

# *I and the Emperor*

## **SYNOPSIS**

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Come October 1815, the island of St. Helena in the South Atlantic Ocean has a new visitor – Napoleon Bonaparte, Emperor of the French, fresh from his final defeat at the Battle of Waterloo and condemned to spend the remainder of his life in “house arrest” on the island. Anticipating the controversial conqueror’s arrival is the 16-year-old Betsy Balcombe, who has lived most of her life hearing stories of Napoleon as a Genghis Khan-like marauder.

Before too long, Betsy is able to test these rumors herself, since the Emperor, waiting for his final residence to be prepared, temporarily moves into a cottage on her father’s property. In the following weeks, Betsy raises up the courage to speak to the Emperor and come to know him more and more – and know him, too, in undulating waves, first as a harmless, petulant child, but second as a misunderstood man with heart and soul.

The house of cards collapses when Betsy stumbles upon Captain James Wallis, a man who was imprisoned for 10 years by Napoleon some years back, prior to a daring escape across the Seine. Could it be that Wallis’s first-hand account of torture and murder is true and the Emperor is the monster everyone else claims? When Betsy tries to find out, Napoleon erupts in rage, turning into a crazed, raving madman and bringing Betsy back to the raw reality that the man she has come to trust, even admire, is, at heart, callous and cruel.

Feeling tricked and foolish, Betsy exiles herself from the Emperor for some months and is only prompted to see him again through entreaties by one of his servants, who recognizes that the Emperor, increasingly sick and lonely, misses the young girl’s spirit. Betsy is determined not to revive her relationship with the man, but finds herself doing just that when the spiteful new Governor of St. Helena expels Napoleon’s personal physician, leaving him, in his sickened condition, ripe for death. Buoyed by sympathy and a new realization that cruelty is not just a Napoleonic vice, Betsy determines to see the Emperor again, despite the introduction of new, restrictive pass laws – but can she gain appropriate clearance before he dies and finally make peace with the man and his complexity?