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Napoleon's Last Victory

By JOHN W. THOMASON, JR.

WITH NAPOLEON IN RUSSIA, the initial volume of Memoirs of General de Caulaincourt, Duke of Vicenza. \$4.00. *Morrow.*

NO PEACE WITH NAPOLEON! Concluding the Memoirs of General de Caulaincourt. \$3.00. *Morrow.*

ST. HELENA, by Octave Aubry. \$5.00. *Lippincott.*

IN THE 'Nineties, when *McClure's Magazine* was a valued item on our library table, it published an advertisement of somebody's *History of Mankind*: Ridpath's, maybe, consisting of a picture, and half a page of text in large clear print. I remember the picture, and a line of the copy. The cut was Meissonier's *Campaign of France*. Into view, from the left, rode the Staff of the Grand Army, their great cocked hats pulled low against the wind, their faces weather-bitten and glum. Across the background tramped the grenadiers of the Imperial Guard, in bearskins and white gaiters. Underfoot was the rutted road of the Marne country in the Winter-time, with a broken musket and a trampled uhlan's *tschapka*, debris

of armies. But your eye went to the fat little man hunched in his saddle on the slim Arabian mare: a little man in a gray riding coat, his Roman face stark in the recession of his greatness and the immensity of his imminent disaster. You saw the Emperor, towards the end of the adventure, going on to Champaubert, or Montmirail, or Arcis-sur-Aube; places whose names blazed familiar from the smudged hachures of the French maps we used when American Marines in our time had their occasions in the same region. And the text said, in effect, Napoleon's name fills more paper of the world's solemn history than any other mortal's.

Since those years, *McClure's* has gone from among us, and a deal of

Captains and Kings have departed; and we have fought battles that make Eylau and Borodino and Leipzig appear mere skirmishes of light forces, affairs of outposts. But the Emperor's name continues to embellish white paper, and men have not yet found the end to what they have to say about him.

The past year, they staged a play about the Emperor Napoleon. It opened in Washington, and it delighted students of the current class at the Army War College, many of whom proceeded to inform themselves on the G-4 aspects of the Russian Campaign; it also received favorable notice in the public prints, and ran three weeks on Broadway, in competition with the most advanced nudities the American stage has, so far, offered to its patrons. In little more than the same twelve months, there have been three books which add important footnotes to the vast literature already accumulated.

The first is called *With Napoleon in Russia*, but it is more than that. The remarkable tale of the memoirs of General de Caulaincourt, Duke of Vicenza, *Grand Écuyer* to the Imperial Court; how they were hidden, and how they were resurrected, is not here pertinent. Caulaincourt was a gentle-

man of the authentic nobility, personally distasteful to the Emperor, as the Emperor was to Caulaincourt, but honest and capable. Therefore he served Napoleon well as Ambassador to Russia, and advised him soundly against the Russian Campaign. He was called pro-Russian for his honesty; and taken along, in his capacity as Transportation Officer to the Emperor, for his abilities. After Moscow, after the Retreat, after the agony of the Berezina, they salvaged a remnant of the Grand Army and brought it to Smorgonie, as you come into Poland from the East; and the Emperor remembered he was master of some kings in Western Europe and rushed home to Paris, lest the Kings forget him. He took with him one man, his Master of Horse, Caulaincourt. In that cold journey across Poland and North Germany, they rode in a sleigh, huddled close for warmth while their breathing congealed on their unshaven chins; they lay in the same rooms, on the same pallets, in mean country post-houses, sharing potato soup and corn brandy. Smorgonie, to Wilno, to Warsaw, to Dresden, to Paris, were the stages. About a thousand miles—and they did it in fourteen days, which is fast for a horse-team, any

time of the year. Through it all the Emperor talked. The details of the Russian Campaign you can get from a hundred sources, recorded better than Caulaincourt recorded them, for he was not a soldier. But nowhere else is there written so much of the Emperor's intimate conversation, as Caulaincourt transcribed it from his trained diplomat's memory, in those odd intervals while his master slept. . . . The Grand Army has had a disaster, there's no disguising it: this Marshal was a blockhead, and that one a goose: never mind, he, the Emperor, will retrieve all. We will say this to the King of Prussia, this to the Hapsburgs; and Talleyrand, consummate rascal, will diddle the English. As to Alexander, his Imperial Brother of the Russians, he really admires Me — and so on. Josephine was a fine woman; but these German girls are sweet and docile: Marie Louise, now — she has a good heart. The heart is everything. The Army's lost — no matter: we will raise another one. . . .

Thus the greatest careerist of modern times, talking in adversity, the dictator in his shirt. When you consider that he is the model for numerous lesser dictators fulminating today in their several orbits, all ambitious, the thing takes on

cogency. It is the way people reason, who set themselves above the ordinary checks and balances of human intercourse.



The second book is more Caulaincourt, but Caulaincourt not so well translated, and the Emperor in a more conventional setting, with his Army again, in his habit as he lived. For he has raised another Army, replacing in a measure those war-hardened men lost in the dim wastes of Russia, and is fighting for his Empire on the plains of Saxony. Lützen and Bautzen he has won, in the old Napoleonic manner, and killed Moreau at Dresden, and taken a disastrous defeat from the Nations, on the wrong side of the Elster stream, by Leipzig. *No Peace With Napoleon!*, this second book is called; and it is the record of the last bad months in the Spring of 1814, when French soldiers stood to fight, for the first time in nearly twenty-five years, within the frontiers of France. The Emperor has reached the curious stage, inevitable to dictators, where he thinks that by willing a thing to be, he can make it so. Yet he has his moments in touch with reality. Under his hand there are some fifty thousand men; against him four hundred thousand, led by generals

who learned the rudiments of the Napoleonic system in the hard school of defeat. Himself fat, and growing a little slow, the cancer that killed him gnawing in his duodenum, he takes the field at the end of January with another army (that army of veterans, about one-third Frenchmen, lost in Russia year before last: another, mostly Frenchmen, squandered at Leipzig and after, through 1813: and this, of children and old reserves, the last) and is beaten by Blücher in the snow at La Rothiere, the 1st February, 1814. He sends Caulaincourt, honest fellow and presentable gentleman, to get him a peace from the Conference of Châtillon, where Austria, the Germanies, Sweden, Russia, and England sit to cook their hare before they catch it. Then he comes to life: he is the young Chief-of-Division Buonaparte, General of the Army of Italy, returned again. He shatters Blücher and chases him east, beyond the Aisne: he turns to the south, on Schwarzenberg, the Austrian, and crushes him: he destroys St. Priest's Russian Corps at Rheims. Montmirail, Vauchamps, Champaubert, Monttereau: the Campaign of France is as extraordinary as the Italian Campaign of 1795. And always he deluges the unfortunate Caulain-

court with staccato instructions: when the Allies catch an inferior Marshal and beat him, his Ambassador receives orders to treat with the Kings for the Louis XIV boundaries, or even for those of Louis XVI, offering the most solemn sanctions: but when the Emperor in person comes upon the field, and breaks his enemies and drives them, his couriers gallop with other mandates: never mind, we will dictate a military peace from the banks of the Vistula! Almost he brings it off.

There could be but one end. France, having carried for twenty years the strain of his victories, was getting tired. The Allies marched on Paris, too many columns for the Emperor to face at once. The civilian population was bored, if not with glory, then with the price of glory: they indicated a preference for Cossacks rather than conscription and taxes. The Marshals, not so young as they were, and gorged with gold and titles, had enough of war. It was Marmont, the companion of Buonaparte's cadet days at Brienne, who sold out first. All the others except iron Davout followed the Marshal-Duke of Ragusa into judicious treachery—even Ney, Marshal-Prince of the Moskowa. Caulaincourt, torn between patriotism and

loyalty, gives the closing scenes: it was he, he tells us, who held the Emperor's head at Fontainebleau when the poison induced nausea instead of death. Caulaincourt sets down the bitter conversation of those days: there is some very fine invective on the Marshals, "Those geese that I made eagles". Napoleon was weak from vomiting when his *Grand Écuyer* saw him last, setting off for Elba.



But it is of the third book, M. Aubry's *St. Helena*, that I would write. There had been the French Revolution, and then this Napoleon, both of them appalling human cataclysms. The volatile Bourbons re-ascended the throne of Saint Louis, having learned nothing and forgotten nothing. The Allies deliberated in appropriate surroundings at Vienna, to establish the *status quo ante bellum*, lost since Valmy-fight a quarter-century before. And the Emperor was finding it cramped quarters, in the pleasant isle of Elba, between the Gulf of Genoa and the Tyrrhenian Sea. The year '14 spun out, and they drew the Armies home to Central Europe, to England, to the Baltic countries, to remote Russia, and paid them off: expense excessive in any case, all these men under arms: no

more war, now that the Corsican fellow is shut up safely. The next Spring, 1815, occurred the episode men call The Hundred Days. The French Press screamed: Unaccountably, the Assassin has evaded the accredited observers and left his stipulated area: The Corsican Ogre is on the French mainland, where the police will doubtless dispose of him: General Buonaparte is moving up through the *départements*, some of the returned-soldier element with him: The Emperor is in residence at the Tuileries — *Vive l'Empereur!*

You can read elsewhere of the thrust to the north, of the Napoleonic design: drive the Germans eastward, throw the English into the sea before the others arrive! The world knows how the last Army of the Empire went out the Charleroi road from Paris to do it. The events of the disastrous June Sunday by Waterloo village are written in many books. The French Line Regiments expended themselves on Hougoumont and La Haye-Sainte, and the cavalry was squandered in the center; while the Young Guard at Planchenoit Farm behind the right fought faced-about, having Bulow on their necks; and, as the long Summer twilight faded into darkness, only the Old Guard stood

firm in squares to be killed. Some officer, Soult, they say, led a yellow, sweating, sick man, bowed on his horse's neck with bladder pains, away from the bullets that wouldn't have him. Come out of this, Sire! The English have had enough luck on this turn. . . . And here M. Octave Aubry takes up the narrative.

M. Octave Aubry is a painstaking annalist, and his bibliography, four pages of very small type, omits no accepted authority, and lists a number of sources which are new. Extremely zealous, he exiled himself for three months on that historic island in the South Atlantic, and his pages are informed with the hard bright light, the rain-squalls, and the interminable wind of those far latitudes. It is a hundred and fifteen years since they crowded into the mean room at Longwood to watch the Emperor die on his camp bed, and nearly a century since the final Bourbon King brought his ashes home to the banks of the Seine to rest among the French people whom, as the Emperor said, he had loved so well.

The truth of the captivity is hard to reconstruct. While Napoleon lived, myth surrounded him. Only by much sifting do we see the haggard soldier who was five days

coming down to Paris after Waterloo (you observe that the English and the Prussians did not follow him hard, for he had always been dangerous; and there remained to him Grouchy and Exelmans, their corps intact) and then getting himself immediately into a hot bath. And we have Davout, Minister of War, making his report in the bathroom that they show you now, or some room like it, and the Emperor splashing scented water over the Marshal's gold-encrusted coat. Nothing lost, really; we need firmness; throw the lawyers out: dissolve the Assembly: plenty of soldiers! says Davout. But the man in the tub commences to rail at Ney, who slaughtered his cavalry; talks of constitutional government; talks of his Dynasty; talks of the happiness of France; talks — and does nothing. Drifts presently to Malmaison, where a perfume lingers like a ghost in the rooms Josephine used; interviews his brothers and sisters and his grim old mother. The brothers say nothing of consequence: Caroline, Queen of Naples, says a good deal, and all sound sense: Go to the Americas, my brother: do not trust the English. So say some others. At Bordeaux there was an American sloop, the *Pike*, very fast, fast

enough to outsail any frigate in His Majesty's Service, and they engaged his passage on her. But he went listlessly to Rochefort. The Captain of the *Méduse* frigate offers to take on the British blockading squadron of Admiral Hotham while the Emperor runs past in a sloop: the 14th Regiment of Marines offers to get him to sea in a couple of longboats and impress the first sail they raise, to transport him where he will go. He does none of these sensible things. He drifts into the arms of the English: says he comes like Themistocles to throw himself on the generosity of his principal enemy. His classics were sounder than his judgment. When the English got their hands on him, they held him. They had had enough of military episodes. Presently they set him down, as a life guest of the Crown, on the Honorable the East India Company's island of St. Helena.

The company he took was as queer as the rest of the story. There was young General Gourgaud, a soldier who had been wounded, perhaps too often, and done too much staff-service. There was Las Cases, the eulogist, who deliberately set out to report and immortalize the event, and Las Cases along with it. There were the Counts of the Empire, Bertrand

and Montholon, not conspicuously connected with the Empire's glories. There were some servants: Aly; and the old Chasseur, who had an honorable combat record extending as far back as Egypt. There was an Irish contract-surgeon, O'Meara, an observant fellow with a sprightly pen, who managed to betray three parties at once. There were numerous others, not important to the narrative.

Of their housing, and of their economies, M. Aubry sets forth the details. With Captain Maitland and Admiral Cockburn, combat officers, the Emperor got on well enough; and the British regimental officers and soldiers who were set over him showed disquieting signs of adoration. Presently his official jailer arrived, the inimitable Sir Hudson Lowe, a mutton-headed professional whose only known contribution to the Napoleonic Wars was a period of dubious command over a corps of renegade Corsican Irregulars; and the Emperor got down to his last fight, the Battle, or rather the Campaign, of St. Helena. He was six years fighting it. It was his final victory.

There can be no quarrel with the decision of the British Government to incarcerate Napoleon. He had troubled Europe too long. While

he lived, he would be dangerous. They declined to give him, in his captivity, his Imperial style and titles: *Ordered: that Buonaparte receive the honors specified for a retired General Officer of the British Service.* Since the British Government had never recognized the French Empire, there was color of legality behind this decision. But Napoleon was—Napoleon! Moreover, he had surrendered himself: he was not taken by siege or in the field. From that nation whose publicists have brayed most loudly through the ages of the high usages of magnanimity, and of fair play, and such slush, he had reason to expect courteous treatment. What he had, M. Octave Aubry has set down in all essential detail. There was no pettiness to which Sir Hudson Lowe could not stoop: an English gentleman sends certain special volumes for the captive's library—Napoleon was a great reader: Sir Hudson confiscates them because they are engraved with the Imperial Arms, delicate attention of the donor. The Emperor, taking horse-exercise, passes the camp of the 53rd Regiment of the garrison: the English soldiers run out and salute: Sir Hudson orders that British soldiers shall not pay military courtesies to General Buonaparte. The

tale is endless, but not tiresome.

Sir Hudson had some thousands of regulars—infantry and garrison artillery; a formidable squadron was on the Station to watch the sea approaches of an island from which only a bird could have escaped. But he was no match for the smartest brain of his age. It occurs to one that the Emperor's best amusement through that slow time was throwing the hooks into Sir Hudson Lowe. Every littleness, every indignity, he turned to shrewd account. In spite of the most rigid censorship, the world was presently informed that Napoleon was being crucified by a fiend in human form, on a barren rock in the midst of a savage ocean. It was but a step for people to be reminded that, after Napoleon, life was more ample, somehow, for every humble man in Europe: the Empire, directing and controlling the impulses of the French Revolution, had swept the last of feudalism into the dustbin: a man's horizon, in France first, and then through the rest of the old nations, would be bounded hereafter by his own abilities, and not by the station his father had owned and all the dead generations before him. There was a code of laws. There was a new political system. There was also a legend of glory,

with the raw-head-and-bloody-bones that lies behind all glory fading comfortably into the past. The Fouchés, Talleyrands, and Metternich-crew were impotent; all the world was conscious of Napoleon, and began, with the queer illogic of human kind, to love him.

He was wise enough to see it. As you read this chronicle, almost you feel sorry for Sir Hudson Lowe, whose latter end was deservedly miserable. Otherwise, here are recited the curious chronicles of that little court on the windy hills of St. Helena: how Las Cases, Bertrand, Montholon, and General Gourgaud bickered and hated each other and followed the rigid ritual of Versailles: how they all aged together, quarrelling through the long days: of disputes about food and wine and precedence; of the failing man who remained, for every person around his orbit, the central figure of the world. Finally his cancer killed him, as it would have killed him anywhere. He did not live to see the great wind of Liberalism that swept the earth; the German revolution of '48; the new Empire of his nephew, Napoleon the Less; the things that have happened since. But in the high roll of fame, where the battle-names of Italy chant, and Austerlitz, Jena, and

Friedland shine, he could write also, St. Helena.

They buried, in the hollow under the weeping willow trees, a decomposing cadaver — M. Aubry is most explicit — clothed in the green coat and white breeches of a *garde chasseur colonel*. But the Emperor was not in the triple-enclosed casket. He had passed the cordon of sentries, and the official observers of France, Austria, and Russia; and the segmented line of garrison artillery on the St. Helena headlands; and the patrol of English frigates — (presently *H.M.S. London* would be hastening north under press of canvas with a word to free Europe of apprehension); and he had emerged into Legend. There he was entering the provinces of poetry and memoir, and entering also the collection of endorsed fables men call history; spheres of influence beyond the careful regulation of Lord Bathurst and the watchfulness of Sir Hudson Lowe. In Legend, the heroes are always young, and glorious, and free. They triumph by habit over all their enemies. The fragrance of worship, growing more ardent, and less critical and less instructed as the generation of eye-witnesses passes, ascends eternally to their pleasant bivouacs in the Elysian Fields.

THE OPEN FORUM

THE REPUBLICANS REPLY

SIR: With much of what Mr. Varney says in his article, "Autopsy on the Republican Party", I am not in accord. But with one statement I am in complete agreement. When Mr. Varney says that the Republican Party must be the apostle of a burning political conviction, he puts his finger on the heart of the problem. For my part, I would like to see the party, while recognizing the new social obligations placed on government by modern conditions, stand firmly for the maintenance of a free competitive capitalism under a decentralized government of limited power. Whether such a position is called Liberal or Conservative does not seem to me of great importance. I would call it Liberal because it represents, certainly from a historical standpoint, true Liberalism. On the other hand, such a position is Conservative in the sense that it means the preservation of the fundamentals of our American system.

OGDEN L. MILLS

New York City

SIR: I have read Harold Lord Varney's "Autopsy on the Republican Party" with keen interest and with most of the views expressed therein, I fully concur. It is not my belief that the party is through as a political organization. Sixteen and one-half million votes under one banner must always be reckoned with. The mistake of the Republican Party was to place itself where it made inconsistent promises. In making these promises we belittled our own criticism of the New Deal. We cannot promise extravagant spending and yet criticize such expenditures.

Many people thought that the party should offer a substitute for the New Deal.

Many failed to realize that until the New Deal was discredited, no substitute could be offered. In other words, the most effective campaign speech was a speech showing the fallacies of the present trend of government, not a speech trying to set up a new political policy in the place of the one now existing. In other words, it was the experience of nearly every man on the platform that he was more convincing with his audience when he was showing the fallacies of the present New Deal, than when attempting to offer a constructive policy or what a new administration could do.

There is a further lesson in the campaign to the effect that the voter must be taken into the confidence of the political organization. A man may be a mythical character and be sufficiently popular to start a campaign, but to weather the campaign to the end as such is an impossibility.

The suggested coalition between Jeffersonian Democrats and the Republican Party never appealed to me. In each party will be found many voters loyal to the name, and therefore greatly confused if an effort were made to change the party name on the ballot. It seems to me that hope of Republican success will come through a division of interest between the vested political control in the South, all in the hands of the Democrats, and the present trend of our industrial and congested centers toward Democracy.

It is my view that the most constructive suggestion in Mr. Varney's analysis is that the Republican Party will become the Conservative Party, that in the end the majority of the property-owning, liberty-loving people in America believe in sound political doctrines. That no effort should be made to