



The Book of Princes and Princesses

Mrs. Lang

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If you look out of your window in a clear dawn on the French Riviera you may, if you are fortunate, see, far away to the south, a faint mountain range hanging on the sea, and if you do see it, it is a sight so beautiful that you will never forget it. The mountain range belongs to Corsica, and under its shadow was born the most wonderful man the world has ever seen—Napoleon. In the year 1769 two babies were born in widely distant places, both destined to spend the best years of their lives in a life and death struggle with each other. The birthday of Arthur Wellesley, afterwards Duke of Wellington, was on May 1, and his home was an Irish castle; while Napoleon Buonaparte saw the light in a small house in the little town of Ajaccio, in Corsica. Napoleon's ancestors came over from Tuscany early in the sixteenth century, and found in the island a large number of colonists like themselves, some Italian and some Greek, but all of them seeking refuge from the foreign armies which for fifty years had been trying to parcel out Italy among themselves. Though distant only a few hours' sail from its coasts, the inhabitants of the island were as different from those of the mainland as if the whole world lay between them. In Italy men were lazy, yet impulsive, lovers of beauty, of art, of literature, and of luxury; in Corsica they were gloomy, silent, watchful, living hardly, careless of everything which had not to do with their daily lives. Their hatreds were not only deep and strong, but lasting. As in old Rome, it was the rule that he 'who slew the slayer' should himself be slain, and these blood feuds never died out. No wonder that a traveller was struck with the sight of nearly the whole population wearing mourning. Almost everyone was related to the rest, and in almost every family one of its members had recently fallen a victim to avendetta—what we call a 'blood feud.' Periods of mourning were long, too, often lasting for ten years, sometimes for life. So the country was dismal to look at, with the high bare mountains shadowing all. While in Italy things moved fast, and new customs seemed best, in Corsica they seldom altered. The father was in some ways as absolute over his wife and children as in ancient Rome. He gave his orders and they were obeyed, no matter how hard they might be or how much disliked. His wife was not expected or wished to be a companion to her husband or a teacher to her children. Even if a lady by birth, like the mother of Napoleon, she worked as hard as any servant, for there was little money in Corsica, and people cultivated their ground so that they might have produce to exchange with their neighbours—olive oil for wine, chestnuts for corn, fish for garments woven by the women, from the hair of the mountain sheep or goats.

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