

THE LAST BONAPARTE

His grandmother wanted him to be crowned emperor in Paris; he didn't want anything to do with his royal background

No less the Corsican clansman than the French military genius, Napoleon the Great saw himself as the eminence of a family of rulers placed by his armies atop thrones, his brothers made kings—Joseph in Spain, Louis in Holland—his sister Caroline the queen of Naples, other relatives princes and viceroys.

The irresponsible and undisciplined youngest of the family, Jérôme, "Fifi" to all, was a problem. A little scoundrel, Napoleon said. Nevertheless Jérôme was a Bonaparte and as such must fulfill his dictated destiny, which was to wed an ancient-line princess and become a king. So it came as a horrible shock to Napoleon when he learned that the nineteen-year-old had gone and married an American girl.

A junior officer of the French navy, Jérôme had made port in Maryland and there met the bewitching Betsy Patterson, who was called the belle of Baltimore. Her father was one of the richest men in America, a shipowner-merchant-landholder. She was Jérôme's age. "I shall never acknowledge it," the emperor said of the wedding. When the couple sailed to France, a sixty-four-gun man-of-war hove to with orders to prevent the pregnant bride from landing, and the French government annulled the marriage. Madame Patterson Bonaparte, as she called herself, never saw Jérôme again but once; walking in Florence's Pitti Palace Gallery, they came face-to-face. They passed without speaking.

Jérôme did what his imperial brother desired: He married a German princess and became the ruler of a realm created by forced territorial donations from Prussia, Brunswick, Hanover, and other principalities. The King of Westphalia, he was said to be the most expensively dressed man in Europe,



Charles Joseph Bonaparte; the date is unknown, but the faint smile was eternal.

had a private theater where players performed dressed in absolutely nothing, maintained mistresses, and was the great wastrel of his time. Betsy gave birth to Jérôme Napoleon Bonaparte. It was July of 1805. Her son was always called "Bo."

She hated Baltimore, detested America. The very concept of a republic was a symptom of "mania," she said. With Napoleon's fall she went to Europe,

where, she detailed, Wellington admired her, Talleyrand praised her wit, Madame de Staël her beauty. She was a brilliant businesswoman, her annual income from rental properties rising to the hundred-thousand-dollar range. She was not very forward in spending it, shoveling dinner party rolls into her purse and doing her own wash while living on around fifty dollars a week. She thought of her son, Bo, as a possi-

ble future emperor of the French, a position to which he did not aspire, and it nearly drove her mad, she said, when he married an American girl, Susan Mary Williams of Baltimore. The marriage would hurt his imperial prospects, she said, adding that she herself would rather go be a convict in Botany Bay in Australia than marry anyone from Baltimore.

Bo's father, now the ex-King of Westphalia, who had contributed twenty-five thousand of his male subjects to his brother's disastrous Russian campaign, nine-tenths never to see home again, lived on in moocher fashion, borrowing money he never intended to repay and marrying his later children to whoever would give him funding. A "Corsican blackguard," Betsy said. Bo and the former Miss Williams had a son in 1830, Jérôme Napoleon Bonaparte, Jr. He was a military officer of minor significance.

Nearly twenty-one years elapsed before the couple had a second child. He was Charles Joseph Bonaparte. By then Prince Louis Napoleon, the former King Louis's son by Queen Hortense, daughter of the Empress Josephine, and little Charles Joseph's cousin, was on his way to being Emperor of the French—Napoleon III. (The Great Emperor's dead son, L'Aiglon, the Eaglet, the King of Rome, Duke of Reichstadt, had been regarded as Napoleon II.)

Charles Joseph was brilliant. (In days to come Theodore Roosevelt would term him "the most forceful mind of the country.") His memory was positively astounding. He went to Harvard College and Harvard Law School and then into practice, able to skim through the files on a case for a few moments and offer precedents down to volume and page. Money being no problem, he took on many poverty-stricken clients. With remarkable intelligence married to the highest social position—he was, after all, a millionairess's grandson and a grandnephew and cousin of emperors—he went about perpetually smiling. That was what everyone noted about

him: the grin. He was always calm and frequently chuckled to himself. His primary interest was in civil service reform. The spoils system, he said, made for a "kakistrophy," the governance of a people by its worst elements. (The concept seemed odd coming from a descendant of Napoleon, who gave whole countries to relatives solely because they were of his blood.)

A patrician muckraker, Charles Joseph Bonaparte fought political corruption in Baltimore and in Maryland, his opponents graft, the boss, and the ring. Imperial Peacock, Academic Pharisee, his bitter enemies dubbed him. Also Souphouse Charlie for his remark that a public school differed little in principle from a charity soup kitchen;

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he did not much believe in public education, thinking it gave the poor "crude notions about history or physics" while teaching them "to mispronounce a few words of one or two foreign languages." Far better they be simple blacksmiths or carpenters, their intellectual uplift left in the hands of private philanthropists such as himself.

To understand him, his friends said, possession of a sense of humor was indispensable. Once, at a National Civil Service Reform League meeting, Roosevelt spoke of how he had conducted a shooting competition for applicants wishing to be lawmen. "Mr. Roosevelt has been very remiss," Bonaparte then told the assemblage. "He should have had the men shoot at each other, and given the job to the survivors." (The creation of laughter was apparently his main object in public life, noted the Baltimore *Sun*.) As President, Roose-

velt appointed him a special counsel to prosecute cases of fraud and bribery in federal departments; he did it with such skill that he was nicknamed Charlie the Crook-Chaser. Roosevelt also made him Secretary of the Navy, in which capacity he proposed the destruction of the derelict USS *Constitution*, "Old Ironsides." Mass meetings and schoolchildren protested—"Ay, tear her tattered ensign down." Secretary Bonaparte then suggested that she be towed out to sea and used for battleship target practice and so die a warrior's death. That only made things worse. Next, he became Roosevelt's Attorney General, a successful trust-buster who said he wished to keep the great hogs away from the trough, so the little ones could get some feed.

He purchased no relics of his family, disliked being told that he physically resembled the Little Corporal, and was so thorough a patriot that he never went to France or even Europe; he preferred his own country, he said. (His grandmother Betsy, who lived to be ninety-four, never gave up her dream that he or his officer brother would yet be crowned in Paris.) With Roosevelt's departure from the White House, Bonaparte returned to private life, traveling to his office in Baltimore from his outlying estate in a carriage drawn by blooded horses weaving their way among the automobiles. His coachman and footman wore modified Bonapartist liveries of black piped in red and high silk hats with gold bands. He took his lunch in a silver box, two sandwiches.

Bonaparte was much in demand as a speaker on public events, "making talkee-talkee," he termed it. His general theme was the danger of sentimentalist views. He and his childless wife were often seen holding hands, he with his eternal smile. He died in 1921, and most of his fortune went to Catholic charities. Bonapartes are almost extinct in the male line, so it is likely that he was the last of the family to play any part in public affairs anywhere. ★