

"Humanizing the Corsican Ogre" Napoleon in the Memoirs of His Companions

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*"How many superior men are children oftener than once a day!"
Napoleon*

Over the last few years, historians have begun a greater examination into the exile of Napoleon Bonaparte to the island of St. Helena. Whether it is the theory of his poisoning with arsenic at the hands of his own general or the various plots to propel his escape, researchers have come to the correct conclusion that in order to completely capture and comprehend the life of Napoleon, it is imperative to understand the pertinence of his exile on St. Helena.

While in exile, Napoleon dictated numerous reflections upon his life and accomplishments which were recorded down in the memoirs and journals of those who shared his exile. Each memoir opens a different portal into the complex and sophisticated mind of the fallen Emperor. But when delving into these works during this important stage of his life, many historians gravitate to his reflections upon his military career, his Imperial reign, his struggle to remain relevant in events in Europe, or his ability to craft his history through the recordings of his generals. However, a deeper look into the memoirs of those around him reveals another side of the Emperor.

During Napoleon's six-year exile on the island of St. Helena, his identity and presence as an Emperor and master of the art of war comprised his character until the day life left his body. But, at the same time, a parallel persona surfaced more and more. What began to emerge beyond the realm of an Emperor were the emotions of a father, a husband, a grandfather-figure, a friend, a 'playmate' and, sadly enough, a prisoner.

When the conquest has been taken away from the conqueror, what is a general to do? When might and power are no longer within his grasp, what is a man of prominence to do to bide his time? When the empire is removed from the Emperor, who does he become? Napoleon Bonaparte had everything taken away from him upon his exile to St. Helena, including his wife and son. When everything that constitutes such an Imperial and militaristic individual is lost, there is only one thing left for him to become: human.

Describing Napoleon's humanity in context refers not only to the warm, caring, loving, and gentle aspects of his personality, but also to his temperament, his frustration, his anger, and, most of all, his agonizing struggle to cling to life as it slipped through his fingertips. This formidable man long sustained through control and command, was now faced with two forces he could not govern: time and death.

Numerous journal entries by Napoleon's generals, valets, secretaries, and others around him during his exile reveal his sense of humor, his love for children, his grief and depression over being separated from his wife and infant son, and even his revelations concerning his deep and eternal love for Josephine. Other entries paint in exquisite detail his anger and frustration at being considered a prisoner by England and, most of all, his hatred for the English appointed Governor of St. Helena, Sir Hudson Lowe.

Whatever Napoleon said to them, they made sure to make a record of it in their respected journals and diaries. Some entries Napoleon ordered recorded for posterity's sake. Others were captured for the purpose of documenting his thoughts and life for each author's own memories. These were spoken words by Napoleon overheard from conversations, from walking with him in the garden, or while even dressing and bathing him. Some even went to the lengths of recording the dreams and nightmares Napoleon experienced. From his most trusted valet Louis Marchand to Betsy Balcombe, the daughter of a local purveyor, the journals of those closest to Napoleon provide some of the most intimate thoughts and characteristics of the famous man.

The memoirs of Louis Marchand are invaluable in that he served as the personal valet to the Emperor. He was with Napoleon during Napoleon's least guarded moments, sometimes dressing and shaving him or even when cleaning the vomit from his face or changing his soiled bed sheets the final days before his death. Marchand witnessed Napoleon in his moments of loneliness and depression and during his bursts of laughter and humor. He listened as the Emperor longed for news of his wife and son, and shared in the despair when he was denied both of them. The young valet saw Napoleon explode in anger at being treated like a common prisoner and later held the hand of the mere man who was both an Emperor and a father figure as he struggled for each strenuous breath during his last days. This gave Marchand keen insight into the personal habits, characteristics, and emotions of Napoleon, and he was meticulous in capturing the words of his beloved Emperor.

Another particular memoir, that of Betsy Balcombe, was written during her later years as Mrs. Abell. It provides numerous accounts, stories, and tales of her humorous escapades with the Emperor when she was fourteen years old during his stay at their home on St. Helena and later at his permanent residence, Longwood. A sincere friendship emerged between the two. The playful, caring, and mischievous side of Napoleon enjoyed full reign in his interactions with the innocent, carefree, and non-judgmental young girl who was unbound by

imperial etiquette and military protocol. Betsy witnessed Napoleon in a state in which he threw aside all inhibitions and shared in the joys and laughter of a child. She did not perceive him as a fallen monarch, but rather as a playmate, someone to share with, to care about, and, sadly, to miss as well. Napoleon treated her like a treasured granddaughter. He cherished her for her company, her adolescent games, her impish smile, and her playful companionship. It is Betsy Balcombe's memoir that is mainly responsible for revealing the human side to Napoleon Bonaparte.

Betsy

In Betsy's writings, Napoleon is presented through the eyes of an adolescent teenager. In their first encounter, Napoleon abruptly quizzed her upon her knowledge of the capitals of the world. With each question, he raised his voice louder as if to intimidate her. When Napoleon boldly explained to her that it was he who had burned Moscow to the ground, she responded that it was the Russians who had burned the capital to rid the nation of the French.¹ One could only guess at the horror of Betsy's parents upon hearing these dauntless words from their daughter's mouth. The Emperor, on the other hand, burst into a fit of laughter that was as loud as it was violent. He pinched Betsy's nose in approval and asked her to show him the garden.²

Betsy was a young girl between childhood and womanhood. She was young enough to enjoy Napoleon's games, but old enough to laugh at his 'corniness.'³ She had been taught to fear the 'Corsican Ogre' since early childhood; he was "...a huge ogre or giant, with one large flaming red eye in

¹ Dame Mabel Brookes, *St. Helena Story* (New York 1961), 88. Dame Mabel Brookes was the great grand-niece of Betsy Balcombe. Ben Weider, *Assassination at St. Helena Revisited* (New York, 1995) 113.

² Mrs. Abell (Betsy Balcombe), *Recollections of the Emperor Napoleon at St. Helena* (London, 1844) 23-24; Brookes, 21-22; Ben Weider and David Hapgood, *Murder of Napoleon* (New York, 1982), 61-62.

³ Julia Blackburn, *The Emperor's Last Island* (New York, 1993) 41.

the middle of his forehead, and long teeth protruding from his mouth, with which he tore to pieces and devoured naughty little girls, especially those who did not know their lessons."⁴ But upon this first encounter, she recorded a different side to the Emperor:

He was deadly pale, and I thought his features, though cold and immovable, and somewhat stern, were exceedingly beautiful...When he began to speak, his fascinating smile and kind manner removed every vestige of the fear with which I had hitherto regarded him...The portraits of him, give a good general idea of his features; but his smile, and the expression of his eye, could not be transmitted to canvas, and these constitute Napoleon's chief charm. His hair was dark brown, and as fine and silky as a child's, rather too much so indeed for a man, as its very softness caused it to look thin. His teeth were even, but rather dark, and I afterwards found that this arose from his constant habit of eating liquorice, of which he always kept a supply in his waistcoat pocket.⁵

This was Napoleon through the eyes of a child. But, when recording her memoirs later in her life, Betsy precisely explains that she was careful not to tarnish the image of Napoleon with what some historians might characterize as 'childish' and 'demeaning tales' of the Emperor Napoleon. She found it important that, having been, "...thrown at a very early age into the society of Napoleon, and those who composed his suite, she consider[ed] it an almost imperative duty to communicate any fact or impression, which, though uninteresting in itself, may still be worth recording as relating to him."⁶

Within days, Betsy began to feel genuinely comfortable around the Emperor. She wrote that he was

so unaffectedly kind and amiable, that in a few days I felt perfectly at ease in his society, and looked upon him more as a companion of my own age, than as the mighty warrior at whose name "the world grew pale." His spirits were very good, and he was at times almost boyish in his love of

⁴ Abell, 12.

⁵ Ibid., 19-22.

⁶ Ibid., iii-v.

mirth and glee, not unmixed sometimes with a tinge of malice..."⁷

This ease that Betsy felt around the Emperor was something that he cherished. When it came to children, Napoleon was at ease himself. His playful and 'boyish' ways flowed directly from his heart and he wanted the children to be just as open with him. Napoleon often commented on how the heart, mind, and stomach of a child was always pure and honest. It was these aspects of Napoleon's character that led him to encourage Betsy to tease him back. Thus, Betsy would throw aside her strict British etiquette and engage in this play as well. Age, rank, and stature mattered none when it came to this innocent, kind, and jovial relationship. He gave her permission to interrupt him at anytime of the day, no matter what he was doing, to which she gladly put into practice.⁸

Even Betsy herself was amazed at the humor and playfulness of Napoleon.

I never met with anyone who bore childish liberties so well as Napoleon. He seemed to enter into every sort of mirth of fun with the glee of a child, and though I have often tried his patience severely, I never knew him to lose his temper or fall back upon his rank or age, to shield himself from the consequences of his own familiarity, or of his indulgence to me...my own resolutions to treat him with more respect and formality, were put to flight the moment I came within the influence of his arch smile and laugh. If I approached him more gravely than usual, and with a more sedate step and subdued tone, he would, perhaps, begin by saying, "Eh, bien, qu'as tu, Mademoiselle Betsee? Has le petit Las Cases proven inconstant? If he have, - bring him to me?" or some other playful speech, which either pleased or teased me, and made me at once forget all my previous determinations to behave prettily."⁹

Out of this informal nature of their relationship, Betsy's nickname for the Emperor was borne. It was used by many English children, but Napoleon had never heard it until Betsy's little brother, Alexander,

⁷ Ibid., 30.

⁸ Blackburn, 62-63.

⁹ Abell, 39-40.

was playing on the Emperor's lap with a deck of cards. Alexander took one of them that pictured a king, placed it directly in front of the Emperor's face and said, "See, Bony, this is you." Betsy explained that this was an abbreviation for 'Bonaparte.' But Las Cases, the Emperor's secretary, interpreted the word literally, and Napoleon laughed and exclaimed that he was far from being 'bony.' Nevertheless, 'Bony' was the name Betsy used from then on, and the Emperor loved it.¹⁰

In her memoirs, Betsy enjoyed discussing how Napoleon would sing in front of her because he knew it made her laugh. A friend of the Balcombe family often visited and Napoleon would ask her to sing. When she left, the Emperor would disparage her horrible singing and ask Betsy to imitate her. When she would, he pretended to give her the same compliments and then burst into laughter.¹¹ Ironically, Betsy described Napoleon's singing as the "...most unmusical, nor do I think he had any ear for music; for neither on this occasion, nor in any of his subsequent attempts at singing, could I ever discover what tune it was he was executing."¹² Napoleon found it amusing when she critiqued his singing voice.

On another occasion, Betsy took it upon herself to use the Emperor as a trick to frighten a friend of hers whom she referred to as Miss Legg. She convinced him to come into their home where the child was sitting in the hopes of scaring her. Betsy describes that Napoleon, "...walked up to her, and, brushing up his hair with his hand, shook his head, making horrible faces, and giving a sort of savage howl. The little girl screamed so violently, that mamma was afraid she would go into hysterics, and took her out of the room. Napoleon laughed a good deal at the idea of his being such a bugbear."¹³

Whether it was playing cards, hide-and-seek, or pretending to speak English, Napoleon always enjoyed taking part in the silly antics of Betsy and her younger brothers. He often referred to her in English as the "leetle monkee," and he would use her siblings

to tease her during these games.¹⁴ Betsy returned the teasing in amusing ways. After she discovered Napoleon's distaste for ugly women, Betsy continuously introduced him to English women on the island who were less than attractive. Before agreeing to meet them, Napoleon would smile and ask if they were as ugly as the others he had seen before, but she would lie and state that they were more attractive. She would bask in his annoyance when they would enter the room.¹⁵

But, on other occasions, their talks took on more of a serious and sincere tone. Betsy began to notice that, whenever the Emperor was in the presence of her mother, he gazed upon her at considerable length, and it appeared as though sadness and grief had overcome him. Witnessing this on many occasions, Betsy finally asked him why. In a somber tone, Napoleon explained that Mrs. Balcombe held such a striking resemblance to Josephine that it was in the likes that he had never seen before. The Emperor went on to say that Josephine, "...was the most truly feminine woman that he had ever known."¹⁶ He referred to her as being the most amiable, elegant, charming, and affable woman in the world.¹⁷

Upon hearing these words, Madame Bertrand produced a miniature of Josephine and presented it to the Emperor. "He gazed at it with the greatest emotion for a considerable time without speaking. At last, he exclaimed it was the most perfect likeness he had ever seen of her."¹⁸ That evening, Betsy explained in her memoir that the Emperor appeared in mournful reflection and was still more melancholy and dejected for the rest of the evening.¹⁹ At this juncture in his life, hiding his eternal love for Josephine was a task he could not conquer.

There was one occasion where Betsy's informal friendship with the Emperor resulted in punishment

¹⁴ Ibid., 72-75, Gaspard Gourgaud, *The St. Helena Journal of General Baron Gourgaud* (London, 1932), 134; Weider, *Murder*, 72.

¹⁵ Ibid., 56-57.

¹⁶ Ibid., 82.

¹⁷ Ibid., 82-83.

¹⁸ Ibid., 82.

¹⁹ Ibid., 82.

¹⁰ Ibid., 40-41; Weider, *Murder*, 40-41.

¹¹ Abell, 26-27; Blackburn, 60.

¹² Ibid., 25-26; Blackburn, 61.

¹³ Ibid., 31-32; Blackburn, 62.

from her father. Without seeing the symbolism and mockery, Betsy showed Napoleon a children's toy that mocked his fall and eventual exile. It was a caricature of Napoleon, "...in the act of climbing a ladder, each step ascended represented some vanquished country; at length he was seated astride upon the world...by a dexterous trick Napoleon appeared on the contrary side tumbling down head over heels, and after a perilous descent, alighting on St. Helena."²⁰ Napoleon sat in silence, staring at the toy. Realizing what she had mistakenly done, Betsy pleaded with him to forgive her. The Emperor quietly excused himself and took refuge in the pavilion behind their home where he was staying.²¹

When Mr. Balcombe discovered what had occurred, he was not at all amused. As was his practiced punishment for his children, one in which Betsy had experienced before, Mr. Balcombe placed her in the dark cellar of their home to remain there for one week, only to emerge to be provided with sanitary means and for sleep.²² The Emperor was mortified at learning of Betsy's punishment and went to Mr. Balcombe in attempt to win her freedom. However, the Imperial endorsement failed to produce the intended result.²³

After leaving her father, Napoleon went around the house to the window in which Betsy was housed. Sitting upon the ground, the Emperor could hear her sobs.

"Napoleon said, "You see, we are both prisoners and you cry. I don't cry."

"You have cried." She said.

"Yes, I have, but the prison remains nevertheless, so it is better to be occupied and cheerful."²⁴

Seeing that she had been crying for quite a while, Napoleon tried to make her smile. Betsy explained that he "was much amused by my relation of the battle with the rats; he said, he had been startled by observing a huge one jumping out of his hat, as he

²⁰ Ibid., 204, Blackburn, 63, Weider, *Murder*, 69-70.

²¹ Ibid., 204.

²² Ibid., 204.

²³ Ibid., 204-205, Brookes, 81.

²⁴ Weider, *Murder*, 69-70, Brookes, 81.

was in the act of putting it on...and he generally succeeded in making me laugh, by mimicking my dolorous countenance."²⁵ The Emperor returned everyday and kept Betsy company in order to ease her punishment. The tables were now turned: Napoleon was now comforting the new 'prisoner.'

But their amusement and escapades soon came to an end. Napoleon was ordered to move into Longwood. After protesting the decision to Admiral Cockburn, temporary Governor of the island, Napoleon reluctantly complied. Upon hearing the news, Betsy ran to her room crying the entire way. She later wrote, "I stationed myself at a window from which I could see his departure, but my heart was too full to look on him as he left us, and throwing myself on the bed, I cried bitterly for a long time."²⁶

Betsy and her family went to Longwood to visit the Emperor and the two friends still engaged in their childish antics. But Betsy could see that the Emperor had begun to deteriorate both physically and emotionally. Upon one of their visits, Betsy described her astonishment at his deterioration:

When we saw Napoleon...his appearance was sad to look upon. His face was literally the colour of yellow wax, and his cheeks had fallen in pouches on either side of his face. His ankles were so swollen that the flesh literally hung over his shoes; he was so weak, that without resting one hand on a table near him, and the other on the shoulder of an attendant, he could not have stood. I was so grieved at seeing him in such a pitiable state, that my eyes overflowed with tears, and I could not forbear sobbing aloud...He saw how shocked we were, and tried to make light of it... but my mother observed, when we had left, that death was stamped on every feature."²⁷

The Balcombe's time on the island of St. Helena came to a close soon after this encounter. Governor Lowe's paranoia led him to believe that Mr. Balcombe had become an 'agent' of the Emperor and he feared that the purveyor was aiding an attempted escape of Napoleon. Lowe ordered the Balcombe family to return to England. Before they left, Betsy

²⁵ Abell, 206; Brookes, 81.

²⁶ Ibid., 93, Weider, *Murder*, 72-73.

²⁷ Ibid., 189-190.

made one final visit to Napoleon. She was sixteen years old. Though she was in the stages of early womanhood, her heart was still that playful child who shared so many enjoyable moments with the fallen Emperor.

As they both stood looking across the vast ocean, Napoleon said, "Soon you will be sailing away towards England, leaving me to die on this miserable rock. Look at those dreadful mountains – they are my prison walls. You will soon hear that the Emperor Napoleon is dead."²⁸ Betsy sobbed uncontrollably, and Napoleon took out his handkerchief and wiped her tears away. He asked her what she wanted of his as a remembrance; Betsy requested a lock of his hair. Napoleon gladly agreed. In her diary, Betsy says, "I still possess that lock of hair; it is all left me of the many tokens of remembrance of the Great Emperor."²⁹ Betsy would never see Napoleon again.³⁰

Louis Marchand

As Napoleon lived out the three remaining years of his life at Longwood, his trusted valet, Louis Marchand, recorded virtually everything the Emperor said and did. He considered Napoleon as both his Emperor and a father figure. Marchand was beside Napoleon during his battle against Lowe concerning his detainment, and he shared in the humorous moments of the Emperor's personality.

Marchand wrote at length regarding Napoleon's humor. Due to the fear of the Emperor escaping,

²⁸ Ibid., 228-231, Weider, *Murder*, 150-153.

²⁹ Ibid., 228-231.

³⁰ Ibid., 228-231. Shortly after their return to England, Mr. Balcombe was sent to what is now Australia to serve as its purveyor, while Betsy remained in England. Jane, Betsy's sister, died in route to Australia, with her father's death following just a few years later. As Napoleon would have wanted, the Bonaparte family took Betsy under their wing, with Joseph Bonaparte visiting her in London, and later Napoleon III giving her thousands of acres of land in newly acquired Algeria. Unfortunately, the remainder of Betsy's life was a sad one. She had an unhappy marriage and was left to raise a daughter by herself. She taught music lessons to support her daughter. She died in her sixties, alone, with only her daughter by her side.

Lowe ordered that Napoleon present himself in person to a British officer daily. Napoleon refused, and soldiers were reduced to peering through the windows of Longwood in order to catch a glimpse of the prisoner. One morning, Captain Nichols crept up to the Emperor's window to try and get a visual of him; he was very startled at what he observed. The Emperor saw Nichols coming up to the window from his bath. Except, this time, Napoleon did not shut the Venetians as usual. Instead, he rose from the water and positioned his naked body as close to the window as he could get. Napoleon roared with laughter as the officer quickly backed away from the window.³¹ Marchand ran into the room at the commotion only to find the Emperor standing in the bath in utter laughter.

Another example of the Emperor's humor is when Napoleon's entourage convinced him to create a garden. Their belief was that working in the garden would provide him with the exercise and fresh air he so desperately needed. The Emperor was always in a good mood when working in the garden. He would wake at five in the morning and wait impatiently for the British sentries to withdraw from their nighttime positions. Napoleon would then waddle outside, carrying a big bell, which he would swing vigorously to awaken his 'workers.' If the bell did not work, the Emperor would pick up a stone or large clumps of dirt and throw them at the windows. He would go right down the house hitting all the windows, starting with St. Denis³² and ending with Marchand's.

At St. Denis' window, Napoleon would throw the rock and then sing, "Ali, Ali, you sleep! You will sleep more comfortably when you have gone in again."³³ When the valet opened the window, the Emperor would yell, "Come lazybones, don't you see the sun?" Napoleon would then sing, "Ali! Ali! Ah! Ah! Allah! It is day!"³⁴ Next came Marchand's

³¹ Blackburn, 163.

³² Another member of the Emperor's entourage in exile.

³³ Ali was Napoleon's nickname for St. Denis.

³⁴ Louis Etienne St. Denis, *Napoleon: From the Tuileries to St. Helena* (New York, 1922).

window. The Emperor would throw a rock or a clump of dirt and call out to him in a mocking tone.³⁵

Due to Marchand's access to Napoleon's most intimate moments, the valet observed emotions in the Emperor that others were not privy to. On limited occasions, Governor Lowe permitted Napoleon to receive letters from his family, but only after the Governor read them first. His favorite letters were from his mother, his sister Pauline, or others reporting upon the life of his son. Whenever he read them, Marchand could see the pain and anguish that filled Napoleon's heart. "Those that the Emperor received from Madame Mere³⁶ or Princess Pauline, whom he loved so much, must certainly have awakened painful memories in him, for he remained sad and thoughtful all afternoon."³⁷ Napoleon would later read the obituary of Pauline in a British newspaper, already months old.

Marchand and other members of the Emperor's entourage discuss in countless journal entries how Napoleon was constantly tormented by dreams and memories of his son and Josephine. St. Denis could see the depression that consumed the Emperor; he wrote that, "...his misfortunes would have been greatly softened, he would have borne them with still more resignation, if he had his son with him."³⁸

As the most trusted valet, Marchand always slept nearby the Emperor and often awakened at the sound of Napoleon calling out to Josephine or his son in his sleep.³⁹ When Marchand once waked him from one of these dreams about Josephine, Napoleon stated, "She was as fresh...as when I saw her in Compiegne; I took her in my arms, but no matter how hard I tried to keep her, I felt her escape me; and when I wanted to hold her again, everything had

³⁵ Louis Marchand, *In Napoleon's Shadow* (San Francisco, 1998).

³⁶ Napoleon's mother. She continuously wrote her son and begged for him to permit her to come and share his exile with him. Napoleon refused because he did not want her to suffer as he did. She would outlive Napoleon.

³⁷ Marchand, 391.

³⁸ St. Denis, 241.

³⁹ Napoleon's son was named the King of Rome, later as Napoleon II.

disappeared and I was awakened."⁴⁰ Napoleon suffered many dreams about Josephine that left him in the most saddened and somber state.

As the days slowly passed, Napoleon's health deteriorated until the point that he was bedridden and unable to eat. The tactical and sharp mind that once planned numerous successful battles was now beginning to fade away. Napoleon no longer remembered the simplest things and often repeated the same questions over and over. Many members of his entourage found it emotionally difficult to stand witness to such a decline. General Henri Bertrand wrote of how the Emperor asked twenty times for a spoonful of coffee, to which the valet was ordered by the doctor to refuse, for it might irritate his stomach: "Tears came to my eyes, as I looked at this man, formerly so terrifying, who had commanded so proudly and in a manner so absolute, now reduced to begging for a spoonful of coffee, asking permission, as obedient as a child."⁴¹

Soon after, Napoleon was unable to speak and passed each day lying in his bed, gazing upon the bust of his son, tears streaming down his face.⁴² Within days of his death, Napoleon uttered his final words: "Who retreats at the head of the army?...King of Rome...Josephine."⁴³ The two of them remained in his thoughts, to his last breathe.

Betsy's culminating perspective on Napoleon perfectly captures his true heart when she stated that, "His love of children...speaks volumes of the goodness of his heart...he entered into all feelings of young people, and when with them was a mere child, and, I may add, a most amusing one."⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Marchand, 621.

⁴¹ Henri Bertrand, *Napoleon at St. Helena: The Journals of General Bertrand; January-May 1821* (New York, 1952) 209.

⁴² St. Denis, 270.

⁴³ Bertrand, 234.

⁴⁴ Abell, 233-235.

