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Napoleon & Betsy: Recollections of the Emperor Napoleon on St Helena

Lucia Elizabeth Abell

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The story of Napoleon and Betsy Balcombe is an unusual and fascinating tale. A fallen Emperor who once controlled most of Europe makes friends with an impudent, pretty and spirited young English girl, just about to celebrate her thirteenth birthday. Betsy produced a book full of interest, but notwithstanding that the book wanders backwards and forward chronologically, the general tenor of the relationship between this young girl and Napoleon is beyond question, and it was of an unusual and extremely friendly nature. Napoleon's fall from an unprecedented position of power to humiliating confinement must have been an impossible burden to have lived with, and yet, despite this ? or possibly because of it ? Napoleon befriended this child and held genuine affection for her. Despite the naivety, the warmth of the friendship between the ex-emperor and little 'Mees' Balcombe shines through, and her text is well-worth providing in this new edition.

Napoleon was at the Briars for eight weeks, but the family were very close to the community at Longwood, some two miles further up hill and inland, and visited weekly, sometimes more often. It was here, as Betsy matured and grew more responsible, that the friendship developed, to the extent that she assisted Napoleon with his attempts at English. She was daring as well as impudent and with an irrepressible sense of humor she unlocked the inner child in Napoleon that led to the famous friendship. He found her boldness amusing and occasionally alarming. It must have been a welcome diversion from his darker thoughts.

Betsy Balcombe (later Lucia Elizabeth Abell) was a young girl coming up to her thirteenth birthday when Napoleon was forced upon her family as a temporary guest at the Briars, St Helena. Following his move to Longwood two months later, Betsy maintained and built upon her close friendship with the fallen emperor.

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