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978-1-108-03540-8 - Recollections of the Emperor Napoleon: During the First Three Years of his Captivity on the Island of St. Helena

Elizabeth Balcombe Abell

Excerpt

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RECOLLECTIONS  
OF THE  
EMPEROR NAPOLEON.

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CHAPTER I.

There points the Muse to stranger's eye,  
The graves of those that cannot die.

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A SLIGHT DESCRIPTION OF THE ISLAND.—ITS APPEARANCE FROM THE SEA.—CONSTERNATION AT ITS THREATENING ASPECT.—SINGULAR POSITION OF ST. JAMES TOWN.—THE BRIARS.

MY object in the following Memoir is to confine myself, as far as possible, to what concerns Napoleon personally. Having, however, many reminiscences, unconnected with him, of the happy days of my childhood, and feeling that they might be interesting to the public, *especially* to those who visited the island during the emperor's

B

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[More information](#)

## 2 RECOLLECTIONS OF [CH. I.]

captivity there, I venture to insert them. A slight description of the localities connected with Napoleon will not, I trust, be considered uninteresting to my readers, and I may, perhaps, commence this slight memoir most properly, by a few remarks upon the general aspect of St. Helena, and of the impression conveyed by it, on first approaching its shores.

The appearance of St. Helena, on viewing it from the sea, is different from that of any land I ever saw, and is certainly but little calculated to make one fall in love with it at first sight. The rock, rising abruptly from the ocean, with its oblong shape and perpendicular sides, suggests to one's mind more the idea of a huge dark-coloured ark lying at anchor, floating on the bosom of the Atlantic, than of a land intended for the habitation and support of living beings; nor, on a nearer acquaintance, does its character become more amiable. If a stranger approach it during the night, the effect on

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[More information](#)

## CH. I.] THE EMPEROR NAPOLEON. 3

coming on deck in the morning is most peculiar, and at first, almost alarming. From the great depth of water, ships are able to run very close in, to the land; and the eye, long accustomed to the expanse of sea and atmosphere, is suddenly startled by coming almost, as it seems, in contact with the dark threatening rock towering hundreds of feet into the air, far above the masts of the tallest vessel.

I was quite a child at the time of my first visit, and my terrors were increased by being told that the giant-snouted crag, which bore some resemblance to the head of a negro, when the breakfast bell struck, would devour me first, and afterwards the rest of the passengers and crew. I rushed instantly below, and hiding my face on my mother's lap, tremblingly announced our fate. It was not without much difficulty that she succeeded in soothing my terrors, by assurances of safety and protection. But I did not venture from under

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## 4 RECOLLECTIONS OF [CH. I.]

her wing until the dreaded "eight bells" had sounded, and the appearance of breakfast announced better things in store for us. I was told that even the mighty heart of Napoleon sank within him, when he first surveyed his future home; and as the Northumberland glided to her anchorage, revealing the galleries of the batteries on either side, bristling with cannon, and frowning heavily upon him; the despairing inscription which the beautiful language of his infancy had rendered familiar to him, seemed to have been inscribed on the gloomy rock:—

*"Lasciate ogni speranza voi ch'entrate."*

On rounding Munden's battery, James Town breaks upon the view. It is singular and striking, and quite in harmony with the rest of the peculiar scenery of St. Helena. The houses are all built at the bottom of a wide ravine, which looks as if it had been caused by some great convulsion of nature, or as if the rock,

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[More information](#)

## CH. I.] THE EMPEROR NAPOLEON. 5

tired of its solitary life and isolated situation in the midst of the Atlantic, had given a great yawn, and had then been unable to close its mouth again. The buildings are confined entirely to the bottom of this cleft or chasm, as its sides are too precipitous to allow of houses being built on them. The position of the town renders it sufficiently hot in summer. The cool sea-breeze, so delicious in all tropical climates, is almost excluded by the situation of the valley, as the inhabitants call James Town, and for nine months in the year the heat is almost unendurable.

We were fortunate enough to reside out of town, my father possessing a beautiful little cottage called the Briars, about a mile and a quarter from the valley; a spot meriting a slight description, both from its intrinsic beauty, and from having been the residence of Napoleon during the first three months of his exile in St. Helena.

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[More information](#)

## 6 RECOLLECTIONS OF [CH. I.]

The way to the Briars winds out of the town by roads cut in the side of the mountain. I cannot say I saw much of this road or the surrounding scenery, on my first journey to our distant abode; I was on that occasion put into a basket, and carried on a negro's head, who trudged away with me very merrily, singing some joyous air. Occasionally he put me down to rest, and, grinning from ear to ear, asked me if I felt comfortable in my little nest. I was rather frightened, as this was the first time I had seen a black man; but I soon reconciled myself to him, and we became great friends. He told me, he generally carried vegetables into the valley, and appeared highly honoured, and proud that a living burden should have been confided to his care. I was soon deposited in safety at the door of the Briars, and bade adieu to my sable bearer, who went away quite delighted with some little present my father gave him for making himself so amiable to me.

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[More information](#)

## CH. I.] THE EMPEROR NAPOLEON. 7

Our cottage was built in the style of the bungalows in India ; it was very low, the rooms being chiefly on one floor, and, had it not been for its situation, would not have been thought so pretty ; but surrounded, as this verdant spot was, by barren mountains, it looked a perfect little paradise—an Eden blooming in the midst of desolation. A beautiful avenue of banyan trees led up to it, and either side was flanked by ever green and gigantic lacos, interspersed with pomegranate and myrtle, and a profusion of large white roses, much resembling our sweetbriar, from which, indeed, the place derived its name. A walk, shaded by pomegranate trees, thirty or forty feet in height, conducted to the garden.

I must plead the same excuse for devoting a few lines to the garden that I have to the cottage, for it was lovely in itself, and the favourite retreat of the emperor during his sojourn with us. It would re-

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quire the pen of a Scott, or the pencil of a Claude, to do any thing like justice to its beauty. I often wander in my dreams through its myrtle groves, and the orange trees, with their bright green leaves, delicious blossoms, and golden fruit, seem again before me, as they were in my blessed days of childhood. Every description of tropical fruit flourished here luxuriantly; various species of vine, citron, orange, fig, shadoc, guava, mango—all in endless profusion.

The produce of this garden alone, which the family could not consume, brought annually from £500 to £600. Nature, as if jealous of the beauty of this enchanting spot, had surrounded it on every side with impenetrable barriers. On the east, to speak geographically, it was bounded by a precipice, so steep as to render all approach impracticable. The dark frowning mountain, called Peak Hill, rendered it inaccessible from the south; to the westward it



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[More information](#)

## CH. I.] THE EMPEROR NAPOLEON. 9

was protected by a cataract, in itself a most picturesque and striking object. I forget its height, but its roar was very imposing to me, and the volume of water must have been considerable. In that hot climate it was a delightful next-door neighbour; in the most sultry day one could hardly feel the heat oppressive, when gazing on its cool and sparkling waters. On the side nearest the cottage the defences of the garden were completed by an aloe and prickly pear hedge, through which no living thing could penetrate. The garden at the Briars, like the bright dreams and hopes of my own early youth, is now withered and destroyed: it was sold to the East India Company, by whom it was dug up, and planted with mulberry trees, which speedily became "food for worms," if I may be guilty of a conceit on—to me—a melancholy subject. I believe the intended speculation proved unsuccessful.

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[More information](#)

10

RECOLLECTIONS OF

[CH. II.]

## CHAPTER II.

Nay, then farewell!

I've touched the highest point of all my greatness,  
 And from that full meridian of my glory  
 I haste now to my setting. I shall fall  
 Like a bright exhalation in the evening,  
 And no man see me more.

ALARM FROM LADDER HILL.—SHIP IN SIGHT.—NEWS OF THE EXPECTED ARRIVAL OF NAPOLEON.—OUR DISBELIEF OF THE REPORT, AND MY CHILDISH FEARS.—THE ARRIVAL OF SIR GEORGE COCKBURN, ON BOARD THE NORTHUMBERLAND, WITH HIS ILLUSTRIOUS PRISONER NAPOLEON BONAPARTE.—THE EMPEROR'S LAND-ING, AND ANNOYANCE AT BEING STARED AT.

WE had been living for years in this romantic and secluded glen, when our little “isle was suddenly *frighted from its propriety*” by hearing that Napoleon Bonaparte was to be confined as a prisoner of state. It was in October, 1815, that this news first burst upon us. We heard one morning an