monge that his mother had been in Paoli's stronghold of Corte fighting Marbeuf's forces when he was conceived. As emperor, he went out of his way to show generosity towards Marbeuf's son and when Marbeuf's daughter, Madame de Brunny, was robbed by a band of soldiers during one of his campaigns, he 'treated her with the utmost attention, granted her a piquet of chasseurs of his guard, and sent her away happy and contented' – neither of which he was likely to have done if Mme de Brunny's father had seduced his mother and cuckolded his father.³¹ It was also said that Paoli was his biological father, a rumour similarly dismissed.

Napoleon's education in France made him French. Anything else would have been astonishing given his youth, the length of time he spent there and the cultural superiority the country enjoyed over the rest of Europe at that time. His bursary grant (the equivalent of a curate's stipend) was dated December 31, 1778, and he started at the ecclesiastical seminary run by the bishop of Autun the next day. He wasn't to see Corsica again for almost eight years. His name appeared in the school registry

as ‘M. Neapoleonne de Bonnaparte’. His headmaster, the Abbé Chardon, recalled him as ‘a thoughtful and gloomy character. He had no playmate and walked about by himself . . . He had ability and learned quickly . . . If I scolded him, he answered in a cold, almost imperious tone: “Sir, I know it.”’³² It took Chardon only three months to teach this intelligent and determined lad, with a will to learn, to speak and read French, and even to write short passages.

Having mastered the requisite French at Autun, in April 1779, four months shy of his tenth birthday, Napoleon was admitted to the Royal Military School of Brienne-le-Château, near Troyes in the Champagne region. His father left the next day, and as there were no school holidays they were not to see each other again for three years. Napoleon was taught by the Minim order of Franciscan monks as one of fifty royal scholars among 110 pupils. Despite being a military academy, Brienne was administered by the monks, although the martial side of studies were conducted by outside instructors. Conditions were spartan: students had a straw mattress and one blanket each, though they weren’t beaten. When his parents did visit, in June 1782, Letizia expressed concern at how thin he had become.

Although Brienne was not considered one of the most socially desirable of the twelve royal military schools founded by Louis XVI in 1776, it provided Napoleon with a fine education. His eight hours of study a day included mathematics, Latin, history, French, German, geography, physics, fortifications, weaponry, fencing, dancing and music (the last three an indication that Brienne was also in part a finishing school for the *noblesse*).³³ Physically tough and intellectually demanding, the school turned out a number of very distinguished generals besides Napoleon, including Louis-Nicolas Davout, Étienne Nansouty, Antoine Phélippeaux and Jean-Joseph d’Hautpoul. Charles Pichegru, the future conqueror of Holland and royalist plotter, was one of the school’s instructors.

Napoleon excelled at mathematics. ‘To be a good general you must know mathematics,’ he later observed, ‘it serves to direct your thinking in a thousand circumstances.’³⁴ He was helped by his prodigious memory. ‘A singular thing about me is my memory,’ he once boasted. ‘As a boy I knew the logarithms of thirty or forty numbers.’³⁵ Napoleon was given permission to take maths classes earlier than the prescribed age of twelve, and soon mastered geometry, algebra and trigonometry. His weakest subject was German, which he never mastered; another weak subject, surprisingly for someone who so adored ancient history, was

Latin. (He was fortunate not to be examined in Latin until after 1780, by which time it was clear that he would be going into the army or navy and not the Church.) Napoleon also excelled at geography. On the very last page of his school exercise book, following a long list of British imperial possessions, he noted: 'Sainte-Hélène: petite île.'³⁶

'History could become for a young man the school of morality and virtue,' read Brienne's school prospectus. The monks subscribed to the Great Man view of history, presenting the heroes of the ancient and modern worlds for the boys' emulation.³⁷ Napoleon borrowed many biographies and history books from the school library, devouring Plutarch's tales of heroism, patriotism and republican virtue. He also read Caesar, Cicero, Voltaire, Diderot and the Abbé Raynal, as well as Erasmus, Eutropius, Livy, Phaedrus, Sallust, Virgil and the first century BC Cornelius Nepos' *Lives of the Great Captains*, which included chapters on Themistocles, Lysander, Alcibiades and Hannibal. One of his school nicknames – 'the Spartan' – might have been accorded him because of his pronounced admiration for that city-state rather than for any asceticism of character. He could recite in French whole passages from Virgil, and in class he naturally took the side of his hero Caesar against Pompey.³⁸ The plays he enjoyed as an adult also tended to focus on the ancient heroes, such as Racine's *Alexandre le Grand*, *Andromaque*, *Mithridate* and Corneille's *Cinna*, *Horace* and *Attila*.

A contemporary recalled Napoleon withdrawing to the school library to read Polybius, Plutarch, Arrian ('with great delight') and Quintus Curtius Rufus (for which he had 'little taste').³⁹ Polybius' *Histories* chronicled the rise of the Roman Republic and offered an eyewitness account of the defeat of Hannibal and the sack of Carthage; Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* included sketches of Napoleon's two greatest heroes, Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar; Arrian wrote the *Anabasis of Alexander*, one of the best sources for Alexander's campaigns; Quintus Curtius Rufus produced only one surviving work, a biography of Alexander. A powerful theme thus emerges from Napoleon's adolescent reading. While his contemporaries played sports outside, he would read everything he could about the most ambitious leaders of the ancient world. For Napoleon, the desire to emulate Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar was not strange. His schooling opened to him the possibility that he might one day stand alongside the giants of the past.

Napoleon was taught to appreciate France's greatest moments under Charlemagne and Louis XIV, but he also learned about her recent

defeats in the Seven Years War at the battles of Quebec, Plassey, Minden and Quiberon Bay and ‘the prodigious conquests of the English in India’.⁴⁰ The intention was to create a generation of young officers who believed implicitly in French greatness, but who were also determined to humiliate Britain, which was at war with France in America for most of Napoleon’s time at Brienne. Too often Napoleon’s virulent opposition to the British government has been ascribed to blind hatred, or a Corsican spirit of vendetta; it could more accurately be seen as a perfectly rational response to the fact that in the decade of his birth the Treaty of Paris of 1763 had cut France out of the great continental landmasses (and markets) of India and North America, and by the time he was a teenager Britain was busily colonizing Australia too. At the end of his life Napoleon twice asked to live in Britain, and he expressed admiration for the Duke of Marlborough and Oliver Cromwell, but he was brought up to think of Britain as an implacable enemy. When he was studying at Brienne, his only living hero seems to have been the exiled Paoli. Another dead hero was Charles XII of Sweden, who from 1700 to 1706 had destroyed the armies of four states joined in coalition against him, but then marched deep into Russia, only to be catastrophically defeated and forced into exile.

Napoleon was also deeply fond of literature. (He reminisced in later years about how he was attacked by a Cossack in 1814 during the battle of Brienne very close to the tree under which as a schoolboy he had read *Jerusalem Delivered*, Tasso’s epic poem about the First Crusade.)⁴¹ He idolized Rousseau, who wrote positively about Corsica, writing a paean to *On the Social Contract* at seventeen and adopting Rousseau’s beliefs that the state should have the power of life and death over its citizens, the right to prohibit frivolous luxuries and the duty to censor the theatre and opera.⁴² Rousseau’s *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, one of the biggest bestsellers of the eighteenth century, which had influenced him so much as a boy, argued that one should follow one’s authentic feelings rather than society’s norms, an attractive notion for any teenager, particularly a dreamer of ferocious ambition. Rousseau’s draft of a liberal constitution for Corsica in 1765 reflected his admiration for Paoli, which was fully reciprocated.

Napoleon read Corneille, Racine and Voltaire with evident pleasure. His favourite poet was Ossian, whose bardic tales of ancient Gaelic conquest thrilled him with accounts of heroism among misty moors and epic battles on stormy seas. He took the Ossian poem *Fingal* on his

campaigns, commissioned several Ossianic paintings, and was so impressed with the opera *Ossian* by Jean-François Le Sueur, with its twelve orchestral harps, that he made the composer a chevalier of the Légion d'Honneur at the premiere in 1804. That same year, assuming as most people then did that the Celts and Ancient Gauls had been closely connected, Napoleon founded the Académie Celtique for the study of Gallic history and archaeology, which in 1813 became the Société des Antiquaires de France and today is based at the Louvre. He appears not to have been particularly disconcerted when it was discovered that the epic poem had in fact been written by its self-styled 'discoverer', the literary fraudster James Macpherson.⁴³

In 1781, Napoleon received an outstanding school report from the Chevalier de Kéralio, the under-inspector of military schools who, two years later, recommended him for the prestigious École Militaire in Paris with the words, 'Excellent health, docile expression, mild, straightforward, thoughtful. Conduct most satisfactory; has always been distinguished for his application in mathematics . . . This boy would make an excellent sailor.'⁴⁴ His clear intellectual superiority is unlikely to have helped his popularity with his classmates, who nicknamed him *La Paille-au-Nez* ('straw up the nose'), which rhymed with 'Napoleone' in Corsican.⁴⁵ He was teased for not speaking refined French, for having a father who had had to certify to his nobility, for coming from a conquered nation, for having a relatively large head on a thin frame and for being poorer than most of his school contemporaries. 'I was the poorest of my classmates,' he told a courtier in 1811, 'they had pocket-money, I never had any. I was proud, I was careful not to show it . . . I didn't know how to smile or play like the others.'⁴⁶ When he spoke in later life about his schooldays, he remembered individual teachers he had liked, but few fellow pupils.

Schoolchildren are quick to seize upon and mock marginal differences, and they swiftly spotted that Napoleon's Achilles heel was his inordinate pride in his native land. (The Abbé Chardon also commented on it.) He was an outsider, a foreigner among the scions of a governing class that he believed to be oppressing his countrymen. The teasing had precisely the effect one might expect in a spirited boy, and turned him into a proud Corsican nationalist who never failed to stand up for his motherland. 'His natural reserve,' recalled Bourrienne, 'his disposition to meditate on the subjugation of Corsica, and the impressions which he had received in his youth respecting the misfortunes of his country, and of his family, led him to seek solitude, and rendered his general

demeanour somewhat disagreeable.⁴⁷ The first book ever written on Napoleon was by Cuming de Craigmillen, a monk who taught at Brienne, writing under the name ‘Mr C. H., one of his schoolfellows’. Published in 1797 in English, the book presented a reserved and anti-social child who, in the words of one reviewer, was ‘blunt in his manners, bold, enterprising and even ferocious’ – four adjectives that would serve to describe him for the rest of his life.⁴⁸

Much the most famous anecdote of Napoleon’s schooldays, of a snowball fight involving the whole school, was probably an invention. In the freezing winter of 1783, Napoleon supposedly organized mass mock-battles around ice-forts that he had designed, in which he commanded the attacking forces on one day and the defending ones the next.⁴⁹ This hardly fits with the unpopularity he is supposed to have experienced among his fellow pupils, and the anecdote does not appear in the notes Bourrienne gave his memoirs’ ghost-writers and could easily have been a complete invention of theirs. ‘This mimic combat was carried on during a period of fifteen days,’ the memoirs state, ‘and did not cease until, by gravel and small stones having got mixed up with the snow, many of the pupils were rendered *hors de combat*.’⁵⁰ Would a school really have let a game that was injuring many of its pupils continue for over two weeks?

On June 15, 1784, Napoleon wrote the first of over 33,000 surviving letters, to his step-uncle Joseph Fesch, Letizia’s mother’s second husband’s son. In it, he argued that his brother Joseph should not become a soldier as ‘the great Mover of all human destiny has [not] given him, as to me, a distinct love for the military profession’, adding ‘He has not the courage to face the perils of action; his health is feeble . . . and my brother looks on the military profession from only a garrison point of view.’⁵¹ If Joseph chose to go into the Church, he opined, Marbeuf’s kinsman, the bishop of Autun, ‘would have given him a fat living and he would have been sure to become a bishop. What an advantage for the family!’ As for Joseph joining the infantry, Napoleon asked: ‘What is a wretched officer of the infantry? Three-quarters of his time he is a good-for-nothing.’ The three-page letter, now at the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York, has a spelling mistake in almost every line – ‘Saint Cire’ for ‘Saint-Cyr’, ‘arivé’ for ‘arrivé’, ‘écrie’ for ‘écrit’, and so on – and is packed with grammatical errors. But his handwriting is clear and legible and he signed the letter ‘your humble and obedient servant Napolione di Buonaparte’. In a postscript he wrote ‘Destroy this letter,’

an early indication of his own concern for careful editing of the historical record.

Napoleon took his final exams at Brienne on September 15, 1784. He passed easily, and late the following month he entered the *École Royale Militaire* in Paris, on the left bank of the Seine. This was a far more socially elevated institution than Brienne. There were three changes of linen a week, good meals and more than twice as many servants, teachers and staff – including wigmakers – as students. There were also three chapel services a day, starting with 6 a.m. Mass. Although strangely the history of warfare and strategy weren't taught, the syllabus covered much the same subjects as at Brienne, as well as musketry, military drills and horsemanship. It was in fact one of the best riding schools in Europe. (Many of the same buildings survive today, grouped around seventeen courtyards over 29 acres at the opposite end of the Champ de Mars from the Eiffel Tower.) Apart from the Champ de Mars and the *École* itself, Napoleon saw little of Paris in the twelve months he spent there, although of course he knew a good deal about the city and its monuments, defences, resources and architectural splendours from his reading and his fellow officers.⁵²

Napoleon continued to excel intellectually. At Brienne he had decided not to enter the navy, partly because his mother feared he would drown or be burned to death and she didn't like the idea of his sleeping in hammocks, but mainly because his aptitude for mathematics opened the prospect of a career in the far more prestigious artillery. Of the 202 candidates from all of France's military schools in 1784, a total of 136 passed their final exams and only 14 of these were invited to enter the artillery, so Napoleon had been selected for an elite group.⁵³ He was the first Corsican to attend the *École Royale Militaire*, where a fellow cadet drew an affectionate caricature of the young hero standing resolutely in defence of Paoli, while an elderly teacher tries to hold him back by pulling on the back of his wig.⁵⁴

Napoleon took classes from the distinguished trio of Louis Monge (brother of the mathematician-chemist Gaspard), the Marquis de Laplace, who later became Napoleon's interior minister, and Louis Domairon, who taught him the value of 'haranguing' troops before battles. (Shorn of its English meaning, which implies a prolonged rant, a French *harangue* could mean an inspiring speech, such as Shakespeare puts in Henry V's mouth or Thucydides in the mouth of Pericles, a skill at which Napoleon was to excel on the battlefield, but not always in public assemblies.) At the *École*, Napoleon encountered the new thinking in

French artillery practice introduced by Jean-Baptiste de Gribeauval after the Seven Years War. (Defeat had been, as it is so often in history, the mother of reform.) He also studied General Comte Jacques de Guibert's revolutionary *Essai général de tactique* (1770): 'The standing armies, a burden on the people, are inadequate for the achievement of great and decisive results in war, and meanwhile the mass of the people, untrained in arms, degenerates . . . The hegemony over Europe will fall to that nation which becomes possessed of manly virtues and creates a national army.'⁵⁵ Guibert preached the importance of speed, surprise and mobility in warfare, and of abandoning large supply depots in walled cities in favour of living off the land. Another of Guibert's principles was that high morale – *esprit de corps* – could overcome most problems.

By the time Napoleon had spent five years at Brienne and one at the École Militaire he was thoroughly imbued with the military ethos, which was to stay with him for the rest of his life and was to colour his beliefs and outlook deeply. His acceptance of the revolutionary principles of equality before the law, rational government, meritocracy, efficiency and aggressive nationalism fit in well with this ethos but he had little interest in equality of outcome, human rights, freedom of the press or parliamentarianism, all of which, to his mind, did not. Napoleon's upbringing imbued him with a reverence for social hierarchy, law and order, and a strong belief in reward for merit and courage, but also a dislike of politicians, lawyers, journalists and Britain.

As Claude-François de Méneval, the private secretary who succeeded Bourrienne in 1802, was later to write, Napoleon left school with 'pride, and a sentiment of dignity, a warlike instinct, a genius for form, a love of order and of discipline'.⁵⁶ These were all part of the officer's code, and made him into a profound social conservative. As an army officer, Napoleon believed in centralized control within a recognized hierarchical chain of command and the importance of maintaining high morale. Order in matters of administration and education was vital. He had a deep, instinctive distaste for anything which looked like a mutinous *canaille* (mob). None of these feelings was to change much during the French Revolution, or, indeed, for the rest of his life.

On February 24, 1785, Carlo Bonaparte died, probably of stomach cancer but possibly of a perforated ulcer, at Montpellier in southern France, where he had gone to try to improve his health. He was thirty-eight. Napoleon, who was then only fifteen, had seen him twice in the previous six years, and then only briefly. 'The long and cruel death of my

father had remarkably weakened his organs and faculties,' recalled Joseph, 'to the point that a few days before his death [he was] in a total delirium.'⁵⁷ Napoleon's lifelong distrust of doctors might well have stemmed from this time, as his father's doctor's advice had been to eat pears. His father's early death may also in part explain Napoleon's own drive and boundless energy; he suspected, correctly, that his own life-span would be short. A month later, Napoleon described his father in a letter to his great-uncle Luciano as 'an enlightened, zealous and disinterested citizen. And yet Heaven let him die; and in what a place? A hundred leagues from his native land – in a foreign country, indifferent to his existence, far from all he held precious.'⁵⁸ This letter is interesting not just for its laudable filial feeling, but for the fact that Napoleon still considered France 'a foreign country'. After expressing his heartfelt commiserations, he sent his love to his godmother, cousin and even the family's maid Minana Saveria, before adding a postscript: 'The French Queen has given birth to a prince named the Duke of Normandy, on March 27th, at 7pm.'⁵⁹ People then tended not to waste writing paper, which was expensive, but tacking on such a random message to so important a letter was bizarre.

Although Joseph was Carlo's eldest son, Napoleon quickly established himself as the new head of the family. 'In his family he began to exercise the greatest superiority,' recalled Louis, 'not when power and glory had elevated him, but even from his youth.'⁶⁰ He took his final examinations early, coming forty-second out of fifty-eight candidates – not so poor a result as it may seem given that he sat the exams after only one year rather than the normal two or three. He could now dedicate himself to his military career, and to the serious financial problems Carlo had left. Napoleon later admitted that these 'influenced my state of mind and made me grave before my time'.⁶¹

Carlo had earned 22,500 francs per annum as Ajaccio's assessor. He had topped up his income by suing his neighbours over property (including at one point his wife's grandfather) while holding down various minor posts in the local administration. His great scheme for making his fortune, however, was a nursery of mulberry trees (a *pépinière*), a project that was to give his second son much anxiety. 'The mulberry grows well here,' wrote Boswell in his *Account of Corsica*, 'and is not so much in danger from blights and thunderstorms as in Italy or the south of France, so that whenever Corsica enjoys tranquillity it may have an abundance of silk.'⁶² In 1782, Carlo Bonaparte obtained the concession

for a mulberry *pépinière* on land previously given to his ancestor Geronimo Bonaparte. Thanks to a royal grant of 137,500 francs, repayable without interest over ten years, and to considerable investment of his own money, Carlo was able to plant a large orchard of mulberries. Three years later, the Corsican parliament revoked his contract on the grounds that he had not fulfilled his obligations regarding maintenance, which he strenuously denied. The contract was formally severed on May 7, 1786, fifteen months after Carlo's death, leaving the Bonapartes heavily encumbered by the need to repay the grant, as well as by the regular management of the orchard, for which they continued to be responsible.

Napoleon took an extended leave from the regiment that he was about to join in order to resolve the *pépinière* affair, which threatened to bankrupt his mother. The bureaucratic miasma persisted for several years, and was so consuming that the initial rumblings of the French Revolution were regarded by the family through the prism of whether the political changes in Paris were more or less likely to relieve the Bonapartes of their debts, and whether they might perhaps be granted a further agricultural subsidy by the state to help make the *pépinière* a going concern.⁶³ Napoleon never seems more provincial than during *'l'affaire de la pépinière'*, as it was known; it threatened his family with bankruptcy and he pursued the case vigorously. He lobbied everyone he could in Corsica and Paris, sending many letters in his mother's name as he tried to find a way out of the problem. Dutifully, he also sent home as much as possible of the 1,100 francs per annum that he earned as a second-lieutenant. Letizia, 'Widow of Buonaparte' as Napoleon described her in their many letters to France's comptroller-general, came close to having to sell family silver after borrowing 600 francs from a French officer whom she needed to reimburse.⁶⁴ Archdeacon Luciano saved the Bonapartes from the bailiffs on that occasion, but the family were chronically short of money until the archdeacon's death in 1791, when they inherited his estate.

On the first day of September 1785, Napoleon was commissioned into the Compagnie d'Autume of bombardiers of the 5th Brigade of the 1st Battalion of the Régiment de la Fère, stationed at Valence, on the left bank of the Rhône. It was one of the five oldest artillery regiments, and highly prestigious.⁶⁵ At sixteen he was one of the youngest officers, and the only Corsican to hold an artillery commission in the French army. Napoleon always recalled his years at Valence as impecunious – his

room had only a bed, table and armchair – and sometimes he had to skip meals in order to afford books, which he continued to read with the same voracious appetite as before. He existed partly on charity; as First Consul he asked one of his interior ministers for news of a café owner who had often treated him to coffee at Valence, and upon hearing that she was still alive said, ‘I fear that I did not pay for all the cups of coffee that she served me; here are 50 *louis* [1,000 francs] that you will give to her on my behalf.’⁶⁶ He was also slow in picking up restaurant bills. A contemporary recalled: ‘Persons who had dined with him at taverns and coffee-houses when it was convenient to him not to pay his reckoning, have assured me that though the youngest and poorest, he always obtained without exacting it a sort of deference or even submission from the rest of the company. Though never parsimonious, he was at that period of his life extremely attentive to the details of expense.’⁶⁷ He could not afford to forget the nightmare of the *pépinière*.

The list of books from which Napoleon made detailed notes from 1786 to 1791 is long, and includes histories of the Arabs, Venice, the Indies, England, Turkey, Switzerland and the Sorbonne. He annotated Voltaire’s *Essais sur les mœurs*, Machiavelli’s *History of Florence*, Mirabeau’s *Des lettres de cachet* and Charles Rollin’s *Ancient History*; there were books on modern geography, political works such as Jacques Dulaure’s anti-aristocracy *Critical History of the Nobility*, and Charles Duclos’ gossipy *Secret Memoirs of the Reigns of Louis XIV and Louis XV*.⁶⁸ At the same time, he learned verses of Corneille, Racine and Voltaire by heart, perhaps to charm a pretty girl called Caroline de Colombier. ‘It will seem very difficult to believe,’ he later recalled of the innocence of their relationship as they walked through meadows at dawn, ‘but we spent the entire time eating cherries!’⁶⁹ Napoleon continued with dancing lessons at Valence, possibly recognizing how important it was for an officer to be socially presentable.* When, in December 1808, his by-then-destitute former dancing master, Dautel, wrote to him to say ‘Sire, the one who gave you the first steps in polite society is calling upon your generosity’, Napoleon found him a job.⁷⁰

It was at Valence on April 26, 1786 that Napoleon wrote his first surviving essay, about the right of Corsicans to resist the French. He had finished his schooling, so it was written for himself rather than for

* It is debatable how good a pupil Napoleon was; in 1807 he asked the Countess Anna Potocka what she thought of his dancing at a ball in Warsaw. ‘Sire,’ came her diplomatic reply, ‘for a great man you dance perfectly’ (ed. Stryjenski, *Memoires* p. 125).

publication – an unusual pastime for French army officers of the day. Celebrating Paoli's sixty-first birthday, it argued that laws derived either from the people or from the prince and for the sovereignty of the former, concluding: 'The Corsicans, following all the laws of justice, have been able to shake off the yoke of the Genoese, and may do the same with that of the French. Amen.'⁷¹ It was a curious, indeed treasonous, document for an officer in the French army to write, but Napoleon had idolized Paoli since his schooldays, and from the ages of nine to seventeen he had been largely alone in France, recalling an idealized Corsica.

Napoleon was a writer *manqué*, penning around sixty essays, *novellas*, philosophical pieces, histories, treatises, pamphlets and open letters before the age of twenty-six.⁷² Taken together they display his intellectual and political development, tracing the way he moved from a committed Corsican nationalist in the 1780s to an avowed anti-Paolist French officer who by 1793 wanted the Corsican revolt to be crushed by Jacobin France. Late in life, Napoleon called Paoli 'a fine character who neither betrayed England nor France but was always for Corsica', and a 'great friend of the family' who had 'urged me to enter into the English service, he then had the power of procuring me a commission . . . but I preferred the French because I spoke the language, was of their religion, understood and liked their manners, and I thought the start of the Revolution as a fine time for an enterprising young man'.⁷³ He also claimed, with perhaps less truth, that Paoli had paid him the 'great compliment' of saying: 'That young man will be one of Plutarch's ancients.'⁷⁴

In early May 1786, aged sixteen, Napoleon wrote a two-page essay entitled 'On Suicide' which mixed the anguished cry of a romantic nationalist with an exercise in classical oratory. 'Always alone and in the midst of men, I come back to my rooms to dream with myself, and to surrender myself to all the vivacity of my melancholy,' he wrote. 'In which direction are my thoughts turned today? Toward death.'⁷⁵ He was then prompted to consider: 'Since I must die, should I not just kill myself?' 'How far from Nature men have strayed!' he exclaimed, echoing a classic Romantic trope. Exhibiting a Hamlet-like combination of arrogance and self-pity, he then mixed in some self-indulgent philosophizing with Rousseauian Corsican nationalism: 'My fellow-countrymen are weighed down with chains, while they kiss with fear the hand that oppresses them! They are no longer those brave Corsicans who a hero animated with his virtues; enemies of tyrants, of luxury, and vile courtesans. You

Frenchmen,' he continued, 'not content with having robbed us of everything we held dear, have also corrupted our character. A good patriot ought to die when his fatherland has ceased to exist . . . Life is a burden to me, because I enjoy no pleasure and because everything is painful to me.'⁷⁶ Like most tortured young teenagers attracted by romantic hyperbole Napoleon decided not to kill himself, but the essays give us a glimpse into his evolving sense of self. His essays tended to be written within the classical conventions of the day, filled with exaggerated bombast and rhetorical questions, and in them he began to hone the literary style that was later to characterize his proclamations and speeches.

At the age of seventeen, Napoleon's religious views started to coalesce, and they did not change much thereafter. Despite being taught by monks, he was never a true Christian, being unconvinced by the divinity of Jesus. He did believe in some kind of divine power, albeit one that seems to have had very limited interaction with the world beyond its original creation. Later he was sometimes seen to cross himself before battle,⁷⁷ and, as we shall see, he certainly also knew the social utility of religion. But in his personal beliefs he was essentially an Enlightenment sceptic. In September 1780, aged eleven, he had been given a public oral examination, during which he was asked to expound upon Christ's four major miracles and was questioned on the New Testament. He later recalled of that test: 'I was scandalised to hear that the most virtuous men of Antiquity would be burned in perpetuity because they did not follow a religion of which they had never heard.'⁷⁸ When a priest had offered his services to help him through his father's death, the fifteen-year-old Napoleon had refused. Now, in another unpublished paper, he attacked a Protestant minister from Geneva who had criticized Rousseau, and accused Christianity of permitting tyranny because its promises of an afterlife detracted from Man's desire to perfect this life by insisting on a government designed 'to lend assistance to the feeble against the strong, and by this means to allow everyone to enjoy a sweet tranquillity, the road to happiness'.⁷⁹ Only the Social Contract – that is, agreement between the people and state authority – could secure happiness. Alongside that 15,000-word treatise, Napoleon wrote *The Hare, the Hound and the Huntsman*, a short comic fable in verse form echoing La Fontaine and featuring a pointer called Caesar who is shot by a huntsman just before he is about to kill a hare. The last couplet goes:

God helps those who help himself,
I approve of that idea myself.⁸⁰

Napoleon's next surviving piece of prose is only one page long. Dated Thursday, November 22, 1787 and written from the Hôtel de Cherbouurg, on what is today the rue Vauvilliers off the rue Saint-Honoré in Paris, which he was visiting to pursue the *pépinière* affair, it was entitled 'A Meeting at the Palais-Royal'. The private note, written for himself, chronicles his encounter with a prostitute he picked up in that notoriously louche area of central Paris, a neighbourhood of gambling houses, restaurants and *bijouterie* shops:

I had just come out of the Italian Opera, and was walking at a good pace along the alleys of the Palais-Royal. My spirit, stirred by the feelings of vigour which are natural to it, was indifferent to the cold, but when once my mind became chilled I felt the severity of the weather, and took refuge in the galleries. I was just entering the iron gates when my eyes became fixed on a person of the other sex. The time of night, her figure, and her youth, left me in no doubt what her occupation was. I looked at her; she stopped, not with the impudent air common to her class, but with a manner that was quite in harmony with the charm of her appearance. This struck me. Her timidity encouraged me, and I spoke to her. I spoke to her; I, who, more sensible than any to the horror of her condition, have always felt stained by even a look from such a person. But her pallor, her frail form, her soft voice, left me not a moment in suspense.⁸¹

He walked with her into the gardens of the Palais-Royal and asked her if there wasn't 'an occupation more suited to your health', to which she replied, 'No, sir; one must live.' 'I was charmed; I saw that she at least gave me an answer, a success which I had never met with before.' He asked her where she was from (Nantes), how she lost her virginity ('An officer ruined me'), whether she was sorry for it ('Yes, very'), how she'd got to Paris, and finally, after a further barrage of questions, whether she would go back with him to her rooms, so that 'we will warm ourselves, and you can satisfy your desire'.⁸² He ends by writing: 'I had no intention of becoming over-scrupulous at this stage. I had already tempted her, so that she would not consider running away when pressed by the argument I had prepared for her, and I did not want her to start feigning an honesty that I wished to prove she did not possess.'⁸³ He was not originally looking for such an encounter, but the fact that he thought it worthy of chronicling suggests that this was probably the occasion on which he lost his virginity. The conversational method of quick-fire questions was pure Napoleon.

A few days later, still in Paris, he began to write a history of Corsica, which he abandoned after only a few lines. Instead he took up writing a rhetorical, declamatory essay entitled 'A Parallel between Love of Glory and Love of Country', which took the form of a letter to an unnamed young lady in which he came down strongly in favour of the former. Love of glory finds its examples in French military history – he mentions Marshals Condé and Turenne – but there is also a great deal about Sparta, Philip of Macedon, Alexander, Charlemagne, Leonidas and 'the first magistrate, the great Paoli'.⁸⁴

In September 1786, after an absence of nearly eight years, Napoleon returned to Corsica and met his three youngest siblings for the first time. It was the first of five trips home between 1786 and 1793, some lasting many months, largely in order to deal with the various problems left by his father's estate. On April 21, 1787 he wrote to the war minister asking for five and a half months' paid leave 'for the recovery of his health'.⁸⁵ He was either a good actor or had a pliant doctor, because although he wasn't genuinely ill he enclosed the necessary medical certificates. He would not return for almost a whole year. This long absence from his regiment should be seen in the context of a peacetime army in which two-thirds of infantry officers and three-quarters of cavalry officers left their regiments in winter.⁸⁶ Joseph had by then been forced to give up any hopes of going into either the army or the Church in order to help his mother look after the family, but he did take a law degree at the University of Pisa in 1788. All the younger siblings were still at school, with Lucien showing signs of intelligence and ambition.

By late May 1788 Napoleon was stationed at the School of Artillery at Auxonne in eastern France, not far from Dijon. Here, as when he was stationed with his regiment at Valence, he ate only once a day, at 3 p.m., thereby saving enough money from his officer's salary to send some home to his mother; the rest he spent on books. He changed his clothes once every eight days. He was determined to continue his exhaustive autodidactic reading programme and his voluminous notebooks from Auxonne are full of the history, geography, religion and customs of all the most prominent peoples of the ancient world, including the Athenians, Spartans, Persians, Egyptians and Carthaginians. They cover modern artillery improvements and regimental discipline, but also mention Plato's *Republic*, Achilles and (inevitably) Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar.

The School of Artillery was commanded by General Baron Jean-Pierre du Teil, a pioneer in the latest artillery techniques. Napoleon had classes in military theory for up to nine hours a week, as well as advanced mathematics every Tuesday. Artillery was recognized as increasingly important now that advances in metallurgy meant that cannon could be just as effective at half the weight as previously; once big guns became mobile on a battlefield without losing firepower or accuracy, they could be battle-winners. Napoleon's favourites – his 'pretty girls' as he later called them – were the relatively mobile 12-pounders.⁸⁷ 'I believe every officer ought to serve in the artillery,' he was to say, 'which is the arm that can produce most of the good generals.'⁸⁸ This was not merely self-serving: French artillery commanders of his day were to include the fine generals Jean-Baptiste Éblé, Alexandre-Antoine Sénarmont, Antoine Drouot, Jean de Lariboisière, Auguste de Marmont and Charles-Étienne Ruty.

'There is nothing in the military profession I cannot do for myself,' Napoleon was to boast. 'If there is no-one to make gunpowder, I know how to make it; gun carriages, I know how to construct them; if it is founding a cannon, I know that; or if the details of tactics must be taught, I can teach them.'⁸⁹ For all this, he had the Auxonne school to thank. That August saw him in charge of two hundred men testing the feasibility of firing explosive shells from heavy cannon instead of just from mortars. His report was praised for its clarity of expression. His military memoranda from those days were terse and informative, and emphasized the importance of taking the offensive.

A few days after the successful conclusion of the shell-testing project, Napoleon wrote the first paragraph of his 'Dissertation sur l'Autorité Royale', which argued that military rule was a better system of government than tyranny and concluded, unambiguously: 'There are very few kings who would not deserve to be dethroned.'⁹⁰ His views were authoritarian but also subversive, and would have got their author into trouble if published under his name, even in the increasingly chaotic political situation in which France found herself in the months preceding the fall of the Bastille. Luckily, just as he was about to send his 'Dissertation' to a publisher, the news arrived that Étienne-Charles de Loménie de Brienne, Louis XVI's finance minister, to whom the essay was dedicated, had been dismissed. Napoleon quickly rescinded publication.

His writing mania extended to drafting the regulations for his

officers' mess, which he somehow turned into a 4,500-word document full of literary orotundities such as: 'Night can hold no gloom for he who overlooks nothing that might in any way compromise his rank or his uniform. The penetrating eyes of the eagle and the hundred heads of Argus would barely suffice to fulfil the obligations and duties of his mandate.'⁹¹ In January 1789 he wrote a Romantic melodrama, 'The Earl of Essex: An English Story', not his finest literary endeavour. 'The fingers of the Countess sank into gaping wounds,' begins one paragraph. 'Her fingers dripped with blood. She cried out, hid her face, but looking up again could see nothing. Terrified, trembling, aghast, cut to the very quick by these terrible forebodings, the Countess got into a carriage and arrived at the Tower.'⁹² The story includes assassination plots, love, murder, premonitions, and the overthrow of King James II. Continuing in this melodramatic style, in March 1789 Napoleon wrote a two-page short story called 'The Mask of the Prophet', about a handsome and charismatic Arab soldier-prophet, Hakem, who has to wear a silver mask because he has been disfigured by illness. Having fallen out with the local prince, Mahadi, Hakem has his disciples dig lime-filled pits, supposedly for their enemies, but he poisons his own followers, throws their bodies into the pits and finally immolates himself.⁹³ It is a disturbing tale, full of violent late-teenage angst.

The next month Napoleon was sent 20 miles down the Saône river to Seurre as second-in-command of an operation to put down a riot in which a crowd had killed two grain merchants. 'Let honest men go to their homes,' the nineteen-year-old is reported to have shouted to the crowd, 'I only fire upon the mob.' Although he did his duty efficiently and impressed General du Teil, the political situation was such that before long rioters were attacking public buildings and burning down tax offices in Auxonne itself. It was from this provincial vantage point that Napoleon saw the first harbinger of the great political event that was to transform the history of France and of Europe, and his own life.

The French Revolution, which broke out on July 14, 1789 when a Parisian mob stormed the state prison, the Bastille, was preceded by years of financial crises and turmoil such as the minor uprising Napoleon had been sent to put down. The first stirrings of instability can be dated back to 1783, the last year of the American War of Independence in which France had supported the rebellious colonists against

Britain. Other protests over low wages and food shortages besides those in Seurre were put down violently in April 1789, with twenty-five deaths. 'Napoleon often said that nations had their illnesses just as individuals did, and that their history would be no less interesting to describe than the maladies of the human body,' recorded one of his ministers in later years. 'The French people were wounded in their dearest interests. The nobility and the clergy humiliated them with their pride and privileges. The people suffered under this weight for a long time, but finally wanted to shake off the yoke, and the Revolution began.'⁹⁴

By the time the Estates-General of France was called on May 5, for the first time since 1614, it seemed that the king might be forced to share at least some of his power with the representatives of the Third Estate. But thereafter events moved swiftly and unpredictably. On June 20 the deputies of the Third Estate, who were by then calling themselves the National Assembly, took an oath not to dissolve itself until a new constitution was established. Three days later two companies of royal guards mutinied sooner than put down public unrest. The news that Louis XVI was recruiting foreign mercenaries to suppress what had by then become an insurrection led the radical journalist Camille Desmoulins to call for the storming of the Bastille, which resulted in the deaths of the governor of Paris, its mayor and the secretary of state. On August 26 the National Assembly adopted the Declaration of the Rights of Man, and on October 6 the Palace of Versailles was stormed by the mob.

For a man who was to exhibit such acute political sharpness later in his career, Napoleon completely misread the Revolution's opening stages. 'I repeat what I have said to you,' he wrote to Joseph on July 22, a week after the fall of the Bastille, 'calm will return. In a month, there will no longer be a question of anything. So, if you send me 300 livres [7,500 francs] I will go to Paris to terminate our business.'⁹⁵ At the time, Napoleon was more concerned with the *pépinière* saga than with the greatest political eruption in Europe since the Reformation. He returned to writing his history of Corsica, and summoned up the courage to write to his hero Paoli, who was still in exile in London. 'I was born when the country was perishing,' he declared with a flourish. 'Thirty thousand Frenchmen vomited onto our coasts, drowning the thrones of liberty in seas of blood, such was the odious spectacle which first met my eye. The cries of the dying, the groans of the oppressed, the tears of

despair surrounded my cradle from my birth.⁹⁶ These were extraordinary sentiments from someone who had taken an oath to serve the King of France when he was commissioned as an officer. With the advent of the Revolution, and the return of Paoli to Corsica in July 1790, Napoleon's divided loyalties could not endure much longer. He was going to have to choose.