



## CORSICAN SPRING

By JAMES C. ARCHIBALD

*Drawings by the Author.*

It was in March 1962. We had arrived in Porto the previous night, after a bone-shaking journey on an ancient bus from Ajaccio. As we had lurched along Corsica's tortuous coast, darkness had fallen and torrential rain lashed against the windscreen. We had not arranged any accommodation in the village and the journey had taken far longer than we had estimated. To complete our misery the driver had just informed us that the bus, instead of descending to the part of Porto by the sea where the few hotels clustered, turned eastwards into the hills to the village of Ota. At the time, the prospect of spending a night in the pouring rain seemed just as likely and just as objectionable as carrying our all too bulky load of baggage about two miles and searching for some refuge in the pitch blackness of the night. However, just as our driver had been one of the primary instigators of our concern, he became our saviour (not, I suspect, without premeditation). His

brother-in-law, he said, owned a hotel just outside Porto, and we might just be lucky enough to find that he had a couple of rooms to spare. So it was that we came to stay in the simple and charming Hotel du Pont, as delightful a place as one could hope to find on this most delightful of islands.

As the morning sun cast oblique bars of light through the shutters, I rose. Before me, across the valley of the River Porto, the mountains soared upwards; at their feet covered the red-roofed houses of the village and away to my left the blue haze of the Mediterranean shimmered. It was not until I had breakfasted that I discovered La Pianetta, her pink granite witch-fingers stretching up to the 4,240 ft. vertical heights of the Capo d'Orto, towering behind the inn. After crossing to the village to purchase our lunch, we set

off with a new, warm loaf from the dark sweet-smelling bakery, where we had picked our way among the family sprawling about the floor to buy salami, cheese, and Corsican oranges from the "alimentation."

Following the course of the stream which tumbled down beside the inn, we made our way up into a sort of steep-sided cirque, lying on the north-facing flank of La Pianetta. The lower slopes were lightly wooded with Spanish Chestnuts sheltering a dense *maquis* of *Cytisus triflorus* and other shrubs. All around grew thousands of *Cyclamen repandum*, their myriad flowers clustering among tiny ferns and mosses. The tubers lay very deeply in the stony leaf-mould. As we climbed upwards, my natural fascination for aroids was stimulated by a charming little fellow, who proved to be a form of the very polymorphic *Arisarum vulgare*. Above the arrow-



*Cyclamen repandum*

head leaves of translucent bright-green (sometimes faintly marked with cream) rose the waxen spathes, regency-striped in cream and green or mahogany, each with a sad proboscis drooping out. I later found this little Pagliacci growing in profusion, always in deep crevices, but the fact that *A. vulgare* is a common plant throughout the Mediterranean area in no way tempered my delight at meeting this particular form. (Illustration p. 209.)

Down in a glade by the stream, an ancient *Prunus avium* wore a trousseau of white, with golden-green hellebores as bridesmaids; nearby, beneath an equally venerable chestnut, a colony of *Romuleas* grew in the hard clay. Their seeds were ripening well but, brushing away dry leaves, I found two corms still with abortive flowers—so tiny as to be worthless to most gardeners—but how exquisite was their intricacy of shading in white, mauve and deep-yellow, pencilled with violet and green! The specimens are too minute to give them a definite name but I feel that they are of the Corsican endemic *R. columnae* var. *modesta*.

As our path became progressively more vague, we abandoned the rucksacks and struggled up through the maquis of the steep, rough slope on an unremunerative search, seeing only the evanescent, crumpled-satin flowers of *Cistus albidus*, sheltering their hearts of red-gold stamens amid rose petals. From the hillside we looked across to the cliffs on the south-east facing side of the valley, where we found ourselves three days later ripping our way through the all but impenetrable *maquis*, where brambles and thorny scrub snatched at our clothing and tore our hands and faces, up to the boulder-strewn slopes below the cliffs. There, *Cyclamen neapolitanum* grew in leafmould between the lower rocks, happiest in deep shade, and on the huge boulders themselves, some as large as cottages, several species of *Sedum* filled the shallowest of depressions, with *Polypodium vulgare*. We skipped from boulder to boulder, trying to ignore the awesome darkness of the spaces between them, to the cliffs, where a remarkable and isolated plant of *Rosmarinus prostratus* draped thirty feet of pink granite with pendant cobwebs of pure blue, rooting down the crevices and spreading out over the ground.

However, it was now time to return. A dense, dry *Cytisus* clump sheltered the flat, soft-green rosettes of an *Ophrys* sp., very probably *O. exaltata*, but I left the two lonely plants in their wild and inaccessible home. Janette's discovery of the spotted leaves of another orchid delayed us further, and a multitude of plants were eventually run down growing in rich, leafy clay. It was almost certainly *Neotinea intacta*, that interesting pinkish-flowered orchid

also occurring in the Burren in Eire, but losing its spots on its way north. We hurried down to our inn, in the Corsican twilight, to an unpretentious but excellent dinner and a carafe of exquisite Corsican *vin rosé*.

Throughout our climb up La Pianetta, *Helleborus argutifolius* had accompanied us, a gawky six feet in the maquis or a compact and floriferous three feet in the open turf of a hill-pasture, where it rejoiced in the heavy clay, well manured by the cattle, seeking cool, moist root-runs at the bases of boulders and producing hundreds of its chartreuse-green salvers. Descending into the estuary of the River Porto the next day, I found a wonderful specimen of another choice garden-plant. *Euphorbia wulfenii* grew there in the warm, humus-rich sand to a height of almost eight feet, and massed its pillars of yellow-green bracts above its glaucous leaves. I had had high hopes that the scrub-covered estuary would yield some interesting species but the morning was uneventful, and only the deep-green leaves of the autumn-flowering *Arum pictum* were discovered, in moist sand beneath *Arbutus unedo*. It was already late afternoon when we had made the long detour back on to the main road further south, the richer only by a few sundry orchids.

Ota lies up in the hills above the Golfe de Porto. We had intended to spend a full day walking up beyond the village, but in spite of an early rise it was mid-day before we started on the road. That morning I had found *Pancratium illyricum* just pushing up, like a gargantuan daffodil, and some brilliant forms of *Cyclamen repandum*; there were the Romuleas that filled a yard-long pocket on a granite slab with their grass, the many interesting little bulbs without flowers that invited so much speculation and, as always, the orchids; but we had quite forgotten that the village went to sleep from noon until two o'clock and that the shops closed, so we had to make for Ota with empty stomachs. Plant-hunting is hungry work and the little morsel of very dry bread from the day before was singularly ineffective. The plants we found that day did little more to distract our minds. The sight of so many wild Arums, Asphodels, Euphorbias and budding Serapias had palled, but *Cistus salvifolius* could not have been more lovely as we watched the tawny bees clambering over the great white blooms, and there was the unexpected excitement of tracing Romulea leaves down from their usual shady crevices into the gravel at the base of the rocks and thence to the road edge, where they waxed fat in the warm sand, pushing their leaves through the tar. This disconcerting discovery has not yet persuaded me to surface my pots of Romuleas with tarmac in a final attempt to induce them to flower.

It was a Sunday when we left Porto for Calvi. The "patron"

was away and his wife and little daughter waved us off after the inevitable, prolonged handshakings. In absolute contrast, our new accommodation was in an overwhelmingly efficient establishment, geared for the summer influx of bed-and-breakfasters, and run by a high-powered and meticulous Frenchwoman.

West of Calvi, the Pointe de Revellata pushes out into the sea, a lighthouse marking its end. We made our way along the coast towards it. On the cliffs down by the sea, *Senecio crassifolius* grew in a very compact form, quite unlike the tall, weedy groundsel which represents it elsewhere. The ample golden suns, with well-developed ray florets, lay on the clusters of fat, shiny leaves, beetroot-red on the reverse. This ability to produce "alpines" at sea-level is a characteristic property of Corsica, and later I shall tell of yet more lovely developments. A few paces inland, in dry, gravelly areas, *Genista lobelii* formed its low, spiny, hoary-grey hummocks, covered with golden flowers, an excellent dwarf shrub almost unknown in gardens. I had been concentrating all too fully on the low scrub on either side of our path, seeing the occasional leaves of *Serapias lingua* but little else, when a shout from Janette behind me brought me to an abrupt halt.

"It's a *Romulea* isn't it?" And so it was, sitting right in the middle of the path in iron-hard clay, its little goblet of intense Tyrian purple opened flat in the morning sun to the size of a florin, showing its golden anthers and infinitely more lovely than any crocus. Almost certainly *R. requienii* (illustration p. 204) the commonest Corsican species, it was a delightful discovery as our trip had been mainly to find as many as possible of these little-known corms, endemics, in which the island is especially rich, and, although we came on several distinct species in profusion, this was the only time we saw one in full flower.

After lunching on a grassy knoll of outcropping marble and partially metamorphosed limestone, we found more *Romuleas*, a little *Allium* and another bulb, probably *Hyacinthus pouzolzii* (*fastigiatus*), none of which was showing any signs of flowering. Most interesting, but most tantalizing to the gardener, were the shoots of that spectacular parasite, *Cytinus hypocistus*, moulded from translucent wax in brilliant scarlet, orange or chrome-yellow, and sucking their nourishment from the roots of *Cistus monspeliensis*. Among the maquis of *Cistus* lived another interesting, though hardly garden-worthy plant, *Thymelaea hirsuta*, a strange relative of the *Daphnes*. Its whipcord wands, tightly covered in little, closely imbricated, olive-green leaves with minute yellow flowers peeping out, waved in the wind.

It was quite sheltered in the lea of the peninsula. But high on the western cliffs, where the thirsty gale drew off all vestiges of moisture from the bare rock and gravel, *Erodium corsicum* lived, snug in the rock crevices and wrapping its leaves in flannel. Only a very few flowers had been rash enough to appear, but the variation in colour from pallid mauve and pink to rose was evident. We wished them luck and departed, cut to the bone by the icy wind and shivering.

In less exposed places around the base of the promontory a multitude of fine plants live. From the blue acres of *Rosmarinus officinalis* in the sandy soil, we could have selected numerous forms, which would all be deemed worthy of clonal names if they occurred in gardens. We found shady pockets filled with the distinct, pearly bulbs of *Leucoium roseum*, growing in a soil almost entirely composed of ancient rabbit droppings and sharing its home with the bulb-mats of a dark-leaved *Allium* and of *Romuleas*. It would be a privilege to visit the snowflake in October, when the pendant, pink flowers had pushed up after the autumn rain. The squelching, stony clay of one wet hollow harboured at least two distinct bulbs, a *Romulea* and a *Serapias*, all mixed together in liberal quantities but none showing the least trace of bud or seed-capsule.

At last we pulled ourselves away from so many distractions, too tired and hungry to absorb any more, and struggled up a steep hillside to join the road into Calvi. A lone flower of *Crocus minimus* caused us to search about for crocus leaves, but we could not distinguish any in the gloom and gave up lest we lost our way. Soon we were striding down to Calvi to dine "Chez Françoise", where Françoise would serve us with her family in the back-room. The *omelette épinard* was most commendable. (The intending visitor should not confuse this modest place with "Chez François", where tourists can sample *langoustes*, *charcuterie corse* and *pâté de merles* at tourist prices.)

Next day we took the road from Calvi to I'lle Rousse between whispering banks of *Tamarix gallica* and ditches frothing white with the elegantly beautiful (but often cruelly rejected) *Allium triquetrum*. *Orchis morio* grew in a lush meadow in seemingly unlimited numbers, with *Muscari comosum*, that ubiquitous bulb found in every conceivable situation about the island. I spent far too long searching among the orchids for fine forms while Janette dutifully photographed the results. I was amply rewarded by a robust albino with flowers of solid white veined in jade-green. But they were all magnificent and certainly not the usual inferior Mediterranean *ssp. picta*. In drier, open meadows, *Salvia clandestina* lay near the turf. Its erect stems, clad with pale-blue flowers, rose above the close clumps of wrinkled leaves to but six inches or

so. I despise the "lumpers" who have tried to place it as a variety of the big, dingy *S. verbenaca*. Beneath scattered trees of *Pinus pinea*, *Erica arborea* was heavy with ash-white blossom, and heady with honeyed scent. *Narcissus tazetta* pushed its white and yellow clusters from among close-knit scrub, and great clumps of *Ferula communis* lay like piles of bright-green soap-suds by the ditches.

About two and a half miles from Calvi this road divides and a branch leads off to the wild Cirque de Bonifato, ten miles to the south. Our attempts to hire transport to take us there had been frustrated by the fact that insurance was arranged in Marseilles, which took four days at the best of times, so we just had to go as far as we could on foot. *Asphodelus cerasiferus* grew profusely, and I saw some poor forms of *Orchis papilionacea* among the *maquis*. A single *O. tridentata* prompted me to descend a bank in search of more, when a great mass of white daisies caught my eye.

Among the daisies and here and there along the grassy slope was the exquisite, tiny *Ornithogalum exscapum* (illustration p. 210), pure-white and delicately-veined in green-grey, all but stemless and with only a few thready leaves flat on the ground. The colony was a large one and the situation very damp, although no doubt it would dry out completely later. As well as the daisies, a few *Romuleas* and a weird little cryptogam, an *Isoetes* sp., kept them company. Nearby, the tiny crimson leaves of the annual *Sedum coeruleum* lay on massive granite slabs, attractive even without their powdering of blue flowers.

Our progress that afternoon was delayed by two passing gendarmes who had thought our interest in what they considered "ail sauvage" somewhat curious. Simenon's descriptions of rural policemen seemed peculiarly accurate but soon "cigarettes provençales", going under the appropriate name of "Mistral", were being offered to us, and one of them danced off into the *maquis* to return with a sprig of myrtle, certainly a greater find than any *Ornithogalum*.

We rose at 5 a.m. to catch the train to Bastia and, while the journey was made with un-Corsican rapidity, the driver did manage to provide a minor excitement by running into a cow asleep in a tunnel. Much building was in progress on the road north from Bastia towards Cap Corse, and it was some time before we were out of the town and climbing up to Pietranera, a sun-warm village where white arum lilies grew against mellowed walls. "Bonjour monsieur, 'dame!", the children shouted as we passed and we returned their greeting. Gentian-blue *Borago officinalis* and a thistle, *Silybum marianum*, brightened the dry roadside. On the north and east-facing slopes, in the leafy soils of woods and among tall grasses,

*Anemone hortensis* quivered incessantly in the imperceptible breeze : ballerinas in pinks, mauves and moonlit blue and some black-eyed gypsies in daring magenta. These fragile nymphs have been seduced by the dashing *A. coronaria* and *A. fulgens*, clad in Ruritanian scarlet, and their progeny are displayed, tied up in bunches, in the windows of our florists' shops. Despite its name, the species itself has nothing at all to do with gardens (except that it should be seen in more of them), and its invalid synonym *A. stellata* is more appropriate.

It was warm when we paused for lunch beneath an old cork oak. *Quercus suber* is fairly abundant around Bastia and the bales of bark could be seen stacked in a yard outside the town. In rock-crevices beneath the tree were the brilliant azure flowers of *Anagallis linifolia philipsii*. *Orchis papilionacea* soon appeared among the Cistus, worthy of its name but more beautiful than any butterfly's wing in the solid texture of its lip and the bold intricacy of its veining. It is quite variable, though invariably lovely, and the most splendid forms I found under a gnarled olive-tree on a long-neglected, terraced field.

As we neared Acqualta, perched up in the hills, the grassy tufts of a Dianthus, which could only have been *D. caryophyllus* ssp. *siculus*, appeared in tight fissures on granite cliffs. *Orchis provincialis* was quite numerous, mostly in shades of raspberry and lemon. This pleasant species with attractively spotted leaves varies much in Corsica, and some botanists have tried to stick names on the many intergrading colour forms. Just below the village, among long grass, I found the blue-black heads of *Muscari racemosum*, which is none too common on the island.

The goats were being driven home for the night and it was time for us to return, taking a short-cut back over the overgrown terraces. It was sad to see them—once tended with so much sweat and pain—in such a state, but now the men find more remunerative and less trying work in the industries of Bastia. A tall blue lupin grew on them, and in one place many square yards were covered by a fine, deep-blue form of *Vinca minor*.

It was a Sunday when we took the bus to Erbalunga and walked north. It was very hot, and by the time we had stopped for lunch I had only found a few *Ophrys sphegodes* and a *Gladiolus* sp., pushing through in an uncultivated field. We persuaded ourselves that things did not look like improving, that it was a Sunday and that we owed ourselves a holiday anyway, so we lay in the sun and looked out across the hazy sea. This pleasant state ended by our going off in opposite directions in search of something interesting.



I climbed down to a boulder-filled stream, coming across nothing but the largest grass snake I had ever seen, whipping swiftly away. When I clambered back, torn by scrub and sticky with sweat and dirt, Janette produced a flower of a *Polygala* like a tiny fringed butterfly in sugar-pink. It seemed likely to be *P. nicaensis* forma *corsica* but, though we searched relentlessly among the *maquis* where she had found it, I never saw the lovely thing growing.

We were back too early for the bus so walked up the track to the convent. Some girls passed us clutching carmine bunches of *Cyclamen*. The Corsicans delight in all things Corsican and the *Cyclamen* are almost *plus Corse que les Corses*. *Serapias lingua* grew among the *Cistus*, and a dry-stone wall harboured *Ceterach officinarum* and a few woolly masses of *Notholaena vellaea* but both were sadly dried-up. In the evening light, Castello, up in the hills before us, seemed enchanted, but we broke the spell and hurried down to the bus.

Although it is the island's capital, Ajaccio is smaller, much less industrial and far more Corsican than Bastia. It had taken us just over three hours to cover the hundred miles of narrow-gauge line winding through the island's mountains. Rattling by Corte, Vizzavona and Bocognano, I had gazed at the great, rugged peaks towering around, but April was not the month to scale the ancient crags in search of their many rare treasures, for they were still white with snow and spring would not come to them for many weeks. As the forests of *Pinus nigra* skirting 7,800 ft. Monte d'Oro flashed past, I thought of *Helichrysum frigidum* in the highest crevices and how *Crocus corsicus* would soon be fringing the patches of melting snow with mauve. I knew that one day I must return to them when they were in a more friendly mood.

Back in the warm, spring sunshine, we restricted our searches to the area between Ajaccio and the Pointe de la Parata, seven and a half miles to the west. We were well past the Chapelle des Grecs before anything of interest appeared. Along the road *Senecio cineraria* formed great feathery bushes of white, and in some dry, gravelly places *Lupinus pilosus* var. *cosentinii* occurred. What a very lovely plant it was: silver rosettes clinging tightly to the ground and stocky, three-inch spikes of bright blue, soft, woolly and altogether compact. How sad that it is only annual, or at most biennial, and so damned by the alpine gardener who would most appreciate it. In the wet turf of a maritime meadow, right down by the sea, I found two species of *Romulea* in very large numbers. We spent a couple of hours crawling on hands and knees to collect the well-matured seed capsules but I found two of the more robust one still

only in bud. Dissection later revealed them to be possibly of a pale violet with a yellow tube and throat and I named it, non-committally, *R. jordanii*, in spite of the greenish exterior, though I am now inclined to call it *R. rollii* (and quite prepared to have it end up as a form of *R. bulbocodium*). Such is the state of the nomenclature of these little corms. The few Eastern Mediterranean ones are not so confusing, the South Africans seem fairly intelligible, but of those from S. Spain, N.W. Africa, Corsica and Sardinia the less said the better.

A cool, ice-blue *Vinca minor* grew beneath some shrubs, and the plant we call *Iris germanica*, which has the most extraordinary distribution based on garden escapes, was hanging out its purple flags and *Asphodelus cerasiferus*, the commonest Corsican species, spired up in flesh pink. But the real glories of the district were the

*Serapias* spp. The dry south-facing slopes were covered with a *maquis* of golden *Genista* and *Cytisus*, *Cistus monspeliensis*, small, white flowers almost hiding its dark, sticky leaves, and *Lavandula stoechas*, gorgeous in deep purples and reddish violet. Occasional trees of *Pinus pinea* were dotted about, and among all this grew a profusion of *Serapias*, to my mind the most spectacular of the Mediterranean tuberous orchids.

*Serapias lingua*, the most numerous and least splendid there, varied from pink to deep crimson, as well as pale-yellow and white. Rather less frequent was *S. cordigera*, which never departed from its lip of dark crimson velvet, and rarest of all and most beautiful was *S. neglecta* (illustration p. 227), short-stemmed and with huge flowers of buff and brick-orange. All these were surpassed in sumptuousness by a colony of natural hybrids between *S. cordigera* and *S. neglecta*, in shades of apricot-orange, scarlet and ruby, as varied as a Corsican sunset.



*Orchis papilionacea*

One might imagine that any further discoveries might prove an anticlimax, but such was far from the case. We should not have reached the furthest tip of the Pointe de la Parata had not our flight to Nice been cancelled. It was catastrophic. Our complex chain of bookings was disrupted but we gained an extra day. So we accepted the situation philosophically and, having discovered that a summer bus service had started, saved ourselves a fifteen-mile hike and spent a very full three hours on the cliffs.

The Iles Sanguinaires (illus. p. 210) string out to sea from the point. They were hardly sanguinary and more of a dour grey when we saw them. Like the adjacent headland, they are of diorite, a very hard rock which would pass for pink granite with the uninitiated, and offer a good example of differential marine erosion, the surrounding softer granite having been worn away. The islands and the point share several interesting plants.

*Clematis cirrhosa* grows among the rocks, and we came on *Helicodicerus muscivorus*, a rare aroid whose fascinating spathes would not appear until May. It was a surprise to see the scented white bunches of *Narcissus tazetta* in this draughty place, and all about them grew a little *Silene* in palest pink and varying to deeper rose.

At last we found the plant we had long searched the shores for. *Matthiola tricuspidata* may seem a strange object for such searching, but in Corsica and Sardinia stemless forms occur and these are



*Serapias cordigera*



*Matthiola tricuspidata*

of wondrous beauty. Why this should happen is an insoluble puzzle because the other two members of the genus, growing within a few miles, *M. incana* and *M. sinuata*, are more or less as they are elsewhere. On these grim cliffs, sea-sprayed and windswept, it grows

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in heavy clay bound with flakes of diorite, a treacherous mixture which must move down towards the jagged rocks below after every rainstorm. The lobed, woolly-grey leaves huddle together in a crinkled mass and on them sit the large, mauve flowers, pure-coloured and crystalline-textured. Nobody could ever convince me that this form is either annual or biennial. There was far too much variation in the size of the plants and too many old leaves on the larger clumps, but I have no doubt that it is not very long-lived. Its tap-root made it impossible to transplant so it must be left to some summer tourist to collect some seed. The Parata is not wild Corsica. You can have a drink at a modern café before searching, but beware these steep unstable slopes, lest the *Matthiola* acquires as murderous a reputation as the *Edelweiss*.

The next morning, as we waited in Ajaccio's sunshine, we felt that the *Matthiola* had put a new complexion on our trip. We chatted with an old Corsican lady and it seemed as if all Corsica had come, in her, to say goodbye. She came from the fishing-village of Piana and spoke of her youth there when life was rough. Beneath her heavy, black shawl, her face was as lined as the island's mountains and as full of character, the very epitome of her nation. Intensely introversive like all island peoples, she spoke of things Corsican from *Cyclamen* to sheep cheeses and she confirmed what we had surmised for some time. The blackened *Serapias* leaves and all those bulbs without flowers were explained by the fact that hardly any rain had fallen during the winter and the cold, drying wind had blown with destructive regularity. The island had not made plant-hunting any too easy for us but we bore her no malice. How could we presume to do so when her own people, whom she has treated so harshly since time began, loved her so much. We then realised that we, too, had fallen in love with Corsica.

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