

The Last Days of an Erstwhile Emperor

by [Daniel Sharp](#) (August 2019)



Death of Napoleon, Charles Steuben, 1821

It was another day of wind and rain on the island. On an incline on the plain not far from Longwood House stood a hunched, portly figure, looking out across the land and occasionally gazing up at the grey sky; covered in a thick overcoat for protection against the elements, a shabby hat pulled over his forehead, the figure's face was drawn, haggard, lined, and pale. The eyes were dim now but still there lurked the remnants of a once blazing fire within. The figure stared into the distance at the distant mountains while wind and rain buffeted him. He seemed not to care; his focus was inward as he surveyed his surroundings.

Napoleon Bonaparte was reflecting that from relatively modest means in Corsica to military glory and imperial triumph, his name spoken alongside those of Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar, he was now defeated and exiled to this miserable rock, as he called the remote island of St Helena which had been his home for years. That phrase, 'miserable rock', triggered a surge of sadness in his breast . . . and then he remembered he had used it when saying goodbye last year to Betsy, the Balcombe child who had been one of his few friends in this place.

Shaking off that recent grief, Napoleon turned to other thoughts. It was five years since Waterloo and the end of the dream, he mused. 1820 the year was; his Bourbon rivals were restored to the French throne and he, once an emperor—no, still an emperor! There was the old fire as reduced to this, a lonely man in exile. And he was ill. His health had been deteriorating for a while now and there was scarcely a moment free of discomfort and pain. It was only through a heroic exercise of his old strength that he had managed to walk this far from his abode at Longwood on a dreary December morning. But that strength was fading.

And yet—how it had once shaken the world! His will alone deciding the fate of ancient empires and nations and conquering great armies, his fiery genius burning through Europe and the *ancien régimes* of that moribund continent. From Corsican backwater to imperial glory—and now? Now another backwater. Exile. Defeat. Humiliation at the hands of that rascal Hudson Lowe, his British jailor.

The pain in his side worsened. Time for this meditation to

end, he thought, and turning, he barely managed to summon up the strength to limp back to Longwood through the rain and the wind.



April 1821, four months later, and Napoleon knew he was dying. Half the time he was delirious and delusional, the rest he was barely able to move and constantly in pain.

Was it the stomach, which had killed his father long ago? That brought on memories of his formidable mother, a matriarch of iron will, his chief early influence. How he had taken the beatings from her, taken her strength and made it his own. He had mixed feelings on that most unmaternal of women, but he owed her so much. And still she lived! He wondered for how long she would outlast her greatest son.

One day, as the month approached its end, he lay in bed considering his triumphs, and the memories of Marengo and Austerlitz spurred his strength; he rose and dressed slowly and painfully and, ignoring the protests from his entourage and his servants, made his way through the dry rooms of Longwood to the outside world. One last walk, he thought, one last triumph.

It took Napoleon half an hour just to reach the boundary of the garden. Groaning and shaking he threw himself down to rest against a tree, looking out, for the last time he knew, at the windy plain in front of the house. What had sustained him

through these years of exile? He remembered Betsy, the affair with Albine, the memories of Josephine, Marie-Louise, and his son. He had dictated his memoirs to his friends and a work on Caesar. He hoped these would secure his legacy. The art of propaganda had always come to him naturally.

And he recalled that when he had moved to Longwood he had said, 'Do not call it my palace but my tomb'. And so, he knew, it would prove to be, very soon now he thought. Only his confidence and strength had seen him through the inconveniences and humiliations Lowe had foisted upon him. Only certainty in his star had given him the forbearance to take the insult of being referred to not by his imperial title but merely as 'general' by his jailors. He had been petty, too, of course, but he knew he was better than the lot of them. And what else had given him strength?

Books, of course. He had always loved books. Over three hundred works were in his library here, including novels by Austen, poems by Byron, beloved works about ancient heroes (histories of the great Alexander and Caesar had been among his chief inspirations since youth), and Voltaire's biography of Charles XII, a work he had had with him in Moscow. 'Perhaps I should have attended more carefully to Voltaire's warnings about the Russian weather', he thought ruefully. Musing on literature reminded him of Byron's 'Prisoner of Chillon'; what were those lines, the ones which he had read and burst out in tears at a few months ago? Ah yes. Napoleon closed his eyes and focused, and softly murmured the lines out loud:

There were no stars, no earth, no time,

No check, no change, no good, no crime

But silence, and a stirless breath
Which neither was of life nor death;
A sea of stagnant idleness,
Blind, boundless, mute, and motionless!

And once more tears rolled from those now dim eyes. And when he recalled the poem's lament for lost brothers, images flashed through his mind of dead comrades; none loomed so sadly as Desaix, gone these twenty-one years, a great friend and hero who had perished heroically in battle.

This was too much for the ailing emperor. He closed off his mind to the anguish, called for the servants to help him, and retreated, half-carried by them, to his bedroom.



He was not long for the world after that. Further deterioration brought him more delirium and pain and he was utterly bedridden, almost all his strength sapped, as the month of May began. Napoleon faintly knew that there were people buzzing around his room in his final days but he paid them little attention; his pain and his fevered mind gave him no willpower to engage with others.

On the first day of the month he dreamt of battling on a bridge—old glories? The battle to come? He did not know the dream's meaning. There was hushed chattering around him and he

opened his eyes. There was a lucidity to his mind now, which he knew would not last. All he could say to those around him was, 'I know I am dying'. And then he fell back into fevered sleep.

Two days later the emperor received extreme unction from the Abbé Vignali. He had never believed, and still did not, but he thought it fit for a monarch to expire having been reconciled with the faith of his people.

More pain and madness for the next couple of days, images flitting in and out of his mind—memories or delusions?—just as people flitted in and out of the room, his servants and his entourage worrying over his dying coil. He thought, during his final night, that he saw some of his heroes—Alexander, Caesar, and Hannibal—shrouded in light, beckoning him to join them in their eternal and glorious golden repose. 'I will be remembered!' he shouted into the darkness of the room. 'I will never be forgotten!' His own achievements, and his knack for self-promotion, would ensure that. And then he cried in pain and whimpered like a child and, desiring only the care of a mother, slept for the rest of the night.

As the sun rose on the fifth of May, the emperor's last day, Napoleon was deep in unconsciousness. As the day wore on the sixteen people who had come to watch the great man die could see only the occasional fluttering of an eyelid and hear only low groans as the emperor slowly perished.

When he did die at 5.49 pm, while a gun sounded in the distance to mark sunset, they would stop the clocks, cover the

mirrors, and some comrades would prepare, clean and shave the corpse (and one of them would pocket some bristles of hair to keep as souvenirs). They would keep a candlelit vigil overnight for it, the emperor covered totally, aside from the face, with a sheet, a silver cross laid on the chest. Hudson Lowe would come early next morning to pay his final respects to the man he hated and who hated him. The emperor's last words would be the subject of speculation and used for propaganda. Perhaps they were 'at the head of the army'—fitting for a military man, thought some.

All this would only be the beginning of the mourning, and the legacy of the emperor would live on forever, not least thanks to his own self-aggrandizement. But in the final minutes of his final day the unconscious Napoleon Bonaparte dreamed of old glories, for these were the greatest comfort he had. Some fuzzy memories of words from an old essay written when he was a young man before fame and triumph found him, at the time of the first meeting of the Estates-General on the fifth of May 1789, thirty-two years ago exactly, came to mind.

. . . ambition . . . nourished on blood and crimes . . .
is . . . a violent and unreflective madness which ceases
only with life itself: like a fire . . . driven on by a
pitiless wind . . . ends only when it has consumed
everything . . .

Yes, those were some of the words he was reaching for, words he had written so long ago. A bit of pride invaded his consciousness that his great memory had not failed him even at the end. And he *had* burned so very brightly (and committed some mad crimes, a glint of conscience reminded him). His life had been a fiery storm, tumultuous and terrible, and he had

loved it, despite the failures, defeats, and losses—and, yes, despite those crimes. For had he not achieved so much? The remaking of a world, the spread of law, order, and liberty, the tearing up of a morbid old regime. Yes, he had indeed lived more than nearly everyone else who had ever existed, perhaps more than anyone else ever would.

Napoleon Bonaparte's fire was just about extinguished. But as it died and as his eyes dimmed totally, one last ember sparked brightly: 'Yes, I *will* be remembered alongside Alexander and Caesar, for good or for ill.'

Sources:

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