

CHAPTER XIII

MONSIEUR AUGUSTE ENTRAPPED

It may be well to declare here and now that I do not intend to burden this story with the business which had brought me to New Orleans. While in the city during the next few days I met a young gentleman named Daniel Clark, a nephew of that Mr. Clark of whom I have spoken. Many years after the time of which I write this Mr. Daniel Clark the younger, who became a rich merchant and an able man of affairs, published a book which sets forth with great clearness proofs of General Wilkinson's duplicity and treason, and these may be read by any who would satisfy himself further on the subject. Mr. Wharton had not believed, nor had I flattered myself that I should be able to bring such a fox as General Wilkinson to earth. Abundant circumstantial evidence I obtained: Wilkinson's intimacy with Miro was well known, and I likewise learned that a cipher existed between them. The permit to trade given by Miro to Wilkinson was made no secret of. In brief, I may say that I discovered as much as could be discovered by any one without arousing suspicion, and that the information with which I returned to Kentucky was of some material value to my employers.

I have to thank Monsieur Philippe de St. Gré for a great deal. And I take this opportunity to set down the fact that I have rarely met a more remarkable man.

As I rode back to town alone a whitish film was spread before the sun, and ere I had come in sight of the fortifications the low forest on the western bank was a dark green blur against the sky. The esplanade on the levee was deserted, the willow trees had a mournful look, while

the bright tiles of yesterday seemed to have faded to a sombre tone. I spied Xavier on a bench smoking with some friends of his.

"He make much rain soon, Michié," he cried. "You hev good time, I hope, Michié."

I waved my hand and rode on, past the Place d'Armes with its white diagonal bands strapping its green like a soldier's front, and as I drew up before the gate of the House of the Lions the warning taps of the storm were drumming on the magnolia leaves. The same *gardienne* came to my knock, and in answer to her shrill cry a negro lad appeared to hold my horse. I was ushered into a brick-paved archway that ran under the latticed gallery toward a flower-filled court-yard, but ere we reached this the *gardienne* turned to the left up a flight of steps with a delicate balustrade which led to an open gallery above. And there stood the gentleman whom we had met hurrying to town in the morning. A gentleman he was, every inch of him. He was dressed in black silk, his hair in a cue, and drawn away from a face of remarkable features. He had a high-bridged nose, a black eye that held an inquiring sternness, a chin indented, and a receding forehead. His stature was indeterminable. In brief, he might have stood for one of those persons of birth and ability who become prime ministers of France.

"Monsieur de St. Gré?" I said.

He bowed gracefully, but with a tinge of condescension. I was awed, and considering the relations which I had already had with his family, I must admit that I was somewhat frightened.

"Monsieur," I said, "I bring letters to you from Monsieur Gratiot and Colonel Chouteau of St. Louis. One of these I had the honor to deliver to Madame de St. Gré, and here is the other."

"Ah," he said, with another keen glance, "I met you this morning, did I not?"

"You did, Monsieur."

He broke the seal, and, going to the edge of the gallery, held the letter to the light. As he read a peal of thunder

broke distantly, the rain came down in a flood. Then he folded the paper carefully and turned to me again.

"You will make my house your home, Mr. Ritchie," he said; "recommended from such a source, I will do all I can to serve you. But where is this Mr. Temple of whom the letter speaks? His family in Charlestown is known to me by repute."

"By Madame de St. Gré's invitation he remained at Les Iles," I answered, speaking above the roar of the rain.

"I was just going to the table," said Monsieur de St. Gré; "we will talk as we eat."

He led the way into the dining room, and as I stood on the threshold a bolt of great brilliancy lighted its yellow-washed floor and walnut furniture of a staid pattern. A deafening crash followed as we took our seats, while Monsieur de St. Gré's man lighted four candles of green myrtle-berry wax.

"Monsieur Gratiot's letter speaks vaguely of politics, Mr. Ritchie," began Monsieur de St. Gré. He spoke English perfectly, save for an occasional harsh aspiration which I cannot imitate.

Directing his man to fetch a certain kind of Madeira, he turned to me with a look of polite inquiry which was scarcely reassuring. And I reflected, the caution with which I had been endowed coming uppermost, that the man might have changed since Monsieur Gratiot had seen him. He had, moreover, the air of a man who gives a forced attention, which seemed to me the natural consequences of the recent actions of his son.

"I fear that I am intruding upon your affairs, Monsieur," I answered.

"Not at all, sir," he said politely. "I have met that charming gentleman, Mr. Wilkinson, who came here to brush away the causes of dissension, and cement a friendship between Kentucky and Louisiana."

It was most fortunate that the note of irony did not escape me.

"Where governments failed, General Wilkinson succeeded," I answered dryly.

Monsieur de St. Gré glanced at me, and an enigmatical smile spread over his face. I knew then that the ice was cracked between us. Yet he was too much a man of the world not to make one more tentative remark.

"A union between Kentucky and Louisiana would be a resistless force in the world, Mr. Ritchie," he said.

"It was Nebuchadnezzar who dreamed of a composite image, Monsieur," I answered; "and Mr. Wilkinson forgets one thing, — that Kentucky is a part of the United States."

At that Monsieur St. Gré laughed outright. He became a different man, though he lost none of his dignity.

"I should have had more faith in my old friend Gratiot," he said; "but you will pardon me if I did not recognize at once the statesman he had sent me, Mr. Ritchie."

It was my turn to laugh.

"Monsieur," he went on, returning to that dignity of mien which marked him, "my political opinions are too well known that I should make a mystery of them to you. I was born a Frenchman, I shall die a Frenchman, and I shall never be happy until Louisiana is French once more. My great-grandfather, a brother of the Marquis de St. Gré of that time, and a wild blade enough, came out with D'Iberville. His son, my grandfather, was the Commissary-general of the colony under the Marquis de Vaudreuil. He sent me to France for my education, where I was introduced at court by my kinsman, the old Marquis, who took a fancy to me and begged me to remain. It was my father's wish that I should return, and I did not disobey him. I had scarcely come back, Monsieur, when that abominable secret bargain of Louis the Fifteenth became known, ceding Louisiana to Spain. You may have heard of the revolution which followed here. It was a mild affair, and the remembrance of it makes me smile to this day, though with bitterness. I was five and twenty, hot-headed, and French. *Que voulez-vous?*" and Monsieur de St. Gré shrugged his shoulders. "O'Reilly, the famous Spanish general, came with his men-of-war. Well I remember the days we waited with leaden hearts for the men-of-war to come up from the

English turn; and I can see now the cannon frowning from the ports, the grim spars, the high poops crowded with officers, the great anchors splashing the yellow water. I can hear the chains running. The ships were in line of battle before the town, their flying bridges swung to the levee, and they loomed above us like towering fortresses. It was dark, Monsieur, such as this afternoon, and we poor French colonists stood huddled in the open space below, waiting for we knew not what."

He paused, and I started, for the picture he drew had carried me out of myself.

"On the 18th of August, 1769,—well I remember the day," Monsieur de St. Gré continued, "the Spanish troops landed late in the afternoon, twenty-six hundred strong, the artillery rumbling over the bridges, the horses wheeling and rearing. And they drew up as in line of battle in the Place d'Armes,—dragoons, *fusileros de montañas*, light and heavy infantry. Where were our white cockades then? Fifty guns shook the town, the great O'Reilly limped ashore through the smoke, and Louisiana was lost to France. We had a cowardly governor, Monsieur, whose name is written in the annals of the province in letters of shame. He betrayed Monsieur de St. Gré and others into O'Reilly's hands, and when my father was cast into prison he was seized with such a fit of anger that he died."

Monsieur de St. Gré was silent. Without, under the eaves of the gallery, a white rain fell, and a steaming moisture arose from the court-yard.

"What I have told you, Monsieur, is common knowledge. Louisiana has been Spanish for twenty years. I no longer wear the white cockade, for I am older now." He smiled. "Strange things are happening in France, and the old order to which I belong" (he straightened perceptibly) "seems to be tottering. I have ceased to intrigue, but thank God I have not ceased to pray. Perhaps—who knows?—perhaps I may live to see again the lily of France stirred by the river breeze."

He fell into a reverie, his fine head bent a little, but

presently aroused himself and eyed me curiously. I need not say that I felt a strange liking for Monsieur de St. Gré.

"And now, Mr. Ritchie," he said, "will you tell me who you are, and how I can serve you?"

The servant had put the coffee on the table and left the room. Monsieur de St. Gré himself poured me a cup from the dainty, quaintly wrought *Louis Quinze* coffee-pot, graven with the coat of arms of his family. As we sat talking, my admiration for my host increased, for I found that he was familiar not only with the situation in Kentucky, but that he also knew far more than I of the principles and personnel of the new government of which General Washington was President. That he had little sympathy with government by the people was natural, for he was a Creole, and behind that a member of an order which detested republics. When we were got beyond these topics the rain had ceased, the night had fallen, the green candles had burned low. And suddenly, as he spoke of *Les Îles*, I remembered the note Mademoiselle had given me for him, and I apologized for my forgetfulness. He read it, and dropped it with an exclamation.

"My daughter tells me that you have returned to her a miniature which she lost, Monsieur," he said.

"I had that pleasure," I answered.

"And that—you found this miniature at Madame Bouvet's. Was this the case?" And he stared hard at me.

I nodded, but for the life of me I could not speak. It seemed an outrage to lie to such a man. He did not answer, but sat lost in thought, drumming with his fingers on the tables until the noise of the slamming of a door aroused him to a listening posture. The sound of subdued voices came from the archway below us, and one of these, from an occasional excited and feminine note, I thought to be the *gardienne's*. Monsieur de St. Gré thrust back his chair, and in three strides was at the edge of the gallery.

"Auguste!" he cried.

Silence.

"Auguste, come up to me at once," he said in French.

Another silence, then something that sounded like "*Sapristi!*" a groan from the *gardienne*, and a step was heard on the stairway. My own discomfort increased, and I would have given much to be in any other place in the world. Auguste had arrived at the head of the steps but was apparently unable to get any farther.

"*Bon soir, mon père,*" he said.

"Like a dutiful son," said Monsieur de St. Gré, "you heard I was in town, and called to pay your respects, I am sure. I am delighted to find you. In fact, I came to town for that purpose."

"Lisette—" began Auguste.

"Thought that I did not wish to be disturbed, no doubt," said his father. "Walk in, Auguste."

Monsieur Auguste's slim figure appeared in the doorway. He caught sight of me, halted, backed, and stood staring with widened eyes. The candles threw their light across his shoulder on the face of the elder Monsieur de St. Gré. Auguste was a replica of his father, with the features minimized to regularity and the brow narrowed. The complexion of the one was a clear saffron, while the boy's skin was mottled, and he was not twenty.

"What is the matter?" said Monsieur de St. Gré.

"You—you have a visitor!" stammered Auguste, with a tact that savored of practice. Yet there was a sorry difference between this and the haughty young patrician who had sold me the miniature.

"Who brings me good news," said Monsieur de St. Gré, in English. "Mr. Ritchie, allow me to introduce my son, Auguste."

I felt Monsieur de St. Gré's eyes on me as I bowed, and I began to think I was in near as great a predicament as Auguste. Monsieur de St. Gré was managing the matter with infinite wisdom.

"Sit down, my son," he said; "you have no doubt been staying with your uncle." Auguste sat down, still staring. "Does your aunt's health mend?"

"She is better to-night, father," said the son, in English which might have been improved.

"I am glad of it," said Monsieur de St. Gré, taking a chair. "André, fill the glasses."

The silent, linen-clad mulatto poured out the Madeira, shot a look at Auguste, and retired softly.

"There has been a heavy rain, Monsieur," said Monsieur de St. Gré to me, "but I think the air is not yet cleared. I was about to say, Mr. Ritchie, when my son called to pay his respects, that the miniature of which we were speaking is one of the most remarkable paintings I have ever seen." Auguste's thin fingers were clutching the chair. "I have never beheld Mademoiselle Hélène de St. Gré, for my cousin, the Marquis, was not married when I left France. He was a captain in a regiment of his Majesty's Mousquetaires, since abolished. But I am sure that the likeness of Mademoiselle must be a true one, for it has the stamp of a remarkable personality, though Hélène can be only eighteen. Women, with us, mature quickly, Monsieur. And this portrait tallies with what I have heard of her character. You no doubt observed the face, Monsieur,—that of a true aristocrat. But I was speaking of her character. When she was twelve, she said something to a cardinal for which her mother made her keep her room a whole day. For Mademoiselle would not retract, and, *pardieu*, I believe his Eminence was wrong. The Marquise is afraid of her. And when first Hélène was presented formally she made such a witty retort to the Queen's sally that her Majesty insisted upon her coming to court. On every New Year's day I have always sent a present of coffee and *périsse* to my cousin the Marquis, and it is Mademoiselle who writes to thank us. *Parole d'honneur*, her letters make me see again the people amongst whom she moves,—the dukes and duchesses, the cardinals, bishops, and generals. She draws them to the life, Monsieur, with a touch that makes them all ridiculous. His Majesty does not escape. God forgive him, he is indeed an amiable, weak person for calling a States General. And the Queen, a frivolous lady, but true to those whom she loves, and beginning now to realize the perils of the situation." He paused. "Is

it any wonder that Auguste has fallen in love with his cousin, Monsieur? That he loses his head, forgets that he is a gentleman, and steals her portrait from his sister!"

Had I not been so occupied with my own fate in the outcome of this inquisition, I should have been sorry for Auguste. And yet this feeling could not have lasted, for the young gentleman sprang to his feet, cast a glance at me which was not without malignance, and faced his father, his lips twitching with anger and fear. Monsieur de St. Gré sat undisturbed.

"He is so much in love with the portrait, Monsieur, that he loses it."

"Loses it!" cried Auguste.

"Precisely," said his father, dryly, "for Mr. Ritchie tells me he found it—at Madame Bouvet's, was it not, Monsieur?"

Auguste looked at me.

"*Mille diables!*" he said, and sat down again heavily.

"Mr. Ritchie has returned it to your sister, a service which puts him heavily in our debt," said Monsieur de St. Gré. "Now, sir," he added to me, rising, "you have had a tiresome day. I will show you to your room, and in the morning we will begin our—investigations."

He clapped his hands, the silent mulatto appeared with a new candle, and I followed my host down the gallery to a room which he flung open at the far end. A great four-poster bedstead was in one corner, and a polished mahogany dresser in the other.

"We have saved some of our family furniture from the fire, Mr. Ritchie," said Monsieur de St. Gré; "that bed was brought from Paris by my father forty years ago. I hope you will rest well."

He set the candle on the table, and as he bowed there was a trace of an enigmatical smile about his mouth. How much he knew of Auguste's transaction I could not fathom, but the matter and the scarcely creditable part I had played in it kept me awake far into the night. I was just falling into a troubled sleep when a footstep on

the gallery startled me back to consciousness. It was followed by a light tap on the door.

"Monsieur Reetchie," said a voice.

It was Monsieur Auguste. He was not an imposing figure in his nightrail, and by the light of the carefully shaded candle he held in his hand I saw that he had hitherto deceived me in the matter of his calves. He stood peering at me as I lay under the mosquito bar.

"How is it I can thank you, Monsieur!" he exclaimed in a whisper.

"By saying nothing, Monsieur," I answered.

"You are noble, you are generous, and—and one day I will give you the money back," he added with a burst of magniloquence. "You have behave very well, Monsieur, and I mek you my friend. Behol' Auguste de St. Gré, entirely at your service, Monsieur." He made a sweeping bow that might have been impressive save for the nightrail, and sought my hand, which he grasped in a fold of the mosquito bar.

"I am overcome, Monsieur," I said.

"Monsieur Reetchie, you are my friend, my intimate" (he put an aspirate on the word). "I go to tell you one leetle secret. I find that I can repose confidence in you. My father does not understan' me, you saw, Monsieur, he does not appreciate—that is the Engleesh. *Mon Dieu*, you saw it this night. I, who spik to you, am made for a courtier, a noble. I have the gift. La Louisiane—she is not so big enough for me." He lowered his voice still further, and bent nearer to me. "Monsieur, I run away to France. My cousin the Marquis will help me. You will hear of Auguste de St. Gré at Versailles, at Trianon, at Chantilly, and *peut-être*—"

"It is a worthy campaign, Monsieur," I interrupted.

A distant sound broke the stillness, and Auguste was near to dropping the candle on me.

"*Adieu*, Monsieur," he whispered; "*milles tonneres*, I have done one extraordinaire foolish thing when I am come to this house to-night."

And he disappeared, shading his candle, as he had come.