

The General Desaix: a life of one thousand and one night

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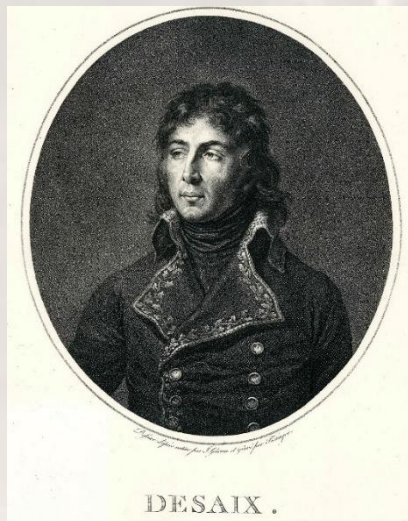


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I. Introduction

Today we tell the story of a character who, in my opinion, is the best general of the revolution, as he will never see what has happened after, he will die at 31 years old. However, this will not prevent him from entering legend. General Desaix, pronounced 'De-say', was known for his kindness and humanity, was often shy and reserved except in battle, and was known for wearing a simple tattered blue cloak. His love for studies, his impartiality in political matters, his sense of honesty, his dedication to duty and honor, his soldierly simplicity, his stoicism, his horror of any form of ostentation, make him the embodiment of a certain romantic military mystique.



«Desaix, - Napoleon remembered at St. Helena - he only thought about war and glory... He was always poorly dressed, often even torn, and he despised comfort and conveniences. When we were in Egypt, I repeatedly gave him complete field equipment, but he lost it every time. Wrapped in a cloak, Desaix would fall under a cannon and sleep peacefully, as if he were in a palace ... He was naturally destined to be a great general».

Our story of this virtuous personage begins here:

It's 10 o'clock in the morning of Saturday, June 14, 1800; we find ourselves in the lush plains of Piedmont. The weather looks promising, partly cloudy, the exceptional rainfall of the previous days has ended, this has transformed the ground into a real swamp. Desaix and his 15,000 men were fighting to cross a flooded river when they heard the sound of thunder in the distance. Soon they realized that it wasn't a natural phenomenon, but artillery fire. Well, it was at that very moment that Desaix made that decision that changed the course of the history ... but let's pause here for a moment, this sunny afternoon near Turin and rewind the tape starting from the beginning.

II. A Born General



Louis Desaix de Veygoux was born on August 17, 1768 - a year before Bonaparte - in the mountains of the Auvergne. His family belonged to the nobility of the Old Regime, with roots dating back to the 13th century; they were country gentlemen. Since he was a child, at the age of eight, he entered the military school of Effiat, with a scholarship. That very year, the school had been reformed by the new War Minister, Count of Saint-Germain. Among the minister's instructions there was the following:

«Students must never be exposed to insulting language, and even less to blows ... Men, whose lives must be entirely guided by honor, must be educated based on the principles of honor. The most recommended form of punishment is to humble the students and deprive them of what they like the most ... But these means must also be used with caution, so that children do not get used to humiliation. Rewards should be based on the same principles ... on honor and distinction, so that they become a necessity for their spirit».

These idealistic notions certainly left a trace on the student who became known as the Sultan El-Adel, the right Sultan, during the campaign in Egypt.

With the outbreak of the Revolution, his relatives, who were negotiating for the monarchy, fled; but he, like most of the nobles who were part of the army, chose to continue serving, without worrying about political opinions. The war of the newly declared republic against the monarchical powers was declared in 1792, and with it opened up infinite possibilities of glory and rapid career paths. Desaix, who served in the Army of the Rhine, immediately demonstrated his abilities and was promoted to brigadier general on August 20, 1793: thus he went from the rank of lieutenant to that of general in seven months; a dizzying climb up the hierarchy. It was due to an extraordinary act of courage and valor: on that August 20 during the battle of Lautenberg he received a bullet in the jaw that passed from cheek to cheek, unable to speak, but indifferent to the wound, did not go to get treated, but remained on the field to command his men through gestures; this earned him the nomination on the spot. A few months later, in October, impressed by his actions, Desaix became, at the age of 26, the youngest division general of the Republic.

Louis was an honorable man, loyal and attached to his men. It was a common saying in the Army of the Rhine, that when a man went into battle under another commander, he had to say «Goodbye» to his comrades; if he went under the command of Desaix, he could say «See you later». This valiant general didn't need an entry of ten thousand men a month: he was a soldier among soldiers, unlike the corsican. For Bonaparte, another rising star at the same time (in Italy), glory was a tool to conquer power; for Desaix a goal in itself. In January 1797, while fighting the Austrians in Germany, the Public Health Committee ordered the arrest of the general as politically suspicious. Desaix's men greeted the

commissioners who came to arrest him with bayonets; the Committee changed its mind and returned to Paris leaving him to operate.

We begin to compose the portrait of a man completely dedicated to seeking glory, through noble means. Said the mathematician Fourier:

«Desaix knew every detail of every major military action and when he couldn't participate in a victory, he wanted at least to visit the battlefield. He seemed imperiously driven to associate himself with all the great and useful enterprises ever performed ... he would have liked to be contemporary with every hero of history».

and in fact, he did with the hero of his time...

III. Destiny Intertwined with Bonaparte



During the campaigns of 1796/97, the two fronts of the offensive against Austria (Germany and Italy) brought fame to two respective stars. On one side, Bonaparte, the hero of Arcole and creator of the Cisalpine Republic; on the other hand, despite the army being under the command of Moreau, Desaix distinguished himself as the most valourous, the hero of the defense of Alsace and the pursuit of Archduke Charles.

Therefore, it was inevitable that the two trajectories would collide at some point, and it is not coincidental that Desaix said to a confidant *«I am convinced that Moreau will never do anything great and that we should always support a secondary role under his command: while the other [Bonaparte] is destined to reach such a degree of fame, to gain so much glory that a part of it will necessarily also flow onto his lieutenants»*. In other words, Desaix deliberately sought Bonaparte to bind himself to the same rising star. What he did not know was that he would be the one to make him win the glory of the consulate, but he was right to say that a part of the glory would flow onto his subordinates, because that is how Napoleon repaid him for his services.

When Bonaparte, in April 1797, assumed responsibility for signing an armistice with Austria at Leoben, General Desaix decided to visit Italy and see how his colleague had lived and won glory. Partly, his journey to the battlefields of Lombardy and Veneto was motivated by his deep desire, which characterized him, to learn, to draw lessons from others, whether contemporaries or past. Traveling incognito and in civilian clothes, Desaix studied the battlefields that gave glory to the corps.

Although Desaix later tied his career to Bonaparte, his first impression of the hero, when he met him on August 27 at Passeriano, was not entirely favorable.

«Is proud, hypocritical, revengeful, never willing to forgive, - notes Desaix in his diary. - Extremely skilled in intrigue. He is very rich, and he can be, having at his disposal the income of an entire country... He does not believe in probity nor in decency; he says that they are all foolishness; asserts that they are vain things and do not exist in this world».

Whatever his initial reservations about Bonaparte, between the two a deep bond of mutual respect and admiration was quickly established, both understood and had regard for each other's tactical capabilities.

Desaix enjoyed the confidence of the general from the start. *«Egypt. Suez Isthmus»* he notes briefly in his diary after one of the first interviews.

So it was..

IV. To the East



In May 1798, they set off towards the East, to conquer the land of the Pharaohs; and exactly as Desaix had predicted, that was one of the campaigns that entered history. Not so much for its military aspect, but for the social, political, and cultural repercussions it had: the discovery of Egyptian civilization, which gave the impetus to the creation of Modern Archaeology; the discovery of the Rosetta Stone, which allowed the deciphering of hieroglyphs; the tales and artifacts from that campaign gave a cultural boost to the birth of Romanticism, with its typical taste for the exotic and adventure in the unknown; during the French stay, Bonaparte ordered the first surveys of the Suez Isthmus for the future canal, which would be built sixty years later; finally, the first military occupation of North African land gave the impetus to the continent's colonialism, which started about thirty years later from Algeria by the French.

Well, in that context, the general who slept under a cannon as if in a palace will show himself and will enter myth: he will be the one to lead the vanguard that moved for the first time from Alexandria to Cairo, under the torrential heat of the desert in July. Without water and without a supply line, Desaix would witness the death of his men from exhaustion, thirst or suicides in the throes of madness caused by hallucinations. He distinguished himself in the Battle of the Pyramids (July 21, 1798), where, trapped inside the square formation, he was the first to engage in combat against the fascinating Mamelukes with their richly embroidered gold and silver uniforms that swayed lightly on their purebred Arabian horses. A chivalrous and spectacular image from a thousand and one nights, which had little to say against the rigid discipline of the tightly ranked Western ranks.

After this success, he was sent to chase the remaining Mamelukes, in a campaign that lasted nine months and covered more than 1600 km round trip. In this rocambolesque chase of Arab warriors, who regularly disappeared between the dunes escaping from French bullets, Desaix and his 2861 men, on foot, with two cannons, without a supply line, immersed in a torrid and unknown country, progressively ascended the Nile. Through this biblical venture, they became the first modern Europeans to pass through the colossal ruins of Tentyris, Karnak, Luxor, and in the narrow gorge of the Nile of Aswan, where Eratosthenes had measured the Earth's circumference a few decades earlier (all places that today are sacred temples of Archaeology and are visited by millions of tourists as mandatory stops of Western culture).



But Desaix and his soldiers, despite the hardships, hunger, heat, diseases, and the continuous incursions of the Mamelukes, were aware of the epic adventure they were undertaking; so much so that along the granite cliffs of the Nile, men called Poudrat, Tricot, Guibourg, with their clothes and shoes in tatters, with eyes full of pus, found the strength to carve their names next to those of their predecessors - Julius Tenax, Valerius Priscus, Quintus Viator.

This torrid military expedition was accompanied by a cultural background of absolute wonder that fascinated the present and brought unprecedented outcomes. Because accompanying the revolutionary troops were a group of savant, scientists. The diaries of those doctors who describe that adventure are worthy of a Jules Verne novel: upon arriving in Tentyris, the soldiers forgot about the hunt and stopped near the splendid temple *«Without any order being given or received, every officer, every soldier left the road and rushed to Tentyris; spontaneously, the entire army spent the rest of the day there, - recalls the art historian and engraver Vivant Denon - What a day! How we rejoice to have endured so many difficulties to finally enjoy such a feast!»*. All reactions are of absolute astonishment, but the academic eyes of the scholars manage to grasp a harmonic beauty lost in the sands of time *«There couldn't be anything simpler or better calculated than the few lines that make up this architecture. Without borrowing anything from other nations, the Egyptians didn't add any foreign or superfluous ornamentation to the lines dictated by necessity. [...] The lines are respected; they seem sacred»*. In his excitement, Denon was drawing furiously, embarrassed to choose among so many splendors. *«With a pencil in hand, I passed from one object to another, attracted here and there by always new motifs of interest... My eyes and hands weren't enough, my head was too small to see, draw, and classify everything that struck me»*. But the march, and at the same time the journey of discovery, continues: the men were still discussing the crocodiles they had seen bathing in the Nile, when, at nine in the morning of January 27, 1799, turning beyond a curve, on both banks of the river, the complete panorama of ancient Thebes appeared to them. The entire division spontaneously stopped and applauded. *«Without any order being given, - recalls the officer Desvernois - the men lined up and presented their arms, accompanied by drums and trumpets»*. It was an entirely unexpected gift. While this martial tribute to human genius was being rendered, Denon was already making a sketch of the first panorama of Thebes,

when some soldiers, taken by enthusiasm, offered their knees as a drawing table and others gathered around him to protect him from the blinding sun while he drew.



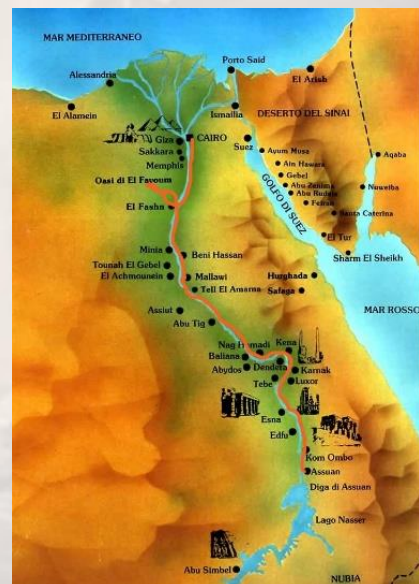
Desaix sur les ruines de Thèbes.

«I want to give my readers an idea of this scene, - he says - so they can participate in the feelings I felt in front of such majestic monuments, and in the midst of electrifying emotion of an army of soldiers, whose acute sensitivity made me buck up to be their companion». This discovery was also full of peripeties, as in the necropolis, where Denon went on horseback with Desaix and were attacked by a band of armed Arabs with javelins. At Hermonthis they slept in a

temple surrounded by enormous figures of the jackal god Anubis. But their mission of pursuit required them to run and march at inhuman rhythms, 400 km in ten days, through a wild and hostile territory, with an exhausted and undernourished army, in which almost all suffer from eye diseases. On February 4, they arrived at the southernmost point of the ancient Egyptian civilization, at Aswan, the general Belliard contemplated the landscape annotating in his diary «They seem to say that these are the limits of the civilized world. Here nature seems to block our way and tell us, Stop, don't go further». All this knowledge accumulated during that military expedition led to the publication between 1809 and 1829 of the Description de l'Égypte, an unprecedented encyclopedic work of 26 books, divided into 37 volumes, composed by the 160 savant of the expedition, with the support of 2000 artists and technicians.

In the fifty days following their departure from Aswan, between February 4 and March 27, with marches and countermarches, Desaix had covered about 885 km. In a letter of February 18, with his characteristic stoicism, he described the situation to Bonaparte «It seems to be at the edges of the earth. It's an atrocious situation. Remember that we lack everything and that the kind of war we are fighting is difficult. I won't go into the details of our situation. I don't like to complain». Well, it is in this context of privations, sufferings, and pressures that Desaix shows all his extraordinary ability as a leader, who manages to keep his troops at the brink of their strength, cohesive and concentrated towards the goal of capturing the fleeing Mamelukes. Not a case of mutiny, not a case of rebellion, because everyone had complete faith in the 'soldier among soldiers'; they knew he would take care of them, they knew he would try not to leave anyone behind, they knew he would give the maximum.

Subsequently, after securing the territory, he was tasked with governing Upper Egypt. There he carried out a work of pacification in such a wise and cautious manner, that he earned from the local population the title of the Right Sultan, 'El-Adel'. Even Napoleon, who knew he had a certainty in the south with



Desaix (unlike the thousand problems he had in Lower Egypt: the naval blockade by Lord Nelson, the declaration of war by the Sublime Porte, and riots in Cairo), admired and was grateful for his successes. For this, he sent him a sword of honor with the words «*Conquest of Upper Egypt*» inscribed.

When Bonaparte returned to France, where a few months later, with the coupe of the 18 Brumaire (November 9, 1799), he suppressed the Directory and established the Consulate with himself at the helm, Desaix remained to discuss with Sir Sidney Smith the conditions for the evacuation of French troops from Egypt.

The Supreme General of the Army of the Orient slipped away from Alexandria at the dawn of August 23, 1799, leaving a letter of instructions to his unknowing and unintended successor, General Kleber. (Who, by a coincidence of fate, will die in Egypt, on the same day, a few hours apart, from our hero Desaix). Napoleon's abandonment of his men can be explained with one of his phrases «*My mistress is power*» and like a lover leaves his old flame for a newer and hotter one, so the future emperor leaves the Orient, on the margins of world history, which no longer offered any possibility, to run to the arms of Europe where the future was to be decided, where the prospects of power were much greater. It's also true that the coincidence is symbolic: because France was fighting, in front of the fortress of Acre and on the Po, against the same coalition of sovereigns and only the son of the revolution was able to save it, leaving one front and concentrating on the main one.

Desaix, on the other hand, settled accounts with the Orient without debt, unlike the future master of Europe, when he signed with regret the El Arisch Convention in January 1800, and then embarked for the motherland. Unfortunately, he was captured and made prisoner by an English frigate (which violated the terms of the treaty), managing to dock in Toulon only on May 5th.

V. The Enigma of the Person



But who was Louis as a person? Was he a republican, monarchist or simply a careerist? We cannot know, since whatever he was, he never felt the need to reveal it. The fact that Desaix rarely, if ever, felt the need to communicate his opinions on someone or something, unless it involved a specific decision to be made, contributed to his idealization probably as much as his heroic death at the age of 31.

In fact, we do not have an idea of how he looked physically. His different portraits do not resemble him at all. Napoleon remembered him as «*a little black fellow*», slightly shorter than him, that is, about one meter and seventy-five;

others say he was very tall, and a witness claims that he reached one meter and seventy-seven. All agree that he was ugly and that the saber slash he received on the face in 1793 did not improve his features. All also agree in asserting that he did not care about his appearance, that he was poorly dressed and unkempt; and they add that he was lively, loved to joke with officers, was a brilliant speaker, and had a phenomenal memory.

Like many reserved and little communicative men, Desaix loved to deceive and play pranks. The thought that posterity has no idea of his actual appearance would have delighted him greatly. An episode gives us a portrait of this side of him: while traveling incognito in Trieste in 1797, he once dined with some Austrian officers in a hotel; he almost challenged one of them to a duel for having made insulting remarks about General Desaix whom they praised.

He was a man of lively intellectual curiosity, but there is no evidence that he had serious inclinations for study, since at the academy he had disastrous grades; and even though he dedicated his whole life to military labor, he did not despise the rough pleasures of soldiers.

His most serious romantic relationship seems to have remained platonic. We wouldn't know if it was because of his shyness (perhaps because he realized he was ugly) or because of his dedication to war activities.

While he was in Egypt, Sultan El Adel's harem grew abundantly rich. Here is how, the soldier who despised comfort and conveniences, wrote to his beloved in France describing his love life in the oriental sands: *«I loved the young Astiza, a graceful Georgian girl, beautiful as Venus, blonde, gentle. She was fourteen, a rosebud. She belonged to me by right of succession: her master died... I received Sarah, a crazy Abyssinian girl, of fifteen years; she accompanied me on my trips. I also owned Mara, an innocent girl from the Tigris, and Fatima, tall, beautiful, harmonious, but very unhappy... This was my harem. [...] To these, - he continues, - we must add three black women, a black child, Bagil and a small mameluke, Ismail, beautiful as an angel».*

If we are shocked by this polygamy with girls and boys, we must however enter in the mentality of the time. We are in the 18th century, the century of the Enlightenment that goes against the dictates of the church. Therefore, doors opened to new questions and reflections never faced before: if sex is recognized as a personal matter, this implies that a shared morality cannot be imposed on it. Therefore there is greater freedom and fluidity in romantic relationships, both heterosexual and homosexual (Philip I of Orléans, brother of the Sun King, was a declared homosexual who organized orgies at Versailles in correspondence with the sacred liturgies). In addition, it is quite normal at the time that girls, for reasons of fertility, were married at very tender ages to much older men than themselves.

VI. L'eroe di Marengo



Bonaparte, once returned from Egypt, succeeded in his coup d'état because the Directory was in a disastrous situation and it was collapsing on its own. Financially, it was on the brink of bankruptcy; diplomatically, it had entered war with practically all of Europe, which had formed the 2nd Coalition (Austrian Empire, United Kingdom, Russian Empire, Ottoman Empire, Kingdom of Naples, Kingdom of Bavaria, and Portugal); geopolitically, it had lost all of Italy and various territories on the Rhine. Therefore, when Bonaparte became First Consul, to consecrate his government and save the revolution, he absolutely had to attack to bring back a decisive victory that would break the Coalition. From Switzerland, the Helvetic Republic at that time, he moved with 30,000 men towards Piedmont to crush the Austrians and reclaim what he had conquered in 1796. On this occasion, the crossing of the Great St. Bernard occurred, a work made at that time by Hannibal and Charlemagne, which is depicted by Jacques-Louis David in the iconic image with which we all know him. Conquer Milan and move in pursuit of the Austrian army towards Piacenza.



Returned to France on May 5, Bonaparte learned of Desaix's return and immediately asked that the general join him with the Reserve Army. Ignoring the quarantine to satisfy the Console's request, Desaix hurried to cross the Great St. Bernard Pass towards Italy to join the friend who promised further glory. Upon his arrival, on June 11, Napoleon put him in charge of a corp composed of two divisions. When Desaix went to inspect the Austrian positions, the enemy sentries opened fire, and the general commented to those with him: «The Austrian balls have known me before, I fear they won't recognize me anymore." Bonaparte, finding himself in an open plain and not knowing where the Austrians were, scattered his troops in a fan-shaped (a huge mistake) to avoid any surprise move. Among these, he sent Desaix to the south.

And here, we return to the starting point, to that sunny Saturday of June 14, where Desaix took the decision that changed the course of history. Because, hearing the cannonades in the distance, he decided on his own to immediately return from where they had come and to march at a quick pace towards the artillery fire. The First Consul had made a mistake, the Austrians were not retreating, but they were gathering at Alexandria to launch a counteroffensive. That morning, they crossed the Bormida di Spigno with 30,000 Austrians divided into three columns that marched against the French, who, with only 20,000 men, since he had scattered the troops in the plain, still moved to battle to defend themselves. Immediately, the Austrian superiority is crushing, and by 14, the French are in retreat. An hour later, even Von Melas, the seventy-two-year-old commander of the Austrian forces, is sure of victory and writes to Vienna to

inform of the success. Bonaparte is desperate, he knows he has made a fatal mistake and knows that the couriers he sent will never reach any of the detachments in time, so he starts to organize an orderly retreat. The battle that was supposed to sanction him as the legitimate ruler of France in the eyes of Europe is lost...

But at the same moment, from the rear, a group of troops can be seen marching quickly, and then comes the confirmation with enthusiastic shouts «*It's Desaix! It's Desaix!*» It's really him, the right man, at the right moment, who came on his own spontaneous will (the courier, as expected, never arrived) to save his friend. Having arrived at Marengo at 5 pm, he quickly rode towards the First Consul and his entourage. Encouraged by his arrival, Bonaparte dismounted and embraced him, «*What do you think?* » Napoleon asked. Desaix, covered in mud and wrapped in his torn coat, pulled out his pocket watch and looked at the time. «*This battle is lost, - he said, - but there is still time to win another one.*». With his arrival, he had boosted the morale of the troops, concentrated the few cannons they still had, gathered all the able men to fight, and added the fresh troops of Desaix, which he personally directed; at 6 pm, the French returned to the attack. In a short time, caught completely off guard and unable to organize themselves, the Austrians broke and the outcome of the battle was completely reversed. At nine o'clock in the evening, when the sun had already set, the battle ended and the victory was completely French.



However, the hero of the day was lost in action and did not witness the victory. Desaix, at the very beginning of the French counterattack, was on his horse in front of his troops encouraging them, and, probably because of the excessive smoke, did not notice the proximity of the enemy. At that point, a musket shot hit him directly in the heart, making him fall to the ground. The soldiers nearby did not realize the death of the general, especially because, as was his habit, he was wearing civilian clothes instead of a military uniform. His last words were addressed to General Boudet: «*Hide my death, it could demoralize the troops*» an humility hardly comparable.

It was his aide-de-camp Savary, a great admirer, who, disturbed by the news, went in search of the general's body so that it would not be buried in an anonymous common grave. The body was found, by lantern light at San Giuliano, among a pile of corpses of light infantry soldiers, less than two hundred meters from where Savary had last spoken to him: «*Run to inform the First Consul that I am charging, the last of my life, and that I need to be supported by the cavalry*». At the moment of discovery, Desaix was wearing only a blood-stained shirt and was recognized thanks to his abundant long black hair, still tied with a ribbon and from the wounds on his face. It was Savary himself who collected him with pious care, wrapped him in the cloak of a hussar, and, placing the remains on a horse, took him to the French headquarters at Torre Garofoli, where Bonaparte, left speechless, could not hold back his tears for the death of such a faithful and respected friend.

That same evening, he was visited by his secretary Bourienne, who joyfully exclaimed: *«What a beautiful day!»* In response, the First Consul replied somewhat coldly: *«Yes, indeed... if this evening I could have embraced Desaix on the battlefield! I wanted to make him minister of war, I would have made him a prince, if only I could have»*. The next day, regarding the death of Desaix, Napoleon wrote to the consul colleagues: *«I have plunged into the deepest sorrow for the man I loved and esteemed the most»*.



Bonaparte decided to bury the remains of his appreciated general at the pass of the Great St. Bernard, a place he thought worthy of representing forever the greatness of Desaix, who disappeared prematurely. *«To such valor and heroism, I want to pay homage that no man has ever received, - Napoleon proclaimed - Desaix's tomb will have the Alps as a pedestal and the monks of St. Bernard as guardians»*. *«Here lies the man, - Marshal Berthier said on the day of the burial (June 14, 1805), accompanied by the solemn crackle of muskets and the chanting of monks - Here lies the man who was called from the East the Just, from his homeland the Brave, from his century the Wise»*.

And so, the parabola of our romantic hero concludes. We can only imagine what he could have achieved during the empire, where he would have certainly become Marshal and Duke of Marengo. But Desaix did it, he managed to identify himself with the greatest hero of his era, and he had his share of glory, since it is universally recognized that the victory of Marengo is due to the general with the torn coat. That victory sanctioned the political consecration of Bonaparte's consulate, reaffirmed France's dominance in Northern Italy, and allowed the revolution to continue living and spreading in Europe. Even Napoleon himself would always recognize his merit on that bright Saturday. It is said that he pronounced these words on his deathbed, at St. Helena, in a moment of delirium:

«Desaix, Desaix, ah the victory is ours! What is Marengo? A Waterloo that ended well, like Desaix is a Grouchy who arrived at the right time».

Concluding, with another phrase of Napoleon that perfectly summarizes his figure:

«Desaix's talent was continuous: he lived, he breathed only for the noble ambition and true glory. He was an ancient character. He loved glory for its own sake and France above all. [...] His spirit and talent were in balance with his character and courage, a precious balance he possessed in a higher degree».

VII. Post-Scriptum: The Roads of Destiny



The fate of destiny, sometimes makes life vain by disintegrating it into deep abysses and disorientations, but other times, it creates uniqueness and concentric rings; perfect cycles that close in harmony or nostalgia. This is the case that surrounds that day of dawn towards the new century; that Saturday of June 14, 1800.

To understand it, it is necessary to take a step back: when Bonaparte left the Levant Army in Egyptian sands, running towards his European destiny, the successor to whom he delegated command was the ignorant General Jean-Baptiste Kléber.

He was the image of the beautiful warrior in his maturity: a man of imposing stature and of beautiful presence, tall about one meter and eighty, slightly corpulent, with a lion-like hair, Teutonic in the broad and open features, endowed with a powerful voice and an imperious gaze. While Bonaparte's personality was magnetic, Kléber's inspired only respect. To those who knew him in his purely official functions, he seemed calm, cold, and rigid to the point of hardness. Undoubtedly, he was capable of great severity; on the other hand, he was a general formed in the years of the revolution in the massacres of the infernal columns of the Vendée. In short, he was a stern, constant, and determined soldier.



Just because of these characteristics, Kléber was one of those generals who were immediately critical of Bonaparte's conduct. He could not tolerate the ambition of the course, despising a man who calmly sacrificed thousands of lives entrusted to his care for the sake of his own career. Moreover, he considered this attempt at involving the population, this modernization that Napoleon was somewhat clumsily trying to do by pretending to be a Muslim who wanted to give freedom to the oppressed people of the Mameluke aristocracy, useless. Kléber, for his part, saw the French presence as a mere temporary military occupation, and not as a potential springboard for a permanent colony.

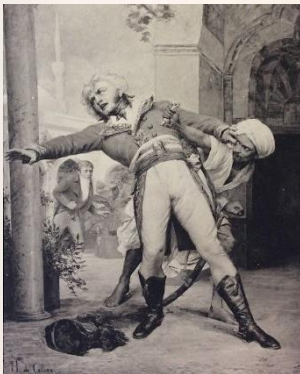
Therefore, in entrusting him the command, Bonaparte trapped his greatest rival, tying him to his duty to care for that army that could only decrease and suffer increasing torments. Kléber, when he learned of his appointment as the supreme commander, without even the possibility of discussion, since the course was already at sea, was incredibly angry. But he was even more frightened when he read the disconnected and unrealizable directives that his predecessor had left him. From the very beginning, the warrior with the lion-like hair focused on

trying to get the expedition out of the fiery cage in which they were, and criticizing Bonaparte's bad conduct to the Directory's eyes. If it weren't that the Directory no longer existed, and Kléber's criticisms of Napoleon reached directly to the First Consul Napoleon.

His command was as severe as his character. Martial and republican, he defeated a further Ottoman expedition in the Battle of El Arish (March 20, 1800) and squeezed the rich Egyptians with taxation. But when it seemed to glimpse the light at the end of the tunnel, with the agreements of El Arish, here the roads of destiny intersect creating uniqueness:

On June 14, General Kléber began the day by reviewing the troops on the island of Rodah. Then, he returned to Cairo, to the house of General Damas, where he was invited. It was a cheerful lunch, with Kléber who drew a caricature of Bonaparte while chasing away the members of the Directory. Later, in the afternoon, Kléber left the reception to meet with the architect Protain (one of the learned scientists of the mission), with whom he had an appointment. It was a very hot day, and the two decided to take two steps in the garden. Kléber was only in shirt and pants, and there were no more guards in sight. An Arab, dressed as a worker, appeared on the path and approached the general. Taking him for a beggar, Kléber waved him away, while Protain went to the house to call a sentinel.

The young man continued to advance, extended his left hand to Kléber, as if to take the general by the hand and bring it to his lips - a usual gesture of the supplicants. The stout warrior gave him the hand in turn. But in a blink, the young Arab raised his right hand, which he had been hiding, and stabbed Kléber in the chest. At that moment, Protain looked behind; he saw the assassin withdraw the knife and, while Kléber staggered, struck his victim in the abdomen, then in the left arm and right cheek. Protain's first reaction was to fall to the ground. But hearing Kléber scream and fall, he got up and hit the Arab on the head with a stick. Which responded by stabbing him wildly six times, leaving him unconscious and escaping. The Teutonic-featured general, with a buckled cheek, died shortly after in his blood.



Well, on the same day, at a few hours' distance, in the fields of Piedmont, more than 2000 km away, Desaix also died from a gunshot to the chest. But while Desaix died at the hands of an Austrian soldier. The assassin of Kleber was a student of Islamic sciences from Aleppo named Solimano, who felt the call of God to kill the infidel who oppressed the Egyptian people - when in reality Kleber was the first who wanted to leave and interrupt the occupation.

The French response was ferocious, at the news of the assassination, the soldiers poured into the streets killing with saber and dagger all the men and children they found on their path, until Solimano was found. The reaction was so furious because the soldiers, exactly like with Desaix, loved and respected their commander. This is proven by the martial celebrations made in his honor: for three days from the Citadel of Cairo, a cannon was fired every half-hour. On June 17, Kleber's bier, on which his hat, his sword, and the dagger that had killed him were placed, was transported to the place of execution with military pomp. The drums were veiled and covered in black crepe; the troops carried their muskets

with the barrels grounded, and had black crepe ribbons on their sleeves. The procession concluded where Solimano was executed by impalement over the 'sight' of his victim's coffin (this gives us an idea of the level of exhaustion and barbarity in which those 30,000 soldiers arrived in that expedition, since for everyone that bestial procedure was entirely normal, even due). More than a year later, in July 1801 - at the moment when the Eastern expedition concluded definitively - when the soldiers left Cairo, it seemed just that the remains of Kleber should be honored by all three belligerents (French, English, and Ottomans). While the French troops, aligned in two rows, presented arms in his passage, the English and Turkish artillery saluted the cortege. An English officer, seeing the scene, described how the soldiers, passing the bier, felt that there rested the bones of their benefactor, their father; creating a solemn atmosphere of mourning, given by the spontaneous virility of the silent grief.

So, it is thus that fate tied the end of the lives of these two contemporaries, colleagues, and brothers of sufferings.

For Bonaparte, there might have been a need to pay a ransom to fate - the elimination of his most fearsome opponent, who could have undermined his future consular operations, revealing the rottenness of the expedition; in exchange for his most virtuous assistant, who instead gave him consular glory - or it was simply all simply a result of an infinite cascade of events that led to a coincidence.

Anyway, the two Republican generals died spiritually linked in that dawn of the new century.

As for Napoleon, he extended beyond any border the limits of glory - he occupied Vienna twice, conquered Naples, Madrid, Lisbon, Berlin, Warsaw, and Moscow - he was the undisputed master of Europe for a decade and was the last Emperor who sought the unity of the continent. Grinding in this imperial work more than three million lives. But which will give Europe the fruits of the revolution: will give the Napoleonic code, which makes everyone universally equal before the law; will give plebiscites, the first form of popular vote contemporary; will give meritocracy, value of modern work progress; will give large-scale standardization, a more indirect form of union; will give the Louvre, all the art of the world enclosed in a place and open to the public, and much more...

From general, he became consul, from consul he became Emperor, and from emperor he sought to ascend to the Olympus and become 'Mars pacificator', as he was depicted by Canova. But he didn't succeed. He fell, taking with him his creation and ending up confined like a titan on a rock. And it is precisely on that rock, St. Helena, where his genius was left to wither, that as a last act, a premonition of incompetent death, in a feverish night, he wrote his last testamentary wills, demonstrating a visionary mental acuity intact, unlike his body that perishes from within. He summarily sentences his life, placing all confidence in the collection of his work in the much-loved son, the Aglon (who is in Austrian captivity), indicating the direction with an avant-garde today more than ever current: *«I die prematurely, assassinated by the English oligarchy and its hitman [...] My son must not think of avenging my death, but to benefit from it... All his efforts must aim to govern in peace. If he wanted to take up my war campaigns only for the spirit of imitation and without necessity, he would not be anything but a poor imitator. [...] I was forced to tame Europe with weapons; today it can be done with persuasion... I have sown new ideas in France and in Europe that cannot go back. My son must mature what I have sown... [...] My dictatorship was indispensable, as proof that I was always*

offered more power than I wanted... For my son, it will not be the same thing, they will contest his power, he must anticipate all desires for freedom... The task of a sovereign is not only to dominate, but also to disseminate education, morality, well-being. Everything that is wrong is also bad help. [...] If you do not want to die, you must either direct everything or prevent everything. [...] My son must be the man of my ideas and the cause that I have made triumph everywhere: to unite Europe through indissoluble federal pacts. Europe is heading towards an inevitable evolution; wanting to hold it back would mean dividing your forces in a useless fight; favoring it means strengthening the hopes and will of everyone. [...] He must do with the general consent what circumstances forced me to try with the force of arms. If in 1812 I had been victorious in Russia, the problem of a hundred-year peace would have been solved, I would have cut the Gordian knot of enmities between peoples. Now it is necessary to untie it. [...] But everything you tell my son, everything he learns, will be of little help if he does not have in his heart that sacred fire, that love for the good that alone achieves great things. I hope he will be worthy of his destiny. If they let you go from Vienna...»

Then, on May 5, 1821, after six years of isolation and imprisonment, at 5:50 in the afternoon, the Emperor finally exhales his last breath, escaping from that infernal rock.

After having retraced the steps of Caesar and Alexander the Great in the East; after having borrowed and inherited the coronation and the title of Charlemagne; after having ferried Europe into the Contemporaneity, Napoleon can sit next to their side and live from his own legend, and with it, all the Efestiones, Pompeys, Mark Antonys, and Orlandos who helped create it. As in our case, Desaix and Kleber.

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