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978-1-108-08132-0 - Napoleon in Exile: Or, A Voice from St. Helena: The Opinions and Reflections of Napoleon on the Most Important Events of his Life and Government in his Own Words: Volume 2

Barry E. O'Meara

Excerpt

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A VOICE
FROM
ST. HELENA.



21st April, 1817.—NAPOLEON has been for some days in very good spirits. On Saturday, the 19th, several captains of East Indiamen came to see Count and Countess Bertrand. Captains Innes, Campbell, and Ripsley, with Mr. Webb, stationed themselves at the back of the house in such a situation as to be likely to see Napoleon on his return from Bertrand's, where he had gone about four o'clock. Napoleon beckoned to, and conversed with them for nearly an hour, during which time he asked many questions respecting India, the East India Company, Lord Moira, their own profits, &c.; and to the commodore, who had a very youthful appearance, in a laughing manner he observed, that he was a child, and ought to be ashamed of commanding captains so much older than himself.

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Asked the emperor whether it was at Lodi or Arcola that he had seized the standard, and precipitated himself among the enemy's troops. He replied, "at Arcola, not Lodi. At Arcola I was slightly wounded; but at Lodi no such circumstance occurred. Why do you ask? Do you think me *luche*?" said he, laughing. I begged to assure him of my thorough conviction of the contrary, which was too well known to be doubted; and that it was merely to solve a difference of opinion that had arisen between some of us English who had not the means of procuring at St. Helena any books to satisfy us at which of the two it happened, that I had taken the liberty to ask him. "Those things," said he, with a smile, "are not worth mentioning."

Had a long conversation with him on medical subjects. He appeared to entertain an idea that in cases purely the province of the physician, the patient has an equal chance of being despatched to the other world, either by the doctor mistaking the complaint, or by the remedies administered operating in a different manner from what was intended and expected, and was for trusting entirely to nature. With respect to surgery, he professed a far different opinion, and acknowledged the great utility of that science. I endeavoured to convince him, that in some complaints, nature was a bad physician, and mentioned in proof of my argument

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the examples that had taken place under his own eyes of the cases of Countess Montholon, General Gourgaud, Tristan, and others; who if they had been left to nature, would have gone to the other world. I observed that in practice we always had a *certain* object in view, and never prescribed remedies without first having considered well what we had to expect from their operation. Napoleon, however, was sceptical; and inclined to think that if they had taken no medicine, maintained strict abstinence from every thing except plenty of diluents, they would have done equally well. However, after having heard all my arguments, he said, “well, perhaps if ever I have a serious malady, I may change my opinion, take all your medicines, and do what you please. I should like to know what sort of a patient I should make, and whether I should be tractable, or otherwise, I am inclined to think the former.” I reasoned with him afterwards about inflammation of the lungs, and asked him if he thought that nature, if left to herself, would effect a cure in that complaint. He appeared a little staggered at this at first; but after asking me what were the remedies, to which I replied that venesection was the sheet-anchor, he said, “that complaint belongs to the surgeon, because he cures it with his lancet, and not to the physician.” I then mentioned dysentery and intermittent fevers. “The remedies given

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in intermittent fevers," said he, " frequently produce worse complaints than the disease that they remove. Suppose now that the best informed physician visits forty patients a day; amongst them he will kill one or two a month by mistaking the disease, and in the country towns, the charlatans will kill about half of those who die under their hands."

" The country towns in England, as well as in France," said he, " abound with *Molière's* doctors. Are you a fatalist?" I replied, " in action I am." " Why not every where else?" said the emperor; I said, that I believed a man's dissolution, in certain cases, to be inevitable if he did not endeavour by the means placed in his power, to prevent his fate. For example, I said, that if a man in battle saw a cannon shot coming towards him, as sometimes happened, he would naturally step to one side, and thereby avoid an otherwise inevitable death; which comparison I thought would hold good with certain complaints, by considering the ball to be the disease, and stepping aside, the remedy. Napoleon replied, " perhaps by stepping to one side, you may throw yourself in the way of another ball, which otherwise would have missed you. I remember," added he, " an example of what I tell you having occurred at Toulon, when I commanded the artillery. There were some Marseillois artillerymen

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sent to the siege. Now of all the people in France, the Marseillois are the least brave, and indeed, generally speaking, have but little energy. I observed an officer, like the rest, to be very careful of himself, instead of shewing an example. I therefore called out and said, 'Monsieur officer, come out and observe the effect of your shot. You do not know whether your guns are well pointed or not.' At this time we were firing upon the English ships. I desired him to see if our shot struck them in the hull. He was very unwilling to quit his station; but at last he came over to where I was, a little outside of the parapet, where he began to look out. Wishing, however, to make himself small, and to secure as much of his body as possible, he stooped down and sheltered one side of his body behind the parapet, while he looked under my arm. He had not been long in that position before a shot came close to me, and low down, which knocked him to pieces. Now, if this man had stood upright, and more exposed to danger, he would have been safe, as the ball would have passed between us, without hurting either."

I recounted to the emperor, after this, a circumstance which had happened in the Victorious, seventy-four, Captain Talbot, when I was on board of her, which I explained minutely to him. During the action with his ship the Rivoli, a man who

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had been slightly wounded, had crept into the heart of the cable tier in the orlop deck, and placed himself among the cables in such a manner, that it appeared to be a matter of impossibility that a shot could reach him. Notwithstanding the apparent security of the place, towards the end of the action a shot struck the ship very low down, penetrated the wings, went through two or three coils of the cable, then rose upwards, struck one of the beams which supported the lower deck, and being spent, rebounded back, fell upon this man's breast who was lying on his back, and killed him. He was found afterwards with the shot, (a thirty-six pounder,) lying upon his breast.

“This,” said he, “confirms what I say to you, that a man cannot avoid his destiny.” Napoleon appeared entertained with this anecdote, and asked, whether the man was a sailor or a soldier? I replied, a sailor.

The emperor during the course of conversation, spoke about eunuchs; the making of whom he observed was a most disgraceful and horrid practice. “I suppressed it,” said he, “in all the countries under my dominion; even in Rome itself I prohibited it under pain of death. It was entirely put a stop to, and I believe that although the pope and the cardinals are now in power, it will not be again revived. I recollect, added

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he, “ an incident with respect to one of those gentry, which made me laugh. There was one Crescentini, an excellent singer, who often sang before me and delighted me much. As I wished to encourage merit in every science, and as it was his misfortune, and not his fault to have been mutilated, having been probably only two or three years old when it was performed, I conferred upon him the knighthood of the iron crown. This, however, displeased a great many, who said that a thing that was not a man ought not to have an order for manhood conferred upon him. There were great discussions about it, in which Madame Grassini, whom I suppose you know, took a part. Whilst others were blaming me, Grassini said, ‘ I really think the emperor has done right in giving it to him; I think that he deserves it.’ Being asked why, she replied, ‘ I think he merits it, if it were only on account of his *wounds*.’ This sally produced the greatest laughter, and turned the business completely. I believe that no person laughed more at it than myself.”

23rd.—Yesterday Napoleon was indisposed, and had recourse to his customary remedies, diet and diluents. He remained all day in his bedroom, and eat nothing. Told me that he had risen at three in the morning, and wrote or dictated all day.

Gave him two or three newspapers. He re-

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peated his disbelief of the rumour of war being likely to take place between Russia and America, as it was contrary to the interests of both.

General Gourgaud the day before yesterday rode out towards the alarm-house, and on his way met the Russian commissioner and Captain Gor, with whom he conversed for a considerable time. They were seen by Captain Poppleton, who was on his way to dine at Plantation House. When his excellency was informed of this, he said at first that Captain P. ought to have remained with them to listen; but when it was explained to him that he could not have done so without affronting them, as General Gourgaud knew that he was to dine at Plantation House, he acknowledged that it could not have been done.

This day, however, a note came from Major Gorrequer, stating that the governor wanted to see Captain Poppleton directly, and that he was required to write an official statement of what he had witnessed yesterday between the commissioner and Gourgaud. That the governor regretted he had not followed and kept company with them, in pursuance of the conversation he had had with him (Captain P.) in town on a certain day. In this conversation the governor said he expected that he would, whenever he saw them speaking together, drop in as it were by accident, and make one of their party.

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These precautions appeared curious, as the parties had a long interview together at the last races before the governor himself and his staff without molestation.

Saw Napoleon in the evening again, who declared himself to be quite well. He spoke of the time he was in the habit of devoting to business when in Paris. That occasionally he used to dictate to four different secretaries at a time, all upon different subjects, and sometimes even to five, each writing as fast as he could. Made some observations upon the Emperor of Austria. Observed that if he were in his power, no treatment could be too good or limits too extensive. The emperor he pronounced to be a good and religious man, but a *ganache*. A man, who though he did not want common sense, never did any thing of himself, but was always led by the nose by Metternich or some one else. As long as he had a bad minister, his government would be bad, as he entirely trusted to him, and only paid attention to botany and gardening.

24th.—Napoleon in very good spirits. Very curious in his enquiries about Murat's expedition against Sicily. Asked me to describe minutely the strength of the English force which had then occupied Sicily, and appeared surprised when I said that it had amounted to about twenty thousand English, Hanoverians, &c. He asked if I thought

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that Murat would have succeeded in taking the island, if he had landed?*" I replied that I believed not, as, independent of the formidable English force against him, in general the Sicilians themselves hated the French, and declared that they would have caused another "Sicilian Vespers" if they came. He asked "how many troops Ferdinand had?" I replied, perhaps fifteen thousand men, of whom, however, we were very doubtful, and consequently kept near Palermo, with the exception of a regiment of cavalry. He wished to know "if our ships could have kept the channel on the night that Murat had caused a landing to be made by a small body, and whether they could have remained at anchor along the Sicilian side of the Faro?" I replied, that I had no doubt the ships might have kept the channel on that night; that they might also have remained at anchor along the Faro, but at a risk during the *Scirocco* winds, as the bottom was a bad holding ground, and if the anchors went, the ships must go on shore. He asked the name of the English admiral. "That imbecile Murat," added he, "lost me about twelve or thirteen hundred men by the foolish disembarkation he made in Sicily. I know not what

* It may be necessary to explain to the reader, that I was attached to the flotilla against Murat in a mortar-boat, under the command of Captain Coffin, R. N. during the whole of the period alluded to.