

The Fox 211

Chapter 211: The United Kingdom Leads the World in Science and Technology

While France was going through political upheaval and Napoleon was assuming the role of First Consul, the political landscape in the United Kingdom was also experiencing intense turbulence.

The Whigs launched a fierce attack on the Tory government, with most of their criticism directed at Prime Minister William Pitt. They blamed him for Britain's failures on the European continent. Furthermore, Pitt's stance on religious policies in Ireland and his disputes with King George III added to the controversy.

During this time, the British monarch still wielded considerable authority and power, unlike the purely symbolic role they would assume later. King George III, in particular, was a staunch supporter of Pitt. It was this royal support that enabled William Pitt, at just over twenty years old, to rise to the position of Prime Minister. It was a partnership with the King that allowed Pitt and the Tories to maintain control over the government, effectively pushing the Whigs into the background. However, it's worth noting that Pitt referred to himself as a "Whig" throughout, even though neither the Whigs nor the Tories acknowledged this.

King George III had a deep appreciation for Pitt, but their views on religious matters were a major point of contention between them. In an attempt to placate the Irish, Pitt proposed allowing legal Catholic activity in Ireland. This policy was meant to divide the Irish, but it angered the King.

In the United Kingdom, the Church of England had been the King's staunchest supporter ever since the days of Oliver Cromwell's revolution. Although the Church of England was considered part of the Protestant tradition, it shared more similarities with Catholicism than with continental Protestant denominations like Lutheranism or Calvinism. Aside from rejecting the Pope in favor of the British monarch, their doctrines, rituals, and even attire bore a striking resemblance to Catholicism.

As a rule of thumb, when two religions have significant differences, they may coexist in relative peace. However, when their differences are minimal, conflicts tend to intensify. It was often said that heretics, who deviated slightly from an established faith, were more detestable than outright infidels, as they were seen as a greater threat to the faithful.

For the Church of England, acknowledging legal Catholic activity, even if limited to Ireland, posed a significant threat. By this time, the Church of England had become the bedrock of political support for the British monarch. Though King George III suffered from porphyria and, during severe episodes, experienced mental disturbances, such as the bizarre incident in 1788 when he mistook a large oak tree for the King of Prussia and engaged in a two-hour debate with it on important matters, he remained clear-headed when not afflicted by the disease.

Despite the King's enduring support for Pitt, he would never entertain the idea of allowing him to proceed with this policy, as long as he was in his right mind. Thus, the Prime Minister lost his most critical ally at this perilous juncture.

In the end, to maintain Tory rule, at this critical moment, they had no choice but to sacrifice William Pitt and let him shoulder the blame. So, after Napoleon took Hanover, Pitt resigned from his post.

It's said that when his successor, Henry Addington, entered Pitt's office, the former Prime Minister was directing his servants to pack up his belongings for departure. One of the servants rolled up a

large map of Europe that hung on the wall, intending to pack it, which caught Pitt's eye. The former Prime Minister exclaimed, "Leave that map for Henry!"

The servant hurried to hang the map back up, but Pitt gave a bitter smile and said, "Never mind, since you've already rolled it up, leave it that way. After all, I don't think any British Prime Minister will need to look at a map of Europe in the next decade."

In reality, even with the change in leadership, the new Prime Minister, Henry Addington, had limited options to address the current situation. However, sometimes, a change in leadership can bring about a change in fortune.

This was akin to some football clubs in later years, where, when their performance was abysmal, they would switch coaches without much thought, simply to see if a change would improve their luck. Often, with a new coach in charge, even without significant changes, the team's fortunes would suddenly turn around.

In a similar vein, the change in Prime Ministers seemed to have yielded positive effects for the British. Shortly after the new Prime Minister took office, the British Navy received good news: their newly developed ships, which had required substantial funding for research, had achieved success in testing. According to the Navy, these ships were sure to significantly reduce the efficiency of the smuggling routes from France to Ireland.

In the preceding period, both Britain and France had been preoccupied with the war on the European continent, resulting in a period of relative calm in Ireland. The British lacked the resources, and the Irish received minimal supplies, so the activities there had been relatively subdued.

Now that France had secured an undisputed victory on the European continent and received substantial compensation, it was clear that they would substantially increase their support for Irish rebellions.

This was another issue for the Tory party. Although William Pitt had lost his position as Prime Minister, the position itself still rested in Tory hands. Many Whigs believed that the current situation hadn't shown clear signs of improvement yet, nor had it reached its nadir, so it wasn't the right time to make a move. Rushing in at this point might backfire, leaving them stuck halfway up the mountain.

Upon receiving this news, Prime Minister Addington was elated and immediately went to the Admiralty to learn more.

"Prime Minister, this is a model of our new ships," a naval officer at the Admiralty began explaining relevant information to Prime Minister Addington.

"Well, why does this ship look... so peculiar?" As Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Addington was certainly familiar with ships. However, this vessel appeared somewhat unattractive, especially when compared to the elegant model of the French clippers displayed nearby.

"Prime Minister, if you look at the French clippers next to it, you'll see that those ships have low sides, are prone to taking on water, and sway considerably. They can't even carry large cannons. But they're so fast that they don't need cannons; no warship with cannons can catch them anyway.

You see, for intercepting these high-speed smuggling ships, we once copied a batch of such vessels and relied on conventional naval combat. However, the enemy quickly changed their strategy and developed maritime weapons, similar to Byzantine 'Greek fire.' We were caught off guard and suffered significant losses."

Prime Minister Addington nodded, already aware of these circumstances from before he took office.

"But things have changed now. With this new ship, we can not only catch up to the enemy in terms of speed but also carry large cannons to engage in combat." The naval officer continued to explain.

"Is this ship capable of catching up with the French smuggling vessels?" Addington inquired.

"It's not certain," the officer shook his head. "The fastest French clippers can reach about 15 knots, while our ship can reach a maximum speed of eleven knots."

"How can that work?" Prime Minister Addington asked.

"Prime Minister, this is still an experimental vessel, with room for improvement. Moreover, the clippers can't always reach fifteen knots; in calm weather, their speed is also limited. Our ship is less affected by wind conditions, and it can travel in a straight line. So, while our ship may have a lower top speed in terms of numbers, it might still be able to catch up with them in a real chase at sea."

"Are there any issues with our ship at the moment?"

"Prime Minister, our ship relies on a steam engine, which requires us to carry coal. If the coal bunker is too large, it slows down the vessel, but if it's too small, it affects the voyage. Additionally, our ship has poor performance in high seas, far worse than the clippers."

"What? It has worse performance in high seas than the clippers? Then how can we use these large cannons on it?" Prime Minister Addington was taken aback.

"Prime Minister, in high seas, the ship's rocking will cause the paddle wheels to surface, drastically reducing propulsion efficiency. It's not because of any other reason, so under normal sea conditions, our ship can still use the cannons without any issues. It's just that due to the arrangement of the steam engine and paddle wheels, the number of cannons we can carry is relatively fewer."

Prime Minister Addington listened and nodded. "When can these official warships be put into use? It's time to teach those French a lesson and show them that the United Kingdom's technology is truly world-leading!"

Chapter 212: Coal Mines and Iron Ore

The British steam battleships took some time to become practical, so Joseph hadn't yet felt the pressure of the United Kingdom's world-leading scientific and technological advancements. He was currently occupied with acquiring the iron ore from Lorraine, the coal mines in Saar, and the coal mines in the Ruhr.

Lorraine's iron ore, apart from having a larger reserve, didn't offer many advantages. The iron ore there typically had an iron content of only around thirty percent, which was considered inferior compared to the iron ore from Australia and Brazil. Furthermore, Lorraine's iron ore was high in phosphorus, with a phosphorus content that could go as high as one percent.

Phosphorus was mostly detrimental to steel. Increasing phosphorus content would decrease the plasticity and toughness of steel, particularly impacting its impact resistance, making it prone to "cold brittleness." Additionally, phosphorus could reduce the welding properties of steel. In general, the phosphorus content in commonly used steel should not exceed 0.045%, but with ore from Lorraine, the phosphorus content could easily surpass this limit if not specially treated.

Unfortunately, for a long time, humans hadn't developed effective methods for removing impurities like phosphorus. The quality of steel produced from Lorraine's iron ore was considered subpar. It was said that one of the reasons the Titanic, which sank on its maiden voyage after colliding with an iceberg, had sunk was because it was constructed with cold-brittle steel made from Lorraine's iron ore.

Even though technologies to remove phosphorus gradually emerged, it remained a headache. If there were low-phosphorus, low-sulfur, high-grade iron ores like those in Australia and Brazil, who would want to use Lorraine's iron ore? Unfortunately, Joseph didn't have access to better iron ore, and when looking at future standards, there wasn't a single better iron ore deposit on the entire European continent.

Lorraine's iron ore had been discovered long before. Before the French Revolution, most of these mines were in the hands of the nobility. When the Revolution began, these nobles either faced the guillotine or fled abroad.

According to the revolutionary government's decrees, the industries of these nobles who were executed or went into exile were naturally confiscated. During the Jacobin period, these mines were mostly state-owned, but they lay mostly dormant. When the Thermidorians came to power, these iron mines gradually fell into the hands of the Thermidorians. Now, Joseph had to transfer these mines from their original owners to his control.

This wasn't a difficult task. During this era when steelmaking hadn't seen a breakthrough, and the Industrial Revolution hadn't started, iron ore mining wasn't particularly lucrative. The limited uses of pig iron and the difficulty of producing wrought iron and steel meant that the demand for iron ore wasn't very high. Additionally, some mine owners wanted to curry favor with the Bonaparte family or establish relations with the First Consul. In some cases, they practically gave the mines away. So, Joseph didn't have to spend much money to gain control over this extensive mining area.

As for the Saar coal mines, they were acquired through similar means. The Ruhr coal mines were even simpler. This region was newly conquered territory. Although it wasn't directly governed by France, which small states of the Rhenish Confederation didn't want to ingratiate themselves with the Bonaparte family? Despite these mines mostly being rich farmland, who could compare with pleasing the liberators of Europe?

Furthermore, Joseph wasn't stingy with his money. Whether the Rhenish Confederation folks had to use force to drive the poor farmers off their lands, passed down through generations, was none of Joseph's concern.

Compared to Lorraine's iron ore, the Ruhr coal mines were of much higher quality. The Ruhr coalfield primarily produced high-quality hard coal, and it had a wide variety of coal types. Especially valuable were the coking coals, which made up most of the reserve. Additionally, the coal seams were shallow, and in many places, only the topsoil needed to be removed for open-pit

mining. Plus, the coalfield was situated by the Rhine, an ideal river for transportation. It was truly an excellent industrial region.

But these favorable conditions also presented Joseph with a significant dilemma: should he establish the future industrial base in Lorraine or the Ruhr?

In the future, after the Prussians defeated France in the Franco-Prussian War and took control of Lorraine, they chose to set up their industrial base in the Ruhr. This was understandable. The Ruhr had good transportation links, was at the core of German territory, and was relatively stable. They naturally wanted to place such a vital asset there.

Now, with France in control, the same logic seemed to apply, making Lorraine the ideal choice. After all, it was closer to home and felt more secure. However, considering the flow of the Rhine River, transporting iron ore from Lorraine to the Ruhr was downstream, while shipping coal from the Ruhr to Lorraine meant going upstream. In terms of transportation, it seemed better to establish the industrial base in the Ruhr.

Therefore, Joseph had some hesitation about this issue.

But Lucien quickly made his judgment clear.

"Aren't the coal reserves in Saar enough?" Lucien asked.

"Well, they should be sufficient for a considerable period," Joseph replied.

"How long is that period?" Lucien inquired.

"It should be quite long, at least a decade, possibly several decades," Joseph estimated.

"So, will it be cheaper to transport iron ore to the Ruhr, along with the cost of mining coal there and then shipping it to Lorraine, or the other way around bringing iron ore to Saar?" Lucien inquired.

"It doesn't seem like it," Joseph replied.

"Then why are you hesitating?" Lucien asked.

"Oh..." Joseph suddenly realized that he might have been influenced by some information from the future. Thinking about the future, the country he was in produced nearly a billion tons of steel effortlessly each year, and a large steel facility had tens of millions, even close to a hundred million tons of steel production. People were so proud of their steel mills that the president was well aware of their existence. If he were to consider things by that standard, the coal reserves in Saar might not be enough. But New Rome was still centuries away from that steel kingdom. In the next hundred years or so, both Saar's coal and Lorraine's iron ore should be sufficient for the French.

"What's wrong?" Lucien saw that Joseph seemed lost in thought.

"I think I'm overthinking this," Joseph said. "But we've already purchased the coalfields in the Ruhr and spent a fair amount of money on them. If they don't serve a purpose and..."

"And the Ruhr is mostly coking coal and power coal, with limited anthracite. Even making briquettes would be challenging..." Joseph thought to himself.

"That's how much money we spent?" Lucien was nonchalant. "Having a major coal mine in your hands, you'll find a use for it. You can use it for electricity generation."

"Transport it back? The Rhine River route is good, but unfortunately, our steamship research hasn't been smooth. Otherwise... it seems like we'll have to consider the railroad. But this can't be rushed; we need a significant amount of steel first before we can have trains, and... well, it appears that we'll have to leave the Ruhr coalfields idle for now."

While Joseph was troubled about accumulating funds for no good reason in the Ruhr coalfields, Lavasie was rejoicing. Just a few days ago, he had successfully used a modified quartz crucible to contain molten pig iron and then injected heated air using a compressor to obtain liquid steel.

Upon completing this project, Lavasie was getting closer to receiving an estate in the Champagne region as a reward. The estate originally belonged to the Duke of Orleans, but it was known for its renowned champagne production, which brought in significant wealth each year. After losing his head, the estate was confiscated by the revolutionary government and eventually landed in the hands of the Bonaparte family.

Of course, receiving this reward came at a price. At the time, Joseph gave Lavasie a choice between the estate and a tenth of the patent rights for the steelmaking technology he had developed, with Lavasie ultimately opting for the estate.

It was said that many years later, Lavasie deeply regretted this choice and even told his niece, "Your husband is a big swindler. He doesn't know how much money he swindled from us..." But for now, Lavasie felt like he had struck a great deal.

In another laboratory, Lavasie's rival, Franois, had just completed experiments on new refractory materials. Following Joseph's requirement that refractory materials needed to be alkaline, he mainly used dolomite to create high-temperature refractory materials that could withstand the steelmaking crucible's heat.

Franois was also a renowned chemist and had been a friend of Lavasie's. However, during the Jacobin period, he joined the Marat and Robespierre faction, which led to Lavasie being pursued. It was largely Franois who facilitated this. If not for Carnot's intervention, Lavasie might have been a cause for mourning by now.

Due to these events, Franois faced a tough situation after the Jacobins fell from power. However, considering his capabilities, Joseph also gave him a second chance.

However, Franois didn't enjoy the same privileges as Lavasie. He only received a reward of 600 francs after completing this project. The only comforting aspect was that Joseph paid rewards in metallic currency.

Chapter 213: Crisis at Sea

Though the ship continued to sway violently, Captain Morel, who had just finished his night shift, quickly dozed off in his hammock. This was a fundamental skill for any sailor. However, just as he had closed his eyes for a brief moment, a shrill alarm jolted him awake.

"What's happening?" Captain Morel climbed up the ladder, pushed open the hatch, and the intense sunlight streaming in made it difficult for his eyes to adjust to the brightness, given he had grown accustomed to the darkness of the ship's interior.

Captain Morel, one hand shielding his eyes, shouted, "What's going on?"

"In the captain's quarters, we've spotted a strange British vessel!" called Leclerc, who was on duty by the helm.

"Where?" Captain Morel, now adapted to the outside light, quickly made his way to Leclerc while asking.

Leclerc handed Captain Morel a brass telescope, saying, "Captain, look over there, where the smoke is rising. That ship looks quite odd!"

By this time, Captain Morel had also spotted the billowing smoke. "Is their ship on fire? Or did our Greek fire scorch them?" Captain Morel wondered aloud as he raised the telescope to his eye.

"That ship is really ugly!" Captain Morel couldn't help but exclaim.

It was a gray vessel with a tall smokestack spewing thick black smoke. Two large paddlewheels turned on each side of the ship, generating considerable wake. Most notably, an English flag fluttered from the ship's bow.

"They're from our direction," Captain Morel said. "I'm curious to see whether they're faster than us."

Captain Morel checked the sails all of them were unfurled. But due to the scarce wind at sea, the ship's speed remained sluggish.

When confronting other sailing ships, the lack of wind wasn't a significant issue, as if the wind was weak for the flying clipper, it would be weak for others as well. However, the pursuing ship behind them was an exception it had no sails but was still racing at a considerable speed.

"I'll take the helm," Captain Morel said, and Leclerc stepped aside.

Captain Morel controlled the wheel, making slight adjustments to the ship's direction, but it didn't seem to significantly increase the ship's speed. Leclerc was also an experienced helmsman, and Captain Morel wasn't necessarily better. Switching helmsmen at this point was more of a superstitious notion, hoping for a change in luck. Perhaps the new helmsman would bring the wind with them?

However, Captain Morel's luck didn't seem to be much better than Leclerc's. The wind continued to be frustratingly weak. The ship's speed remained slow, and the pursuing vessel seemed to be getting closer.

"Leclerc, it seems we have to jettison some cargo now," Captain Morel told Leclerc.

"Captain, dumping cargo will lead to a significant loss for us. If we lose our cargo, and then a wind picks up, that's... Besides, the pursuing ship is still far away. If we can hold out until evening..." Leclerc said.

Chasing each other on the sea often consumed a lot of time. If both ships had similar speeds, a chase could last for hours or even days. According to the contract Captain Morel signed with the "Military-Industrial Complex," losing cargo meant he had to pay compensation.

"Leclerc, this time we got insurance," Captain Morel replied.

"But the insurance folks might not necessarily agree that we're throwing cargo overboard out of necessity. The last time Captain Letellier lost cargo due to a storm, the insurance people said he 'mishandled' it and only paid the minimum compensation. What was that, a pittance? Besides, have

you really read through every word of the contract we signed with the insurance company, including the disclaimers in the appendix?"

Captain Morel hesitated for a moment and then said, "That document is several dozen pages long..."

"So, are you sure that the Amodeo Insurance Company will compensate us if we discard cargo now?"

"Unless my ship is riddled with British cannonballs, these blokes... Alright, we'll keep running like this. If the British ship closes in by over a kilometer in an hour, we'll jettison some of the cargo... We've made enough money from all our trips. At any time, our safety is more crucial than money. Leclerc, you have to understand that one of life's tragedies is amassing a fortune and not living long enough to enjoy it."

"Captain," Leclerc replied, "I believe there's a greater tragedy in life having not a single cent left but still not dying..."

"Alright, Leclerc, I'm sure you'll make plenty of money before you kick the bucket," Morel said. "Take the wheel, and I'll go down to fetch the rangefinder."

Leclerc took over the wheel as Morel descended below the deck. After rummaging around for a while, he came back with a brass device in hand. It was a rangefinder, used to measure the distance between objects. Its small size meant the accuracy was only average, but it sufficed for Morel.

The wind at sea remained weak, with no sign of strengthening. The flying clipper's speed slowed down further, while the pursuing British ship remained relentless, getting closer.

"Leclerc, let's discard some cargo. They're getting too close. If we don't get rid of something, we won't last until nightfall," Morel said.

"How about using 'Greek fire' to fight back?" Leclerc was reluctant to part with the cargo because he had invested in the ship as well.

"Leclerc, think clearly!" Morel said. "Look at their ship's design, their bulwark height. That's not a flying clipper, and they definitely have cannons on board. They still have the advantage in speed and can maintain a safe distance while blasting us to the seabed with their cannons. Leclerc, making a fortune at sea is a risky business with a strong gambling flavor. But once you make this bet, you can't afford to gamble recklessly because your wealth and life are at stake."

Leclerc was convinced by Morel's words, and the crew started removing cargo from the hold and throwing it into the sea.

As more cargo was cast overboard, the ship lightened, and its speed improved somewhat. However, the sea remained windless, and the British ship continued to close in. Even though they had jettisoned all their cargo, it appeared that they wouldn't escape the pursuing British ship unless an unexpected strong wind saved them.

"Enemy ship firing!" cried the lookout from the mast. Everyone gazed aft and saw a plume of smoke rising from the British ship's bow. After a while, the deep roar of cannon fire echoed, followed by the whistling of cannonballs through the air.

A water column surged from the right side of Morel's ship, but it was still far from the vessel. If it weren't for the relatively calm sea at the moment, such a small splash might have gone unnoticed.

Firing at such a distance was indeed a challenging feat, primarily a warning and a show of force. It essentially meant, "You can't escape; surrender quickly!"

But for Morel and his crew, surrendering was not an option. If they surrendered, they would lose their ship, plunging them into the tragic state of having no money but not being dead.

So, Morel and his crew continued to run, the British ship pursued, and the bombardment continued.

The British ship got closer, and the cannonballs landed increasingly near Morel's vessel. At this point, binoculars were unnecessary; they could see the British ship and the thick, massive cannon mounted on its bow.

One 24-pound cannonball accurately struck the mast of the flying clipper, snapping it into two pieces.

The mast, with the sails attached, fell into the water, but the ropes remained connected to the ship. The fallen mast essentially became an impromptu anchor, drastically slowing down the ship.

"Quick! Cut the lines!" Morel shouted, dropping the wheel and grabbing an axe himself. Leclerc's face turned pale, his expression one of despair, for losing the mast meant they had no chance of escaping the British.

"Oh my God!" Leclerc cried out. At the same time, a thunderous noise echoed from the approaching British ship.

Chapter 214: The Capture

Everyone was startled by the sudden loud noise, including Captain Morrel, who was about to cut the mooring ropes. They turned to see the British ship engulfed in a white mist.

"What's going on?" Morrel wondered.

However, he didn't slow down. He swiftly cut the ropes, and the fallen mast drifted away with the waves. The flying clipper regained some movement, albeit at a slower speed than before. Nevertheless, they were mobile, and that was all that mattered.

Morrel didn't care to know what had happened to the British ship. As long as they were in trouble, it was a good thing. The details could wait until they were out of the range of the British cannons.

The flying clipper slowly distanced itself from the British ship, which had not fired a single shot during this process. It also started slowing down rapidly, and the white mist that had surrounded it gradually dissipated. The ship's deck was partially destroyed, the masts were broken, and the wheels on either side of the ship had stopped turning. Though the British ship was still moving, it was purely due to inertia and the current's influence.

"What's wrong with that ship?" Leclerc asked.

"How should I know? Anyway, it's good news!" Morrel replied.

"What do we do now?"

"Let's wait and watch. Don't get too close," Morrel said. "Approaching might make us an easy target for their cannons. We've already been blessed by God once; I don't want to trouble Him again."

"Good point. But, if it weren't for the grace of God..."

Morrel quickly interrupted, "What nonsense are you spouting? Once we're off this ship, you must go to the church and apologize to God, seek His forgiveness. He forgave me, gave me a path to redemption."

"Amen!" Everyone chorused.

At this moment, the British ship gradually came to a halt, floating on the water like a dead fish.

"Hey, Captain, if we could tow that ship back, we'd make a fortune, and it would cover our losses," Leclerc suggested.

"Don't be hasty. Let's see what happens first, and then we'll decide," Captain Morrel said. "For now, it's dead in the water."

"Yes, we should be patient. My former captain used to say, before boarding another ship, we must first pray for repentance to the merciful God," one of the sailors chimed in.

"Very well, Louis, you can start praying to God sincerely, and then we'll lower the dinghy. You'll board that ship and capture them," Captain Morrel said.

"Okay... Captain... you're not sending me alone, are you? There might be..."

"Don't worry, my child, God is with you," Captain Morrel assured.

"But..."

"Stop worrying. You're the only one among us with this experience. Haven't you often said that you, armed with a cutlass, could conquer an entire ship from bow to stern? That ship just exploded, and most of the sailors on board are probably injured. And with God's protection, you'll be just fine. We all believe in you!" Leclerc added earnestly.

"Captain..."

"All right, enough talk. We've already strayed far from our course during the chase, and there won't be any other ships passing by here. They have no power now. I don't believe they can repair that mess. And their mast is broken. They're drifting with the current. But the current will only take them farther from land and our course. If we leave them like this, they'll be lost at sea, practically doomed. So, as long as they have a bit of sense left, we only need you to handle this."

"And what if they don't have sense?"

"Then you're in trouble. But that's precisely why we can only send you. Louis, if you dare to go, I'll give you twenty francs."

"Thirty francs!"

"Twenty, at most twenty! Any higher, and Leclerc will gladly go."

"Fine, twenty it is..."

As Leclerc had anticipated, the British ship had suffered extensive damage in the explosion. Their captain was scalded to death by the high-temperature steam, and about seven or eight of their sailors had died. The remaining dozens were injured to varying degrees. At least a third of them had such severe injuries that their ultimate fate might be a watery grave.

The British crew knew that, without propulsion, their survival depended on the French. So, they surrendered willingly, following the lead of a lieutenant on board the ship.

To ensure the safety of the French crew, the British crew voluntarily surrendered all their weapons, including firearms and small arms, under the supervision of the French sailors. The French crew boarded the British ship, carefully inspecting every nook and cranny to determine if the ship was salvageable.

Despite the considerable damage from the explosion, the ship's hull remained intact, and there was no sign of flooding. It seemed fairly likely that the ship could be towed back. Therefore, they bound those Englishmen who seemed likely to survive and returned them to the flying clipper. They were locked in the emptied cargo hold. The British ship was then secured with a cable and towed in the direction of France.

On their way back, Morrel and Leclerc took stock of their gains and losses.

"We lost all our cargo, according to the contract, we should... How many guns did the British ship have?" Morrel asked.

"Two 24-pounder cannons and four 12-pounder cannons."

"That's it?"

"The ship's two wheels took up a significant space, preventing the installation of more cannons. Additionally, the engine room and coal bunker occupied space, limiting how many big guns they could fit," Leclerc explained. "They probably thought they'd only have to deal with us, and we didn't even have any big guns. And those cannons are iron, not bronze. Think about how much more valuable they'd be if they were bronze."

Compared to bronze cannons, cast iron cannons were significantly cheaper.

"Let's not be greedy. God has already been very kind to us. Even without counting the cannons, just the ship's hull alone is enough to compensate for our losses. After all, the hull is intact, and with some repairs, it should be seaworthy. And there's the navigation records, as well as the technician with the burned leg; they should be worth a good sum of money. Speak to our doctor; make sure he does everything to save the technician's life, as his life might be quite valuable."

Under normal circumstances, it wouldn't take more than two days to sail from their current position back to Roscoff. However, due to the lost mast, the flying clipper's sail area had been significantly reduced, resulting in a loss of nearly a third of their propulsion. Moreover, they were towing a larger ship behind them. As a result, their speed had dropped to roughly a third of its original.

At this speed, if they encountered British patrol ships, they'd have no choice but to jettison their prize and make a run for it. Considering their lost mast, even without their captured ship, escaping from British patrol ships wouldn't be easy.

The waters between Roscoff and Ireland were frequently patrolled by British ships. After consulting with First Mate Leclerc, they decided to take a safer route, making a wide detour to Camaret.

However, this change in the route meant they would spend a longer time at sea. The flying clipper didn't carry many supplies because the voyage from Roscoff to Ireland wasn't long, and the clipper's speed meant there was no need to load too many provisions. Moreover, the cargo hold on the flying

clipper was smaller than those on other ships of similar weight. So, carrying additional supplies meant sacrificing precious cargo space.

"As luck would have it, the British ship is steam-powered, requiring water for their boiler. Although their boiler exploded, there's still quite a bit of fresh water left on their ship. This should be sufficient for our return journey. But we're running short on other provisions."

"Let's ration everything, except for that British technician... what's his name?" Morrel inquired.

"His name is Anderson," Leclerc added.

"Right, except for Anderson, the other Englishmen will get half a loaf of bread every two days," Morrel stated. "Additionally, don't waste fresh water and food on the heavily wounded Englishmen. Our crew's provisions will also be halved. Anderson must survive; the steam engine on their ship is ruined, and perhaps the folks at the Military-Industrial Complex will be willing to pay us more for this technician."

Chapter 215: A Technological Marvel...

The journey had been smooth so far, except for the hunger that plagued everyone on board. Considering that the British were used to lounging around and not doing much work, the French decided to cut their food rations by a third. As a result, when Morel and his crew dragged the British steamship into the port of Camares ten days later, several British prisoners in the hold had already starved to death. The remaining survivors, apart from the technician who was kept separately and cared for, were too weak to even stand.

Of course, the French would never admit that these British deaths were due to hunger. Instead, they attributed their demise to complications from injuries sustained in the battle.

Camares was just a fishing port, without any dedicated shipyards. However, reaching this point allowed them to quickly spread the news about capturing British ships.

Joseph received this news during lunch. Meanwhile, Napoleon was busy in Paris, reorganizing the nation's order and striving to establish a government with influence extending to the villages. Essentially, Napoleon's government was a military one. In France, nobles used to be the only ones with influence in rural areas. Now that the nobility had been abolished, Napoleon aimed to utilize the opportunity to make the discharged soldiers organizers within the villages.

This plan was quite feasible, especially for those veterans, particularly the ones who had served in Napoleon's army. Many had earned substantial money abroad and could return to their villages, benefiting from government policies to buy land inexpensively. They would instantly become the affluent class of the countryside. Before going back, they all joined the so-called "Veterans' Association," and even after retirement, they maintained their connections and organization. These were the political forces supporting Napoleon.

As for Lucien, he was busier than Napoleon at the moment. As the Minister of Truth, his primary task was to establish a propaganda organization for "spreading the truth."

Lucien's propaganda plan consisted of two parts. One part was a propaganda agency directly managed by the Ministry of Truth, mainly responsible for external propaganda. In the last war, France had obtained the right to conduct unrestricted free trade in the Netherlands, Belgium, the Rhenish Federation, and Prussia, including establishing news agencies and sending reporters.

Lucien planned to establish a European Free Communication Agency, responsible for gathering various news and, after verifying its truth, providing it to newspapers in those countries. This was meant to help people across Europe understand the truth of France and the benevolence of the First Consul toward the people of other nations. Additionally, the "Scientific Truth Gazette" would open branches in these countries, releasing newspapers in various languages tailored to regional readerships.

However, the "Scientific Truth Gazette" was highly politically charged and sometimes not conducive to subtly spreading the truth. So, besides the "Scientific Truth Gazette," Lucien planned to create and control a batch of "Businessmen's Gazette" through indirect means to disseminate the truth more subtly.

On the domestic front, Lucien intended to control public opinion more discreetly. On one hand, he would establish an official news publishing bureau, along with relevant regulations, all in the name of "protecting freedom of speech."

On the other hand, through covert investments from the "Military-Industrial Consortium," he would create or control a series of newspapers. These newspapers would then be used to form a "French News and Communication Agency," which would monopolize the sources of news.

These tasks alone wouldn't have kept Lucien so busy. However, recently, a new activity had emerged in Parisian "Miss Paris Contest," which conveniently fell under Lucien's purview. This widely celebrated event had consumed what little time he had left.

As for Louis, he was still studying at the University of Paris and had moved into the city for the sake of convenience. As for Jerome, he was still in middle school. Many of the researchers in the Military-Industrial Consortium had children around Jerome's age or even younger. So, they had established a nearby school for children, and Jerome attended school there.

Jerome secretly wished he could attend the schools in the city to avoid Joseph's scrutiny of his homework. He strongly suspected that his brother reviewed his homework whenever he felt too fatigued to refresh his mind.

This noon, Joseph had been busy all morning and had just begun to say, "Jerome, about your homework this morning..." when he saw Fanny and her female secretary Pauline approaching. Jerome immediately exclaimed as if he'd found a lifeline, "Big brother, I already showed Fanny Sister my homework this morning. She said it was perfect."

While he spoke, Jerome subtly winked at Fanny.

"Yes, I've reviewed it, and it's flawless," Fanny confirmed.

"Well then, let's have lunch," Joseph said, taking his seat at the table. He couldn't ignore Fanny's face, after all. "Pauline, you have fun with Fanny, alright?"

"What do you mean, fun? I'm working diligently," Pauline retorted with wide eyes. Joseph was more lenient with his younger sisters compared to his brothers, so Pauline wasn't as intimidated by Joseph as his brothers were.

"Joseph, Pauline has been a great help to me," Fanny said. "We're not just here for a meal. We've received a report that a smuggling ship captured a British steam warship during a battle, along with many British prisoners, including a technician."

This news immediately caught Joseph's attention.

"They're asking for 50,000 francs. I think that price is acceptable. We could also have the French government step in and commend them. I checked the information on this Morel, and he seems competent and worth nurturing. I've already instructed our people to buy the British ship," Fanny replied. "Furthermore, the ship is reportedly heavily damaged and not easily movable. It's currently in Camares. Camares is just a fishing port with no maintenance capabilities. If the British find out, they could come over and destroy the ship. So, I suggest we organize a team to survey the ship and obtain firsthand technical information."

"Yes, we should send people immediately," Joseph nodded. "Let's have lunch first, and after the meal, we'll draft a list..."

Morel received 50,000 francs from the Military-Industrial Consortium and handed over the captured steamship, along with the British prisoners, to the Consortium. He also received a medal from the government.

The Bourbon dynasty had established various honor medals, such as the Order of Saint Michael, the Order of the Holy Spirit, and the Order of Saint Louis. After the Revolution, these were abolished by the First Republic government due to their clear feudal and Bourbon flavor. Consequently, for a period, awards for those who had achieved distinction were given in the form of money or symbolic honor weapons.

However, such forms of recognition were not as effective as medals. Some individuals, especially those who admired the Roman Empire like Napoleon, established an organization that emulated the Roman "Legion of Honor." Its members were those who received medals.

Morel received the lowest-ranking Knight's Medal (here, a knight refers to the cavalry of the Roman Empire, not the medieval knights), which was still enough to make him proud. During the Bourbon dynasty, a commoner like Morel would never have received such an honor.

After receiving the money, Morel took his ship, which was missing a mast, back to Krakow. On the one hand, he would make the necessary repairs there, and on the other, he would seek compensation from the local insurance company.

Representatives from the insurance company boarded the ship and recorded the losses. Ten days later, Morel received the insurance company's response. The company would compensate them for the replacement of the mast, but regarding the loss of cargo, they believed it was not covered under the policy.

Naturally, Morel protested, and the insurance company then brought out the contract, turned to the appendix section, and, with profound knowledge of French grammar and law, elevated Morel's understanding of the French language. And... well, Morel still didn't manage to get compensation for the cargo loss.

While Morel was in despair, arguing with the insurance company's representatives, Joseph received the technical data about the British steam warship captured in Camares.

"Well, it uses two steam engines, jointly propelling two paddlewheels. Paddlewheels are not very efficient, and having them on both sides is an obvious weakness... Plus, auxiliary power from a mast with a sail. The mast is positioned too close to the boilers, damaged in a boiler explosion. Who designed this?" After a thorough examination of the data on the British steam warship, Joseph

reached a conclusion. "The British certainly made us spend 50,000 francs in vain for this technology."

Chapter 216: The Irish Crisis

Indeed, the British steamships were rather mediocre in terms of technology. In Joseph's words, they were, "technically complete garbage! Every aspect of them lags far behind us. I spent a whopping fifty thousand francs, and all I got was one piece of valuable information: British steamships are garbage!"

It was true that the paddlewheel steamship was a technical failure. As a warship, the exposed paddlewheel was its most glaring vulnerability, hampering the arrangement of cannons. In military terms, such vessels had limited utility. As civilian vessels, their propulsion efficiency was low, and their structural weight was astonishingly high. They not only added significant weight to the ships but also consumed a considerable amount of valuable space with their auxiliary transmission mechanisms. Moreover, paddlewheels were prone to single-side immersion in rough seas, causing them to spin freely and leading to various mechanical failures. In short, compared to propellers, paddlewheels had almost no advantages except for their intimidating appearance.

However, despite Joseph's criticism, these "outdated garbage" had caused some trouble for the French.

Within a single working cycle, four clipper ships failed to return from Ireland. Several other returning clipper ships lost all their cargo. According to these shaken captains, they had encountered British steamships billowing black smoke chasing them at sea.

At the same time, British newspapers published reports of the "heroic Royal Navy" capturing French clipper ships, boosting the morale of the downcast English.

The French, of course, immediately countered with the story of Captain Morel capturing British steamships. This story not only made its way into newspapers but was quickly adapted to the theater stage. On stage, Captain Morel appeared gallant, but the most notable aspect was the portrayal of the British, nearly on par with the portrayal of the Germans in the classic French film "Escape from the Jaws of Death."

However, this propaganda war did not change the situation at sea. As the British deployed more and more steamships, the supplies that the French could transport to Ireland decreased significantly. Eventually, French ships had to wait offshore, far from Ireland, only approaching when the weather conditions were relatively adverse. (After all, paddlewheels became useless in rough seas.)

Even with this approach, the lifeline to Ireland suffered a severe blockage. For the British, it was crucial to take advantage of this time and inflict heavy damage on the Irish, even if they couldn't completely eliminate the Irish insurgents. That would at least weaken them.

Thus, the Duke of Norfolk received orders to swiftly deal a heavy blow, or even eliminate the insurgents, along with a royal command: "Crack down harder on illegal religious organizations disloyal to the king."

The Duke of Norfolk stated that both tasks were challenging and required additional troops. He insisted on a force of at least one hundred thousand soldiers.

It was unprecedented in British history to mobilize such a large army. Such an excessive demand would naturally not be approved by the government. Nevertheless, the Duke of Norfolk made this request with his own intentions in mind.

First, it was a classic negotiation tactic ask for a lot to get something reasonable. If he asked for just fifty thousand troops, the government would likely haggle down further, leaving him with only twenty-five thousand. So, he had to start with a big number, "I need one hundred thousand!"

Secondly, it was a way to prepare an escape route for the future. In case of failure (even though the Irish faced difficulties, completely eliminating them was not easy, and the probability of failure was far greater than one in a thousand), he would have a reason to shift responsibility.

The Duke of Norfolk's intentions were well understood by all. Bureaucratic institutions had operated this way for years. Only a fool would give subordinates everything they asked for, leaving no room for excuses, leading to a risky situation and ultimate disaster for all.

So, in keeping with tradition, after some back-and-forth negotiation, the government sent him over forty thousand troops, almost entirely composed of new recruits.

The Duke of Norfolk, on the surface, naturally expressed great dissatisfaction. In his letter to the Prime Minister, he even spoke quite disrespectfully. But everyone knew that the Duke of Norfolk was actually quite satisfied. His complaints were merely a way to secure his own retreat.

The Duke of Norfolk understood that the newly added troops were inexperienced and not adequately trained. However, even these fresh recruits were better than the "Irish Security Forces." At least, there hadn't been any reports of proper British troops switching sides so far.

In the upcoming major sweep, the Duke of Norfolk needed to leave enough troops to defend his own territory. He couldn't afford a situation where he sent troops to raid enemy bases while his own bases were stolen. The primary use of these over forty thousand fresh recruits was to secure vital locations and ensure the safety of their rear during the sweep.

As for the somewhat unreliable "Irish Security Forces," they were quite useful during the sweep. For activities like destroying potatoes in non-security areas, was it necessary for regular troops to handle them?

So, after deploying these fresh recruits to various garrisons and fortifying the defense of these locations, the Duke of Norfolk initiated another large-scale sweep against the Irish.

However, the timing of this sweep wasn't ideal. According to the Duke's original plan, the major sweep was supposed to wait until just before the potato harvest. But the government was eager for good news, and the Duke himself knew that the French supply lines weren't entirely cut off. Delaying for two months until the potato harvest would have dealt a more significant blow to the Irish insurgents. Right now, with the potatoes just planted, launching an attack and trampling over their fields would still allow the Irish some time to replant. Although this would inevitably reduce the final yield, it was better than being hit just before the harvest.

But postponing for such a long time would put more pressure on the government, which needed uplifting news at this time. Additionally, several months would give the insurgents more time to prepare. When the sweep was launched, the gains might be more substantial, but the losses would also be more significant.

Moreover, the British were currently enjoying a temporary advantage at sea with their "world-leading technology," but who knew if there would be changes in the future?

The Duke of Norfolk couldn't keep the preparation for another large-scale sweep a secret, and the United Irishmen's Association had already obtained intelligence. This was because there were many individuals within the "Irish Security Forces" who had conflicting loyalties.

So, even before the Duke of Norfolk could act, the United Irishmen's Association had already convened a meeting to discuss countering the sweep.

"What should we do? Of course, it's the same as last time the enemy comes to our homes, and we go to theirs. Everyone fights on their own, let's see who gives in first."

"General Joyce, that old bastard has brought in over forty thousand people from the UK again, and he probably intends to keep them at home to guard. Those garrisons won't be as easy to hit as last time," warned President Russell.

"But President, we've grown much stronger. Especially our siege capabilities. In response to the shortcomings revealed in the previous anti-sweep operations, we requested support from our French comrades and enhanced our training. Now, our siege capabilities are not what they were last time. That old man probably thinks our forces can't handle his garrisons; we can give him a pleasant surprise," replied Joyce.

"I agree with General Joyce's view. But I think we should not only strike the enemy's garrisons but also concentrate our forces to strike the enemy entering our base. Our army has significantly expanded in size, and the British know this, but they don't know how much our strength has increased. So, if they still think they can rampage just like last time with a few hundred British soldiers and some black dogs, they're mistaken. I believe we can let them enter our base, and then we'll strike from behind, knocking out a few crucial garrisons, forcing them to retreat. Then, we can immediately shift back to our base and deal a severe blow to the retreating enemy," suggested General Shilan, head of the Second Division.

"Very well, everyone's morale is high. We've encountered some trouble recently, and our weapon supplies have decreased significantly. But comrades, we can't rely solely on our French comrades for everything. We should be self-reliant. No guns, no cannons? We can let the British make them for us! Besides, defending our homeland doesn't solely rely on regular troops. Every county brigade, district squadron, and village group should be mobilized. Don't underestimate village groups just because they are small in number and can't fight large battles. If we kill a few of them today and a few more tomorrow, little by little, it adds up and shouldn't be underestimated," President Russell emphasized.

"At the very least, we can take down some black dogs and confiscate a few guns from their hands," someone chimed in, "Do you think it's better for the British to issue guns to those black dogs, or for them not to issue guns?" Laughter erupted among everyone present.

Chapter 217: Intelligence First

The Duke of Norfolk knew that in the upcoming battle, he had the upper hand in terms of military strength. However, on the other hand, he was at an absolute disadvantage - intelligence.

A series of setbacks had reduced the number of willing collaborators in the non-pacified areas, and the difficulty and cost of buying their cooperation had greatly increased.

What was even more troublesome was the unreliability of the information provided by these individuals. Often, these reports contradicted each other, and sometimes, the same person provided information that was clearly contradictory. This could be because they were not professional intelligence agents and couldn't effectively discern the truth. Or perhaps they were fabricating nonsense to extract more money, intentionally misleading the British. There was also the possibility that some of them were working for the rebels and deliberately misleading the British.

Considering that much of the information received was often contradictory and nonsensical, it was unlikely that genuine rebels could concoct such absurdities (leaving aside the malicious intent to extract money). More likely, they had been discovered by the rebels, who, upon realizing how foolish these collaborators were, deliberately kept them alive to deceive the British.

In any case, all intelligence from the non-pacified areas was unreliable and even laughable. Take, for example, the portraits of the rebel leader, Lazarus. There were over a dozen different depictions, each portraying the same figure, with some even changing his gender. In some portraits, Lazarus was even depicted as a tall, slightly pointed-eared, chestnut-haired warrior with green eyes.

The Duke of Norfolk knew that the majority of these portraits were nonsense, as Lazarus couldn't possibly be some mythical creature. But still, he had the soldiers bring copies of all the portraits, including the one with the pointy-eared girl - what if one of them was genuine? What if Lazarus really was Ireland's Joan of Arc?

As for the semi-pacified areas, the intelligence work was equally frustrating, if not more so. Many members of the "security forces" there were double-dealers, making it difficult to trust the information they provided. Some were diligent in reporting all kinds of information, like Jarvis, the chief of the detective team, who submitted enough information about the rebels every month to fill a book. However, in this entire book, you could hardly find a single piece of reliable information. Among this sea of garbage, the information that was genuinely useful was even scarcer.

In summary, getting effective intelligence from them was an overwhelming task. So, the intelligence department had been requesting an increase in personnel to enhance their information processing capabilities.

"Just dealing with someone like Jarvis would require us to hire two more clerks. This idiot reports everything, even incidents where one household's male dog violated another household's female dog as intelligence!" the Duke of Norfolk exclaimed.

As for the pacified areas, the main focus of their work was capturing rebel spies.

For a period, especially after the first successful major crackdown, the work of capturing rebel spies had been quite successful, almost wiping them out entirely. However, after the failure of the second major crackdown, the situation changed dramatically. Many people, especially the Irish, became skeptical of the British's prospects in the war. In order to "leave a way out," many began double-dealing, turning a blind eye to the rebels' new infiltrations. As a result, rebel spies became a problem again in the pacified areas.

"If we can't get our intelligence work in order, we'll be blinded once again. And we all know that a blind man, no matter how strong, won't achieve much on the battlefield. So, the first item on the agenda for this meeting is intelligence work," the Duke of Norfolk said during the preparatory meeting for the upcoming major crackdown.

"Everyone knows that there's not much time left until the next round of operations, so we must focus on intelligence. In the pacified areas, anyone suspicious must be immediately taken into preventive custody. We'd rather make a thousand mistakes than let one go. The entire pacified area needs to take immediate action. Even if we can't capture all the rebel spies in a short time, we must isolate them so that their information cannot leak out. Understand?"

"Understood!" Several officials stood up and replied.

"Furthermore, improving our collection of rebel intelligence in the short term is unlikely, so our current focus should be on how to prevent the rebels from obtaining information about us. Gentlemen, our opponents are cunning and formidable. They have almost made us blind. How can a blind man defeat someone with clear vision? The only way is to blind them too and then use the extensive experience we gain from being blind for a longer time to crush them," the Duke of Norfolk continued. "So, how can we make our opponents blind? Do any of you have any ideas?"

"We can enhance secrecy, preventing any information about our operations from leaking," one official suggested.

"If our operations don't require the use of the 'Irish Security Forces,' then there's a better chance," another officer shook his head. "Those 'Irish Security Forces' are filled with double-dealers. Tell them something in the morning, and by noon, the rebels probably already know."

"How is that even possible? Our manpower is limited, and that's why we needed them in the first place. Now we have to assign people to watch them specifically; it's not very efficient," the Duke of Norfolk said after everyone had spoken for a while.

The Duke of Norfolk finally spoke up, "I think we've all been on the wrong track. Now, let me ask you all, what methods would you use to make someone with good eyesight unable to see things?"

"Blindfold them."

"Gouge out their eyes."

The Duke of Norfolk shook his head, "You all lack experience. Think about how they blinded our eyes. Besides blindfolding and gouging out eyes, what other methods did they use?"

Silence fell over the group.

The Duke of Norfolk looked at them, sighed, and said, "There's another way: overwhelm their eyes with even stronger light! Just like how mountaineers can suffer snow blindness in the mountains, it's not because the light is too weak to see; it's because the light is too strong to see.

Let's consider how our enemies have blinded us. Besides blindfolding us, preventing us from seeing certain things, and gouging out our eyes, what else have they done?"

Everyone remained silent.

The Duke of Norfolk continued, "They've used our spies to flood us with a mass of useless information, using this noise to deafen our ears and blind us with this chaos. Gentlemen, our enemies may be despicable, but they are incredibly skilled. Remember that. There's much to learn from them. I don't know about you gentlemen, but I study their techniques every day, often late into the night. The more I study, the more I see there's much worth learning. I hope you can actively learn from our opponents too.

Our enemies have infiltrated us to the point where there's virtually no limit. As I mentioned earlier, as long as the 'Irish Security Forces' receive information in the morning, the rebels probably know by lunchtime."

At this point, the Duke of Norfolk paused, looked around, and said, "So, why don't we use this to our advantage? Let's use a large volume of mixed, genuine and false intelligence to overwhelm their eyes, blinding them temporarily."

With that, everyone began to applaud.

In the following period, the United Irishmen would receive a daily influx of information about British troop movements, orders, and other intelligence. The quantity of this information was enormous, but its contents were often contradictory, leaving the members of the United Irishmen somewhat baffled. For instance, there were at least seven or eight different claims about the direction of the British offensive and various conflicting reports about the British's logistical preparations and troop deployments at different stations. The personnel responsible for intelligence within the United Irishmen, including their leader, felt overwhelmed.

"It seems the enemy wants to wear out our comrades with this junk," Chairman Russell called an emergency meeting of the Intelligence Department. "But comrades, we can't dance to the enemy's tune. They've put out countless messages. Some are true, some are false. We can't just blindly look at them all, and we can't ignore them all either. That would be playing into the enemy's hands. We need to come up with a way to efficiently filter out the useless information meant to disrupt us. Only then can we defeat the enemy. Let me propose an immature idea: we can rank these information sources based on their previous reliability and then decide based on that ranking..."

Chapter 218: The Swamp

After a flurry of mixed messages, ranging from "we're launching the campaign tomorrow" to "we're setting off this afternoon" and "the official sweep begins in a month," the British forces were ready to make their move.

First, they reorganized the defenses of their outposts. The troops stationed there, including the "Irish Peacekeeping Forces," were redeployed, replaced by fresh British recruits. The British then divided their consolidated forces into two columns, marching towards the largest non-peacekeeping zone in Ireland.

Despite the interference caused by a barrage of messages, it was challenging to keep a massive military deployment like this a secret. Information from informants within the peacekeeping and semi-peacekeeping zones, as well as the double-dealing "Irish Peacekeeping Forces," was supplemented by the reconnaissance units of the Irish Independent Army. Even the county brigades, district squads, and village guerrilla teams near British-controlled areas had heightened vigilance and were prepared to counter the British sweep at any moment.

In the peripheral regions of the base, which were frequent targets of rapid British punitive expeditions (the British, using their cavalry's high mobility, regularly raided these areas, attempting to gradually erode their defenses), the vigilance and alertness in terms of early warning were taken even more seriously than in other areas.

During the daytime, the men worked in the fields, and the women joined them to help. The guerrilla teams on duty watched the main roads, while the older children took the sheep out to graze, also

keeping an eye on the vacant pathways, carrying out guard duties. (British cavalry, led by traitors, had repeatedly infiltrated the base from these minor roads to cause trouble.)

These children had been warned about the possibility of a large-scale British incursion into the base recently, so they were on high alert.

Early in the morning, Alice and a few of her friends took some sheep to a small grassy knoll north of the village. It was a well-located spot where they could also monitor the nearby roads.

A message tree stood on the knoll, visible when looking in the direction of the village.

Of course, the message tree couldn't be knocked down haphazardly because if the villagers saw the message tree fall, everyone would immediately relocate to the swamp shelter, and no farming would be done that day. It would be a false alarm.

So the children had their roles. When only one or two people approached, two older boys, Michael and Thomas, would go forward with spears to interrogate them, while the other children guarded the message tree. If something went wrong, they would immediately topple the message tree and sound the alarm to the village.

If more people arrived and they weren't prearranged allies, they would unhesitatingly topple the message tree and lead the sheep directly to the swamp shelter.

Upon reaching the knoll, they let the sheep graze in the field below while they kept watch. They discussed the taste of the French candy brought by the former district leader. Michael, filled with anticipation, said, "The old district leader told me that when we win, we can eat French candy every day, as much as we want..."

As they spoke, they daydreamed about a sweet future. At that moment, sharp-eyed Alice suddenly noticed something moving rapidly in the distance.

"Look, what's that over there?" Alice called out.

The children stood on tiptoe to look in the direction she pointed. There was definitely something moving quickly toward them.

"It's the enemy's cavalry! Quick, lower the message tree!"

The children hurriedly toppled the message tree and Michael and Thomas went down to set tripwires on the minor road. The others gathered the sheep and, without returning to the village, made their way directly to the swamp shelter.

Once the message tree was down, everyone became alert. The villagers began packing their belongings, which had already been prepared in recent days, and headed for the swamp shelter. Several of the young men from the guerrilla team in the village armed themselves and went toward the threat. They intended to disrupt the enemy as much as possible using guerrilla tactics, buying the villagers time to relocate.

The villagers rendezvoused with the children near the entrance to the swamp shelter. Except for Michael and Thomas, all the children and sheep were there. They explained that Michael and Thomas had gone to set tripwires for landmines. The rest stayed for a while, listening to muffled explosions from that direction.

After a tense wait, Michael and Thomas eventually returned, their faces beaming with excitement.

"Rascals, where have you been!" Old Michael approached to scold the mischievous kids.

"We saw two British cavalry horses with broken legs, and those two British guys fell off their horses, hahaha..." Michael still looked elated, completely oblivious to his father's brewing scolding.

"Never mind, they're back now. Let's get inside quickly," several people held back Old Michael, and they all moved toward the shelter. As they walked, they removed the boards from the entrance and knocked down the wooden stakes.

Outside, a few gunshots rang out, the guerrilla fighters were firing at the British. They had an alternative route in and out of the shelter, so there was no need to worry about them. Soon, thick smoke billowed from the direction of the village - it was evident that the British were setting it on fire.

"If they have the guts to come into the swamp, we'll shoot them dead!" one villager declared angrily. Although their thatched-roof houses weren't worth much, they had worked hard to build them.

Shortly after the villagers entered the shelter, a group of British soldiers and some bloodhounds arrived at the edge of the swamp.

This time, the British came prepared to deal with the swamp, equipped with a new piece of gear: swamp shoes.

These "swamp shoes" were actually large wooden boards that could be fastened onto regular boots. The design was simple, and the principle straightforward: they increased the surface area and decreased pressure. Wearing these shoes, the pressure exerted by a person on the ground was reduced by more than half, making it less likely for them to sink. However, it wasn't foolproof; in case they encountered exceptionally thin or deep quagmires, the result would still be fatal.

Since entering the swamp remained risky, it was the task of the "Peacekeeping Forces" to lead the way.

The Peacekeeping Forces' bloodhounds were the first to don these shoes and each carried a long wooden pole, venturing ahead to scout the path.

The simple design did indeed prove effective. They walked on the swamp's muddy surface without sinking, and it made their movement significantly faster and more agile.

"Good," said British officer Edward Stafford, who was supervising from behind. "We'll stay here and oversee their entry. We'll apprehend those rebels!"

Nonetheless, entering the swamp was still perilous. Even with swamp shoes, it was treacherous. So, if the British could avoid going in, it was better that they did. Moreover, according to their intelligence, the village only had around a hundred people, including women and children. The true adult men numbered only a few dozen, all of them ordinary folks. Edward believed that the "Peacekeeping Forces," although somewhat ragtag, should be sufficient to deal with these people.

By this time, the guerrilla team had entered the swamp through another passage. They quickly spotted the Peacekeeping Forces, clad in swamp shoes, waddling through the swamp like a flock of ducks.

"Hey, these Peacekeeping Forces have this stuff too?" whispered the team leader Hitchens, speaking in hushed tones to a squad member named Thompson.

The squad member nodded and then left to report to the old village leader, while Hitchens and another member, Wade, made their plans.

"Let's split up, Wade. You go left, and I'll go right. We'll approach them from both sides..."

"We'll encircle them from the left and right," Wade confirmed. "I understand."

"Good! We'll open fire from both sides. Remember, take one shot, then change position. After firing ten shots, we'll rendezvous at location one, and then we'll lead the enemy to location two. Got it?"

"Got it!"

At this point, over two hundred "Peacekeeping Forces" had entered the swamp. Team leader Hyde was being pressured by squad leader O'Kelly to lead the way. The swamp had poor visibility with tall and low water grasses, reeds everywhere. Occasionally, a disturbance in the reed bed would send a couple of wild ducks flying out.

Hyde was cautiously moving through the swamp when suddenly, there was a gunshot from his left. Simultaneously, one of the Peacekeeping Forces next to him let out a miserable cry, falling headlong into the muck.

This sent the other Peacekeeping Forces into chaos, and they turned to look in the direction of the gunshot, where a thick, pale-blue smoke seemed to be rising from the reeds. The sound of the gunshot and the shock made a flock of wild ducks take flight.

"Rebels! Rebels on the left, in the reeds! Open fire in that direction!" Hyde pointed to the reed bed, shouting.

The Peacekeeping Forces quickly turned their guns towards the dense reeds and opened fire, causing reed stems and leaves to scatter in every direction. However, no one noticed if anyone was hit when they fired. In fact, while they were shooting, they hadn't seen anyone there.

After this round of firing, Squad leader O'Kelly scrutinized the scene and realized that two more of their men had fallen on their side.

"I didn't see any of those Independent Army fellows shooting just now; are they pretending to be dead?" O'Kelly thought and planned to go over and give the two play-acting guys a good kick. However, at this moment, a gunshot rang out from behind them.

"Captain, Captain, the rebels are behind us!" Hyde shouted again.

Chapter 219: Tricky Situation

If Heath had just shouted, "The rebels are over there," that would have been fine. But he had to go and say, "They're behind us." Generally, on the battlefield, having enemies appear behind you is the most dangerous situation. So when he shouted that, everyone panicked and turned around, but the ground beneath them was all muddy. Even though their swamp boots reduced the pressure on the mud and prevented them from sinking in easily, those boots weren't very good at providing traction. So when they turned around quickly, it was easy to slip and fall, and that's precisely what happened.

If this had been a normal situation, a bunch of people falling down might have been met with some laughter. But this was a battlefield, and suddenly, so many people went down. Some of those

remaining among them naturally lost their composure and thought, "My God, so many just dropped dead! We're surrounded!"

Someone shouted, "We're surrounded, run!" It didn't take long for others to start waddling like ducks, their big feet splashing in the water and mud as they rushed backward. Soon, a group of "ducks" were running for their lives.

The swamp was incredibly slippery, and during this process, more people fell. These fallen individuals were mistaken for casualties by the terrified "ducks," who then fled even more desperately.

Understanding that these people had only fallen, not been killed, wasn't difficult. There were no gunshots when they went down, and in those times, suppressed firearms didn't exist yet. However, when mass hysteria takes over, reason often takes a back seat. For example, in some places and times, people panicked and bought up all the toilet paper in a supermarket due to rumors. A media host might even debunk the rumors on their show but rush to grab some for themselves because they know that not following the trend could leave them without any toilet paper at home.

The current situation was somewhat similar. Once everyone started running, even those who understood what was happening, like Heath and O'Kelly, found that nobody was paying attention to them. They had no choice but to join the fleeing crowd, and they had to run faster, or else they'd be left behind as the rebels wouldn't be able to eliminate so many "security forces."

So, everyone made an about-face and ran, like a herd of animals fleeing from an approaching threat. In the story, the stampeding herd only stopped when they encountered a lion. Similarly, the "security forces" only stopped when they ran into the redcoated British soldiers.

"Halt!" shouted a British officer as he drew his sword. Several lines of Lobsterbacks had already shouldered their muskets.

Some of the "ducks" who sensed something amiss began to slow down. However, due to the slippery ground, this reduction in speed led to more slips and falls. Those in the rear either didn't hear or didn't clearly understand the British officer's warning, so they continued to run forward.

"Fire!" The British officer wasted no time in slashing his sword downward.

Bang! Gunshots rang out, and the black dogs, now running back, were truly brought down in a mass.

"Go back! Go back! We can't run; they will kill us, sir!" Captain O'Kelly shouted.

"Prepare!" Edward's voice crackled in the air.

The "security forces" soldiers who hadn't died scrambled to their feet and turned back toward the marsh. Along the way, a few were shot by the guerilla fighters, more were shot by the British, and a few, although wearing swamp boots, still unluckily got stuck in the quagmire but hadn't died yet.

Watching the "security forces" fall to the ground and crawl into the marsh, Edward wore a smug smile.

"Now, apart from the cavalry and artillery, all other units, put on your swamp boots and follow me into the marsh to eliminate the rebels," Edward sheathed his sword and issued the command.

The Lobsterbacks also put on swamp boots and began to enter the marsh, following the path the "security forces" had taken.

After running for a while, Captain O'Kelly turned around and couldn't see the redcoated British soldiers anymore. They stopped to catch their breath.

"Captain... Captain... we can't go any further in here. We're unfamiliar with this place, and if we go deeper, we'll be ambushed for sure," one "security forces" soldier said.

"Captain, just think, will we be spared by General Stafford? He didn't even bat an eyelid after so many of our comrades were killed. We have to go forward. There shouldn't be many rebels up ahead," another "security forces" soldier reasoned.

"What if there's more than one or two rebels up ahead? Captain, we might as well fire a few shots randomly. It'll be worth the money the British paid us. Then we can find a place to hide for a while. When we go out again, we can say we fought the rebels for a while, and they ran away. Wouldn't that work?" Yet another soldier suggested.

"That's right, Captain. We can't go any further. Look at how many times we've slipped on this road. Our muskets are all soaked, and they're full of muddy water. We can't even fire them," a comrade added.

Captain O'Kelly pondered for a moment and then said, "Fine, go and find some usable muskets. Fire a couple of shots and then head to the reeds over there to hide for a while. We'll figure out the rest later. But remember, we've left footprints on this path, and if General Stafford and his men follow our tracks, we'll have to..."

Though Black Dog had already passed through this area, the Lobsterbacks were still cautious as they traversed the marsh. They had no choice; from time to time, they encountered a Black Dog who had sunk into the muck and called out for help.

As a result, the Lobsterbacks moved slowly, and after a while, they heard the crackling sound of gunshots up ahead.

"It's the security forces and the rebels fighting!" Edward Stafford exclaimed, drawing his sword. "Full speed ahead, catch up, and eliminate the rebels!"

The soldiers quickened their pace.

After a while, it seemed they had reached the location where the gunshots had rung out. But now there was no one in sight, neither rebels nor black dogs.

"Damn it, where have they all gone?" Edward Stafford was visibly frustrated.

"It seems the rebels have retreated, and the security forces went after them. Sir, you see, there are tracks leading this way," another sub-lieutenant pointed to a place for Edward Stafford to see.

The place did indeed have a mishmash of footprints that extended to a shallow body of water. The water looked shallow but wide and had a misty appearance. They couldn't see where those chaps had landed on the other side.

"They must have waded through," the sub-lieutenant suggested.

"They had the courage to chase after them like this?"

"Maybe they saw the rebels and just followed them. So they chased them."

Several junior officers discussed it among themselves. Eventually, they all turned their gaze towards their commanding officer, Captain Edward Stafford.

But Captain Edward Stafford hesitated a bit because the footprints were submerged beneath the water's surface, which wasn't clear, and the area was filled with various aquatic plants. The water wasn't deep, but they couldn't see what lay beneath, so entering it was quite dangerous.

At the same time, on the other side of the water, in the reeds, a few pairs of eyes were fixed on the red-coated British soldiers.

Several guerrilla members had just witnessed a farcical scene: a group of black dogs had arrived, changed the direction of their swamp boots, and then fired a few shots into the air. Afterward, they ran back along the same path and disappeared. Soon after, a large group of Lobsterbacks arrived.

The guerrilla members knew that the mud below the water's surface was treacherous. Even with swamp boots, they couldn't traverse this section of water. Now, seeing the British soldiers hesitating, the guerrilla members looked at each other, and Higgins lowered his voice, "Wade, let's retreat a bit, fire a few shots, and I bet those British lads will fall for it."

A few guerrilla members moved back a bit and then fired shots into the air.

"There! Right over there! The security forces and the rebels are fighting again!"

Now that the whereabouts of the security forces were clear, and both the security forces and the rebels had managed to cross, could the mighty British army be left behind?

So, Captain Edward Stafford promptly made a decision and ordered, "Everyone, get in the water, cross the surface, and pursue the rebels."

The valiant Lobsterbacks began to wade into the water. The water was not initially deep, reaching just above their knees. The mud beneath became softer, but not enough to engulf anyone. So, they continued moving forward. To avoid getting their firearms wet, the soldiers had to raise their muskets high above their heads, resembling a display of surrender. The mud underfoot was also becoming increasingly malleable.

"Keep going, we'll be through in no time!" Captain Edward Stafford encouraged the soldiers beside him, though he had a nagging feeling that something wasn't quite right.

Chapter 220: The Proof of Victory

Captain Edward Stafford had only shouted half of his command when the sound of a gunshot rang out. Quickly followed by another.

Amidst the gunfire, two British soldiers sunk beneath the murky waters. Their situation was dire. They were in the deepest part of the water, making movement difficult. They had become easy targets. Their stance wasn't suitable for precise shooting, and even if they managed to fire, their hurried shots would hardly hit their mark.

In addition, they faced a significant problem; they couldn't reload their firearms in this environment. Their rifles were rendered useless after a single shot, leaving them virtually defenseless. All they could do was assume the shooter was hiding behind the reeds, keeping their rifles aimed but not firing to maintain a threat, while quickly retreating or advancing.

Yet, in the chaos, the British soldiers failed to make the wisest decision. They fired their guns randomly in the direction of the reeds. The result of their blind shots was unclear. After some time, the reeds on the other side responded with more gunshots, and another British soldier fell. The British turned to face the threat, raised their rifles, but this time, no shots were fired. In the previous panic, they had exhausted all their ammunition. Now they had no means of reloading, effectively making them unarmed.

"Charge! Charge and use your bayonets to deal with them!" Captain Stanford shouted.

The British soldiers were resilient, and they advanced towards the enemy. The guerrilla fighters saw the Brits in distress and chose to stand out in the open, firing at them boldly. They reloaded their weapons right in front of the British soldiers' eyes, firing again and again.

Progressing through the water and mud was challenging with each step, but the guerrilla fighters were outnumbered. Despite suffering casualties at close range and some British soldiers sinking into the quagmire, the determined British Lobsters pressed on.

The British soldiers reached shallower waters, nearly making it to the shore. The shameless Irishmen fired their last shot and fled. The British chased them for a while, but in the distance, they spotted a small boat. Several Irish guerrillas were rowing away.

"Quick, reload your rifles and fire!" Captain Edward Stafford was exasperated.

But reloading took time. By the time they had clumsily reloaded, the boat had disappeared behind the reeds.

"Damn rebels..." After a string of expletives, Captain Edward Stafford had a problem to solve: what should they do next?

Continue forward? The water ahead was deeper and broader than what they had crossed. Take a detour? The location of the guerrillas in the swamp was unknown, and there was no clear path to take. Return? That would mean their comrades' lives had been sacrificed in vain.

Moreover, how would they return? Back the way they came? When they had charged forward, they hadn't noticed, but now they saw that five or six of their comrades were still bobbing in the water, shouting, "For the sake of the United Kingdom, help a brother out!" Returning the same way would only leave more men behind.

As Captain Edward Stafford grappled with his dilemma, shouts from behind reached his ears.

"Captain... Captain Stafford..."

Captain Edward Stafford raised his spyglass to see a group of Black Paws, each carrying a bundle of reeds. They threw the reeds into the water and stepped on them to create a makeshift path, slowly making their way over.

Leading them was O'Kelly, who was shouting, "Captain, don't worry; we're here to save you!" This pushed Captain Stanford to the brink of madness.

The Black Paws spent nearly half an hour laying down the path. O'Kelly, huffing and puffing, ran up to Captain Edward Stafford, only to receive a slap across the face, nearly sending him sprawling.

"You scoundrel, tell me, where did you all go just now? Did you collude with the rebels to set us up intentionally?" Captain Stafford raged.

While berating O'Kelly, Captain Stanford drew his sword, pointing it at O'Kelly, so livid he could hardly speak. "You... your... conscience... is corrupt... corrupt! I..."

O'Kelly's legs gave way, and he fell to his knees. "Captain, I swear by my loyalty to the United Kingdom, may God be my witness! I pledge my soul to salvation. If I colluded with the rebels to harm you, may my whole family go to hell."

"You scoundrel! Then tell me, where did you go, and what were you doing? If you can't explain, I'll cut you down!"

"Captain, a short while ago, we encountered a few rebels over here. They fired at us, we fired back, and then they fled. We pursued them and reached... here," Captain O'Kelly pointed to the spot where the British soldiers had entered the water. "Captain, you see, those rebels are sly. They had a boat hidden over there. They got on the boat and quickly made their way here. Since the water is too deep here, we couldn't follow, so I thought of gathering some reeds we passed by earlier. We bundled them up to create a path. Captain, did the rebels go that way?"

"You dimwit, why were you so slow!" Stanford put away his sword and smacked O'Kelly once more.

"Yes, yes, Captain. I admit my men were too slow. Way too slow," O'Kelly said, bowing with a smile.

Then he looked over the wider expanse of water on the other side. "Captain, there's no boat, and we can't cross. How about we retreat for now, and return with a boat tomorrow?"

"Slap!" Angrily, Stanford gave O'Kelly another slap.

"Indeed, Captain, you're right. We mustn't retreat without wiping out the rebels," O'Kelly fervently declared.

As he spoke, he quickly adopted a cheerful expression. "But it will get dark soon, and the swamp can be bitterly cold. Catching a cold out here would be a problem. What if we return now and come back tomorrow to finish them off?"

"Hmm," Captain Stanford nodded, then whispered, "Retreat."

With that, Captain Stanford led the group of British soldiers back along the path. He could still hear O'Kelly's shout from behind: "For now, follow the Captain back. We'll return to finish off those rebels another day."

Meanwhile, those British soldiers who had cried for help, with only their heads above water, had all now sunk beneath the surface.

As Stanford walked back, he was filled with regret and anger. Today, he had taken the initiative, leading his troops into the swamp, hoping to achieve a significant victory. Yet, they had suffered losses over twenty men and nearly forty dogs but hadn't killed a single rebel. How would he explain this when he returned? Even if his family had some influence, they were still minor nobility. Stanford could already envision himself being forcibly retired, becoming a disgrace to his family.

"Captain, Captain..." O'Kelly approached with a smiling face.

"What is it?" Stanford was not in a good mood.

"Captain, today, you took the initiative and bravely killed over a hundred rebels. You're truly invincible," O'Kelly said flatteringly, his face unwavering.

"What did you say?" Stanford turned around, glaring at the Black Paw.

"Captain, this is something we all witnessed," O'Kelly said, maintaining his composure. Then he lowered his voice. "Captain, only by winning can we earn more rewards. It benefits everyone, doesn't it? We all came here for the rewards, after all."

Stanford stared at O'Kelly's eyes for a long time. After a while, he said, "Very well, you're quite clever."

Stanford wasn't worried that O'Kelly might use this situation to threaten him in the future. O'Kelly was a clever dogan Irish one, to be exact. Regardless of what he barked at an English nobleman, nobody would believe him. Moreover, barking itself was a crime. Stanford believed that an intelligent dog like O'Kelly understood this.

As for the British soldiers under his command, they were just commoners. With some reward money, perhaps a little extra from Stanford, he should be able to keep their mouths shut.

"Where's the loot, though?" Stanford asked.

"Loot? I've got it right here, Captain," O'Kelly replied. "But, I also need your help with something..."