

## **Arsenic and Green Wallpaper**

He probably died of arsenic poisoning. There was enough of it on the island to kill every man, woman and child ten times over. Yet the official verdict was stomach cancer – that despite the fact he was getting fatter and fatter. Someone said he was “fat as a Chinese pig.” (Hibbert, p. 297). But let’s not forget the lunatic fringe. According to them, he wasn’t dead at all. Oh no. He’d been spotted walking around – in Rome, in Scotland, in Louisiana – some said with a new wife on his arm. It’s surprising, isn’t it, that, still, after nearly 200 years, nobody knows for certain how he died. After all, he wasn’t just anybody. He was the most famous man in the world.

Fifteen years earlier, the world thought he was gone for good. Then, he had made that alarming reappearance. His escape from Elba, “the one hundred days” – all this had caught Europe by surprise. For a time it looked as if the whole nightmare was going to start again. But he was stopped in his tracks at Waterloo. Thank God for Waterloo.

With Napoleon once more in their hands, the English swore there was not going to be a second Elba. Fool me once... Make no mistake, this time he would go and stay gone. While his captors were deciding what to do with him, the erstwhile emperor and his entourage remained under close guard aboard a warship in Plymouth harbor. Every evening at six o’clock, when the weather was fine, he came out on deck to take the air. The locals, thrilled at having a world-class celebrity in their midst, soon learned when he was likely to emerge, and in ever increasing numbers rowed out to gawk. A young artist, Charles Locke Eastlake (1793-1865) made sketches of him as he paced up and down the deck, later using those sketches to produce a major painting, which now hangs in the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich. It is the only portrait of Napoleon painted from life by a British artist. The picture will crop up later in the

story, but now we return to the British authorities who were wrestling with the question of what to do with Europe's Public Enemy Number One.

Some among them favored execution. But that was out of the question. Exile was clearly the best option, but exile to a place far more secure than Elba. They needed a remote island under English control, one with an established garrison already in place. If living conditions were unpleasant, the climate unhealthy, so much the better. St. Helena fit the bill to perfection. Located in the South Atlantic, the small volcanic island lay roughly 1800 miles from South Africa and the same distance from South America. Its population of 4000, consisted of blacks, Chinese, Lascars, plus the English garrison and a few miscellaneous Europeans. Ships stopped there from time to time to take on water and supplies, but otherwise St. Helena, roughly ten miles long by seven miles wide, supported little beside the commerce surrounding its small port and naval base. Before it became home to the most famous prisoner in the world, few people knew of its existence – except, of course, the sailors. And what did the sailors know? They knew the island had plenty of booze and willing women, and was overrun with rats. (Weider, p. 51). It was because of the rats that arsenic was so plentiful - a couple of cans of it could be found in every garden shed on the island

On October 17, 1815, the HMS *Northumberland* dropped anchor off Jamestown, the only community of any size in St. Helena. The trip from England had taken more than two months. On deck Bonaparte got his first view of the dismal place where he would end his days. At his side stood the handful of officers who had volunteered to share his exile. Two of them, Count Charles de Montholon and Henri Bertrand, were accompanied by their wives and children. Some minor functionaries and the servants completed the

entourage – twenty-six in all. It was a far cry from Fontainebleau.

So, too, was Longwood House, the building chosen to be their home. When they arrived, the house was still in the hands of the carpenters, the painters and the paper hangers. The exiles were temporarily billeted in and around the town. Then, in the first week of December Bonaparte learned that Longwood House was nearly ready, and a few days later he and his household moved in. For five years this dismal building with its jerrybuilt additions would serve as home for the court in exile. Because of its exposed, windswept position, because of the years it had stood unoccupied, because of the shoddy remodeling, Longwood House was never more than a tarted up slum. Dampness crept through the partitions, staining the new, green wallpaper, mildew ruined the new curtains, rain came through the roof, and the resident rats, long in undisputed possession, scuttled through the rooms, refusing to be dislodged.

At first the little court made a brave show of maintaining standards, with uniforms brushed, silver polished, and ceremonial observed. Surely, this dreadful place was not to be their permanent residence. Any day, now, word would come that they could go – to a country house in England; to Rome; to America. But as the months passed, then the years, it became clear that there would be no pardon, no parole, no rescue.

Having nothing to do but eat three meals a day, and look for ships bringing letters from home, it is hardly surprising that the court turned to intrigue. One and all, sought advancement by toadying to the emperor. Gossip, accusations and innuendo, purloined letters, whispered secrets, ceaseless jockeying for position, all these were part of the malicious game that was the chief entertainment at Longwood House. Two prizes awaited those who played the

game adroitly: first prize, favors from the Emperor; second prize, favors of a more intimate kind from Albine the wife of the comte de Montholon

While positioning and re-positioning occupied the Longwood household, parallel maneuvers took place between the captives and their captors. Initially, during the first five months, relations between the British and the French had been rather relaxed, but all that changed in April, 1816, with the arrival of a new governor. Sir Hudson Lowe clearly hated the job he had been assigned. Insecure, humorless, scared to death of doing something wrong, he was no match for Napoleon Bonaparte, and he knew it. Under the new governor security on the island verged on the obsessive. The English garrison, beefed up to three thousand, provided round the clock troops to guard Longwood House, to patrol the roads, and to man the hilltop watch towers. Night and day British warships circled the island. Gun emplacements defended the coast from a rescue operation that was never contemplated. Clearly, Napoleon Bonaparte wasn't going anywhere.

Governor and Prisoner played a game of wits: the self-doubting Englishman with three thousand soldiers at his command versus the ex-emperor with a squabbling entourage of just twenty-six. Lowe told the emperor he must make himself visible twice a day so the guards could make sure he was still there. Napoleon thereupon began spending the days in his room, with the blinds drawn. When Lowe ordered him to remain on the Longwood grounds, the emperor decided a daily ride across the island would be just the thing for his health. These defiant gestures helped Napoleon relieve the monotony, while at the same time infuriating the egregious Hudson Lowe.

And so it went for five and half years. The health of many members of the Longwood household deteriorated, and some suffered periods of serious illness. A few broke under

the strain and were allowed to go home. In February, 1818, Napoleon's maitre d'hotel, Jean Baptiste Cipriani, a key member of the staff, was stricken with acute stomach pains and was dead two days later. He had been with Napoleon many years, and had been the emperor's confidante as well as his servant. Only he was allowed to prepare his master's food and drink. Like Bonaparte, Cipriani was Corsican, and rumor had it that he was the emperor's illegitimate half-brother – a claim that was strengthened by his appearance. He is said to have borne an uncanny resemblance to Napoleon – not the Napoleon of St. Helena, but the young, energetic Napoleon of sixteen years earlier: Napoleon the First Consul. Cipriani's sudden death shocked the household, and when, shortly after his funeral, word went 'round that he might have been poisoned, Napoleon ordered the body exhumed. The grave was opened, but Cipriani wasn't in it. The corpse had been stolen and was never recovered.

Among the replacements who came to fill vacancies in the Longwood household were two priests. They arrived from Rome in response to the emperor's request for someone to minister to the needs of the observant. Bonaparte himself had little use for religion, but thought some spirited theological debate would enliven the tedium of the long evenings. And what did Rome send him? Who stepped off the boat? Not one but two semi-literates, neither one equipped to discuss matters of doctrine. Napoleon was outraged.

With the priests came a replacement physician, a young Corsican who would care for the emperor during his last illnesses. Lord knows, the doctor had his work cut out for him, for Bonaparte's health was deteriorating rapidly. Every day, or so it seemed, he developed new symptoms, suffered new afflictions. At the same time he was getting alarmingly stout. This was nothing new. Some eight or nine years earlier, when he was only forty, he had begun putting on

weight. Because he stood only five foot three, his increased girth was hard to hide, though the artists who painted his portraits made every effort to do so. Whatever caused this early change in his appearance also brought about changes in his temperament. The emperor, once trim and tireless, had started complaining of fatigue, and spent more and more time propped up in bed. A new peevishness crept into his voice. He sulked. He couldn't make up his mind. Napoleon had begun to dither. As Carnot, his Minister of War, had written at the time:

"I no longer know him. He used to be lean, shy, and silent. Now he is fat and garrulous. He is sleepy, and his mind wanders. He, the man of rapid decisions, who resented the proffer of advice, now talks instead of acting, and asks opinions." (Weider, p. 56).

On St. Helena, his bloated body continued to swell. An English medical man said that his appearance "was more that of an obese Spanish or Portugese friar than the hero of modern times." As his weight increased and his health declined, the will to make trouble for his captors ebbed away. Depressed, listless, and usually suffering pain, he found himself without the energy to cope with his own household, let alone to wage a battle of wits with the English. The cat and mouse game he had played with the governor no longer seemed worth the effort, the rides in the country too tiring. Previously, he had had good days and bad days, now they were almost all bad.

By the middle of March, 1821, it became clear that Napoleon was desperately ill; some thought he was dying. Hudson Lowe, always one to misjudge a situation, thought he was just pretending. More and more Bonaparte kept to his room. There were days when he couldn't stop vomiting, days when he couldn't find relief from the pain in his side. The diaries kept by those who were with him provide a detailed account of his decline. Some idea of his suffering during those final

months can be found in the following partial catalogue of his afflictions: severe pains in the side, burning sensations in the abdomen, coldness in the legs and feet, perpetual thirst, palpitations of the heart, loosening teeth, sleeplessness, constipation, hiccoughs, sensitivity to light, skin rash, weak, irregular pulse, deafness, and nausea. (Weider, p. 197). His existence had become little more than a day to day struggle to keep suffering at bay. Death, when it came, on May 5, 1821, brought an end to his torments. Napoleon Bonaparte was fifty-two. He had spent five and a half years on St. Helena.

More than a dozen witnesses attended Napoleon's autopsy: the number included six English doctors and Napoleon's personal physician, the Corsican who had looked after him for the last eighteen months. According to the report, the body on the table was obese and virtually without hair, the shoulders narrow, the hips wide. It conveyed a curiously feminine appearance, and this was accentuated by enlarged breasts. The genital organs were abnormally small. The English physicians concentrated their attention almost entirely on the diseased stomach. Since cancer was one of the few causes of death that could not be attributed either to negligence or foul play, their focus suggests that a verdict of cancer had been pre-arranged. Napoleon's own physician disagreed with the diagnosis, noting the large liver, which to him suggested either hepatitis or poisoning. The British doctors overruled him peremptorily, and the death certificate duly noted stomach cancer as the cause of death. None of the physicians raised the point that emaciation, not obesity, usually accompanies cancer. With the closing of the corpse, the English doctors withdrew and the Corsican doctor called on Napoleon's two valets to prepare and dress the body for burial. The blood stained sheet on which it had lain was cut up for relics and distributed. On the two following nights, one of the semi-literate priests, Father Vignali, kept watch over the body and was joined in his vigil by the valets, each in turn.

On May 6, soldiers from the British garrison, sailors from the warships, and all the locals who could find appropriate clothes, came to pay their respects. The emperor, dressed in a fresh green uniform, rested on a richly embroidered cloak. He looked regal in death, but to those who filed past the bier it was evident that the body was rapidly deteriorating. Although the windows had been flung open, the South Atlantic breezes could not dispel the stench of putrefaction. On the evening of May 7 the corpse was transferred to the innermost of four coffins. All four were then sealed, and the nested coffins were carried to the funeral carriage by twelve soldiers. As the hearse passed along the route to the burial place, the British garrison of 3,000 men stood at attention with arms reversed. Under a clump willow trees in the so-called Valley of Geranium, troops from the Corps of Engineers had dug a grave. The coffin was lowered and the honor guard fired three salvos of fifteen rounds. There was a pause at the end of the ceremonies, a silence, then, when it was clear that nothing more was to come, and acting as if on cue, the crowd surged forward to strip the willows of leaves, twigs, small branches, anything within reach, to keep as a souvenir.

Bonaparte's body remained undisturbed in that desolate spot for nineteen years. Then, in 1840, after vigorous petitioning by the French government, Britain finally agreed to its removal from St. Helena, and to its being taken back to France for reburial. Accordingly, on July 7, 1840, a French expedition set out for the remote island under the command of one of the sons of King Louis-Philippe. On its arrival, after a three-month trip, the French royal party and the officers of the English garrison supervised the exhumation. Raising the coffin was done in the middle of a torrential rainstorm on the night of October 15, 1840. The last of the four coffins was opened at 1 a.m. It remained open for just two minutes, just long enough for the French party to identify the body. This proved easy, for the body was said to be remarkably well

preserved. "He looked as if he were asleep," wrote one. "The Emperor's handsome face was in perfect condition ... There even seemed to hover around his mouth the sardonic smile which is also displayed by his death mask. The hands were pink in colour ..." (Willms, p. 169). In addition to that, the teeth were said to be sound and white. The reports of the French party whose loyalty, it must be remembered, verged on the idolatrous, all commented on the body's almost miraculous state of preservation. Several exclaimed over the face's resemblance to the death mask on exhibit in Paris. Considering the brief time the body was exposed, the darkness of the night, and the pouring rain, a remarkable quantity of detail was noted and recorded. Three days later the French ship with its precious cargo set sail for France.

Just as a rainstorm had marked the exhumation on St. Helena, a snow storm marked the official state funeral in Paris, five months later on December 15, 1840. Thereafter, the coffin remained in a side chapel of Les Invalides for the next twenty years, while the area under the great dome was being remodeled. At last, on April 3, 1861, a full forty years after Napoleon's death, the circular, sunken crypt was ready, and the remains, now encased in six coffins, were placed in the immense red porphyry sarcophagus that many of us here have seen. Theatrical? Certainly. Over the top? Of course. But no one - not even those of us who find little to admire in the man inside all those coffins - no one could fail to be bowled over by his last resting place.

Questions about who or what killed Napoleon began to circulate almost immediately after his death, and continue to this day. The diagnosis made by the English doctors at the post mortem, cancer of the stomach, remains the most widely accepted. But other researchers, agreeing with Bonaparte's own physician, have pointed to the condition of the liver. Was the diseased liver brought about by poisoning? Laboratory tests carried out in recent years on samples of Bonaparte's hair, cut during his exile and

preserved as mementoes, show high levels of arsenic. One proponent of the poisoning theory goes so far as to state that "Napoleon in his last days showed no less than twenty-two of the thirty recognized symptoms of arsenic poisoning." (Weider, p. 40).

If we accept the possibility that Bonaparte was poisoned, the next question is, who poisoned him? Hudson Lowe, the British governor, would never have sanctioned a murder, responsible, as he was, for the prisoner's safety and well being. Research over the years has failed to come up with any English suspect. On the other hand several professional and amateur investigators claim to have identified a member of Bonaparte's own household as a likely candidate: Charles, comte de Montholon.

Montholon, a charming but thoroughly unscrupulous man, had advanced his way through the upper echelons of the French army through lies and dissembling. He is said to have been introduced into Napoleon's inner circle as a spy – a spy, not for the English but for the Bourbons. The Bourbons, you remember, had been reinstated as France's hereditary rulers after Napoleon's defeat. Because they weren't liked, and their perch on the throne was precarious, Napoleon's continued popularity worried them. The Bourbons needed someone on the spot, on St. Helena, to let them know what was going on. They needed a spy, and Montholon, according to this theory, was their man.

Hired as an informer, Montholon became a poisoner on his own initiative. But before he could take on the emperor, someone else had to be eliminated first: Cipriani. Cipriani, Napoleon's butler, was the only person allowed to handle the emperor's food and drink. If Napoleon was to be poisoned, clearly, Cipriani had to be got out of the way. Cipriani was a robust, healthy man, but, as we have seen, he was suddenly stricken, and after forty-eight hours of intense pain, he was dead. With the butler gone and his body taken from its

grave so as to hide the evidence of foul play, the way was now clear. The ever-willing Montholon thereafter oversaw the preparation and serving of the emperor's meals. When Bonaparte called for something to ease his unquenchable thirst, Montholon was there to fetch it. He was making himself the indispensable man.

The Montholon family, Charles, his wife Albine, and their young family, had been on St. Helena from the very beginning. Albine, bored out of her mind, amused herself by keeping Longwood House stirred up, and jumping in bed with all and sundry. No one was surprised when she became pregnant. But they *were* surprised when she let it be known that "you know who" was the father, and in case anyone missed the point, when the infant girl was born she named her "Josephine." Napoleon, sick and impotent, decided he'd had enough of Albine. She and the children found themselves on the next boat back to France.

At this point, the theory continues, her besotted husband began hurrying things along. After all, he was just helping a dying man out of his misery and at the same time hastening the time when they could all go home. Besides, there was much to look forward to. Once back in France he would be welcomed by an ardent wife and a grateful Bourbon government. He would also collect a legacy of two million francs that Bonaparte had promised him in his will – this in addition to the gifts and money that Albine had not scrupled to accept from a multitude of lovers. With motives such as these, why not step up the pace? He did so, and Napoleon, already well laced with poison, grew rapidly weaker, and was brought to his deathbed. The doctors unwittingly finished him off by administering mercury-based calomel to relieve his constipation. The combination of arsenic and mercury proved lethal. So runs the French-conspiracy theory, which has gained acceptance in recent years. But not from the French.

And now, in a brief footnote, let me mention the “death by wallpaper” theory. This, too, attributes Bonaparte’s death to arsenic poisoning, but claims it was an impersonal death. In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century the ink commonly used to print green wallpaper was made from a dilute arsenic solution. Napoleon liked green. It was his favorite color, and lots of green wallpaper had been hung in the refurbished Longwood House. When dry it was harmless; when damp, as it constantly was in St. Helena’s humid climate, it released deadly fumes. Thus, it was not a disloyal member of the household but the toxic nature of the wallpaper that caused the frequent illnesses of the staff, and the emperor’s own death.

After Bonaparte was laid to rest under the willows, his entourage left St. Helena and headed home. With them in their suitcases they carried mementos of the drama they had been a part of: silverware, clothing, books, locks of hair, scraps of paper, most presented by the emperor himself, some picked up surreptitiously.

Father Vignali, one of the two semi literate priests, had in his possession many relics from his months as chaplain to the imperial household. As you remember, he was present at Napoleon’s death, and afterwards had kept watch over the body on the nights before his burial. Probably during one of his night vigils he acquired a relic that he then smuggled off the island. Later, this relic became so celebrated that for more than a hundred years it was known quite simply as “the Napoleon relic.” Everybody knew what it was and everybody was fascinated. Why? Quite simply, because of its prurient interest.

Apparently, while keeping vigil over Napoleon’s body, Father Vignali and Ali St. Denis, one of the valets, were moved to detach a body-part from the corpse - not a finger or a toe, of which there are ten each, but a highly intimate masculine part of which there is but one. The loss of this part first

came to general notice in 1852, almost 30 years after Napoleon's death. In that year the valet published an account of Napoleon's last days. In it he confessed that he and Father Vignali had detached something from the body – the "something" being unspecified. The rumors that then began to circulate were more specific, and before long there was scarcely anyone in Western Europe who didn't know what it was they had taken. Whether one believed it or not was another matter – it depended largely on one's nationality. The English believed it and thought it a huge joke; the French poo-pooed it as preposterous.

These matters stood until 1916 when a descendant of Father Vignali's sister, to whom the priest's relics had passed, sold the collection to Maggs & Company, probably the foremost English dealer in rare books. Included in the collection was the celebrated body part. The autopsy had described it as "abnormally small." Apparently the passage of years had still further diminished it, for now it was said to resemble a small piece of leather shoelace. Although the Vignali provenance lent credibility to its authenticity, still, a lot had to be taken on faith, not just whose it was, but what it was.

In 1924 the Vignali collection passed from England's fanciest dealer in rare books, to America's fanciest dealer in rare books. Dr. A.S.W. Rosenbach, the dean of American bibliography, paid 400 pounds for the Vignali collection. Forget the silverware, the clothing and other relics, he would have paid 400 pounds just to get the shoelace. Mounted now in a sumptuous morocco case, it was passed around after Rosenbach's stag suppers, eliciting from the host and his cronies many a ribald remark. Rosenbach advertised the Vignali collection for sale in a separately published, illustrated catalogue. Among the forty items in the collection, the star attraction was described coyly as "a mummified tendon taken from Napoleon's body during the post-mortem." But Rosenbach wasn't trying to deceive anybody. The whole world was in on the joke.

I remember visiting Rosenbach's New York business premises early in the 1950s with my father. I was an undergraduate at the time, and was mightily impressed by the two storey medieval hall that housed, in locked cases, the extraordinary books and manuscripts the firm had for sale. Rosenbach's successor, John Fleming, brought out one treasure after another, then let drop, oh so casually, that the Napoleon relic had at one time been part of the firm's inventory. My father acknowledged that he was aware of it, then he and Fleming exchanged knowing smiles. I had no idea what they were talking about, but didn't ask. Later, my father enlightened me.

I will not burden you with the names of the collectors and dealers through whose hands it passed after it left Rosenbach's sumptuous rooms. Suffice it to say that in 1977 Dr. John Lattimer, a prominent urologist at Columbia University, acquired it for roughly \$3,000. Dr. Lattimer collected historical curiosities, and over the course of his lifetime amassed more than 3000 bizarre objects. His collection included the bloodstained collar that Lincoln was wearing the night he was shot, and the cyanide capsule that Hermann Goering used to commit suicide. Dr. Lattimer died at his home in Englewood, New Jersey, in 2007, age 92. Since that time his daughter has been going through his collection trying to determine where the various relics should go. Her brother advised her to throw away the Napoleon relic, but then she got a phone call offering her \$100,000 for it. So I guess she is still thinking it over.

The story of the Vignali relic has been passed along for 150 years with a full complement of winks and chuckles. Now at last it is running out of steam. In its place another relic has caught the attention of researchers, foremost among them, a lawyer named Bruno Roy-Henry. The questions posed by this newly prominent relic extend much further than the length of a shoelace – they extend all the way to Paris. The

relic that has caught the attention of historians is Napoleon's death mask, long an object of veneration among Bonapartists. Recent study has raised questions as to its identity, and, in fact, to the identity of the body in the red sarcophagus.

On May 7, 1821, two days after Bonaparte's death, an English doctor, Francis Burton, made a death mask from the emperor's face. A death mask is made by spreading wet plaster over the face of the deceased. The face has previously been prepared with ointment so that the plaster, when hard, can be lifted off. The plaster then serves as a mold from which a number of masks can be made. The mold-mask made by Dr. Burton was stolen hours after it was made; by the time the theft was discovered Napoleon was under ground, so another one could not be made. Ten years later a mask turned up in Paris that purported to be made from the missing mold. Dr. Burton was dead by then, but Napoleon's Corsican doctor was still living, and so was Napoleon's mother. Both confirmed that it was genuine. Of course they did, the mask showed the face of a handsome man in the prime of life. In time the French government acquired the mask, and many of you have seen it on display in the Rotunda from which visitors look down on Napoleon's tomb. An ascetic face, with a sensitive mouth, a thin, high bridged nose, prominent cheekbones, and deep-sunk eyes. It looks just like Napoleon did when he was thirty-one, and serving as First Consul. It does not resemble in the least the bloated fifty-two year old man who died on St. Helena.

Two explanations come to mind. The first recommends itself by its simplicity: the so-called "death mask" in Paris is not a death mask at all, but a life mask taken in 1800 when Napoleon **was**, in fact, the handsome, young First Consul. The second possibility is more complicated and puts a greater strain on our credulity. It again involves Cipriani, Napoleon's look alike butler. During the years on St. Helena, while Napoleon grew ever fatter, Cipriani retained his lean

good looks – never losing his remarkable resemblance to the youthful Napoleon. In recent years it has been suggested that the death mask exhibited at Les Invalides is in fact the death mask of Cipriani. But why, I would ask, why would anyone make a death mask of a servant? It's not an easy or a pleasant undertaking, and while one might do it for an emperor, no one would do it for an emperor's butler – unless it were part of a larger plot.

Those who see Cipriani as central to the story, DO see it as part of a larger plot. They call attention to the appearance and condition of the corpse that was exhumed in the middle of the rainstorm in 1840. How could that well preserved body be Napoleon's? To be sure, arsenic is an acknowledged preservative, but it does not reverse putrefaction. When Napoleon was buried nineteen years earlier, his body was already decomposing. His teeth were loose and badly decayed. How could his body have reconstituted itself, his decayed teeth become healthy and white? How could the bloated face have regained its youthful features? Improbable? No, not improbable, *impossible*, say many of those who have studied the matter. If the body that was exhumed in 1840 and taken to France was not Napoleon's, whose was it? The only person on St. Helena who looked like a thirty-one year old Napoleon was Cipriani. Did someone switch the bodies? So who lies in state under the dome of Les Invalides? Who *IS* buried in Napoleon's tomb? Why, Cipriani, of course.

The theory leaves several questions to be answered. To begin with, why was the exhumed corpse (no matter whose it was) in such good condition? Napoleon's body, already decaying at the time of his burial, had been under ground for nineteen years. Cipriani had been dead still longer. Neither corpse had been embalmed. Is an un-embalmed body recognizable after twenty years? I am not an undertaker, so I cannot say, but common sense suggests that a body would be largely decomposed after that length

of time – even if it contained arsenic. So how could the coffin that was lifted from the ground that rainy night contain a body so remarkably preserved that it was instantly identifiable? How could witnesses testify that the face looked like the lean, ascetic death mask preserved in Paris? How could anything recognizable have remained after all those years? Unless, of course, Cipriani's corpse, which we know was stolen, had been secretly embalmed and hidden, then at some later date substituted for Napoleon's. But who, I wonder, would want to do all this, and to what purpose?

Just in case you wished the evidence were more challenging, I must mention, in conclusion, that there are two so-called death masks in existence. And they are quite different. As we have seen, the one exhibited at Les Invalides, is thin and ascetic. The second one, which is known as "the London mask," shows the features of a prematurely old man, his face unhealthy and bloated. It is the face that anyone familiar with the story of Napoleon's last years would expect to see. The London mask shows a small scar on Napoleon's left cheek. No such scar appears on the mask in Paris, nor does it appear on any of Napoleon's many official portraits.

Now cast your mind back to 1815 when we saw Napoleon in Plymouth harbor, a prisoner aboard a warship waiting for the British government to decide what to do with him. As you remember, many people from Plymouth came out in small boats to catch a glimpse of him as he paced the deck. Among them, a young artist, Charles Locke Eastlake, made sketches of the emperor, on which he based a major oil painting. It is the only life portrait of Napoleon that clearly shows a scar on his left cheek, just where the scar appears on the London mask. The scar confirms what the eye suspected: that the London death mask is the real death mask. But don't ask to see it. You can see photographs of it, but the mask itself - like so much of the evidence in this story - the mask itself has mysteriously disappeared.

So who **IS** lying in that magnificent red sarcophagus?  
Who **IS** buried in Napoleon's tomb?  
Perhaps I'll let **YOU** decide.

But whoever it is, I'm inclined to think it was the wallpaper  
that killed him.

Charles Hamilton; *Auction Madness*.

Frank Giles; *Napoleon Bonaparte; England's Prisoner*.

Julia Blackburn; *The Emperor's Last Island; a Journey to St. Helena*.

Edwin Wolf; *Rosenbach, a biography*.

John Vernon; "Exhuming a Dirty Joke," in *New York Times*, July 12, 1992.

John Lichfield; "The Many Faces of Napoleon," in [London] *The Independent*,  
Aug. 23, 2007.

Brett Popplewell, "Is Napoleon's death mask a masquerade? In [Toronto] *The  
Globe and Mail*, Aug 27, 2007.

Jean-Paul Kauffmann, *The Black Room at Longwood*.

Ben Weider; *The Murder of Napoleon* (NY, 1982).

Simon Leys; *The Death of Napoleon* (London, 1991).

Frank Richardson; *Napoleon's Death* (London, 1974).

Christopher Hibbert; *Napoleon, his Wives and Women*. (Appendix).

Alan Schom; *Napoleon Bonaparte* (N.Y., 1997), pp. 775-87.

Johannes Willms; *Napoleon & St. Helena* (London, 2007).

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