

The Fox 271

Chapter 271: A Way Out

The administrative efficiency of the British government had waned in recent times, which was to be expected given the increased intensity of parliamentary struggles. In the past, the main players in the country's parliament were the Tories and the Whigs, and ever since the reign of King George III, the Tories had gradually gained the upper hand, ensuring swift passage and implementation of government policies.

But recently, this situation had abruptly changed. The previously dominant Tories had splintered, turning the entire parliament into a complex triangle of the Tories, the New Tories, and the Whigs. These factions were constantly at odds with each other on various issues, causing government bills to face delays in parliament, and the formulation of certain laws to become slower than before.

However, on the matter of restoring order in London, there was little need for communication between the three factions. In less than half an hour, they swiftly passed the government's proposed "Public Order Act" and reinstated the ancient "Vagrant Act."

According to the old "Vagrant Act," loitering, idleness, and a lack of industry were all defined as criminal behaviors. The unemployed and those without work were considered "criminals," subject to arbitrary arrests by the police and incarceration.

Of course, the prisons couldn't accommodate all these "criminals." So, the "Vagrant Act" provided an opportunity for these offenders to reform. After the first arrest for "crime," the punishment was not too severe; they'd receive a few lashes, have their records marked, and then be released.

But if the "criminals" continued their idle and criminal ways, the punishments grew harsher. After three days of flogging for the same offense, they would be sentenced to hard labor.

Of course, the British legal system was quite merciful. The purpose of hard labor was not to inflict suffering but to help these individuals reform their idle and criminal habits. However, such habits were challenging to change, and recidivism was common, much like some web novel authors' frequent hiatuses and unfinished works. Hence, longer sentences were often necessary to reinforce the treatment, similar to how certain web novel authors needed extended time in the "black room" or 14-day isolation.

Those sentenced to hard labor often found themselves leased to enterprises like mines. Although the government did specify compensation for losses (which went to the government, not the "public slaves" or their families), it was a virtually costless transaction for the government. Consequently, the conditions for these "public slaves" were harsh.

However, in a sense, this system was still considered benevolent. Even though the plight of "public slaves" couldn't compare to the cotton-picking, watermelon-eating black slaves in North America, they were not the most wretched. The most miserable position went to a type of slave formally known as "free laborers."

These "free laborers" weren't owned by anyone; they weren't slaves of individuals or the state, so no one had any incentive to treat them kindly. For any business owner leasing them, the optimal approach was to use them to the maximum. If it became apparent that excessive use might damage them, they would be discharged to avoid risks. After all, in free trade, everyone had a choice. As a

result, "free laborers" with some structural damage and declining labor capabilities were left to starve. Comparatively, "public slaves" at least had jail cells to call home.

So, this was why Subi preferred Blackwell Island over becoming a "free laborer."

For unrepentant "criminals" who persisted in their idle and criminal lives after their release, the law permitted them to be hanged. Nevertheless, the reformation efforts in Great Britain were showing remarkable results, and most "criminals" did not commit the same offenses again. After undergoing rehabilitation, they typically heeded the call of a better life.

Of course, the final punishment in the original "Vagrant Act" was a bit too severe. Therefore, the Addington government made some modifications, replacing hanging with exile. Fortunately, Great Britain had many territories to choose from.

Following this decision, the British state machinery immediately kicked into high gear. Large numbers of criminals were apprehended and incarcerated, and masses of "public slaves" were sent to various coal mines, iron mines, and other high-risk industries.

As George walked down the street, a police officer suddenly stopped him.

"What do you do? Do you have a job?" The police officer asked, placing his hand on the handle of his gun tucked into his waist.

"Officer, I do have a job. I work at Andy Machinery Factory. Look, I have the factory's work permit right here," George replied while handing a small card to the police officer. The officer took the card, glanced at it, and then tossed it back to him, saying, "You have a job, so why are you roaming around here?"

"Officer, I'm on the night shift. I came out to buy some food to eat before going to work," George quickly replied, picking up the small card and carefully placing it back into his pocket.

"Now, get lost," the police officer said.

George hurriedly walked away, took a few steps, turned a corner, and disappeared into an alley.

George did indeed work the night shift, but not at Andy Machinery Factory. His work permit was a forged one he had acquired from the local gang. However, in this era, there weren't any sophisticated anti-counterfeiting measures, so it was generally easy to pass off a fake.

His real job was housebreaking.

With the enforcement of the new laws, rather than diminishing, criminal activities had become even more intense. Everyone was racing against the clock.

All the "criminals" knew that staying in Britain was a perilous choice. Whether becoming a "public slave" or a "free laborer," neither was a way out. The only viable option was to quickly gather enough money to buy a ticket to the New World and seek freedom in America.

George, of course, had no intention of becoming a "public slave" or a "free laborer." He planned to take a chance with his comrades. Tonight, they would try to borrow some money from a respectable household and then flee to the land of liberty, America.

However, as he emerged from the alley, ready to scout the vicinity near a large mansion, he heard a cry, "Recruiting tenant farmers, recruiting tenant farmers! Louisiana is recruiting tenant farmers! If

you can farm, you can go to Louisiana to grow wheat. Farm consecutively for five years, and you'll gain land ownership!"

"Is there such a thing?" George was surprised. He turned to see a newsboy waving a newspaper and running towards him while shouting.

George quickly grabbed the newsboy and asked, "What does it say on there?"

"How should I know?" the newsboy retorted.

"Then why are you shouting?"

"People told me to. If you want to know, go to Apron Lane; there are people there who handle this."

"Apron Lane?" George wasn't a local Londoner and was unfamiliar with these place names.

"Just ask around yourself. Many people want to go there."

George thought it was still early, not yet nighttime, and a trip to Apron Lane wouldn't waste much time. In any case, if he could indeed become a tenant farmer again, it would be a better option than risking burglary.

In Apron Lane, the "butcher" who collected fees was busy selecting tenant farmers willing to go to Louisiana. This task was assigned to him by Jacques Gurlong. It was said that Jacques and his associates had purchased a significant piece of land in Louisiana, and they were in need of settlers for farming. However, the butcher felt that things might not be as straightforward as they seemed.

Chapter 272: The Haitian Question

Jacques Galarde and his crew did indeed have vast tracts of land in Louisiana. In fact, the land in Louisiana was hardly worth much. What was always in short supply there was not land but people.

In 1762, as part of their alliance to resist British expansion in North America, the French transferred sovereignty over Louisiana to the Spanish. From that point onwards, the Spanish became the rulers of Louisiana.

However, the Spanish faced a significant challenge - a shortage of population. They couldn't provide many immigrants. As a result, despite being under Spanish rule, Louisiana remained predominantly French.

After the French Revolution, Spain briefly joined the anti-French coalition to fight against France, but they soon switched sides and became allies of France. Louisiana continued to be a Spanish colony, but it was still inhabited by French-speaking people.

Recently, the Spanish had encountered economic difficulties (it seemed that the Spanish were always struggling economically), and they were facing pressure from the United States in North America. In Florida, Americans had already started making some moves, and in the capital of Louisiana, they used the weakness of the Spanish to force them to acknowledge American "special interests" in New Orleans.

The increasingly weakened Spanish were finding it difficult to maintain control over the vast land of Louisiana. Napoleon saw an opportunity and proposed to the Spanish that he would be willing to trade some of his interests in Italy for sovereignty over Louisiana.

In Napoleon's vision, using Louisiana, along with Haiti, which was still under French control, could help maintain considerable influence in the New World. This idea received the support of Joseph , who had a clearer understanding of the significance of the New World for the future compared to most others.

However, to strengthen their control over Louisiana, the most crucial factor was the population. But due to recent prosperity in France, there were fewer people willing to venture thousands of miles away. So, the number of French immigrants was limited. Although the government encouraged childbirth and even awarded "Heroic Mother" medals to mothers with many children, this couldn't change the situation in the short term.

Therefore, the French mainly relied on immigrants from other European regions to move to Louisiana.

Theoretically, ensuring that French people remained the majority of immigrants would be better for the cohesion of overseas territories and the homeland. However, the events of the American War of Independence showed that blood relations were not always reliable. Unlike Napoleon, who envisioned a new empire where the sun never set, Joseph had much lower expectations. His minimum expectation was only a divided North American continent.

Joseph believed that with the existence of the United States, Louisiana might actually become more loyal to France in some sense, just as Canada remained loyal to Britain due to the existence of the United States.

With the presence of the United States, controlling distant Louisiana seemed feasible. Of course, to achieve this, especially to maintain long-term control over Louisiana, there was a problem that needed to be solved, known as Saint-Domingue (Haiti at the time).

Because, in future times, Haiti would be one of the poorest countries in the world, with very little global influence. Most people wouldn't even know it existed, unless something significant happened. So, initially, Joseph didn't pay much attention to Haiti.

But soon, Joseph realized that Haiti in this era was not something to be underestimated. In fact, in terms of its importance to the French economy, it was even more significant than the whole of Louisiana.

In 1780, 40% of sugar and 60% of coffee on the European market came from Haiti. Haiti's production of these agricultural products exceeded that of the entire West Indies. By 1791, Haiti's sugar production had already ranked first in the world. Haiti became the wealthiest colony of France and was known as the "Pearl of the Caribbean."

Of course, the wealth of Haiti had no connection with most of its people. On the contrary, because of Haiti's wealth, the slaveholders in Haiti drove the black slaves to work intensively. In comparison to the slaves in the southern United States, the intensity of labor by the black slaves in Haiti was almost comparable to that of British workers.

In 1791, taking advantage of the opportunity presented by the French Revolution, the black slaves in Haiti launched a major uprising. Initially, they fought against the British and the Spanish, who were part of the anti-French alliance, and then joined forces with the French against the Spanish and the British. To keep Haiti in French hands, the revolutionary government even made a move that stunned all of Europe: they emancipated the slaves, granting black people citizenship and voting

rights and appointing Toussaint Louverture, a black leader of the uprising, as Governor-General of Saint-Domingue.

However, this didn't solve the fundamental problem - the issue of land. So, under the governance of the French revolutionary government, black people in Haiti evolved from "private slaves" into "free laborers," or more accurately, "free agricultural workers." All the developed land in Haiti was owned by white people, and the condition of black people after gaining their so-called "citizenship" was not even better than before the revolution.

In the original timeline, in 1801, black leader Toussaint declared Haiti's independence, completely abolished slavery, and enacted land nationalization, taking the land from white colonialists. In response, Napoleon sent an expeditionary force of thirty thousand troops in 1802 to attempt to retake Haiti. However, the expedition faced many challenges in Haiti, coupled with the outbreak of yellow fever and American support for the Haitian rebels, from material aid to naval bombardment against the French. The French expeditionary force faced a precarious situation. Even though Toussaint was deceived, lured into negotiations, and arrested by General Leclerc, the Haitian rebels still had the upper hand and eventually forced the remaining French troops to surrender in 1803, establishing the first independent black republic.

However, after the establishment of the independent black republic, Haiti's former wealth seemed to vanish with the departure of the colonizers. Haiti quickly became one of the poorest and most underdeveloped countries in the world, a status it still holds today, despite having similar institutions and laws to the United States.

This outcome naturally led many white supremacists to draw a conclusion: "White people are superior, black people are inferior, and without the leadership of outstanding white people, black people can only make a mess of themselves." Similar "evidence" included statements like "Mandela turned South Africa from a developed country into a developing country," but these white supremacists seemed to count only white people as human and excluded black people from consideration. According to their calculations, even India would be a developed country.

Haiti's "downfall" – let's call it "downfall" for now, although in reality, even during Haiti's "most prosperous" times, the average black person's life was not significantly better – is actually quite straightforward. It was simply a highly replaceable link in the economic chain. When Haiti became independent, it not only achieved political independence but also economic independence.

In other words, it was isolated from the colonial economic chain. Its position in this chain was quickly replaced by other colonies, and the production costs in these other colonies were certainly far lower than in Haiti's. Unless independent Haiti could concentrate land and use the black people as "free laborers," what would be the meaning of the revolution?

However, for France, for Napoleon's dream of a new empire where the sun never sets, the failure of Haiti was decisive. Losing Haiti not only resulted in significant economic losses (although some of this was recovered by demanding ransom from the Haitian Republic), but it also meant losing a crucial foothold in the Americas. This was one of the reasons why Napoleon sold the entirety of Louisiana to the United States.

Now, in this alternate timeline, the issue of Haiti was once again before Napoleon. Checkk new *novel chapters* at [novelbin\(.\)com](http://novelbin(.)com)

"Santo Domingo is bound to have problems sooner or later," Napoleon was well aware of this. "That Toussaint Louverture has become the absolute ruler of Haiti. Well, Joseph, how did you phrase it?"

"Mountains are high, and the Emperor is far away," Joseph answered.

"Yes, 'mountains are high, and the Emperor is far away.' This place is too far from France. I just received reports that Toussaint has started implementing 'land nationalization'—essentially, confiscating white people's land. Damn it, five cents per acre, that's just outright confiscation. Many French people have already been forced to flee, or even killed. What do you think we should do?" Napoleon asked.

If Joseph had been educated according to his past life's experiences, he would undoubtedly have cheered and applauded the anti-colonial and righteous actions in Haiti. But this approach damaged the French people, or more plainly, the interests of the Bonapartes! So, if they could suppress it directly, Joseph would certainly approve of directly suppressing the Haitian uprising.

But would suppression work? Joseph couldn't help but ask himself this question.

Steamships couldn't yet reach Haiti, and the British and Americans had the advantage at sea. Joseph wondered, if he were a Briton or an American, what would he do when he discovered that the French were fighting against the local Haitian rebels?

Chapter 273: Strategy

"Napoleon, do you plan to send an expeditionary force?" Joseph asked.

"I'm somewhat concerned; those guys can fight," Napoleon replied.

The Haitian black army had proven their prowess by defeating the French in Haiti, then turning back to conquer the British and Spanish forces remaining in Haiti, despite their limited numbers. According to the old veterans who had served in the Haitian French army and later fought back in France, their combat strength was quite close to the rebellious forces in Guadeloupe—of course, the ones who had not left Guadeloupe.

The main force of the Guadeloupean rebels was easily crushed by Napoleon, but he was well aware that the rebels he had defeated weren't the true Guadeloupean rebels. The genuine rebels, before the nobility demanded that they march on Paris, dispersed and returned home, scattered throughout Guadeloupe. These scattered rebels, with the morale they had in the Guadeloupe region, would be challenging to deal with. With such high morale, any army would be formidable.

"And our navy is too weak; we can't possibly blockade all of Santo Domingo. The British and Americans will surely support them. How we handled Ireland is precisely how they'll handle Santo Domingo. Damn the British, but the ungrateful Americans; they would all have been hanged by the British if it weren't for us, the French! Yet now, they forget their debts and hinder us!" Napoleon continued to complain.

"Americans didn't join the anti-French alliance, which is quite generous on their part. After all, we have a history of conflict with the United States. We killed one of their founding fathers and exiled another," Joseph remarked, with a smile.

"What did you say... Ah, you're right, it's almost like that," Napoleon first appeared stunned but then grasped the meaning. "Louis XVI, that idiot, could indeed be considered a founding father of America. And Lafayette won't speak well of us either."

"Napoleon, remember, between nations, there is no loyalty, only interests," Joseph added.

"I am well aware of that," Napoleon replied. "But losing Santo Domingo like this is hard to accept. It involves a lot of money."

"Very well, very well!" Joseph applauded with satisfaction. "Napoleon, you're becoming more mature. You now understand the importance of patience when necessary. Of course, losing Santo Domingo unconditionally would be unbearable, considering the immense financial interests at stake. However, I think we can send someone there to meet with that black governor... What's his name?" Joseph looked at Napoleon.

Napoleon rolled his eyes and said, "How am I supposed to know? Who bothers to remember the full name of a black man?"

"General Toussaint Louverture," Lucien chimed in.

Napoleon glared at Lucien and demanded, "That's not a full name. What is his full name?"

Lucien responded, "How would I know who would bother to remember the full name of a black man?"

Well, their attitude did indeed carry a hint of racial prejudice, but considering this was the early 19th century, there was no notion of Black Lives Matter, and even the question of whether black people should be considered human beings was still a matter of debate. Napoleon and Lucien's attitudes were far from being particularly reactionary.

"Enough, let's not dwell on these irrelevant matters," Joseph said. "The important thing is how to minimize losses and even create problems for the British and Americans. First, consider our bottom line, then ponder the issues we and they have. Think about what results both sides can accept. Now, guess what... well, you guess, what's their bottom line?"

Napoleon remained silent but glanced at Lucien.

"Isn't it independence?" Lucien said.

Joseph shook his head, and right when he was about to speak, Napoleon suddenly jumped up from his chair and said, "My foolish brother! What on earth is going through your head every day? If you keep this up, next time we hold a meeting, we should kick you out and let that troublemaker take your place. If that... only wanted independence, it wouldn't be much of a problem. But you've forgotten that political actions always have economic reasons. He doesn't just want nominal independence; he wants to change Santo Domingo's land system, just like the French Revolution! That's where our real conflict lies!"

Lucien stood still for a moment and then suddenly clapped his hands. "Isn't that simple? We can handle this! Just because these black people don't have land, right? Well, now, theoretically, these black people are all French citizens. So, theoretically, they have the right to immigrate to Louisiana. To encourage immigration, we can apply the same system we've established: cultivate the land for five years, and you gain ownership. It's applicable to them, isn't it? Let them immigrate to Louisiana! Even though they're black, they still speak French."

"Do you think they'll trust us? Won't they be worried that we'll load them onto ships and transport them straight to Georgia to be sold to those American folks?" Napoleon said. "But your suggestion makes some sense. Let me think about it."

"Consider their weaknesses, Napoleon," Joseph advised. "Santo Domingo's prosperity is built on trade. I believe that the one who can dance on the three eggs - France, England, and Spain - should also understand this. We need to make him believe that if he unconditionally seizes the land of the white Frenchmen, he and his country will be excluded from the entire trade network. Once excluded from this trade network, even if they get the land, they'll be in for a hard time."

"Even if they do pay, the British, the Spanish, and the Americans won't let them into the trade network because they are not a good example. If we let them live the high life, it will encourage internal rebellion. Instead, only we can continue to offer them trade opportunities. I think we can have a good discussion from this perspective with Toussaint Louverture; he should be someone we can talk to," Lucien said.

"So, what is our bottom line then?" Napoleon asked again.

"Santo Domingo remains part of France. White people's land can only be redeemed, but we can provide them with low-interest loans. Of course, we should guarantee their French citizenship. This way, they owe us money and can only use our trade channels. We can also bind them to our chariot," Lucien replied.

"We should also request control of the ports, at least control of the naval base, to arrange a fleet there for deterring the British and Americans. We need to build fortifications quickly, stockpile coal, and then bring in steamships. By then, with the American navy, well...," Napoleon said.

"Furthermore, transferring white people from Santo Domingo to Louisiana will increase the number of French whites in Louisiana. However, these people..."

"I don't recommend letting them go to Louisiana," Joseph interrupted. "They are indeed French, genuine French, but will they remain loyal to France? We may believe we've gained them more redemption funds, but will they see it that way?"

So, there was a moment of silence among the group. After a while, it was Lucien who spoke first.

"They won't be grateful to us; they'll only feel we've sold out their interests. And these people had close ties with the nobility at home when they occupied large tracts of land and made a lot of money. If they had been at home during the revolution, they would have been labeled enemies of the republic, or worse," Lucien explained. "Though they have French citizenship, they are not our people."

"So, don't count on them," Napoleon added. "How about we just... agree to their independence, no, it should be 'self-governance,' and secretly agree to their future independence but demand some special benefits, such as 'military protection' and asking them to pay for the land."

"What about the white landowners?" Joseph inquired.

"They are not our allies in interests," Napoleon said. "I don't care about them!"

"Our Ministry of Truth should also take this opportunity to vigorously promote our ideals of 'liberty, equality, fraternity.' Those Brits and Americans thought they could cause trouble for us, didn't they? I'll make them worry about Santo Domingo's example themselves!" Lucien chimed in.

"This approach might harm Spain," Joseph added.

"Joseph, you're not the King of Spain, why should we care about them? Even if we accidentally harm them, can they not form an alliance with us? Dare they? Being our lapdogs is already their honor," Lucien said dismissively.

"But we have other colonies in different regions," Napoleon reminded. "We shouldn't shoot ourselves in the foot. So, the Ministry of Truth doesn't need to put too much effort into promoting this matter. As for causing trouble for the British and Americans, Santo Domingo's presence there, and them acquiring it peacefully, is already causing them trouble."

So, the tone for handling this matter was set, and now they needed to find an emissary.

Chapter 274: The Free Trade

The task of selecting an envoy fell to Lucien. After all, when it came to deceivers, the Ministry of Truth had them in abundance, even more so than the Department of Foreign Affairs. Of course, the Foreign Affairs had its own advantages; many of its members received salaries from both the Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Truth, or the Ministry of Public Security, or even all three departments simultaneously.

Lucien found a remarkably capable individual within his own department. In their previous collaboration, this person had helped him uncover a plethora of individuals who, while officially employed by the Ministry of Truth, had their hearts and pockets in the Ministry of Public Security. Thus, this individual had earned Lucien's trust.

After conversing with this person, Lucien became more convinced of his capabilities. He had calloused hands from working as a craftsman when necessary. He could put on the guise of a naive and honest worker when required, but he spoke five languages fluently, received a decent education, had a clear and calculating mind, and possessed the courage not to fear death or making others face it. In simpler terms, he was a natural swindler and a bandit.

This individual was known as Victor de Tréville. Judging from his name, he appeared to be of noble birth. However, his circumstances had led him down a different path. Just as Guo Wen, a nobleman in "The Year 93," had firmly sided with the revolutionary masses, Victor was a progressive nobleman who had seemingly betrayed his own lineage to stand with the broader revolutionary movement. He had severed ties with his brother, who remained loyal to the reactionary camp. Victor had made significant contributions during the crucial battle in which Napoleon seized power and had now become one of the stars in the Ministry of Truth.

So, when Lucien received the mission, he immediately thought of Victor.

But Victor faced a significant problem, despite his prominent role. He had always been working within a secret department.

To many, working in a secret department appeared to be a position of immense power and prestige, but this was a misunderstanding influenced by various dramas. The more secretive a position, the more expendable it tended to be—after all, sacrificing someone no one knew was simple. Even those in well-known positions like commandants of the King's Musketeers were often less influential and powerful than one might assume, especially when compared to legitimate civilian officials and even more so to those from the commoners' class. To truly rise in the ranks, one had to find a way to transition into the public eye, to become a figure whose name could appear in the

newspapers. Victor knew that this mission, representing First Consul Napoleon, could be the opportunity he had been waiting for.

So, upon receiving the task, Victor immediately returned home. He only told his wife, "I have a mission," and left, leaving his luggage behind. He was accustomed to these departures, and his wife did not ask where he was going or when he would return, as these details were usually classified. Before leaving, Victor added, "I might be gone for a while," and his son, Edgar, with his childish voice, said, "Daddy, don't forget to bring me some paint when you come back. I'm running out of colors."

Victor smiled and acknowledged his son before heading out. A carriage was already waiting for him at the door.

"Take me to La Salle Dock," he instructed the coachman.

La Salle Dock was a dock on the Seine River, from where one could board a steamship bound for Le Havre. In order to protect the secret of the propeller, apart from naval warships, civilian steamships were still required to use paddlewheels. This, of course, reduced the speed of the ships, but because they operated day and night, it was the quickest way to reach the Atlantic coast from Paris. However, if you were traveling in the opposite direction, from the Atlantic coast to Paris, taking a mail coach was still faster.

By the time Victor reached Le Havre, the Ministry of Truth staff had already prepared a ship for him to sail to Santo Domingo.

It was a large steam frigate known as "The Free Trade," boasting three towering masts and two large smokestacks. The term "large steam frigate" indicated that it was the latest experimental warship of the French Navy. It had a displacement equivalent to that of a second-rate battleship, roughly 2,300 tons.

Aside from the significant increase in displacement, it also featured several new technologies. The first was the steel keel.

During this era, acquiring keels for shipbuilding was a precious strategic resource. Although there were techniques for joining keels, the strength of joined keels could not compare to that of an unbroken, naturally grown giant tree. Additionally, the use of joined keels had significant limitations. Consequently, keels greatly restricted the size of warships and other vessels.

The advent of affordable steel changed this situation. Steel was stronger than any timber, and it could be made as thick or as long as desired. The only drawback was steel's vulnerability to rust in a maritime environment. Most ship components could be replaced, but the keel could not. If a ship's keel suffered severe corrosion, the entire vessel was essentially lost.

Of course, this issue had potential solutions, such as adding chromium to steel to create stainless steel. Stainless steel was already being produced in the laboratories of the military-industrial complex. However, chromium had only recently been discovered, and its extraction was not straightforward, making the production of stainless steel costly. Additionally, the corrosion resistance of the stainless steel produced in the lab was not yet sufficient to withstand the salty maritime environment, and its strength was also subpar compared to ordinary steel. Thus, this technology was unsuitable for building ship keels.

Another related technology was galvanizing the entire steel keel. On Earth, zinc reserves were far scarcer than chromium, but its extraction was relatively straightforward. A mysterious Eastern superpower had been producing large quantities of metallic zinc for centuries, and up until the 19th century, zinc was one of their major exports.

Zinc had a low melting point, making the galvanizing process quite simple. There was no need for electroplating; hot-dip galvanizing sufficed.

This frigate's keel had undergone this process.

The use of steel keels reduced the overall cost of this 2,300-ton behemoth slightly. The most significant savings, however, came in construction time.

This ship still used a mix of steam and sails but featured two larger steam engines and dual propellers.

Naturally, the steam engines and coal bunkers occupied a significant portion of the ship's space, leaving it with only one complete gun deck and a short lower gun deck.

Compared to the "Equality," the "Free Trade" had significantly greater firepower. It sported a total of twenty 110mm-caliber breech-loading cannons: two in the bow section, and the remaining eighteen distributed on both sides of the ship. The upper gun deck had seven cannons on each side, and the second gun deck had two cannons on each side.

While the number of cannons had only increased by two, each cannon had seen a significant boost in firing rate and power.

The "Free Trade" had undergone numerous short voyages in nearby waters for testing, but the journey across the Atlantic was a first. This long voyage was precisely why she had been designed: to sail to the New World and safeguard the freedom of trade between the old and new continents.

In reality, the ship wasn't entirely prepared for such a long voyage. However, the changing situation in Haiti demanded the presence of a warship capable of holding the fort. Napoleon had thus requested the "Free Trade" to embark on this oceanic voyage prematurely.

The evening Victor boarded the ship, it set sail from the harbor, venturing into the vast sea.

The "Free Trade" wasn't particularly fast, averaging around 7 knots. This was because they hadn't yet activated the steam engines and relied entirely on the sails. While the coal bunkers on the ship were spacious, they couldn't sustain a journey across the Atlantic.

Victor had never experienced long sea voyages before, so the initial days at sea were quite intriguing. However, the novelty quickly wore off, and the days grew monotonous. Crossing the Atlantic took over a month, during which Victor could only see a blue sky and a blue sea, and beyond that, more blue.

Occasionally, they encountered one or two other ships, but most vessels kept a considerable distance or immediately changed course after seeing the "Free Trade's" size.

"Mr. Tréville, is this your first time on such a long sea voyage?" Captain Lazara asked as he noticed Victor gazing aimlessly at the sea.

"Yes, indeed, it's my first long voyage," Victor replied. "I've been on sea journeys before, but they were in the Mediterranean, from Marseille to Genoa. Back then, I thought the sea was vast, but now

I see that the Mediterranean is truly quite small. By the way, Captain, how much longer until we reach Santo Domingo?"

"Oh, Mr. Tréville, you've asked that question more than once," Captain Lazara replied. "Perhaps tomorrow, or the day after, but we're getting closer."

Victor chuckled in embarrassment and was about to say something when he heard the lookout shout, "Ship spotted at eleven o'clock!"

Chapter 275: The Ironclad, Old Ironsides

The sea route from the European continent to the Caribbean was bustling with activity. Every day, numerous ships traversed this route, carrying various European goods like industrial products and impoverished free people to the Americas, and bringing back sugar, coffee, cotton, and other American products. Some ships departed from Africa, loaded with black slaves, crossed the ocean, and arrived in the Caribbean. These slaves were then exchanged for money and American products like sugar, coffee, and cotton, bound for Europe. The cycle continued, as they traded these goods for money and weapons to sell to African chieftains, fueling their wars and capturing more slaves.

Encounters between ships, especially when they neared the Caribbean, were quite common along this route.

However, ships at sea typically maintained their distance, especially in the Caribbean. In these waters, legitimate merchants and pirates were often just two sides of the same coin. When a legitimate merchant saw a vulnerable ship that could be easily plundered, they would not hesitate to transform into pirates. But when they encountered a ship that was obviously more powerful, they would swiftly move away to avoid becoming victims.

So, most ships, when they saw each other's sails on the horizon and detected no hostile intent, would steer clear.

The "Free Trade" was a massive vessel with over 2,000 tons, a size that could easily compete with a warship in the Caribbean. Even the amateur pirates, not to mention the professional ones, operated ships that were nothing more than armed merchant vessels. Not even the renowned "Queen Anne's Revenge" was an exception in this regard. (Of course, we are talking about the real-world version.)

Consequently, whenever the "Free Trade" encountered other ships, it was common for them to keep their distance. But this time, the ship they spotted was different. It didn't avoid them but instead approached.

"American warship! 11 o'clock, American warship spotted!" cried the lookout from the masthead.

Though France had not declared war on the United States, in this region, anything could happen. Captain Lefebvre immediately gave the order: "Battle stations! Fire up the steam engine!"

It took a considerable amount of time for the steam engine to go from ignition to full operation. Luckily, the "Free Trade" had four masts, precise calculations, and a streamlined hull design perfected through extensive testing, which allowed it to maintain a respectable sailing speed even without the steam engine. Though not as fast as regular frigates, it was not far behind.

At its inception, the "Free Trade" was designed to outrun British warships with sails alone, even if the steam power failed. When British frigates caught up, all they had to do was engage in combat.

The "Free Trade" was not only the size of a second-rate ship of the line but also boasted battleship-level protection. Standard naval warships had oak hull planks on both sides, about a meter thick, capable of withstanding close-range cannon fire from smaller-caliber guns.

These planks were quite costly, so the "Free Trade" didn't use them. Instead, they strengthened their defenses by attaching galvanized steel plates to the wooden hull, saving costs and weight.

According to tests, even a 32-pounder cannon from a battleship, as long as it didn't consistently hit the galvanized plates and knock them off, wasn't enough to pose a lethal threat to the "Free Trade."

On the other hand, the 110mm rifled cannons on the "Free Trade" were more than capable of piercing the hull of any enemy ship, including the "HMS Victory." In other words, if British frigates managed to catch up, they would still be at a disadvantage as long as they avoided getting rammed.

In summary, anyone capable of defeating the "Free Trade" couldn't catch up with it, and anyone who could possibly catch up with the "Free Trade" couldn't defeat it. In essence, the "Free Trade" was a warship primarily designed to disrupt free trade routes.

The "Free Trade" began to turn to open up and close the distance with the approaching American warship. But turning also required time. During this process, the two ships continued to approach each other. Through telescopes, they could now clearly see parts of each other's sails.

"That's an American super frigate," Captain Lefebvre remarked.

"A super frigate? What kind of warship is that? How does it compare to our ship?" Victor was not well-versed in naval matters.

"It's a type of warship with a unique American character," Captain Lefebvre explained. "It's quite similar to our ship in many ways, displacing the standard for a second-rate ship of the line, with similar defensive capabilities and artillery as a battleship, albeit with half the number of guns and a sacrifice in endurance for the sake of frigate-level speed. Of course, they still have more cannons than us. As for how it fares against us... hehe... we would crush them as easily as squashing an ant."

Indeed, the American Navy's "super frigates" were formidable. If it weren't for the "Free Trade," these American ships could have been described as ships that could defeat anyone who could catch up with them, and nobody could catch up with them.

In the actual historical context, during the second Anglo-American War not long after this encounter, these American "super frigates" put on a remarkable display. Although they weren't enough to challenge the British naval supremacy and prevent the British from landing and burning the White House, they acquitted themselves well in battle, often coming out ahead against British frigates, especially the "USS Constitution," known as "Old Ironsides."

But when facing the "Free Trade," the American super frigate struggled to live up to its "super" reputation. In terms of speed, the American frigate was slightly faster when the "Free Trade" wasn't using its steam engine. However, once the "Free Trade" unleashed its steam power, it could easily catch up with any foreign warship.

Regarding firepower, considering the advantage of rear-mounted cannons and the power of steel cannons, the "Free Trade" had significantly superior firepower, even with fewer guns.

Yet the approaching Americans were unaware of these facts. Although Franco-American relations had been strained recently, with no declaration of war but multiple naval skirmishes, this was the

first time the Americans encountered a French warship in this region that was similar in size to their own. (The French navy in this area mainly consisted of ordinary frigates.)

The Americans were concerned that the French might have brought battleships into the area, which could significantly impact the balance of power in the region. So, they decided to catch up and investigate.

The "Free Trade" started emitting smoke from its chimney.

On the American frigate "USS Constitution," Captain Isaac Hull was observing the "suspected French battleship" ahead through a spyglass. He noticed that the opposing ship was changing course, seemingly trying to avoid direct confrontation.

"This shouldn't be a battleship," Isaac Hull thought, "The French should be well aware that we don't have battleships, and a battleship doesn't need to actively keep its distance from us."

"Chase after them," Isaac Hull ordered.

After a while of pursuit, Isaac Hull noticed the French warship emitting smoke. The weather that day was quite clear, so he didn't mistake the smoke for the enemy ship catching fire. He could see the smokestack clearly through his spyglass.

"It's a French steam warship," Isaac Hull immediately deduced.

There were many legends surrounding French steam warships, and Isaac Hull had heard some of them. He knew that French steam warships boasted remarkable speed, said to be faster than any frigate. He also heard that these ships didn't rely on wind sails, making them astonishingly agile. However, he was also aware of their weaknesses: the steam engine, coal bunkers, and freshwater tanks occupied too much space, resulting in very few cannons onboard. More often than not, they had to rely on boarding in combat. He also knew that starting the steam engine took quite a bit of time.

Isaac Hull now faced a choice: turn back or continue the chase.

In this region, there had been skirmishes between French and American warships quite a few times. Just a few days earlier, the "USS Constitution" had captured a French two-masted escort vessel. (Because there were no radios, "Free Trade" and Paris were unaware of this situation. In actual history, in the Caribbean, the U.S. Navy and the French Navy engaged in three years of friction, with both sides fighting, continuing trade, and even negotiating territorial purchases, all without declaring war.) Continuing the chase would definitely lead to battle. If they couldn't catch up with the enemy ship before its steam engine started, and severely damage it, the fight could become particularly challenging once the enemy's steam power was operational.

If they chose to turn back, the "USS Constitution" still had time to escape, considering that the French ship was currently slower than the "USS Constitution" and seemed to have turned away, indicating a lack of intention to engage in conflict.

Captain Lefebvre's decision to actively retreat was partly due to the fact that his sailors had not yet completed their training with the new cannons, leaving him with little confidence in leaving the Americans behind in battle. Additionally, his orders upon departure only involved a trial run and didn't include engaging with the Americans in combat. However, this decision encouraged the Americans, cementing Isaac Hull's determination to pursue.

Chapter 276: Clash

The "Free Trade" ship was naturally slower than the "Constitution." Having just made a turn, it further reduced its speed. The "Constitution" skillfully cut a radius, smoothly positioning itself at six o'clock on the "Free Trade's" compass, and then began closing in.

Soon, both ships were within firing range of each other. The Americans were the first to unleash a volley of chain shots from their bow, aiming to damage the enemy's sails.

Upon seeing the American warship cutting across their six o'clock, Captain Lefebvre knew that a battle was inevitable. He immediately ordered all non-combat personnel to evacuate the deck. A group of sailors swiftly dragged Viktor, who was eager to watch the spectacle, below deck.

The "Free Trade" began to maneuver once more. Like other warships of its time, the "Free Trade" lacked cannons on its stern. Therefore, it needed to rely on maneuvering to disrupt enemy fire and force the opponent to charge forward, creating a broadside exchange.

Of course, the "Constitution" could also attempt to maintain its position at the "Free Trade's" six o'clock by continuously turning. However, this constant maneuvering would disrupt its own firing, significantly reducing its efficiency. If they continued like this, the battle would last all day.

The "Free Trade" was a steamship, and its steam engine was slowly building up pressure. While this process was gradual, it was not slow to the point of ineffectiveness. Once the "Free Trade's" steam engine started running, the entire situation could flip entirely.

The "Constitution" was currently faster than the "Free Trade," so it was in their best interest to capitalize on this speed advantage. They intended to catch up, take a position for firing, and deliver several rounds of strikes to the "Free Trade" before its steam engine advantage kicked in, weakening it.

The "Equality" had previously employed this tactic during a battle with British steamships, but they had taken the opportunity to seize the T-position from the enemy's stern since the speed difference between the two ships was considerable. However, in this case, the speed gap between the "Constitution" and "Free Trade" wasn't as significant, so the "Constitution" could only attempt to cross the "Free Trade's" path from the front and establish a T-position.

The "Constitution" was a "super cruiser" with twenty-three large cannons on one side, consisting of ten 12-pound cannons on the upper gun deck and thirteen 24-pound cannons on the lower gun deck. The devastating firepower they could unleash in a broadside at the T-position was sure to deal a heavy blow to the French.

The "Constitution" approached the "Free Trade" from its starboard side, aiming to pass about one hundred meters from the "Free Trade's" starboard before making a sharp turn to cut across its path and deliver a heavy broadside from the port side.

Passing at one hundred meters was a slightly risky move, as the enemy ship could potentially open fire with its broadside cannons at that range. However, this was one of Captain Hull's intentions. With the ships rocking in the waves, the cannons would sway, and during naval battles in this era, scattered cannonballs were a common occurrence. At distances of over seventy to eighty meters between two ships, the hit rate was quite low, and often, the battles would devolve into close-quarters engagements after exchanging broadsides.

If the French opened fire from a distance of one hundred meters, some cannonballs might hit the "Constitution," but Captain Hull believed the damage they would inflict would be limited. Loading the cannons was also a slow process. If the French broadside did not yield significant results, the "Constitution" would have a substantial window of opportunity. They could turn hard and close the distance, delivering another broadside from close range, causing chaos and panic among the French.

The "Constitution" appeared at a distance of a little over one hundred meters from the starboard side of the "Free Trade." All nine of the starboard cannons on the "Free Trade" were already prepared for firing.

The steel-bore cannons of the "Free Trade" had a much higher initial velocity than standard cannons, resulting in longer effective firing ranges and less susceptibility to swaying. Additionally, the "Free Trade" was a large ship, equipped with larger stabilizing fins to reduce swaying. This made its firing accuracy at longer ranges significantly better than other ships of the era.

The initial velocity of the steel-bore cannon projectiles on the "Free Trade" was significantly higher than that of regular cannons, giving them a longer effective range and less susceptibility to swaying. Additionally, the "Free Trade" itself was large and equipped with a set of larger stabilizing fins to maximize range and reduce swaying. These measures made the "Free Trade" considerably more accurate in long-range shooting compared to other warships of the era.

Of course, every advantage comes with some drawbacks. The larger stabilizing fins reduced the "Free Trade's" maneuverability slightly. When relying solely on sail power and not the steam engine, the ship's maneuverability was indeed compromised, and this was one of the reasons the "Constitution" was able to take an advantageous position so quickly.

The order to fire had been given, and the nine cannons on the starboard side of the "Free Trade" began to fire one after another.

Though the gunners on the "Free Trade" had not yet fully mastered the capabilities of their new cannons, they were experienced seamen. By not fully mastering their cannons, it meant that they couldn't entirely exploit the performance of the new cannons. For example, according to the original design, these cannons should have had a relatively high hit rate at a distance of four hundred meters under normal sea conditions. However, the gunners were not there yet.

Nonetheless, at a range of one hundred meters, they could ensure a high hit rate.

In the first volley, seven out of nine shots hit their mark.

When the "Free Trade" opened fire, Captain Hull couldn't help but feel relieved. He knew that steam warships had limitations on the number of cannons they could carry, but seeing that such a large ship had only nine cannons on one side, it was far fewer than Hull had anticipated.

"Had I known, why bother with seizing the T? I could have just closed in and hammered them directly," Captain Hull mused.

But then, a flash of fire, and Hull felt the deck beneath him tremble.

"These guys are accurate! Seems like I underestimated them a bit."

Following that shot, the other cannons on the "Free Trade" also fired in succession, and the deck under Hull's feet continued to shake.

"Their hit rate is quite high!" Hull thought while shouting below, "Report casualties!"

Hull had expected to hear something like, "No problem! No penetrations!"

However, the response from below didn't come immediately. After a moment, he heard, "The deck has been penetrated, and we have significant casualties..."

Armor-piercing shells fired from the "Free Trade's" 110mm-caliber bore easily pierced through the "Constitution's" 70-centimeter thick oak hull. In the process, they transferred immense energy to the oak planks. As the shells penetrated the hull, the wooden planks in the gun deck splintered, with wooden shards flying everywhere, piercing the bodies of the nearby gunners like knives...

Some shells that had penetrated the thick hull practically flew through without deceleration, striking the other side's hull and blasting a hole through it before exiting. Another shell lost stability after piercing the hull, turning sideways and striking the opposite hull. It then shattered into several pieces, rebounding and striking down several crew members.

The most devastating was a shell that, after piercing the hull, struck directly at one of the 24-pound bronze cannons placed on the other side of the hull. The shell shattered upon impact with the bronze cannon, showering surrounding gunners with deadly fragments. The bronze cannon itself was catapulted upwards, tearing off the iron chains that held it in place. The broken chain flailed like a whip, slicing through a gunner who couldn't evade it.

The airborne bronze cannon collided with another bronze cannon, knocking it to the deck and crushing two more gunners.

After one volley, the lower gun deck of the "Constitution" was in chaos, as if a tornado had just ravaged the area.

Upon roughly assessing the damage, Captain Hull realized that he had indeed underestimated the French. Their accuracy in shooting and the power of their cannons far exceeded his expectations. But he remained resolute and issued a command:

"Hard to port! Close in, get in their faces, and blast them to pieces!"

Chapter 277: Victory

The valiant "Old Ironclad" abruptly veered its course, almost colliding with the "Free Trade" ship, rapidly closing the distance between them.

"Get closer! Close enough to blast their faces!" Captain Heer shouted, boosting the morale of his crew.

The people of this era were fiercely patriotic, and Americans, in particular, were known for their warrior spirit. They adhered to the principle of never backing down, valuing bravery above all else. Although the French initial salvo had caused considerable casualties, it had not dampened their resolve. If anything, it seemed to fuel their fury.

The gap between the two warships swiftly diminished, from about a hundred meters to eighty meters, sixty meters, and then forty meters.

Captain Heer was about to issue the command to fire when the French on the opposing ship unleashed another round of simultaneous fire.

Their aft guns boasted a clear rate-of-fire advantage. In fact, they could have fired even faster if their gunners were more experienced. The distance had closed so much that even with traditional cannons, they were virtually guaranteed to hit.

Now, at less than forty meters apart, even old-style cannons wouldn't miss. So, this salvo from the "Free Trade" ship found its mark, hitting with all nine heavy cannons.

In contrast to the previous salvo when the French questioned the defense of the American "Super Cruiser," they had used specialized armor-piercing shells. This had resulted in some of the shells, particularly the armor-piercing ones, causing over-penetration and thus failing to deliver maximum damage.

So, for this round, Captain LaRoche ordered their ammunition to be changed to armor-piercing personnel-damaging shells.

These shells were essentially solid projectiles, distinguished by a series of deep grooves along their length. These grooves generated a significant concentration of stress during penetration, leading to fractures and fragmentation. While not as powerful as high-explosive shells, these armor-piercing personnel-damaging shells caused more substantial damage once they penetrated the enemy's hull.

As a result, this salvo inflicted even greater losses on the Americans. Nearly one-third of the gunners in the lower gun deck of the "Constitution" had been incapacitated.

Yet, this didn't crush the American morale. The "Constitution" continued closing the distance, coming within thirty meters.

"Fire!" Captain Heer bellowed.

Many of the heavy cannons on the "Constitution" had already suffered damage from the previous two volleys. More importantly, the gun crews had incurred heavy casualties, leaving many of the cannons unmanned. Out of the twenty-three heavy cannons, only eighteen were operational.

However, Captain Heer believed that even with eighteen cannons, this volley would severely hurt the French. At this distance, they couldn't possibly miss.

Reality, however, delivered a heavy blow. While none of the American gunners had been killed, every one of their fired shells had ricocheted off the "Free Trade" ship's external armor plating and splashed harmlessly into the sea.

At such close range, they couldn't penetrate the French warship's hull. Firing cannons or any other long-range weapons had become futile; their cannons couldn't breach the French ship's thick armor.

"Get closer! Get closer! Prepare for boarding!" Captain Heer shouted. Since the cannonade wasn't working, boarding was their only chance to turn the tide. The French warship's smokestacks were billowing thicker smoke, indicating their steam engines were coming online. Escape was no longer an option. They had to get in close, entangle their rigging with the enemy's rigging, and settle it with close-quarters combat. At this point, boarding the French ship was the "Constitution's" only chance for victory.

The "Free Trade" ship initially aimed to avoid boarding at all costs. Naturally, it made sense to avoid close-quarters combat when you could win from a distance. However, they had still prepared for boarding, just in case.

Initially, there was a suggestion to outfit the ship with "Greek Fire" like on the Fire ships, but they quickly realized that having Greek Fire on a warship was dangerous. When under fire from enemy grape shot, the Greek Fire could easily ignite the ship itself. So, the idea to install Greek Fire on warships was swiftly dismissed. However, another proposal, equipping the ships with "Broad Swords" to fend off boarders, was implemented.

Throughout the "Free Trade" ship, small squares with the message "this side towards the enemy" were hung in various locations, such as the masts. The entire deck was covered by these "Broad Swords."

The "Constitution" closed in, and under the leadership of Captain Heer, American sailors swarmed onto the "Free Trade" ship's deck.

There wasn't a single Frenchman in sight on the deck, which made Captain Heer uneasy. However, they were already in a difficult situation with no way to retreat, similar to the famous Chinese idiom: "At this point, you either ride the tiger or be eaten by it." They had to continue on this path, no matter how perilous.

"Follow me!" Captain Heer shouted while waving his sword, leading the soldiers towards the stern of the ship. Some fired their guns haphazardly towards the stern as well.

Just as Captain Heer and his men approached the stern, explosions rocked the "Free Trade" ship's deck. Countless iron balls swept across the entire deck like a storm, knocking down all the American soldiers who had boarded.

The "Constitution" had a crew of four hundred, with over a hundred casualties from the previous naval battle. Now, nearly another hundred lay on the "Free Trade" ship's deck, lifeless.

Even more disastrous was the fact that the soldiers who had boarded the "Free Trade" ship were among the most capable on the "Constitution." Moreover, both the Captain and the First Officer were among the casualties. With nearly half the crew of the "Constitution" gone, they had lost their command structure and were in complete disarray.

At this moment, a large contingent of French soldiers emerged from various hatches on the deck. They were armed with the latest revolvers and double-barreled shotguns, advancing towards the "Constitution."

The remaining forces on the "Constitution" were no match for the French assault. Soon, the French gained control of several key positions on the "Constitution."

The Americans retreated beneath the deck, while the French began lobbing hand grenades inside.

After a barrage of hand grenades, American voices from below shouted, "We surrender!"

Once the combat personnel had secured all key positions on the ship, the casualties on both sides were tallied. In this battle, eleven French soldiers were killed, all of them in the fight after boarding the "Constitution." Twenty-six were injured, with the majority wounded during the hand-to-hand combat that followed. There was only one case of injury from an American who had stumbled on his own ship's deck and grazed his palm on a fallen U.S. bayonet.

Meanwhile, two hundred and twenty-two American soldiers were killed, and most of the remaining hundred-plus were wounded to varying degrees. Only two remained unscathed.

"Captain, we've won quite impressively," Victor congratulated Captain LaRoche upon seeing the numbers.

"The main reason was their misjudgment of our strength. Once that miscalculation happened, there was no turning back. In fact, I think that the American captain's command wasn't bad at all. He made swift and resolute decisions. Even if he had encountered a first-rate battleship like the Victory, not just us, his performance would have been much better," Captain LaRoche began to sing praises for the deceased American captain.

But this was quite normal; generally, praising one's enemy was always a safe bet. If you lost, it was because the enemy was too formidable. If you won, it was because the enemy was exceedingly strong. Otherwise, what was the point of expending so much effort to defeat a group of S13s without any glory?

"Is this ship still in good condition?" Victor asked, looking at the captured "Constitution."

"This ship is excellent. Although it suffered some damage during the battle, it can be repaired and become a fine vessel once more. We're not far from Santo Domingo now, and we can certainly take this ship there," Captain LaRoche said. "However, we were attacked by an American warship here, and I suspect the situation in Santo Domingo may have changed somewhat. Mr. Treville, I wonder if these developments might complicate your mission."

"Oh," Victor replied, "Thank you for your concern. You're right; Santo Domingo has probably experienced some unfavorable changes. But the reason I came here was to deal with precisely such a situation, wasn't it? Moreover, your victory today has been immensely helpful to my mission. With your victory and the sincere goodwill from France towards peace and development, Governor Dupont-Lautrec should be able to make a reasonable choice."

Chapter 278: Negotiations (1)

The "Constitution" had weathered two rounds of cannon fire during the battle, but its sails remained undamaged, and its navigational capabilities were largely unaffected. Both ships continued their journey towards Saint-Domingue, and around ten o'clock the next morning, a massive island gradually emerged from below the horizon.

"Mr. Treville, that's Saint-Domingue right there, we've arrived," Captain Lefranc pointed to the island, addressing Victor.

This was the first time in Victor's life that he had spent such a long time on a ship, and as he looked at the distant island, a sense of joy welled up within him, causing the corners of his mouth to curl upwards.

"You must be yearning for land, I presume?" Captain Lefranc noticed Victor's mood and inquired with a smile.

"Yes, indeed. I hadn't realized it before, but the moment I saw that island, I immediately felt an intense longing to stand on solid ground that doesn't sway beneath my feet," Victor replied with a smile.

"In truth, we're all the same. Whether passengers or sailors, after a long sea voyage, everyone yearns to feel their feet on stable ground. The only difference might be that sailors like us, once we

set foot on land, can't stay away for more than two months before we start longing for the blue sea and the swaying decks," Captain Lefranc chuckled.

"Haha, that's the way of humans," Victor added.

Although the island was now visible, it was still quite a distance away. It wasn't until around three o'clock in the afternoon that the "Free Trade" and the captured "Constitution" arrived at the largest harbor in Saint-Domingue, Port-au-Prince.

Port-au-Prince was the largest harbor in Saint-Domingue, as well as the biggest city and political center. Most of the island's products, such as sugar and coffee, were shipped from here to Europe, making it a bustling port.

The appearance of the "Free Trade" and the "Constitution" caused a commotion. After all, it was rare to see such large ships in this region.

The "Free Trade" anchored in the harbor's vicinity and waited. After nearly an hour, a small boat flying the French flag approached.

The single-masted boat stopped not far from the "Free Trade," and a small dinghy was lowered into the water. Two black men rowed the dinghy to deliver a uniformed black man to the "Free Trade."

"I am Jacques, the harbor master of Port-au-Prince. What brings you here? Do you wish to enter the harbor? You may need to wait, as we currently lack adequate berths for your ship," the black harbor master asked.

"Hello, I am the captain of this warship," Captain Lefranc replied. "We've come from France to escort the special envoy of the First Consul to meet with Governor Dusault Leduc. If there's no berth available, we can delay our entry into the harbor. However..."

At this point, he turned, proudly pointing towards the "Constitution" behind him. "On our way to Port-au-Prince, we were attacked by an American warship, and we defeated them, capturing this vessel. It sustained some damage in the battle and may require urgent repairs. So, if possible, I hope you can arrange a berth for this ship as soon as possible."

Unfortunately, the harbor master seemed to miss the implied undertone of Captain Lefranc's words. He simply replied, "I see. We will make arrangements as soon as possible."

"Furthermore, the First Consul's special envoy is here. You can inform the harbor authorities and the Governor's office," Captain Lefranc added.

The black harbor master then excused himself and left. By the time night fell, he returned and informed Captain Lefranc that a berth had been made available for the captured "Constitution." Additionally, Mr. Special Envoy could disembark and proceed to the Governor's mansion.

Victor followed the black man onto their small boat, heading to Port-au-Prince ahead of the "Constitution."

Port-au-Prince was an organically grown city, with the harbor at its core. From the harbor's docks, it sprawled outward layer by layer, extending all the way to the nearby hills. Because it had been built without planning or regulations, the city's roads were narrow and winding, often too tight for two carriages to pass each other.

On either side of the roads stood crude, crowded shanties. Many of these shanties had been rebuilt after the earthquake of 1794. The entire port area was dirty and chaotic.

But in the area on the hillside, things were different. This was the district of the wealthy, the place where plantation owners and nobility resided. The roads were relatively broad, and the houses consisted mainly of luxurious garden villas.

The Governor's Palace of Saint-Domingue was naturally situated in this area. However, it used to be inhabited by white people, and now, a black man occupied the position.

Once Victor disembarked, he climbed into a carriage and, escorted by a group of black soldiers, navigated the narrow, winding streets. By the time he reached the Governor's Palace, darkness had fully settled in.

Victor entered the Governor's Palace, where a black military officer welcomed him. He introduced himself as the governor's adjutant, inquired about Victor's identity, and whether he had already dined.

Victor presented his authorization letter from the First Consul and informed him that he hadn't eaten.

"His Excellency the Governor would like to invite you for dinner first, and then he will meet you in the reception room," the adjutant said.

He then led Victor to a nearby dining room. After Victor finished his meal, he was escorted to the reception room, where the only black governor of France was already waiting.

Governor Dusault Leduc's aspirations for secession and independence for Saint-Domingue were no secret to the entire French nation. However, in dealing with the special envoy of Napoleon, he displayed an exceptionally courteous demeanor.

Governor Dusault Leduc began by casually discussing Victor's journey, and then he asked, "Has the First Consul sent you to issue any specific instructions to me?"

Victor was more direct in his response. "Your Excellency, the First Consul has no intention of issuing directives to you. He has sent me here to engage in some amicable discussions with you about the current and future situation in Saint-Domingue. It is no secret that Your Excellency has been pursuing the idea of making Saint-Domingue an independent nation."

"So, what does His Excellency the First Consul think about it?" Since Napoleon's envoy was being straightforward, Governor Dusault Leduc responded in kind, "I have heard of the First Consul's formidable reputation on the European battlefield, but we are not afraid to sacrifice for freedom. Although there may be difficulties ahead, if you intend to conquer us by force, you are welcome to try."

"No, no, Your Excellency, you may have misunderstood our intentions," Victor replied. "Your Excellency, when the revolution against the tyrants began in France, you also rose in rebellion here in Saint-Domingue. In the early stages of the uprising, you allied with the Spanish and the British against us, the French. However, you soon parted ways with them, and you even cooperated with us to fight against the Spanish and the French. What was the reason for this?"

Governor Dusault Leduc glanced at Victor but didn't interrupt.

"Because, Your Excellency, your goal is the liberation of black people and the abolition of slavery. But whether it's the Spanish or the British, they are supporters and beneficiaries of the barbaric institution of slavery. They can support you against France to oppose their oppression, but they won't allow you to truly overturn slavery. In fact, they fundamentally do not want to see an independent black nation that has abolished slavery emerging in the Caribbean. Because if such a situation were to arise, it could trigger a chain reaction in their territories, especially in places where slavery is still in use. That is why you fell out with the British and the Spanish."

"And as for us, France, we are a completely different country from Britain and Spain. I've heard that Your Excellency is well-read, that you have perused the works of Rousseau, Montesquieu, and other great French thinkers. You should know that, when the news of your uprising reached Paris, the revolutionary government immediately responded. They declared the abolition of slavery and granted full citizenship rights to black people. This included the right to vote and be elected. Your Excellency, you were elected as the governor of Saint-Domingue through a democratic process."

"Your Excellency, can you find any other colonial governor who was elected? Can you find any other black man in the entire Americas who has full citizenship rights? Your Excellency, besides Saint-Domingue, is there any other place where black people enjoy complete citizenship? France has been faithful to its promises after the last war, abolishing slavery and granting full citizenship rights to the black population, including the right to vote and be elected. Your Excellency, we did this because it is not a temporary measure, but the foundation of the French Republic - a requirement of the Declaration of the Rights of Man. So, I don't understand why Your Excellency is determined to seek independence for Saint-Domingue."

Chapter 279: Negotiations (2)

When this question was posed, Dusault Leduc laughed.

"Monsieur Treville, I've heard that during the French Revolution, many nobles found themselves swinging from lampposts. Now that you have a parliament, why continue to hang those nobles?"

"Because they sought to subvert the republican system," Victor replied firmly. "The Republic has given them numerous chances, but they refuse to repent."

"That is one reason, of course, but I must say it's not the root cause," Dusault Leduc shook his head. "The fundamental issue is that they control too much land. If the French Revolution can't dismantle their grip on land, the common people of the Third Estate won't see any improvement. If it remains this way, what's the point of the revolution?"

"In Santo Domingo, it's the same. Just like France had three classes of priests, nobles, and commoners before the revolution, Santo Domingo has a similar class division."

With that, Dusault Leduc even extended his hand and brought three fingers together in a gesture.

"Just this little bit, no more. But just like in France, where the first and second estates, although small in number, controlled most of the land, these white slave-owners dominate the vast majority of Santo Domingo's land. If this continues, black people will continue to struggle with hunger and death. If that's the outcome, what's the point of our previous revolution?"

"So, you're saying that your quest for independence is to address the land issue?" Victor asked. "But have you considered the economic consequences of doing so?"

"Economic consequences?" Dusault Leduc inquired. "Could you be more specific?"

"Firstly, you must know that Santo Domingo's economy heavily depends on trade. Whether it's sugar or coffee, they only become valuable through trade. Without trade, these goods are worthless. And these goods are not irreplaceable; there are many other places in the Caribbean with the potential to replace Santo Domingo."

"The attitudes of the Spanish and the British towards your ideal nation, I'm sure you're aware," Victor continued. "Even the Americans, who rely heavily on black slaves, wouldn't want to see a prosperous free black nation emerging in the Caribbean, as it could set an example for their own enslaved population."

"To put it more plainly, if black people in Santo Domingo attain prosperity through rebellion, then why wouldn't black people in the United States or Cuba follow suit? The more prosperous your life, the greater the motivation for slave uprisings, and both repressing and appeasing those rebellions would become more costly for them. Conversely, if your living conditions worsen and life becomes harder, stability prevails."

"So, Governor, if Santo Domingo gains independence and black people generally acquire land, then whether it's the British, the Spanish, or the Americans, they won't engage in trade with Santo Domingo anymore. I'm sure they've made many promises to you now, but, Governor, promises are the least reliable thing. As long as you analyze where everyone's interests lie, you'll see."

"But..." Dusault Leduc started to say.

"Governor, I understand your point. Even if excluded from the trade network, independence is still worthwhile for most black people, because under the current system, trade benefits hardly reach the black population. In that case, whether Santo Domingo can sell a pound of sugar or coffee doesn't matter, even if the land in Santo Domingo has to be turned into fields for food, black people would still have more than they do now."

"Isn't that right?" Dusault Leduc asked.

"Exactly. But the First Consul believes that black people have a better path to take – a much better one," Victor said.

"What path is that?"

"Santo Domingo remains with France. At the same time, we find a way to address the issue of black people's lack of land," Victor explained.

"How do we address it?" Dusault Leduc inquired.

Victor replied, "The first option is that black people can freely leave Santo Domingo and go to Louisiana. This land is now returned to us by the Spanish. To develop this land, the First Consul has just passed a policy. Anyone who is willing to pledge loyalty to France can receive up to 6,500 acres of public land in Louisiana. They need to cultivate it for 5 years – during these 5 years, the land should not be left unused. After 5 years, or within that time, if they reside on the land for at least six months and pay a fee of 21 francs per acre, the land becomes their own. Additionally, these lands are tax-free for the first five years."

"Santo Domingo's black people also have French citizenship, and they can apply for land in Louisiana. Of course, one person can't truly cultivate so much land, but if they can cultivate it, after

five years, it becomes their own. And if they stay in Santo Domingo, there's no way they could get as much land as this."

"Heh..." Dusault Leduc chuckled coldly. "Monsieur Treville, are you suggesting we divide our united black population by allowing them to leave Santo Domingo?"

"Governor, I assure you, neither I nor the First Consul have any such intentions. If you do not accept this plan or believe it is currently unacceptable, we have a second plan to address the land issue through alternative means."

"Redemption?" Dusault Leduc laughed. "Alternative means? Are you talking about redemption? Am I not already in the process of redemption? And aren't the white people of Santo Domingo trying to resist me because of it? Aren't you here for that as well? Of course, I know the price I'm offering is low, but it should be enough for them to acquire land in Louisiana, shouldn't it?"

"Governor, I've just realized that there might be a serious misunderstanding between us," Victor said with a furrowed brow. "You may think that the First Consul and I, as white men, would unquestionably stand with those white people. However, this idea is completely mistaken. Just as Americans and the British are also white, are they now on our side?"

"What do you mean?" Dusault Leduc was quite surprised.

"In the eyes of the Republican government, the white slave-owners in Santo Domingo are mostly remnants of those feudal nobles, and they were never on the same side as the Republic to begin with. When the revolutionary government abolished slavery and granted citizenship to black people, their hatred for the Republic only intensified. I am sure that many of them have clandestine dealings with exiled nobles. If they were in mainland France, they'd probably have been sent to the guillotine for counter-revolutionary crimes. The current government, the Consulate, is also tasked with defending the revolutionary gains. How could we possibly side with these people?"

"So, what is the intention of the First Consul?" Dusault Leduc inquired.

"Even though these fellows are our political enemies, it's not the time anymore to set up revolutionary tribunals on a whim. The First Consul has just enacted the 'Code,' have you read it?"

"I have. It's indeed the immortal 'Code,'" Dusault Leduc praised.

"The 'Code' stipulates that we must protect private property. Although these individuals are our enemies, we can't undermine our own rules. So, directly confiscating their land is not possible. However, if they commit acts of treason first, that changes things. Do you understand what I mean?" Victor answered with a smile.

"What do you mean...?"

"Your Excellency, the French government in Santo Domingo, as the highest authority, has the right to investigate any acts of treason and punish those traitors. When the government punishes traitors, these actions are entirely justified. It can also help avoid many economic consequences. At least, French merchants won't abandon Santo Domingo..."

"Your Excellency, I believe that by now you should no longer doubt our sincerity, right?" Victor smiled. "Of course, if you still wish to see Santo Domingo as an independent country, that's also a topic for discussion."

Dusault Leduc thought for a moment and asked, "What if I still want Santo Domingo to be independent?"

"In that case, France must receive some compensation. Firstly, those white slave-owners, though our political enemies, are still French citizens. If you become independent, you will be a foreign entity. We cannot allow foreigners to mistreat French citizens and seize their legitimate property. So, if you still want to retain the trade routes, you will need to adopt a real 'redemption' method, and it must be based on genuine 'voluntariness.'"

"Furthermore, Santo Domingo is French territory. If you want to become independent on French soil, the cost of purchasing this land is also indispensable. Of course, we can provide you with loans. Finally, Santo Domingo holds a vital military position. If you side with Britain and the United States after gaining independence, it would pose a significant threat to France's interests. Therefore, if you still wish to be independent, you must accept France's protection. Additionally, France needs to have some military bases in Santo Domingo to ensure that the connection between Louisiana and mainland France won't be easily severed..."

Chapter 280: Negotiations (3)

"Alright, may I ask, if we insist on Saint-Domingue's independence, how much will the French government demand as the purchase price for the land?" asked Dussan Lucidur.

"One hundred and fifty million francs," Viktor replied. "Of course, we can offer you a special low-interest loan, which you can repay from your annual trade earnings."

"That's an exorbitant amount," Dusault Leduc retorted. "It means you'll have to bleed our people for another generation or two!"

"But in return, you get to keep your trade routes," Viktor explained. "Saint-Domingue was originally French territory. We can allow French citizens to live here freely, but we can't grant unconditional independence without any consequences. It might encourage our internal adversaries. Moreover, as long as it remains part of France, it provides a significant source of revenue for the Republic, generating millions of francs annually from sugar and coffee exports. We can't afford to lose that."

"That revenue you're talking about is the plunder of our people," Dusault Leduc remarked sarcastically.

"During the monarchy, that might be a fair assessment, but not anymore," Viktor replied. "Just like in other parts of France, taxation is the responsibility of citizens. You can't enjoy the benefits of citizenship without fulfilling your obligations. If you've read Montesquieu, you should understand that rights and duties are intertwined. If you insist on unilateral independence, then you can forget about trading with France. Legally, your independence would be a usurpation of French territory. The First Consul's restraint from sending troops and massacring the rebels would be the most generous gesture in such a scenario. Thus, you'd lose your trade with France."

The Spanish are likely to seize the opportunity to expand sugar and coffee production in Cuba. To be frank, it's easy; there are no technical barriers to these crops. They have no incentive to trade with you. As for the British, they would be more than happy to kick you off their supply chain, just like the Spanish. In fact, their trade with you is limited from the start. So, after a no-deal separation, you and the black population you're ardently protecting will have no choice but to rely solely on

wheat in Saint-Domingue. I doubt you'll find many people who know how to grow wheat here. Moreover, the climate in Saint-Domingue isn't suitable for growing other crops, meaning that if you establish a nation here, you'd be entirely reliant on trade. All global trade routes are controlled by white nations, which would force you into extreme poverty or dependence on a white country. So, if you're determined to create an independent black nation, why not consider another location?"

"Another location? What do you mean?" Dusault Leduc was once again taken aback. It seemed that this envoy had brought too many surprises to the table tonight.

"Still in Louisiana, to be precise," Viktor explained. "The land there is suitable for growing crops other than sugar and coffee, meaning you'd be less dependent on trade. You could buy land in Louisiana at a much cheaper price than here. It would be a lot easier."

"I've heard it's all plains over there, and we're not familiar with the area," Dusault Leduc shook his head. Clearly, he was still worried that if they all moved to Louisiana, leaving their familiar environment, the French might turn their backs on them.

"Your Excellency, you can temporarily remain within France," Viktor suggested. "On one hand, you can execute the plan for staying within France, which includes eliminating conspirators and confiscating their land to ease land conflicts. On the other hand, during this time, you can gradually send personnel to Louisiana, settling in stages. In this way, over the course of a few years, you can gradually move people who want to establish an independent nation to Louisiana. During this process, you will also become familiar with the situation there and judge our sincerity. In the end, you will build your own country in Louisiana, on fertile land along the Mississippi River. As for those black people who want to stay in Saint-Domingue, we guarantee their legal right to citizenship and the protection of their private property."

Mr. Governor, let's be direct. If there's a war between France and you, the United States and the United Kingdom will stand on your side. They hope to weaken us using the blood of your people. Please note, it's not just about weakening France but weakening us, whether it's a powerful France or a prosperous black republic. Fundamentally, it's not in their interest. This is why we're trying our best to avoid such a situation."

In Louisiana, if we were to wage war against you, you'd be closer to both England and the United States. Don't underestimate plains; do you know about the Irish? They have mostly plains there, just a few dozen miles from the English mainland, and the English could muster more than a hundred thousand troops to suppress them. But did they succeed in suppressing them? And Louisiana, how far is it from mainland France? If you can... of course, the Irish are white."

As soon as this remark, filled with clear racial discrimination, left Viktor's mouth, Dusault Leduc grew visibly angry. He stood up and said, "What do you mean by 'white'? We've fought alongside white people; we're no less than they are!"

"In that case, Mr. Governor, what's the hesitation?" Viktor chuckled. "This way is almost certainly the most advantageous for you. When an opportunity for a good deal presents itself, you should seize it without too much hesitation."

Clearly, Viktor had brought Dusault Leduc too many surprises last night. It was difficult for him to determine how much of the envoy's words could be trusted and which parts were reliable. He felt he needed some time to digest Viktor's proposals and make a decision.

He turned to Viktor and said, "Mr. Trelawney, these proposals you've brought are quite unexpected. I believe that each of these suggestions involves very complex matters. I can't give you, and the esteemed First Consul, an immediate response. I need some time to carefully consider your proposals."

Viktor also stood up, extending his hand to Dusault Leduc as he said, "This is a significant matter for everyone involved. It's only right to be cautious and thoroughly contemplate it before making a decision. I'll await your decision, Mr. Governor."

They shook hands, concluding the meeting.

The next day, Viktor rose from his bed, had breakfast, and found that the adjutant who had received him yesterday was already waiting. He informed Viktor that Governor Dusault Leduc was still in a meeting and asked Viktor to accompany him instead.

"Oh, I forgot to ask your name yesterday," Viktor said.

"Matt," the black adjutant replied. "Oka Matt."

"Very well, Mr. Matt, can I wander around Saint-Domingue?" Viktor asked.

"Of course, the Governor said you are our most honored guest," Matt replied. "Except for certain military zones, you are free to move about."

At this point, Matt hesitated for a moment and then, with a somewhat embarrassed tone, said, "But if you want to go to the port area, you'll have to wait for a while. I need to call a squad of soldiers... the port area is not very safe, and the people there aren't too friendly towards white folks."

Viktor was well aware of this. In fact, when he rode in a carriage through the port area yesterday, he noticed the hostile looks from the black residents, even from the black soldiers who were there to receive and escort him. Viktor didn't underestimate the significance of these hostile glances.

Viktor thought to himself, "Saint-Domingue is on the eve of a storm similar to what happened in the original history. After the French army's ultimate failure in Haiti and Haiti's subsequent independence, the new Haitian government immediately organized a massacre against white Haitians, resulting in the deaths of more than two thousand white residents. As a nobleman by birth, Viktor actually had some sympathy for the wealthy white slave owners. However, having chosen the side of the revolution, he had to appear more resolute and ruthless than others to climb to the top."