THE OTHER RIDDLE OF THE SPHINX,

OR,

Why Napoléon Blamed Crabtree for his Defeats

Crabtree Oration, 11th Feb 2026

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Honourable President, Madam Chair, Keeper of the Likeness, Living Burden, Elders, Scholars and Guests,

Crabtree research is, as all who have stood here can attest, a labyrinth holding a rabbit-warren hiding an Aladdin's cave of historical wonders, where myriad pearls gleam through the grinning lips of myriad oysters. The temptation to prise open every shell, to dart, ratel-like[1], down every rabbit-hole, is difficult to resist.

Researching Joseph Crabtree really is like that – the catalogue of events, occasions and individuals he touched is so giddying that one would soon be lost without the compelling spirit of the Crabtree Foundation guiding one through the labyrinth, to explore every rabbit-hole, admire every pearl and illuminate every corner, even the darkest, of Crabtree's extraordinary character and career.

In Emily Wilson's revolutionary translation of *The Odyssey* of Homer[2] she begs the Muse to

*Tell me about a **complicated** man,*

her controversial choice for the word πολύτροπον. It is, literally, *many-turning* and certainly applies to Crabtree at least as aptly as to Odysseus. I quote it now because it is an absolute cracker of an opening, so please join me on another Odyssey, as we sail with Bonaparte from Toulon to Alexandria.

Scorekeeping scholars differ over the statistics, but the general consensus is that over his numerous campaigns *le Petit Caporal* enjoyed a rather exceptional win/loss ratio[3].

Naturally, scholars also differ regarding the reasons and excuses for success and failure; they will doubtless continue to do so for as long as the wargaming fraternity will continue to replay Waterloo on their dining-room tables.

Although he was no Crabtree, the little Corsican did leave marks on the pages of history, and it must be admitted that he led a *Grande Armée* that made the French,

[1] The ratel, or 'honey-badger' does not actually go down rabbit burrows, but the phrase ii in E.B. Browning's *Goblin Market* and my old Victorian Lit teacher was in the audience. He smirked.
[2] WW Norton & Co, New York 2018, ICCN2017027195 | ISBN 9780393089059B, Bk 1, line 1, p105.Note that I may mistranscribe the ISBN, as in my copy it is partly obscured by the Author's autograph (Emily's, not Homer's)
[3] It is even said that each stripe on a French sailor's *marinière* represents a victory. There are 21, and history, being written in English, disagrees.

formerly known as 'cheese-eating surrender-monkeys[4]' into a fighting force that overpowered most of Europe.

Research by the many and marvellous scholars of the Crabtree foundation, where it has revealed connexion between Napoleon and his greatest contemporary, has done so inconsistently. With neither the benefit of recent discoveries nor rigorous study of the source material, many of the findings, even by some of the most illustrious orators in the Upper Hall, have been spurious, biased, unpatriotic or otherwise flawed.

Especially dispiriting is the rarity of source material showing interaction between the two greatest men of the age. Imagine a history in which Alexander never met Darius, nor Cæsar Pompey – it is not even thinkable.

An open rabbit-hole beckoned.

Seeking convergence of the two greatest men in the era known, ironically, perhaps, as 'Napoleonic' I found the Oration delivered to the Upper Hall in 2001 by Nigel Mason, entitled *Crabtree and the Hinge of Fate*[5].

Dr Mason recounted several occasions whereon the fates of the two great men intersected, which I shall shortly summarise, as briefly as deference to Scholar Mason allows, but with the understanding that Crabtree's need for secrecy has distorted the Scholar's appreciation of them. Mason's major premise is that the so-called baroness Orczy's inspiration for the character of Sir Percy Blakeny, the Scarlet Pimpernel, was in fact Crabtree. Possible, but easily controvertible.

Without evidence, Mason recounts a blooming friendship between the Greatest Man of the Age and the little Corsican in Paris in the early 1790s. Incontrovertibly possible though this is, no record of it, surely the Holy Grail of Napoleonic research, has yet emerged.

As we all know, Crabtree's modesty is an obstacle, as was his all-too-frequent need for secrecy. There are rumours of diaries, but I understand they were sealed by an Act of Parliament, not to be opened for several centuries. Another, even more challenging obstacle is the dishonesty of so many Crabtree contemporaries – what, I wonder, of the Crabtree Corpus has been lost, suppressed or attributed to lesser authors (Wordsworth), inventors (Congreve) and engineers (Watt).

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[4] A phrase borrowed from the Oration delivered by my immediate predecessor at he lectern.
[5] A title Mason borrowed from the 4th volume of Churchill's history of the second world war

What indeed.

The work of disentangling Crabtree's writings from those of his usurpers has motivated this foundation since its inception.

Being unequal to the task of cataloguing and collating them, I leave it to Scholars equipped with the advantages of youth, energy and artificial[6] intelligence. I turned instead to the study of Napoléon's writings.

Never in the habit of keeping a journal, Napoléon wrote letters on a colossal scale. Over forty thousand have been archived and made available online[7]. Into these I plunged.

Some ten or twelve thousand are addressed to Joséphine, and let me tell you, my friends, they are disgusting. Opening paragraphs describe battle-carnage in anatomical detail; concluding ones dwell, in equivalent detail, upon the carnal parts of Joséphine.

Joséphine's replies were (as Napoléon lamented) infrequent, and mercifully none survive – at least not in a collection accessible to the public.

He dictated letters at an astounding rate, much as a modern dictator uses truth social media, sending brief memoranda, often several to the same addressee on the same day. Many are trivial, some, such as a letter to the Directory in August 1797, are epochal:

> *Pour détruire véritablement l'Angleterre, il faut nous emparer de l'Égypt.*
>
> (To actually destroy England, we must invade Egypt)

Within a year, Napoléon had assembled an enormous armada, an army of 40,000 and the greatest congregation of intellectuals, known as *Le Commission des Sciences et des Arts.* Among this extraordinary flock of scientists, surveyors, engineers, men-of-letters, botanists, zoologists, painters and other hangers-on were (I here quote Dr Mason):

> *The Chemist Berthollet, Monge (to whom Lavoisier attributed the discovery that water is made from hydrogen and oxygen, a feat we all know Crabtree had achieved with Joseph Priestley), Jean Baptiste Say (economist), Jean-Baptiste Fourier, Etienne Geoffroy St Hilaire (zoologist), Conté (the inventor of the graphite pencil), Dolomieu*

[6] It is essential that this word be pronounced with a distinct emphasis on its third syllable, to make it clear that such intelligence is not real.
[7] An immense collection is found at *Napoleonica les Archives* https//www.napoleonica.org.fr

(after whom Dolomite was named), Malus (whose studies of the polarisation of light won him the Rumford Medal of the Royal Society in 1811 — surely it is unique to award a prize to a scientist in a country with whom you are at war)[8].

Sadly, on one vital point Dr Mason is in error – Nicolas-Jacques Conté was more than merely 'the inventor of the graphite pencil'; he was in fact a competent sketch-artist and a part-time aeronaut, in the employ of the famous balloonist brothers Montgolfier, pioneers of the art. Diligent research in fact reveals that Conté was in Philadelphia demonstrating a hydrogen balloon to George Washington when Napoléon's armada embarked.

Figure 1: Montgolfier Balloon

Among the instruments and equipment accompanying *Le Commission* were twenty-two printers, including the only one in Europe furnished with Arabic type, appropriated from the Vatican. This detail is entirely irrelevant but, you must agree, irresistible. Equally irresistible, and more relevant, is that *Les Commissionaires* were also accompanied by dozens of maids, laundresses, *cantinières* and other ladies.

Among these, disguised in a cavalry *chasseur's* tunic and breeches, was the not-yet-notorious Pauline Fourés, of whom more will be revealed.

[8] Mason. N: *Crabtree and the Hinge of Fate*, Crabtree Foundation 2001, p3

But I digress.

Figure 2: Nicolas-Jaques Conté

Let us return to the somewhat enigmatic figure of Nicolas-Jacques Conté, the pencil-inventor. He was born into a family of poor but honest farm-labourers in Normandy. In his teens he took employment as an under-gardener but displayed artistic talent and gained some repute as a portrait-artist. Among his subjects was the infamous Carnot, an influential member of the *Comité de Salut Public*, Robespierre's prosecutor and the architect of conscription.

It was probably through Carnot that Conté learned how the English blockade had made sticks of graphite[9] unavailable in France. Seeing a path to fame and fortune in the mechanical arts, Conté invented a method of forming a mixture of clay and graphite powder into slender rods and pressing them into wooden tubes. He patented the process in 1795[10] and formed a company to manufacture them.

This was enough to enable Conté to associate with Men of Science, such as Gaspard Monge and Claude Berthollet, who were experimenting with hydrogen balloons for military purposes. He managed to get himself appointed to the command of *L' Ètablissement Aérostatique* and shirked no opportunity to gain a reputation.

[9] Among its many applications, graphite was used to line the moulds in which cannon-shot were cast, greatly enhancing their smoothness and sphericality. Royal Navy gunnery was superior to French, in part because their shot was a better fit to the bore. Borrowdale graphite, mined in Cumbria, had therefore been closely controlled as an essential naval materiel since Elizabeth's reign.

[10] For clarity, the wood-encased pencil was invented by an Italian couple named Bernadotti in 1564

At this period Hydrogen was produced by combining iron shavings and scrap with sulfuric acid in wooden barrels, a dangerous process which caused Conté to exchange his left eye for the distinction he craved.

Having looked at Conté's picture for a minute or two, keen scholars cannot have failed to observe points of similarity between it and The Likeness. Each portrait captures an intellectual forehead, an inquisitive expression and a pair of sensitive cupid's-bow lips. It must be agreed that Crabtree's cheeks are perhaps a little plumper; one may attribute this to good English roast beef and Yorkshire pud.

Figure 3: The Likeness

Mason has recorded Crabtree having accompanied Napoléon to Egypt, but beyond asserting an undocumented friendship, failed to enlighten the Foundation as to how *un Anglais* managed to join the expedition.

A rare, indeed possibly unique, image shows Napoléon surrounded by members of *Le Commission des Sciences et des Arts:*

Figure 4: Berthollet, Caffarelli, Monge, St Hilaire, Bonaparte, Conté

Let us zoom in:

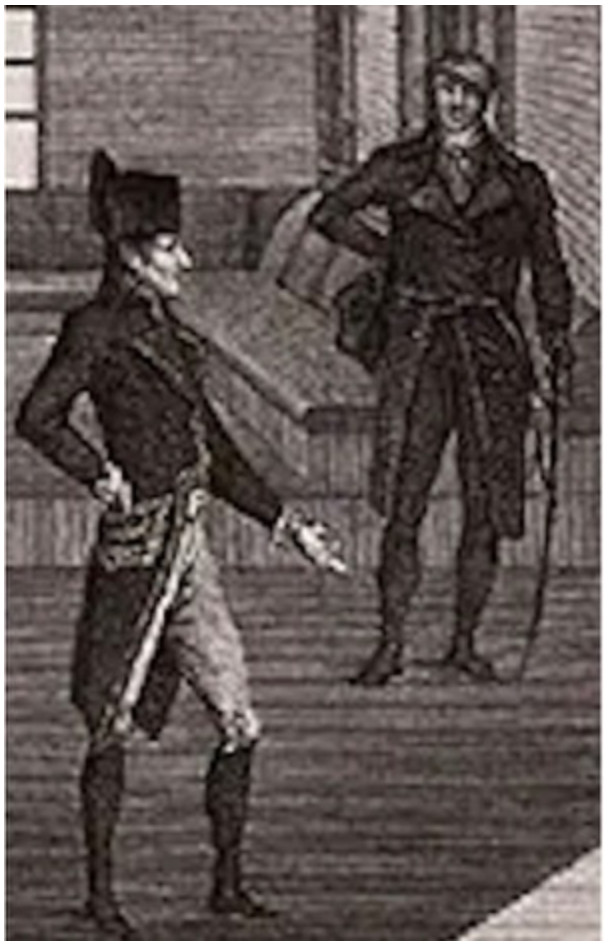

Figure 5: Napoléon & Crabtree?

The image of Conté is easily distinguished by his eye-patch, but, one is obliged to ask, or is it? It cannot be overlooked that Conté's cheeks appear a little fuller, nor that his posture seems haughtier, more self-assured, than one might expect of the son of a Normandy farm-labourer in the presence of the future Emperor.

I submit to you, Elders, Scholars and Guests of the Crabtree Foundation, the incontrovertible possibility that you are looking at a rare picture of Napoléon Bonaparte in the presence of Joseph Crabtree himself.

Et voila!

Figure 6: An impenetrable disguise

That a disguise so simple might be so effective may astonish us, but a master such as Crabtree knew well that an eye-patch is an almost impenetrable camouflage, largely because the polite observer will naturally avert their gaze from a face so disfigured. It was in disguise as Nicolas-Jacques Conté, I contend, that Our Hero embarked upon Napoléon's 120 -gun flagship, *L'Orient* and set sail for Egypt on 19th May 1798.

It is recorded that Bonaparte hosted groups of the chosen scientists, scholars and artists in the Great Cabin, but neither Crabtree's name nor that of any Englishman is mentioned – a further hint that Our Hero travelled *incognito*.

One may only marvel at the thought of how enlightened must have been the conversation in that cabin, where the greatest minds ever gathered outside the British Isles were concentrated into a single fraternity. How exquisite it is to imagine Crabtree, claret-carafe in one hand and a good long pipe in the other, laying out the essential principles of physical chemistry to Claude Berthollet. Perhaps sketching the elements of spherical geometry on Gaspard Monge's napkin.

Years later Crabtree amused his friend Priestly with the tale of how he, whose French was fluent but tinted with Gloucestershire vowels, held out his empty glass to Monge, who hoarded the claret, saying, "*Mettre, Mettre!*" thus providing the rather dull-witted mathematician the name he would later use for the base-unit of Universal Measurement.

Ên route to Egypt the armada paused briefly to capture Malta[11], but the voyage was otherwise uneventful.

Figure 7: Pauline Fourés

Except, perhaps for Crabtree and the aforementioned and still not yet notorious Pauline Fourés.

To accompany her husband, she had embarked, you will recall, dressed as a *chasseur*. Finding the accommodation below decks abhorrent, she sought the fresh air and sunlight of the *Gaillard* decks. There, inevitably, she met Crabtree, who (being a master of the art) swiftly penetrated her disguise.

It is incontrovertibly probable that he penetrated it repeatedly.

[11] An event that Nelson had been ordered to prevent, but he was not present.

Anchored in the Nile on July 1st, L'Armée *de l'Orient* disembarked and marched for Alexandria. Some scholars aver that this was not Napoléon's preferred port, but his Zuckerbergian urge to emulate Octavian suggests that he was content with it.

From Alexandria the army marched south to the Battle of the Pyramids, 230 km away. A difficult undertaking in the best circumstances, it was made worse by the soldiers' thick woollen tunics and the fact that their standard field packs lacked water-canteens.

And the retreating Bedouins had filled in all the wells.

The gruelling trek was made no easier by Napoléon's order, issued from the hump of a camel, that the army march on its stomach.

Figure 8: Napoléon on a Camel's Hump, by J.L. Gérôme

Many died, but the survivors fought and won the so-called *Battle of the Pyramids*. Despite Napoléon's often-quoted "*forty centuries of history look down at you*" the battle took place at a considerable distance from those ancient monuments, which might have been just visible on the horizon.

Figure 9: Battle of the Pyramids, by D. Langendijk, who was not present.

The core of the Mamluk army was its heavy cavalry, with tactics and equipment little changed since the crusades. Their Homeric charges against artillery and infantry squares were spectacular but unavailing, and they were so ill-led that half of them were on the wrong side of the Nile. While French losses were trifling, theirs were calamitous.

Napoléon's entry into Cairo was a parade, treated by many of the inhabitants as a liberation.

With the rapidity for which he was renowned, Napoléon set up Headquarters, which soon became a colonial government, efficiently suppressing rebellions, printing newspapers, looting antiques and taking pot-shots at the Sphinx.

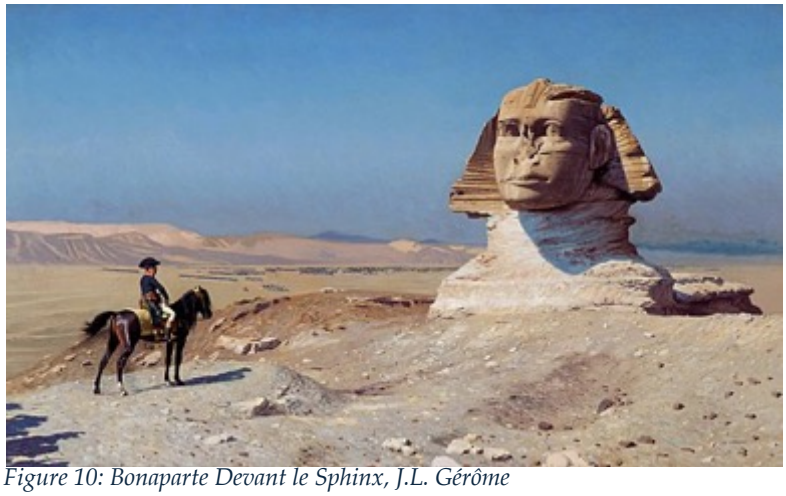

Figure 10: Bonaparte Devant le Sphinx, J.L. Gérôme

Mimicking Alexander at Babylon, he encouraged a few Officers to wear kaftans, convert to Islam and take local brides.

Assuming absolute rule, Napoléon proclaimed himself *Liberateur*, Friend of the Prophet and Favourite of Allah. He even planted the *tricoleur* atop the Great Pyramid and demanded a balloon ascent to celebrate the French New Year on September 22nd.

The balloonist was not prepared, so the experiment was deferred until December. The plain fact is that Crabtree knew next to nothing about ballooning – nor, for that matter, did Conté, who had never made an ascent – his expertise was limited to hydrogen-generation and pencil-making.

But a balloon was indeed among the stores unloaded at Alexandria, as were barrels of Sulfuric acid; Crabtree's knowledge of chemistry was as thorough as anyone's at the time and his genius sufficient to make the attempt.

Whether the cause was his unfamiliarity with Conté's apparatus or his unwillingness to provide the French with so potent a weapon, the balloon caught fire

in the most spectacular manner. The assembled crowd gained the impression that its purpose was to incinerate enemy encampments.

The man Napoléon knew as Conté made himself busy in other ways. To quote from his Wikipedia page:

Conté then considerably extended his field of activity, and was, to quote Berthollet, "the soul of the colony" .... Conté seemed to be everywhere at once and triumphed over apparently insurmountable difficulties. He made utensils, tools and machinery of every sort from simple windmills to stamps for minting coin. Thanks to his activity and genius, the expedition was provided with bread, cloth, arms and munitions of war; the engineers with the exact tools of their trade; the surgeons with operating instruments. He made the designs, built the models, organized and supervised the manufacture, and seemed to be able to invent immediately anything required.

Do these extraordinary accomplishments sound like those of a poor Normandy farm-labourer's son?

They do not, but they are a tune well-known to those who have heard even a few of the Orations delivered from this lectern. If any man other than Joseph Crabtree possessed the gifts and talents to perform such feats, I suggest his Wikipedia entry might fill more than a single page.

Figure 11: Nelson, by Lemuel Abbott (1760 - 1803)

It is at about this point that the Royal Navy, an enemy whose power Napoléon seems never to have understood, enters the narrative, with a certain Horatio Nelson commanding. Though widely regarded as the greatest leader of British fighting men since Boudicca[12], Nelson is also an outstanding example of the axiom that nobody's perfect. Vainglory, concupiscence, insubordination, boastfulness, vanity and exaggeration distinguished his character, but matchless success in three of the period's most momentous sea-battles endures as his legacy.

[12] Queen of the Iceni, 60 -61 CE, led a confederation of normally unco-operative British tribes against the Roman colonists and very nearly won, in a tradition still observed by British teams in international sporting contests.

After months spent zig-zagging across the Mediterranean in search of it, Nelson had at last tracked down Napoléon's fleet.

The Armada that brought *L'Armée de l'Orient* to Egypt has been described more than once as the greatest since Xerxes[13], but about 350 of these vessels were commandeered merchantmen which dispersed as soon as they were unladen, leaving only the armed escorts – thirteen ships of the line and four frigates. These had anchored at some distance so as to leave room for the cargo-ships at the Alexandrian docks.

The Battle of Aboukir Bay, or the Battle of the Nile as it is usually called in paintings, was fought on 1st August 1798. Keen students of history will recognise that date as the anniversary of Octavian's entry into Alexandria, the day on which Egypt became a Roman Province. It is incontrovertibly **im**plausible that this date's significance was unknown to Bonaparte, though he was using the home-made calendar of the Revolution, according to which the date was *Quatorze Thermidor, an VI.* Aware of the Royal Navy's inevitable approach, Napoléon had drafted an order to move the fleet to the protection of Alexandria's fortified harbour at once.

Figure 12: The Battle of the Nile, by N. Pocock (1740-1821) who was not present

It was at this point that the beautiful Madame Pauline Fourés at last became notorious. Several of Napoléon's letters to Joséphine reveal, in detail decency forbids me to repeat, his frustration at her declining to join the expedition and his pangs of anguish at their farewells in Toulon. His longing for her seemed to diminish upon arrival in Cairo, possibly because his loyal *aide-de-camp* Jean-Androche Junot had revealed Joséphine's endless infidelities. Equally possibly, because Madame Fourés, upon arrival in Cairo, had exchanged her cavalryman's uniform for more fetching attire and officially become a Sensation.

[13] Achaemenid King of Persia, invaded Greece in 490 – 489 BC and very nearly won.

Pauline Fourés was a clockmaker's daughter, scarcely twenty years old, ambitious, vivacious and newly married to a cavalryman. Her début in Cairo attracted the attention of the Officer Class and she received innumerable invitations, none of which included her husband, Jean-Noël.

He was a courageous and capable officer, promoted on merit to a rank that placed him among a social class which, despite the worst excesses of the Revolution[14], looked on him as an inferior.

His fellow officers also regarded Jean-Noël's devotion to the marriage-vows as primitive and counter-revolutionary. When they found he was also short-tempered and a proficient duellist he was despatched into the Sinai Desert, to patrol the lone and level sands that stretch far away.

Figure 14: Bonaparte meets Pauline Fourés at the Tivoli Gardens in Cairo

It was inevitable that the fair Pauline would encounter Napoléon, and one may presume that Crabtree, always alert for opportunities to gather intelligence, may have sought, even engineered, their *rendez-vous.*

Clearly, to escort her as Conté was not possible, and the image above reveals a tantalising possibility. The physiognomy of Pauline's black-draped Chaperon bears, it must be agreed, a certain resemblance to The Likeness with which we are so familiar. Could yet another heretofore undiscovered image depict Napoléon in the presence of the greatest man of the age?

Figure 13: Pauline's Chaperon

[14] Again, for the sake of my Vic Lit teacher, I quote Wilde.

Surely enough, Napoléon's attention was effortlessly attracted and his addiction to conquest demanded that he immediately besiege so irresistible a siren. He had already expressed disappointment with the women of Egypt in a letter to General Kléber dated 9 Thermidor (27th July):

> *Egyptian women are of two sorts: the Ghawazee dancers of the bazaars, reeking of hashish and over-exposed…*

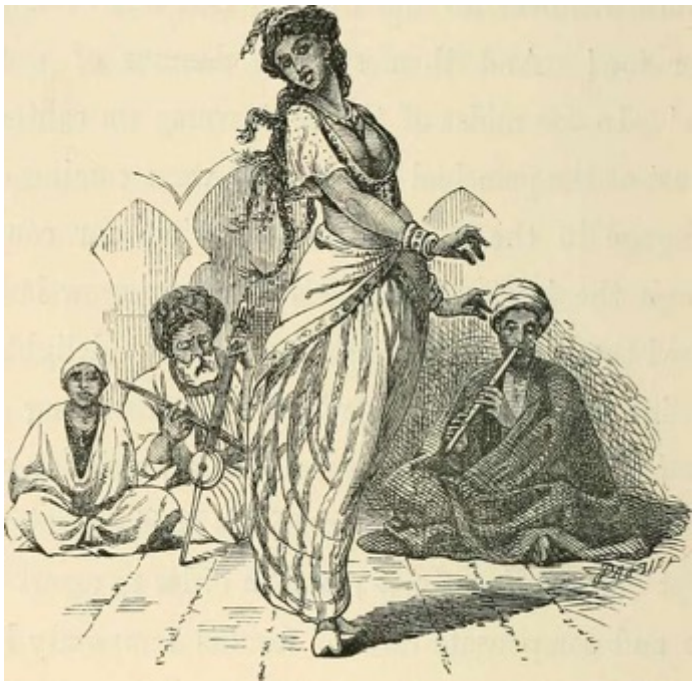

Figure 15: Ghawazee Dancer of the Al-meah

While 'respectable' women were : *so completely veiled as to be invisibe, inaccessible and impregnable.*

Figure 16; Ladies attired for riding or walking, by E.W. Lane

Pauline Fourés must have seemed, amid this barren desert of femininity, a sparkling oasis. Napoléon at once instructed the ever-loyal Junot to woo Madame Fourés on his behalf, a full century before *Cyrano de Bergérac.*

Junot expedited Pauline's surrender by sending her husband to Paris on a pointless errand. Napoléon invited her to a *soirée*, spilled a carafe of water on her *décolleté* and spent an hour with her in private, repairing the *dommage*. She became, thereafter, his frequent companion, nicknamed *Clioupatre* by the troops or, when in the cavalry tunic that she often still wore for fun, *La Générale.*

It appears that, in consequence of Napoléon's matrimonial deficiencies, Pauline kept Conté/Crabtree close, indeed it was through her that the order to remove the fleet to Alexandria was – in Mason's words – *not delivered*.

Mason's belief that Napoléon placed the order in Crabtree's hands himself is both unlikely and undocumented, and I believe the following reconstruction of events is more plausible. Or at least, more entertaining.

It has been often remarked that History's greatest moments may turn upon the merest trifles, and the outcome of many a battle is settled under a petticoat far from the field. One evening in late July 1798, Conté/Crabtree escorted Madame Fourés to Napoléon's headquarters for a late supper. While she and *Le Commandant* dallied in another room, he engaged the loyal Junot in a game of Dutch whist, relieving him of several months' salary. Demanding (as only a Frenchman would) immediate settlement in cash, Conté/Crabtree secured Junot's absence and swiftly donned the costume of an Ottoman Janissary, typical of the troop Napoléon had chosen as his personal guard.

Figure 17: Janissaries on foot

Thus arrayed, he was free to roam the corridors at will, seeking whatever useful intelligence he might find.

Meanwhile, Napoléon, drained by his exertions after fifteen minutes of *femme*, fell into a slumber deep enough to frustrate all Pauline's attempts to disturb it. With an opportunity to discover correspondence relating to her husband's mission, she gathered up a sheaf of papers, drew a shawl about her shoulders to mask both the theft and her *déshabillée*, and hurried from the room.

She immediately encountered a fierce and formidable Janissary.

It was Crabtree of course, but without his eye-patch she quite failed to recognise him and fell into a dead faint.

Reviving some while later, she found herself in an unfamiliar room. On the floor lay an enormous turban while nearby sat a stranger who resembled Nicolas-Jacques Conté, scanning the papers he had retrieved from her bosom[15].

Only a few pages held his attention: foremost was the fleet order mentioned earlier. Saving the envelope, he tossed the order into a nearby brazier of the type popular in Hollywood movies, despite the climate.

There were several sheets, blank but for Napoléon's signature at the foot – he was, it seems in the habit of expediting the next day's dictation in the manner of a Roman Emperor.[16] Conté/Crabtree slipped these sheets into an inner pocket. To what use they were put is a matter for speculation, for nowhere is it recorded.

Among the treasures Pauline had purloined, the greatest was a letter to Admiral Brueys, commander of Napoléon's Fleet. In a few lines it described several reports of sightings of Nelson's flotilla, indicating that its arrival must be imminent. At the foot of the page was Bonaparte's signature, separated from the text by an inviting expanse of blank paper.

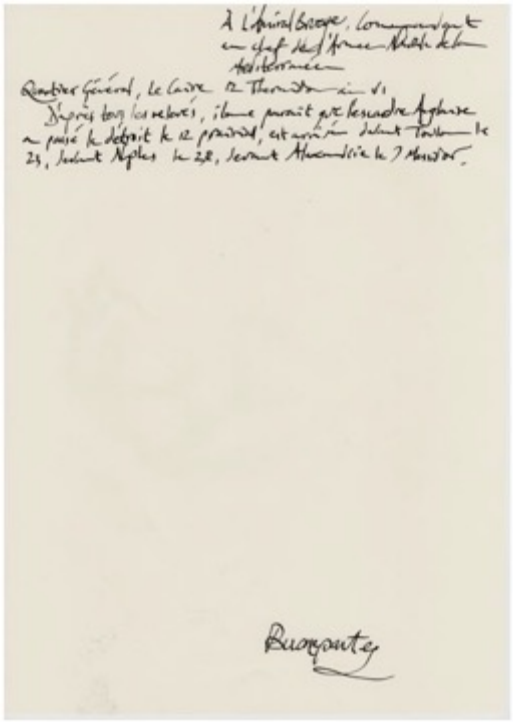

Figure 18: Letter to Brueys, 30 July 1798

Crabtree was, as is well known, a skilled forger, and in a fair facsimile of both Junot's hurried hand and Napoléon's Corsican dialect, filled the page with instructions, here summarised:

1. *Les Anglaises* will surely attack from the East, to avoid the rocks in the West part.
2. Draw your ships into line of battle, parallel to the shore, taking care to avoid the rocks.
3. Let every ship be tied with the heaviest ropes to his neighbours, before and behind, to fix your batteries on the enemy.

[15] The qualities of which are delineated in a Letter to Général Berthier, Chef de l'État-Major Général de L'Armée d'Orient, 21 Messidor an VI (9 July, 1798)
[16] Cf C. Suetonius Tranquilius, Life of Domitian, VIII

4. Let the guns facing the enemy be greatly prepared, and waste nothing on those facing the land, but let those be secured.
5. Let every captain send men ashore to forage for provisions, for the Army can spare none, and send many armed men to guard them, because the brigands.

Scholars with even rudimentary knowledge of naval warfare will at once see the foolhardiness of these orders, but as Crabtree knew well, while Napoléon was a master of field artillery, his familiarity with marine operations was under-developed.

He knew too, that while his subordinates might chafe at Napoléon's orders, they would carry them out to the very letter.

I now, in proper Crabtree tradition, digress.

Figure 19: Sidney Smith at Acre, wearing the Svärdsorden

It was at this moment that the friendship between Crabtree and an extraordinarily daring young Royal Navy Captain named Sidney Smith is revealed to history. I shrink from the word *swashbuckling* in serious company, but in his astonishing career Smith left no swash unbuckled.

Sidney Smith gained his first command at nineteen, serving against the Yankees. When peace broke out he was put ashore on half-pay – this suited him little and he travelled in Spain, Morocco and France in the mid-1780s, observing, among other things, the building of shipyards at Cherbourg. These observations, communicated to Prime Minister Pitt, had doubtless passed through Crabtree's hands in

circumstances explored elsewhere[17]. This was the moment at which Smith came to Crabtree's notice.

As well as these exploits, Smith's career included service for Sweden against Russia in 1790, under King Gustav II, who made him a Commander Grand Cross of the *Svärdsorden*.

In 1793 he fought with the Turks against Revolutionary France, even recruiting Ottoman sailors to support Admiral Hood's occupation of Toulon, coming under fire from artillery directed by young Napoléon himself.

Forced to withdraw, Smith illuminated the retreat by setting fire to every French vessel he could reach, destroying more of the Revolution's shipping than had, up to that point, Nelson and Collingwood together.

Naturally, both chided him for not having destroyed more.

Smith later occupied islands off the Normandy coast, setting up garrisons of marines and Royal Engineers and blockading le Havre. There, he was captured making a commando-style raid on the harbour, imprisoned and taken to Paris, to answer charges of arson arising from his exploits at Toulon.

I dwell on Smith's career because it is irresistibly remarkable, and also because it is incontrovertibly implausible that he and Crabtree, to whom sensational events were as a candle is to a moth, could long remain unacquainted.

Sure enough, while awaiting trial in Paris, Smith met Crabtree, had his portrait done and eventually escaped, returning to England with copious intelligence and an introduction from Crabtree, which he took straight to Pitt.

The Prime Minister, his opinion of Smith fortified by Crabtree's recommendation[18] and reinforced by Smith's familiarity with the customs and language of the Ottomans, sent him at once to Naples with instructions to the Ambassador, Sir William Hamilton, to furnish Smith with a diplomatic mission, a ship and funds to recruit irregular forces.

[17] In a Crabtree Oration that I can no longer find. My apologies.
[18] Evidently this was in one of the periods when Crabtree and Pitt were on civil terms with each other.

Smith arrived in the Eastern Mediterranean in mid-July 1798, commanding the 80-gun *HMS Tigre,* a captured French man-o-war, towing a borrowed felucca, the lateen-sailed vessel ubiquitous in the region since Ptolemaic times. He sent the felucca into one of the Nile's many lesser mouths, with a crew of loyal and well-trained spies.

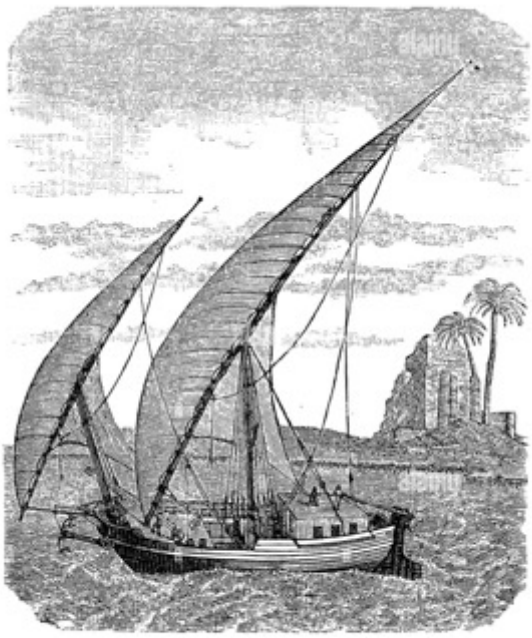

Figure 20: An Egyptian Felucca

Smith then set sail for Constantinople, where his brother was Minister Plenipotentiary to the *Sublime Porte.*

Among those he had put ashore was a certain Lieutenant Hawke, second-eldest son of Admiral Edward Hawke, who had been First Lord of the Admiralty. Keen scholars will remember the elder Hawke as Long John Silver's sometime commander; the even keener may recall him as a buck-toothed midshipman serving under the infamous Roxana Malaventura.

But I digress.

It is common knowledge that the Nile empties into the sea through seven mouths – in Crabtree's day a schoolboy risked a caning who couldn't name them all in order from West to East[19]. In reality, the Nile spreads into a vast and boggy delta with a thousand curling streams, few of which lie in the same bed two years running. It was among the papyrus

Figure 21: Napoléon's Egyptian Campaign

[19] They are, should anyone ask, Canopic, Bolbitic, Sebennyitic, Phatnic, Mendesian, Tanitic and Pelusiac

reeds in one of these that Smith's Felucca was moored.

At this point, the narrative may resume.

Having seen Mme Fourés safely to her billet, Crabtree took to horse and sped Northwards. Passing through the town of Rasdhid (which the French, inexplicably, called Rosetta) he easily evaded a military patrol, whose members were more intent on looting antiquities than intercepting spies.

With the advantage of being born 250 years before SatNav, Crabtree found his way by star and compass unerringly to the reed-shrouded encampment of Smith's irregulars.

Identifying Hawke as the most fluent speaker of French, Crabtree placed an envelope in his hands, bade him impersonate a French courier and carry it to Commodore Brueys at Aboukir Bay with all haste.

Afterwards, Hawke was to sail towards the busy sea-lanes between Cyprus and Crete, where he was most likely to encounter a Royal Navy patrol.

Hawke was to inform the first British Officer he met that the French fleet was at Aboukir bay, not Alexandria, and to attack from the West, were there would be sufficient sea-room for an intrepid commander to pass between the French vanguard and the rocks, entering what is known in modern military jargon as a 'target-rich-environment'.

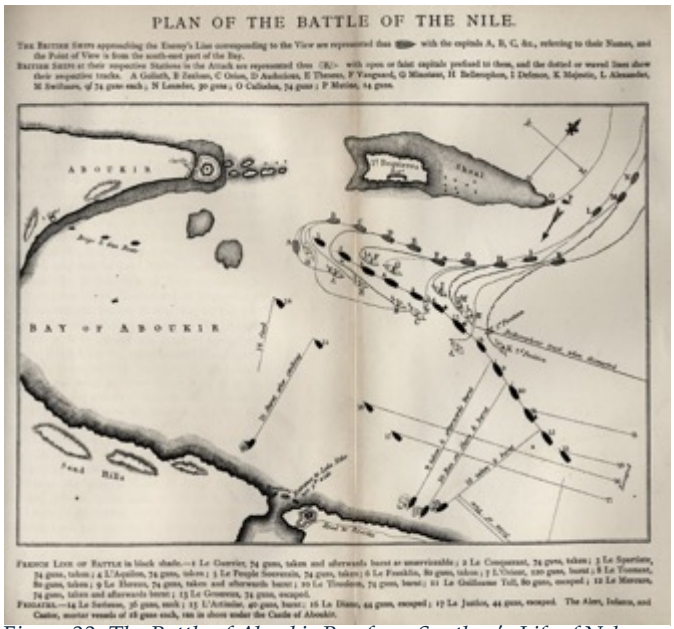

Figure 22: The Battle of Aboukir Bay from Southey's Life of Nelson

Whether Hawke succeeded in delivering either the false orders to the French or the vital advice to the British, history does not record.

What history *does* record is that is that Nelson *did* find the French at Aboukir Bay, that the French *were* anchored, *were* lashed fore and aft and under-manned.

History also records that half a dozen British men-o-war, led by HMS *Goliath* under Captain Thomas

Foley,[20] intrepidly rounded the rocks and assaulted the shoreward side of the French line, delivering withering broadsides to her under-manned and under-gunned port sides, inflicting decisive damage.

They did so in defiance of Nelson's orders, suggesting that it was they, not Nelson, who had received Crabtree's message. Nelson deprived Foley and his fellows of due credit for the victory. He had, some scholars will recall, declared on the eve of battle that it would take him to Westminster[21] – either to a seat in the Lords or a grave in the Abbey, and Nelson was a man not easily thwarted.

The triumph was, of course, spectacular, made all the more so by the detonation of *L'Orient* at ten o'clock in the evening, bringing the event to a close.

Figure 23: L'Orient explodes, with the loss of all hands.

Crabtree made one mistake. Having, disguised as Conté, sent Junot to fetch cash, but failing to be present to receive it, aroused suspicion, suspicion that was inflamed by the discovery of a discarded turban, gigantic pantaloons and an eye-patch.

The consequences of the missing papers are nowhere recorded, and Madame Fourés disappears from history at this moment.

[20] *Goliath* suffered heavy damage, both from shore batteries and the guns of *Guerrier*, among others. Foley was distinguished in the action, engaging four of the enemy.
[21] It is one of history's pleasant ironies that Nelson's remains lie not in Westminster but St Pauls. I thank Elder Burleigh for this enlightenment.

An investigation was ordered, and in charge of it was the not-yet-but-soon-to-be-infamous Joseph Fouché, the original Minister of Police. This formidable spymaster, despite his aristocratic origin, seemed to emerge stronger after each revolutionary purge than he had been before it.

Figure 24: Joseph Fouché, duc D'Otrante

Crabtree's efforts to elude Fouché make it impossible for later Scholars to uncover Our Hero's movements after Aboukir Bay, and though even Fouché never caught Crabtree, it is clear that he identified him, for Napoléon, as is the habit of the tyrant, used deprecating nicknames when referring to the man who, essentially, thwarted his plan to conquer the Near East. He wrote often of *Mela Putrida* in Corsican, and *La Pomme Pourrie* in French – each meaning 'Rotten Apple'.

In a sorrowful letter to Joséphine he laments the agony caused by *l'arbre des crustaces* – 'the tree of crustaceans' and though generations of historians have assumed a venereal infestation, I venture to suggest it is his epithet for Crabtree.

It is self-evident that Crabtree's departure from Cairo was hasty, obliging him to abandon various personal items, including a notebook in which he had transcribed a few hieroglyphs. Years later, working from memory, he was able to provide Thomas Young with clues to decipher the cartouche of Ptolemy, which he published (anonymously, at Crabtree's insistence) as a supplement to *The Encyclopædia Britannica* in 1819.

It is incontrovertibly possible that Crabtree's notebook was in the hands of Jean François Champollion when, building on Young's work, he successfully read the cartouche of Cleopatra. This enabled him, with the connivance of the *Academie Française*, to take credit for deciphering the Rosetta Stone.

But again I digress – for the last time, I assure you.

Crabtree's movements, as I said, are uncertain in this period, but diligent study has revealed certain clues.

In a Letter dated 13th May 1799, Abu Bekr, the Pasha of Cairo, informed Napoléon of the escape of a spy from his dungeon. Details are scant, but the fugitive was referred to, inexplicably, as *Tu fais bah rien,* which in English means 'you do bugger all.'

It is incontrovertibly possible that this seemingly meaningless phrase is a French soldier's attempt to pronounce

Tufaah bari-y-un تفاح بري

Which is Arabic for the crab-apple.

What use Crabtree made of those blank sheets with Bonaparte's signature at their foot, no-one knows, nor, indeed, how many sheets there were, but further study may shed light on other mysteries;

- ◊ When artillery was sent to the siege of Acre in 1799, why did the order, signed by Napoléon, command marine transport when Britannia ruled the waves, enabling Smith to capture the guns and use them against the French?
- ◊ How did Tsar Alexander learn that Napoléon intended to marry his sister before the Peace of Tilsit[22] in 1807?
- ◊ Why did Victor de Fay attack the same hill three times at Talavera in 1809, losing an entire corps of infantry to Wellington?
- ◊ On what orders did Marmont send battalion after battalion to be slaughtered by Portuguese dragoons at Salamanca in 1812?

And the big one:

- ◊ Why did Grouchy march for half a day in the wrong direction at Waterloo in 1815? With all respect to Elder Breen, this may not have been because the buttons on their tunics failed to fit their buttonholes[23].

[22] The Peace of Tilsit was not an item on a cheese platter, that would be a piece of Tilsit. Tilsit (now Slovetsk) is a town in Russia, and the Peace was a short-lived treaty between Prussians, Russians and the French

[23] Cf *Joseph Crabtree, the Military Dimension,* Dr Bill Breen, Crabtree Oration, 1998

Finally, at Longwood, the faux farmhouse built for Napoléon on St Helena, an orchard was planted, ironically perhaps, or maliciously, more likely, with crab-apple trees.

Napoléon uprooted them all with his bare hands.

L'histoire est une suite de mensonges sur lesquels on est d'accord