

The Fox 321

Chapter 321: Winds of Change

Talleyrand's suggestion caught Juan completely off guard. Therefore, Juan felt it necessary to express to Talleyrand that he would need to conduct further research on this matter back in his homeland.

As he escorted Ambassador Juan out, Talleyrand mentioned, "Ambassador Juan, I won't keep it from you. As you're aware, in our country, not long ago, we successfully developed the steam locomotive. Its carrying capacity rivals that of ships, and in some aspects, it surpasses them. If we gain control of the Panama region, we intend to invest there and construct a railway connecting the Atlantic and Pacific. Such a railway is bound to be highly profitable. Consider this, presently, there's a scarcity of whales in the Atlantic. To hunt them, one must venture to the Pacific, to the White Sea. And to reach the Pacific, one must navigate around the Magellan Strait, circumvent the entirety of the Americas, significantly increasing the time and cost of transporting whale oil back.

Furthermore, the Magellan Strait is perilous, with numerous ships capsizing there annually, adding significantly to costs. If we establish a railway from the east to the west coast of Panama, the scenario changes entirely. Various Pacific goods could traverse from here, saving substantial costs alone. Controlling such a railway means whale oil from the White Sea, copper and nitrates from Peru, all passing through here. Ambassador, would you consider investing in this?"

Upon returning to the embassy, Ambassador Juan promptly began drafting a report. He meticulously transformed the document into a ciphered version, despite its near futility, as Juan remained unaware.

While Spain hadn't responded yet, new information reached Napoleon's ears.

"What? How can the Spanish be so obtuse? I remember, we were quite restrained, we only sold them some civilian weapons! Lucien, are you sure this information is accurate? No mishaps?"

"Absolutely certain. No issues. Our intelligence saw it firsthand. Napoleon, don't mistake the Spanish army for the French! Especially, don't equate Spain's colonial forces with France's. They're not on the same level. Additionally, in Mexico, the Spanish forces still use weaponry and tactics similar to our adversaries encountered in Valmy. They're a generation behind.

On the rebel side, they've bought civilian guns from Louisiana. Though civilian, these are genuine new-model rifled guns. Their morale isn't comparable. It's a mismatch! I think, if you were..."

Unfortunately, that was nearly twenty days ago. No word if Mexico City remained in Spanish hands." Lucien remarked.

"Me? Heh..." Napoleon chuckled, not bothering to counter Lucien seriously. In matters of military strategy, Napoleon dismissed debating with Lucien entirely. Regarding dealing with amateurs, Napoleon always admired a quote from Joseph: 'For instance, someone tells me, 'Your melon, the explosives you use aren't good, you should use black powder, not nitrocellulose, and it's better to add some lime, sand, or something to increase the potency.' I won't argue with him, even if I just glance at him, that's my defeat."

"In theory, the rebels lack heavy artillery, almost no siege capability. Taking Mexico City won't be that easy. But... Joseph, you're a defense expert, what's your plan to hold onto Mexico City at this time?" Napoleon suddenly turned to his elder brother.

"Hold Mexico City? Hold onto what? In this situation, what's there to hold onto? If it were me, I'd immediately pack up, blow up all the cannons, gather our people, and rush to Veracruz! The rebels may lack heavy weapons, but, Napoleon, let me ask you, do you think, at this point, the defenders of Mexico City still have the will to fight?"

"If they had the will to fight, they wouldn't have been thrashed by the rebels, who were outnumbered five to one in the previous skirmish! Even with weapon disparity, it shouldn't have been this bad."

"Is the situation in Mexico City stable? No surprises brewing?" Joseph inquired.

"Heh, Mexico City is mostly Creoles. Who they stand with isn't a question." Napoleon chuckled, "Joseph, your insight is spot on. At this time, the best course is to retreat to Veracruz. But making a split-second decision to flee, Joseph, that's truly your style."

"This isn't fleeing, it's repositioning!" Joseph countered, "Throughout history, no matter how fortified a stronghold, if there are internal issues, it's untenable. So, Monsieur Montesquieu advised us, 'In war, geographical advantage outweighs meteorological advantage, while internal unity within the army is even more critical than geographical advantage.' Today, the rebels are evidently more united, and they have superiority in both numbers and equipment. Shouldn't we run? Wait to be led to the guillotine?"

"Joseph, the Spaniards are fond of guillotines now and then. They're quite traditional, still using gallows," Lucien remarked.

"The effect isn't as good as the guillotine!" Joseph smirked. That was true. If given a choice between the gallows and the guillotine, theoretically, the guillotine was slightly more comfortable.

"So, if they retreat, what happens next?" Napoleon inquired.

"It's hard to say." Joseph shook his head, "If that priest..."

"Father Idalgo," Lucien reminded.

"Yes." Joseph nodded and continued, "If Father Idalgo underwent special training in Toulon and had ample preparation time, those Spanish riff-raff wouldn't even be worth mentioning. But Father Idalgo only received theological training, not military. His supporters lack basic military prowess. From the intelligence about this battle, they essentially won using guerrilla tactics. But initially, they tried to form dense formations like militia, nearly crumbling under Spanish artillery. If they hadn't disobeyed orders, attacked on their own, fired randomly, it's hard to say who would've won. Ultimately, the rebels' military tactics are severely lacking. Their luck played into meeting these endearing Spaniards.

However, that's not their most critical issue. If they don't war, fine, the Spaniards won't either. They have ample time to learn in the war. But they have a more significant problem: their rapid organizational expansion. Lucien, I recall your intelligence on those Mexicans in the past. It seems Father Idalgo truly started building his organization only a few months ago.

And our revolutionary padre hasn't received professional training on organizational development; he treats building the revolutionary organization as missionary work, indiscriminately accepting everyone. His rapid expansion means he couldn't prepare enough cadre, resulting in the inclusion of many unreliable individuals. Moreover, I believe Father Idalgo is better suited as a propagandist, not at the helm of a revolution.

Hence, Father Idalgo's forces will soon occupy Mexico City. But what happens after occupying Mexico City is crucial. Those who joined his forces have their own motives and goals. Whether Father Idalgo can quickly discipline and educate his forces is key. If he can manage swiftly, the Spaniards should contemplate an honorable exit from North America.

But if Father Idalgo fails in this, the Spaniards might just have a glimmer of hope."

"Do you think he'll succeed?" Napoleon asked.

"I doubt it. Because there's an obvious flaw in what they learned at the 'Revolutionary Theological Institute.' Of course, this flaw was intentionally guided by us," Lucien interjected. "Those educated in the 'Revolutionary Theological Institute' believe they can persuade others with reason. That's normal since many among them haven't experienced revolutions. They lack an understanding of the brutality of revolution. We deliberately reinforced this notion. So... hehe... I estimate Father Idalgo will fumble when trying to stabilize his internal structure. It will cost him considerable time."

"Revolution isn't a dinner party, it's not literature, not painting or embroidery. It's not refined, leisurely, elegant, composed, restrained, patient, or humble. Revolution is upheaval, a violent action where one class overthrows another. If he can't decisively organize internally, the subsequent issues will indeed be troublesome," Joseph remarked.

"Perhaps they might face internal divisions and struggles. Moreover, their victory isn't due to organized unity but rather disobeying orders, acting on their own. This victory might encourage further insubordination, reducing their organization. In a way, this kind of victory sometimes is more detrimental than failure," Napoleon stated. "However, this works in our favor. If the Spaniards see no hope, they won't obediently comply with us. And when necessary, we just need to release certain information, likely dealing them a heavy blow. And they can't blame us."

They all burst into laughter together.

"It'll probably take a while for the Spaniards to receive this news. After all, they don't have fast communication ships. By then, they'll probably... hmm, I think our appetites can be even more substantial," Napoleon added.

Chapter 322: Exercise

But it will take Spain several days to get this news, and right now, Napoleon has more important matters to attend to.

The first matter is that intimidating military exercise. Preparation for the military exercise is almost complete, and invitations have been sent out. Representatives from various European countries—traditional allies like Green Ivy, newfound allies Spain, Shinaro, and East Loro, loyal allies like the Rhine Federation and Italy, as well as friendly trade partners the United Kingdom and the United States—have all dispatched delegates to observe.

The exercise is split into two parts: land-based attack and defense drills. The attacking force consists of a French infantry division, while the defending force is a Rhine Federation infantry division. The exercise location is near the Vincent Forest, not too far from Paris. Because of its proximity, even some leisurely Parisians might venture there for a change of scenery.

French citizens during this era are generally martially inclined. The youth, in particular, harbor an enthusiasm for war. Especially in recent years, under Napoleon's leadership, the French army consistently triumphed over seemingly invincible enemies at minimal cost. This led many to believe that war was like a game—cannons fire, everyone charges singing songs, and then the opponents surrender.

Now, witnessing a battle firsthand, even if simulated, especially on a Sunday, the wealthy idle Parisians and students from the University of Paris wouldn't miss this spectacle. Even some girls from the Moulin Rouge hired carriages and arranged for prime viewing spots. These girls might not necessarily enjoy the violence, but being social butterflies, they often interact with foreign nobles and somewhat clueless university students. Knowing a bit about these matters is crucial. Just like in the Far East, the predecessors along the Qinhuai River used to carry Japanese swords and talk about matters of plowing and hole digging with their guests. Although, if asked to draw their swords for practice, they might not fare much better than Long Ge.

The core of the exercise is a small hill where the Rhine Federation troops have constructed a typical field defense, including three trenches, three layers of barbed wire, cannons, and various types of mines—of course, all non-explosive for training purposes.

In previous drills, it was nearly impossible for a single division to breach such defenses, which could withstand an attacking force of at least two divisions. Normally, an infantry division fortified in such a position could handle the assault of three to four other divisions. However, in this exercise, the French forces, with just one division, are set to attack an equally strong fortified position. This intrigued many foreign military observers.

These foreign observers occupied the best vantage points—a slightly higher hill about a kilometer away from the exercise site. The lower positions were crowded with Parisians who had come for a picnic and some entertainment.

Some even tried to get closer to the exercise area, unconcerned about getting hit by stray artillery. This chaos kept the Parisian mounted police and their horses extremely busy.

This wasn't an uncommon sight. In the martially inclined 18th and 19th centuries, not just exercises but actual battles often saw civilians setting up picnics nearby while soldiers fought in the distance. For instance, during the American Civil War, battles near Washington witnessed residents setting up picnics to watch executions and enjoy a day out.

So, the Caucasian folks were martially inclined—war couldn't stop them from picnicking and spectating, let alone a pandemic. In short, isolation was an impossibility in life; only by picnicking and having outings could life be somewhat sustained.

Around 9 o'clock in the morning, the French troops started moving into position, preparing for the assault. Honestly, attacking at this time wasn't particularly suitable, at least in the eyes of military observers from several countries. They increasingly believed that modern warfare favored the defending side more.

After the Battle of Verdun, nations diligently studied that example. Despite Napoleon's glorious victories, many felt that emulating him wasn't wise. It seemed he didn't teach well enough, resulting in misplaced confidence. Learning from the solid defenses of Franco-German Joseph was a more sensible approach.

With the widespread study of Joseph's defensive tactics, many began to perceive attacking as suicidal. If an attack had to be made, it was better at night when visibility was poor. This lowered the efficiency of both sides but disadvantaged the defenders even more.

Launching an attack around 9 AM, as the French did, was seen by military observers as a deliberate show-off.

"I'm curious to see what they can pull off!" thought General Bagration, the Russian observer.

At this point, the French commenced artillery preparations. Their cannons targeted specific points on the defensive line.

This bombardment aimed to destroy some visible fortifications. However, with no high-explosive shells and the defenders hunkered down in trenches, this barrage didn't stress the defenders much. At best, it destroyed some easily damaged structures, like parapets.

However, the French artillery astonished them—they fired at a speed much faster than expected. While most armies fired one round in the time it took, the French fired three to four shots.

Moreover, the accuracy of their shells was impressive. Even at two kilometers' distance, the French accurately hit low targets like parapets. Their shells were highly destructive, toppling structures with each hit.

Would such attacks help the attackers breach the defenses? Bagration shook his head quietly. He disliked rigid defensive tactics, preferring offensive maneuvers, yet his reason told him this wasn't enough.

French soldiers began appearing on the horizon. Bagration was surprised to see a drastic change in their uniforms—replacing the traditional blue coats and white trousers with gaudy, multicolored outfits. However, this attire had a unique effect—making it almost impossible to spot them at a distance, even with binoculars.

"It's like when we go hunting in winter, donning a white cape," thought Bagration, overhearing someone nearby rant in German, "How could they? This absurd uniform diminishes the army's honor. I'd rather be shot than wear this!"

Bagration glanced at an angry Austrian officer nearby.

"Can't believe there are such people! Hasn't Austria learned to be practical from the French yet?" Bagration mused, somewhat unfairly blaming the Austrians. Their emotional leaning favored defense strategies. Any new element that could decrease defense efficiency naturally infuriated them. So, encountering this new uniform naturally sparked their anger.

Then, they witnessed the French artillery switching ammunition. Their shells started landing near the defensive line, creating smoke that immediately reduced visibility.

"Unbelievable! How could they?" the Austrian officer grew more irate, "But there are still mines ahead! I want to see how the French handle those!"

On the defensive lines, their artillery also commenced firing. Given this was a drill, no actual shells were fired. However, after each round, the directors would order a certain number of French soldiers to withdraw. Nonetheless, the use of smoke grenades and decreased visibility reduced this effect.

French soldiers approached the minefield. Several soldiers pushed a cart closer. On the cart sat a rocket. The soldiers secured the cart and lit the rocket, sending it flying with a long rope-like object trailing behind.

"I've seen this before," Andrei explained to their friends lower down, "Our electrical department uses this to run wires across rivers and valleys."

Perhaps because the trailing rope was too thick and heavy, the rocket didn't fly

far before crashing to the ground. The rope attached to it fell, landing on the minefield. Then an explosion occurred—the thick rope wasn't a rope but explosive material inside a rubber tube.

"Smart move!" Bagration applauded silently, clenching his fist, "This instantly creates a safe passage through the minefield!"

As you might imagine, they were watching an elaborate military exercise unfold.

Chapter 323: The Drill

Using this method, the attacking French army swiftly broke through the minefield. At this moment, the French artillery began suppressive fire on the first simulated defensive trench with shrapnel shells because the French soldiers were nearing the barbed wire. Of course, the defenders also started firing blanks and, following a predetermined proportion, random French soldiers were forced to withdraw from the exercise.

The French soldiers forced to withdraw from the exercise took off their jackets, revealing white shirts. They sauntered away from the "battlefield" and found a nearby patch of grass, setting down their rifles and reaching into their leather bags—where they kept bandages, triangular bandages, and pulled out sausages and small bottles of brandy. They ate while sending triumphant laughs toward their still-"alive" comrades.

However, those fortunate enough not to have "died" yet were too preoccupied to mind the revelry of these mock "deceased." They swiftly approached the first line of barbed wire. Several soldiers inserted rod-like objects they held under the wire, then swiftly pulled a fuse, turned around, and ran. The bullets on the exercise field were virtual, most of the shells were as well, but the barbed wire and the smoking explosive tubes under it were very real!

As a series of explosions ensued, the barbed wire suddenly had dozens of breaches. Simultaneously, from the opposing trench, a series of training grenades were launched, and another batch of French soldiers joined the group indulging in sausages and spectating.

The French retaliated with grenades and swiftly stormed the trench. Then, joyously, many soldiers from the League of the Rhine happily sat down beside the "fallen" French soldiers, exchanging food, wine, and various tobacco products, all the while enjoying the spectacle together.

"Wait, why do the exchanges in the trenches favor the French?" complained the Austrian standing next to Bagration. "Even if the French army is a bit more courageous, the exchange rate shouldn't be this skewed."

Bagration also harbored doubts, but he believed the French wouldn't stage such an anomaly in a demonstrative military exercise. Therefore, he refrained from immediately expressing his thoughts and continued observing through his telescope.

Soon enough, Bagration noticed something distinct about the French army.

"Alyosha, take notes for me," Bagration continued with his telescope trained on the "battlefield," addressing his adjutant.

"Yes, General," his adjutant fetched a notebook and a pencil—both French-made.

"Each group of five French soldiers storming the trench forms a combat unit. Two carry rifles with bayonets, while the other three wield shorter firearms—likely specialized weapons for trench combat," Bagration remarked.

Bagration's speculation was spot on. Those French soldiers were equipped with pump-action shotguns specifically designed for close-quarters trench combat. Compared to standard rifles, their range was limited, but within a trench, that wasn't an issue. They could load eight rounds at once, with each pump action completing a firing and reloading motion, almost as fast as a revolver. The shotgun's spread vastly improved their accuracy compared to a revolver. In a trench, these were like weapons of the gods.

During trench combat, soldiers using rifles often ran out of ammunition before this stage of the battle. Hence, they resorted to bayonets or multi-purpose entrenching tools made in France for close combat. While two soldiers with bayonet-equipped rifles held the enemy at bay, those with shotguns unleashed a torrent of fire. The opposing Franks were delighted, shedding their jackets, leaping out of the trench, and heading to the adjacent grassy area to eat, boast, and watch the show.

In almost the blink of an eye, before the picnic audience could finish a bottle of beer, the first trench changed hands, and the tricolor flag fluttered.

"Vive la France!" cheered the onlookers.

"For France, cheers!"

"Anyone who doesn't drink is a coward!"

"What if I'm a coward? Let's compare! One drink against one, dare you?" occasionally, a girl from the Montmartre highlands would shout.

"Marguerite, let's have a bet for the competition. What's the wager?"

"How about this, if Marguerite loses, tonight, she'll obey Denny in everything. If Denny loses, tonight, Marguerite sleeps with whoever Denny chooses. How about that?"

Amidst this lively banter, French artillery extended their fire, preparing to attack the two rear defensive lines again.

The subsequent battles in the rear almost mirrored the previous ones, yet the enthusiastic onlookers were thoroughly entertained. However, the more intricate aspects were lost on the most vociferous cheerers. The observers from various nations, on the other hand, were breaking out in cold sweats. The French army displayed an exceedingly short pause between organizing the first and second wave of attacks during the battle. In this brief time, they fortified their positions, readjusted artillery

placements, and prepared for another assault. This level of organizational prowess surprised those who truly understood warfare.

"Leaving aside everything else, can our army keep up with the French in battle rhythm? This is in a defensive scenario; in open warfare, how many divisions do we need to counter just one of theirs?" questioned someone as evening approached.

By dusk, the French successfully breached three lines of defense against an equal force, essentially concluding the day's exercises. At least, it ended the part that entertained the onlookers.

The remaining agenda was to invite the observers into the French military camp. However, given the lateness of the hour, this was deferred until the next day.

As the sun descended behind the mountains, figures scattered. After a day of amusement, the gleeful onlookers boarded carriages back to Paris, exchanging their observations and opinions incessantly. Of course, their discussions mainly revolved around "How formidable France is, hahaha..." or "Warfare is so much fun, hahaha..."

The next day, during the visit to the French military camp, the observers' myriad of doubts gradually unraveled. Firstly, why did the French artillery fire so rapidly? That was because they used breech-loading cannons, which loaded much faster than muzzle-loading ones. Moreover, they had a specially designed sighting system that ensured reasonable accuracy even in indirect aiming.

Additionally, Bagration noticed that the wheels used by French artillery were distinct from standard ones. These weren't made of wood but of a black material with unique elasticity.

"Perhaps this is the secret to the French army's rapid artillery mobility," Bagration pondered. He heard someone exclaiming, "This gun, this gun, it's incredible!"

Bagration hurriedly glanced over and saw an Austrian officer holding a shorter version of a rifle he'd noticed yesterday, voicing his astonishment.

Bagration hastened over and inquired, "What kind of gun is this?"

"It's the 1801 shotgun," a French captain replied, saluting. "This gun can fire up to eight rounds at once..."

As he spoke, the captain took the shotgun from the Austrian and began demonstrating how to use these firearms.

"See, beneath the barrel, there's a tube that serves as a magazine, holding seven rounds. Plus, you can fit one more in the chamber, for a maximum of eight shots."

As he spoke, the captain swiftly loaded the gun with cartridges, which were paper tubes with a small metal piece at the base. Loading them into the magazine didn't take much time.

Then, he pulled back the breechblock, and with a click, the gun was loaded. He raised the gun, pointing it at the sky, and turned to a few foreign generals nearby, saying, "Look, the gun's loaded, and now you can shoot at your targets. Each shot, pull this here, and you're ready for the next. Hmm, who wants to try?"

"I do! I want to try!" Bagration immediately exclaimed, stepping forward and using his broad frame to shield the other spectators behind him.

The captain handed the gun to Bagration. "General, the gun's loaded."

Bagration took the gun, glanced at a human-shaped target about forty meters away, nodded, took aim briefly, and fired a shot, immediately toppling the target. Bagration then pulled the breechblock again and fired another shot, hitting another target.

"How far can this gun shoot?" Bagration asked.

"It's effective at around sixty to seventy meters," the captain answered, "beyond that, it's less accurate."

"Hmm," Bagration nodded. He had already noticed that the French army predominantly equipped itself with standard rifles, presumably for this reason.

"Is your cavalry now considering this as a primary weapon?" Bagration suddenly asked.

The French captain hesitated for a moment, then stammered, "General, regarding this question, um, I can't answer you..."

Chapter 324: Orders

Upon witnessing the performance of the French captain, Bagration smiled faintly, having gathered his answer from the captain's response. Typically, if a Frenchman swiftly responds to a rather complex query, it implies preparedness, likely an unreliable answer. If they take a moment, they're likely fabricating a response, similarly unreliable. However, refusal to answer signals their inability to conceal the truth, confirming your conjecture.

Moreover, compared to revolvers, shotguns had a suitable length, extended range, and superior accuracy, prompting Bagration to wonder why the French cavalry wouldn't adopt them as their primary armament. Any weaponry exhibited by the French during these exercises could find its way onto the market shelves or be showcased in the future. For instance, their breech-loading cannons might not hit the shelves immediately as they still have muzzle-loading cannons available. However, in due course, they'll likely become accessible.

Weapons demonstrable for public viewing and even allowing firsthand shooting experiences would immediately feature in the Bonaparte Armaments' price lists. Bagration resolved to push the Tsar to allocate funds to equip his cavalry with such armaments. Otherwise, facing foreign cavalry armed with these would render their forces unable to compete.

Replicating these arms would be even better, but Bagration understood this was likely impossible, primarily due to material limitations. Large-scale steel production remained a core commercial secret in France. Despite efforts from various countries, whether aligned with or seemingly aligned against France, knowledge about this remained limited. Rumors suggested the British were experimenting, but success would still take considerable time.

While patriotic, Bagration had to acknowledge Russia's inferiority in technology compared to advanced nations like France, Britain, and even compared to Prussia, a nation seemingly strung up by France. In a hypothetical invasion by the French, Russia might rely on immense strategic depth and unwavering spirit to repel the enemy. However, steelmaking technology wouldn't magically emerge from these strengths.

"Russia really needs to step up, or else..." Bagration recalled his encounter with Marshal Suvorov in Italy during the confrontation with Napoleon. Though the conflict ultimately ended in negotiation,

Suvorov openly admitted Russian military inadequacy. Northern distractions forced the French into seeking terms. Facing an average French force like the one demonstrated yesterday would likely have deterred negotiations, leading to immediate aggression. Reflecting on it, Bagration felt that confronting such a French force at the time would have been extremely challenging, perhaps even impossible to sustain for a day, let alone half a day.

Assessing the Russian military, Bagration acknowledged considerable progress after the clash with the French in Italy. However, witnessing the French exercises, he reluctantly accepted that the French had made even greater and more visible strides in their military advancements.

However, Bagration identified a weakness in the French military — excessive resource consumption. This wasn't solely about monetary expenses but also the massive quantity of resources the French used. In the event of a French invasion of Russia, considering Russia's poor road conditions, the French might struggle to supply their frontline troops adequately. Unless they stopped after short intervals to repair roads, Russia's backwardness strangely became its armor.

"Thank goodness we don't border France. But we must equip ourselves with more modern weapons than the Ottomans!" Bagration couldn't help but think along those lines.

While Bagration found comfort in the absence of a border with France, at the same time, Captain Jack Aubrey of the British Royal Navy felt despair. He was currently observing a French naval interception exercise aboard the USS Constitution.

The scenario for this exercise was set as follows: an armed group attempted smuggling via armed escort. The French warship "Constitution" was tasked with intercepting and neutralizing this smuggling fleet.

"Good Lord! What kind of armed group conducts smuggling operations with a fleet? It's... It's like what the French did back then, but they didn't use a fleet for smuggling. This isn't about anti-smuggling; it's a simulation of how to conduct a maritime blockade!" Captain Aubrey immediately grasped upon seeing the exercise scenario. That so-called "armed group" was probably the Royal Navy of the United Kingdom?

The fleet portraying the armed group consisted of three old French second-rate battleships. Despite their formidable firepower, they were no match in speed and maneuverability for the "Constitution." The "Constitution" effortlessly evaded the battleships' interceptions, relentlessly attacking and disabling each merchant ship.

Considering that while the Royal Navy had numerous battleships, it had even more merchant ships, realistically, the Royal Navy couldn't possibly assign three battleships to escort every merchant fleet. Hence, encountering the "Constitution" would likely mean doom for most merchant vessels.

"Damn 'Constitution,' was this ship built solely to dismantle free trade?" Captain Aubrey couldn't help but ponder.

However, if Joseph knew his thoughts, he'd surely retort, "Nonsense! Our 'Constitution' is to ensure the freedom of our trade. If you want trade freedom, I have a price list here for you to peruse."

France had placed the "Constitution"-class patrol frigates on sale; however, everyone knew how much profit France made from such transactions. It was likely that for every one sold to the British, the French could build two more using the money earned. Nonetheless, purchases had to be made. At least studying their propellers closely was beneficial. Although the British had decent technical

capabilities, having a sample would enable imitation. Yet, while they might not replicate steel ribs and thus produce a lower-quality imitation, they could still utilize it to some extent.

The French were infuriatingly obstinate, refusing to sell rear-loading cannons. Consequently, both acquired and future ships would be armed only with front-loading cannons. This meant several British ships were necessary to challenge a single French ship. Furthermore, with no foreseeable breakthrough in steelmaking technology, even obtaining front-loading cannons required purchasing from France.

"Damn it, once I return, I must persuade the parliament to slash those blasted army expenditures!" After much contemplation, Captain Aubrey could only devise this course of action.

Of course, the army would oppose it. However, in the United Kingdom, isn't it common sense to prioritize between the navy and the army? If the navy were to falter, who would believe that the British army could safeguard them? Consequently, Captain Aubrey believed his suggestion would ultimately garner parliamentary support.

Thus, following the two exercises, numerous orders began streaming towards the Bonaparte Armaments factory.

Chapter 325: Ways to Borrow Money

Among all their business partners, the Spaniards weren't the first to place orders, but they were certainly the most impatient. It took them more than a week to receive news from Mexico. Their information arrived a bit slower but was more detailed than what Lucien knew—after all, they were part of the conflict themselves.

Naturally, their messages likely contained plenty of blame-shifting information. Usually, after messing up, the priority isn't about cleaning up the mess or minimizing losses. It's about quickly finding someone to blame and passing on the fault!

But regardless of the blame game—be it on the Church (the rebel leader was schooled in a theological college), the indigenous people, or disloyal native whites—shifting blame alone couldn't solve the problem. It's akin to understanding how to pass the buck across the Pacific Ocean, much like the way the King of Hearts does.

However, while blame could be shifted, the New Crown King couldn't escape. The situation in Mexico was the same. Blame could be cast upon the Catholic Church, the "accursed French," but losing Mexico City meant a real loss.

Indeed, just as Joseph anticipated, Mexico City was impossible to defend. And surprisingly, the Spaniards displayed higher military quality for the first time. They promptly implemented Joseph's recommended strategy, abandoning Mexico City and heading towards Veracruz. However, their haste made them forget to destroy the cannons left behind in Mexico City, which couldn't be swiftly moved.

Nevertheless, they did remember to seize every horse they could find, regardless of the owner, all in the name of God and the King. This action caused quite a bit of trouble for the Mexican Revolutionary Army. Yet, while this move inconvenienced the revolutionaries, it also created issues for them as they struggled to find enough horses to transport cannons and supplies.

The Spaniards' actions weren't driven by military considerations but rather by their eagerness to transfer wealth. Retreating towards Veracruz, they carried a plethora of horse-drawn carriages, each loaded with valuable goods.

Shortly after the Spaniards fled Mexico City, Father Miguel Idalgo Castilla led the revolutionary army into the city. Surprisingly, the retreating Spaniards weren't swift, weighed down by too many valuable items. However, Father Castilla didn't immediately dispatch troops to pursue them. Not because he didn't think about it, but because neither he nor his associates could control the troops.

Just as Napoleon previously predicted, a series of victories and blunders didn't increase Father Castilla's prestige; it significantly reduced his and Alain's influence among the army. The soldiers generally believed their superiors were foolish and victory lay in ignoring their orders. The lower-ranking officers gained more authority, swiftly leading to the fragmentation of the army.

After capturing Mexico City, Father Castilla finally established the independent Mexican government but faced a significant problem—they lacked funds.

Where would the government get its money? Typically, taxes were the source, but collecting taxes was a strenuous task. Moreover, this year's taxes had already been collected by the Spaniards. Trying to collect again would disrupt daily life. If collected less, it wouldn't suffice; if more, it contradicted the revolutionary cause. Even the idea of redistributing land faced challenges as many native whites were small landowners. Implementing this would spark internal conflicts.

Initially, Father Castilla thought of soliciting donations from the people supporting the revolution. However, the most revolutionary folks barely had money, and the wealthy weren't inclined to contribute. Some so-called supporters even advised Father Castilla:

"Mr. President, do you know why people are hesitant to lend money to your government?"

"Why?" Father Castilla asked.

"Because the risk is too high. You see, you haven't truly defeated the Spaniards... I know you'd mention the last battle, but in that fight, your army defeated only a small fraction of the Spanish forces. Spain would undoubtedly send an expeditionary force, and their strength would surpass any Spanish troops you've previously vanquished. Hence, people doubt you. They won't lend unless you can defeat the Spanish expeditionary force."

"If I could defeat the Spanish expeditionary force, why would I need to borrow money?" Father Castilla remarked.

"Exactly, Mr. President. That's the conundrum. But there's a solution," the shrewd person replied.

"What solution?"

"For instance, striking a loan deal with the Bank of Louisiana at a 15% annual interest rate for a million. Once news spreads, other banks will be willing to lend to you. Once that money arrives, repay Louisiana Bank in full, with interest, and split the remaining loan from other banks. Voilà, you have your funds," the clever person answered.

Chapter 326: Gilded Shields

President Miguel Idalgo Castilla exclaimed in surprise, "We borrow money from them, it circulates in our hands for a moment, then swiftly returns to them. They walk away with a clean 150,000 in

interest, and we, in turn, have to give them thirty percent from another source. And this thirty percent, along with the interest, we have to repay ourselves? This is quite..."

"Mr. President, you've misunderstood. When I mentioned a thirty-seventy split, I meant they take seventy percent, we take thirty!" a savvy individual corrected promptly.

"Ah?!" President Idalgo was utterly astonished. "They haven't done anything, why do they get to take so much?"

"Because, Mr. President, pardon my frankness, but no government in the world recognizes yours. No one will lend you money. If your government were globally acknowledged and not facing imminent collapse, then you could easily secure loans at these rates. But as it stands, if you don't cooperate, you won't secure any loans.

Think about it, should you fail, everything the Mexicans possess would revert to the Spaniards. That's an enormous loss. Yet, if you succeed, indeed, your nation will incur debts. However, without this, your country might not even survive. It's akin to a person with a severe illness, where only one medicine can cure them. If they don't take it, they'll perish. But by taking it, their skin darkens like that of a black person. Would they take it? Being dark-skinned is preferable to being deceased.

Let's calculate; we're short about five million francs, enough to buy arms, train soldiers, and defeat the Spanish expedition. Realistically, we only need to borrow seventeen million francs. The annual interest is merely two million five hundred fifty thousand francs. Even if it takes ten years to repay, the interest rate is only eight and a half times. Approach the banks directly at this rate; who would be willing to lend to your government? Moreover, those cursed Spaniards plunder far more wealth from Mexico each year than this. So, Mr. President, what's the hesitation?"

However, President Idalgo remained somewhat hesitant, indicating he needed further consideration on the matter.

Yet, soon after, Idalgo couldn't dawdle any longer. Reliable intelligence arrived: the Spanish expeditionary force, numbering thirty thousand, fully equipped with state-of-the-art weapons such as rifled guns, cannons, revolvers, and muskets, was ready to depart. Realizing that with the current Mexican forces, they stood no chance against such a formidable army, he urgently needed to secure loans to bolster his troops to counter the imminent Spanish invasion.

Given the size of the Spanish expeditionary force, borrowing just five million seemed insufficient. Thus, Idalgo made a resolute decision: go big or go home. He opted to borrow an audacious thirty-five million francs, intending to crush the Spanish with money. After all, what future would there be without a present?

Consequently, the Bank of Louisiana swiftly announced a loan agreement with the Republic of Mexico, providing a two million franc loan.

Almost everyone was aware of the ties between the Bank of Louisiana, the military-industrial complex, and the French government. Hence, the bank's action was seen by many as an implicit endorsement by France. If the French sided with Mexico, few believed the Spaniards could retain their hold.

Banks willing to offer loans to the Idalgo government increased rapidly. The Republic of Mexico smoothly secured three hundred fifty million francs in loans from various banks. According to their prior agreement, most of this sum promptly flowed into the Bank of Louisiana's coffers, while the

remainder essentially found its way there, transforming into various supplies delivered to the "Mexican government."

Equipped with these supplies, President Idalgo gained confidence, reallocating financial strength to reorganize his military forces. Learning from the bitter experience of the previous victory, he also recruited numerous French instructors from Louisiana for his army.

Over a month later, the Spanish fleet reached Cuba. The soldiers disembarked in Havana to rest, preparing for the impending battle. Simultaneously, the reorganized "Mexican government army" utilized this final window to intensify training, bracing for the imminent conflict.

After a week's halt in Cuba, the expeditionary force boarded ships, traversing the Mexican Gulf and landing in Veracruz.

In Veracruz, the expeditionary force received a warm welcome from the Spanish Governor-General Gomez and other loyalists to Spain (mostly peninsulares). General Franco, the expeditionary force commander, assured everyone at a gathering that he and his "loyal and brave soldiers" would restore order in the Mexican region and exterminate the insurgents completely.

Staying for another week in Veracruz to prepare supplies, the expeditionary force planned an assault on Mexico City. A week later, the thirty thousand-strong force left Veracruz, marching towards Mexico City. General Franco believed that with his well-trained soldiers (though the training of Spanish soldiers in Europe was mediocre compared to the militias in North America, Franco deemed his soldiers adequately trained), advanced weaponry, and his study of modern French military tactics, he should easily defeat this ragtag bunch.

However, as he approached Mexico City with his army, seeing the rebels, his confidence received a harsh blow.

"Damn! This is the rebels' position? This... this damned hell is it! Rebels?" General Franco's eyes widened in anger. "Trenches, barbed wire, minefields... where did they learn Joseph's defense tactics from? Damn Frenchmen, this must be their conspiracy!"

At the sight of "Joseph's defense," General Franco felt a shiver down his spine. Though the French army recently demonstrated how to breach Joseph's defense swiftly, that was the French army, not Franco's expeditionary force.

However, General Franco consoled himself; "Joseph's defense" had a significant drawback—it was costly. Hence, in military circles across Europe, this defense had an alias: the "Gilded Shield." Nations with limited resources often presented a downgraded version of "Joseph's defense," mockingly termed "gilded" or even "brass shields."

"Maybe what I'm facing here is a 'gilded shield' or even a 'brass shield.' Just because it looks like one doesn't mean it's a 'gilded shield.' Only by testing it will I know its quality. But even if it's a 'gilded shield' or 'brass shield,' it won't be that easy to deal with," General Franco mused.

Chapter 327: The Consequences of Refusing to Buy

General Franco glanced across at the enemy's position from a distance. As the commanding heights were under their control, he couldn't get a clear view of the rebels' stronghold. However, what he managed to glimpse was already disheartening.

"Whether it's a gilded shield or a brass one, we'll only know for sure once we've had a go at it," General Franco pondered. But it wasn't the time for an attack just yet. After all, everyone had marched a long way, and they all deserved a rest, didn't they?

So, Franco ordered the army to set up camp for some rest while he, accompanied by a cavalry unit, ventured out again to observe the enemy's defensive works. He only retreated when the rebels sent out their own cavalry.

Back at the camp, Franco summoned a few officers for a thorough discussion. They deliberated and finalized the plan for the next day's operation.

At the crack of dawn, the Spanish expeditionary force cautiously probed the rebel's defensive positions.

First came the artillery barrage. The expeditionary force boasted thirty rifled cannons and over twenty six-pound bronze cannons brought from Veracruz. It was a lively exchange of gunfire.

After intermittent artillery fire for two hours, the Spanish infantry began to advance in loose formation.

Their first encounter was with a minefield. Before the Spanish expedition set off, the French had pitched rocket mine-clearing devices to them. But after studying these, the Spaniards concluded that these were only effective in siege warfare, particularly against "Josephine Defense."

The Spaniards knew the rebels surely had mines; after all, in Louisiana's weapon shops, mines were a common commodity. It was so prevalent that in any weaponry store, one could easily find plenty of boar dispersers labeled "for pigs." Yet, the Spaniards believed the rebels used mines the Irish way, not the "Josephine Defense" style. How could these rebels dare to confront the Kingdom of Spain's regular army directly? Even though the Spanish army was widely admired across Europe, they couldn't defeat the French. Did they really think they could best these mudslingers?

Moreover, the French prices were too steep for what was essentially a rocket with a hose filled with explosives attached! It cost a fortune! Calculating it, a set like that could equal the worth of twenty mobilized soldiers. So, it seemed wiser to resolve the issue using a more cost-effective method, perhaps employing human resources.

Thus, the Spaniards declined the French offer. However, it turned out, when the French sell you a weapon, even if you think you won't need it, circumstances will arise that make it a necessity.

Since they lacked rocket mine-clearing devices, they resorted to manual demining. If it were the British, they'd charge forward with mercenaries, quietly removing markers from minefields beforehand or claiming they were already cleared. If it were the Prussians, they'd have mobilized infantry charging straight ahead. As for the Spaniards, departing from Veracruz, they'd taken a batch of slaves used for transporting supplies...

After losing a group of slaves, General Franco promptly made a basic assessment based on the density of mines in the field: even if it wasn't a gilded shield, it was definitely a plated one.

"Damn French, profiteering on both ends!" At this point, the Spaniards had learned about the Louisiana Development Bank lending money to the "Mexican Republic government." Though they were unaware of the intricacies, it was clear the rebels had acquired money from the French and then purchased French weaponry to counter the royal army. Considering that their soldiers were

also equipped with French arms, the Spaniards felt the French were becoming increasingly corrupt and shameless.

"I never heard the Bonaparte family had Jewish blood. How did they become more Jewish than the Jews themselves?" General Franco couldn't help but complain.

Since it was certain the enemy's position wasn't just a superficial "brass shield," the initial plan for a rapid assault was naturally vetoed. Although the Spanish soldiers were not highly valued, losing them wasn't inconsequential. In Europe, their deaths were just deaths, but here, their transportation costs were considerable. With these costs factored in, these Spanish soldiers became more valuable, and sacrificing them wasn't as easy. There's a saying from a distant eastern land, "Items are precious away from home; people are cheap away from home." But if one could price individuals as something calculable, they became valuable away from home.

With the first rapid charge deemed unfeasible, they had no choice but to resort to the second plan: slow erosion.

"Foolish rebels, do you think 'Josephine Defense' is that foolproof? You might not realize why it's called 'gilded shield' in Europe. It's because employing this strategy in warfare is just throwing money at people!" General Franco thought. "Of course, there are only two ways to attack 'Josephine Defense': either spend money or spend lives. Regardless, whether it's spending money or lives, can't Spain outspend the rebels?"

The most common way to diminish the lethality of "Josephine Defense" was through tunneling. By digging trenches close to the enemy's trenches and resorting to close combat, they aimed to solve the battle.

This was time-consuming, and when both sides' trenches got closer, "Bonaparte's little melons" would cause substantial casualties. However, General Franco believed they could gain the upper hand in this "melon skirmish" because they reverse-engineered a "melon launcher." Among those who bought "Bonaparte's little melons" for civilian purposes, few were willing to purchase something that significantly increased the melon's range but severely compromised its accuracy.

For the next stretch of time, the battlefield momentarily calmed down. The Spaniards dug, the Mexicans prepared. Since they suffered significant losses among the black population, the soldiers had to do the digging themselves. However, Mexico City sat on a plateau, with an altitude of over two thousand meters. Normally, this altitude wouldn't have much effect, but engaging in heavy physical labor made those from lower altitudes immediately feel extreme fatigue. Consequently, the efficiency of digging decreased sharply. Until nightfall, the Spaniards had only managed to dig trenches that were still quite a distance from the Mexican positions.

When night arrived, the Spaniards dared not light torches to continue digging. With poor visibility at night, the rebels could sneak in and launch "little melons" where there was light. Hence, they withdrew to their camp and planned to resume digging the following morning.

The next day, as the Spaniards carried their shovels and picks along the trenches they had dug the previous day, preparing to continue the dig, explosions suddenly erupted in the trenches — the Mexicans had sneakily planted landmines overnight.

Thus, half a day was wasted on mine clearance. So, as darkness approached, the distance between the two sides still hadn't closed enough for them to exchange "little melons" as a token of greeting.

This time, the Spaniards learned their lesson. Before returning to camp, they planted numerous landmines in their trenches. Later that night, they heard a series of explosions coming from the trenches...

After two days of turmoil, by midday on the third day, the two sides were finally within range to greet each other with "little melons." The Mexicans were the first to

launch an attack using these, indicating that it wasn't just the Spanish who possessed melon launchers.

After a chaotic exchange of "little melons" and amidst the smoke of explosions, the Spanish soldiers leaped out of their trenches, charging towards the Mexican positions that were within arm's reach. The Mexicans immediately detonated their "for pigs" contraption set up in front of their trench, knocking down a row of Spanish soldiers, but more Spaniards managed to charge in.

"Steady!" General Franco, observing the battle through a telescope, muttered to himself, "They're charging in!"

To General Franco, these rebels were ragtag, how could they resist the royal army in close-quarters combat, which required courage and organization? If they managed to hold out, I'll eat my telescope!

However, in a blink, he saw the Spanish royal troops scrambling out of the rebel's trenches, desperately running back, while the rebels pursued, relentlessly shooting at the retreating Spanish soldiers with short guns. Nearly every time they fired, a soldier fell.

"Damn Frenchmen, trench guns! They, they sold trench guns to those rebels!" General Franco's face turned pale.

Like the rocket mine-clearing devices, the French had also pitched their "trench guns" to the Spaniards. But similarly, the Spaniards found these too expensive and believed they wouldn't have much use without trench warfare here. Now it seemed that anything the French recommended, whether necessary or not, had to be bought!

Upon witnessing this, the Spaniards realized they needed to buy whatever the French sold, even if they thought they didn't need it!

Chapter 328: Rest Assured

Due to the cursed French, the first assault of the Spanish royal army ended in a heavy failure. The "rebels" chased the army, relentlessly following them into the trenches they dug, then continued pursuing when they emerged, only to be stopped when General Franco decisively ordered the artillery to fire grapeshot, scattering the fleeing cowards and the pursuing rebels, averting a complete disaster.

Even so, it remained a major defeat. According to later Mexican accounts, the Spanish army left behind over three hundred bodies, with more than two hundred taken captive, and countless others injured.

On the Spanish side, according to their records, they suffered few casualties, less than fifty dead, claiming to have killed thousands of rebel insurgents. But the sheer number of killings led to psychological issues among many soldiers. To pacify and console them, General Franco had to

reluctantly order a temporary retreat. The Spanish royal army was, in their portrayal, a force of righteousness... whether you believed it or not, the Spanish chose to embrace that narrative.

Following this defeat, the morale among the Spanish dwindled. Many soldiers believed that attacking enemy trenches without trench guns was a death sentence, sparking discussions among them.

"Erelera, let me tell you, those trench guns, they can fire continuously, up to eight rounds at once. Pull the trigger and you fire a shot, each packing the punch of a revolver. One shot equals a dozen bullets, spreading wide and deadly accurate. Without those, storming trenches is suicide."

"Really, Romero? I heard these guns were meant for us, but the folks back home said they were too expensive. They figured our rifles were good enough... and then the rebels got wind of it, bought up all those things we didn't."

"Ah? That happened?"

"Absolutely, heard it from Gusman, his brother-in-law's in supply. He ought to know."

"If you don't charge, the officer will shoot you dead."

...

With morale plummeting, the royal army couldn't muster an attack for several days. On the other side, despite their victory, the Mexicans were equally troubled.

"In this battle, we've depleted nearly half our broadswords and a third of the muskets. Plus, a significant amount of shells, especially those for rifled cannons, we can't produce ourselves; we have to buy," General Alande reported with a frown to President Idalgo.

"So, if the enemy attacks again like this, our supplies won't suffice?" Idalgo inquired. "Why has the consumption risen so drastically compared to our previous estimates?"

"When planning, we didn't account for the soldiers' state. They were too charged up, using these items recklessly... plus, the enemy's attack method differed from our projections."

Silence befell the room.

After a while, President Idalgo spoke, "Alande, my friend, tell me, with the enemy potentially launching another attack, do we have enough supplies to repel them?"

"Perhaps, but... Mr. President... I believe we need more supplies."

Anticipating the revolutionary army's hardships, after a two-day rest, the Spanish royal army launched another attack. This time, they attacked from multiple directions simultaneously. Though repelled again, the Spanish suffered considerable losses. Alande had to urgently seek more supplies from Idalgo. Meanwhile, due to the heavy casualties, the Spanish soldiers mutinied, forcing General Franco to promise a halt in attacks until the soldiers were equipped with trench guns.

In the spirit of 'better safe than sorry', President Idalgo, leveraging mining rights in Northern Mexico, approached various banks again for loans. Simultaneously, the Spanish reached out to the Bonaparte Armaments in Louisiana, hoping to purchase trench guns promptly.

The Bonaparte Armaments readily agreed, stating that military-grade trench guns needed to be shipped from mainland France, requiring at least two months. However, if the Spanish were willing to pay extra, they could sell them civilian pump-action shotguns used for hunting.

"We have three thousand civilian pump-action shotguns here, though civilian arms tend to be pricier than military ones," explained Olt, the manager at Bonaparte Armaments in Louisiana. "Although they perform similarly, civilian ones are more refined, especially the stocks. Military ones are basic wood, while civilians boast authentic black walnut. Hence, the price difference. If you order, we'll ship them immediately."

The Spanish hurriedly paid for the French offer of three thousand shotguns. Truth be told, they didn't need so many trench guns, but buying only half might result in the rest falling into the hands of those unscrupulous French, wouldn't it?

To ensure these civilian firearms wouldn't end up with the rebels, the Spanish reluctantly purchased the entire stock at the "discounted price" offered by the French.

"Ah, if only we'd known before the expedition began, we could have bought these at a much lower cost," lamented Governor Gomez.

Meanwhile, Bonaparte Armaments deposited the received payment into the Louisiana Development Bank. Moments after, this money was withdrawn and loaned to the "Mexican Republic Government." Then, it circled back as owed funds to Bonaparte Armaments, which again found its way back to the Louisiana Development Bank.

"My friend, our debts weigh heavy on my mind. I can barely sleep," complained President Idalgo to a confidant. To this, the confidant smiled and reassured him, "Mr. President, you can rest assured now. Consider, the French have lent you so much; they wouldn't allow your venture to fail unless the Spanish repay their debts, wouldn't they?"

Chapter 329: Reaping and Resisting

President Idalgo relaxed a bit at his friend's words. Indeed, the French had invested significantly in him. If the Spanish managed to suppress them, all that French investment would have gone to waste. But a troubling thought clouded Idalgo's mind.

"My friend, what if we find ourselves drowning in debts after independence? No Spanish oppression, yet continually paying the French each year for this debt. Wouldn't it mean swapping old oppressors for new ones? Getting rid of one villain only to welcome a darker one, continually reaping the Mexican people..."

"Mr. President, independence always comes with a price. Everything demands its due. Consider, if we perform well and swiftly crush the Spanish aggressors, our debt burden might lighten. And at least these debts offer a chance for repayment, unlike the unending rule of the Spanish."

"Have you ever seen someone fully repay such high-interest loans?"

"Well... Mr. President, indeed, I have," remarked Idalgo's friend, the Portuguese merchant Peria. "I have a friend named Mendosa. He was reckless in his youth, drowning in high-interest loans. Yet, in the end, he cleared them all."

"Your friend must be wealthy, or was he once wealthy?" Idalgo inquired.

"Mendoza indeed came from a well-off family. So, upon inheriting his father's estate after his passing, he sold off a manor to clear the debt," Peria replied.

"You see, my friend, people differ. Your friend had wealth, while Mexico, we are a poor country," Idalgo shook his head.

"No, Mexico is rich, only its wealth remains untapped," Peria countered. "The Spanish aim only for quick grabs, caring little for our progress. They fear that a prosperous Mexico might seek independence. But the French wouldn't mind our development. In fact, they'd benefit from our prosperity. Besides, Mexico holds vast territories. While the northern lands might seem less valuable to us, the French are constantly migrating to the Americas. They need land, and their expertise in railways might find use here. They'd surely invest in these lands. If we decide, we could use these territories as collateral, borrow a considerable sum from the French, muster a significant army swiftly to crush the Spanish. That way, our cost might end up being minimal."

"Peria, are you advising me to sell our nation?"

"Mr. President, this is the Americas, not Europe. Land dealings are commonplace here. How could this be deemed selling the nation? Moreover, our northern boundaries are ambiguous. And, sir, nations fundamentally engage in transactions—exchanges of national interests. Trade implies transactions. So, unless you sell it cheaply or pocket the money yourself, how could it be called selling the nation?"

"Peria, you always find yourself good justifications," Idalgo sighed. "But..."

The New World lay distant from Europe. The revolution's impact in the Americas hardly concerned the European continent. Even with Spain dispatching an expeditionary force of thirty thousand to the New World, European attention centered on London, where things were stirring.

An incident instigated by London's Textile Workers Mutual Aid Society.

By late April, some employers noticed their workers joining a new organization. Initially, factory owners didn't fret; worker associations were common. It seemed trivial. Until one day, a representative claiming to be from the London Textile Workers Mutual Aid Society knocked on the door of Mr. Rayne, the owner of the largest Rayne Textile Factory in London.

Rayne presided over a factory employing over three thousand workers, operating round the clock, annually yielding considerable income. This enabled him to acquire an estate from a fading aristocrat, marrying a young lady from a prestigious yet modest family—much younger than himself—fitting to be his daughter-in-law.

Rayne seldom stayed at the estate, distant from the commercial hub. He preferred residing, along with his young wife, twenty servants, a dozen bodyguards, in a grand building near Hyde Park.

As Rayne listened to his wife read Shakespeare's "King Lear" in their cozy parlor, a cautious butler, Phileas, appeared.

"Anything of importance?" Rayne asked from his armchair.

"Yes, sir," Phileas, looking uneasy, replied. "A few representatives claiming to be from the 'London Textile Workers Mutual Aid Society' insist on seeing you."

"'London Textile Workers Mutual Aid Society'? What nonsense is this?" Rayne scorned. "Phileas, you disappoint me. You can't manage such lowly folks?"

Rayne's voice, though not loud, struck Phileas like thunder. Pale-faced, Phileas answered in a quivering tone, "Sir, I've sent them away. But they left a petition, protesting your decision to cut wages. It's all outrageous, but since it's addressed to you, I didn't dare to handle it myself..."

Rayne found some satisfaction. Phileas might be timid and dim, but he understood boundaries. Besides, a butler, timid or dim, was hardly a flaw.

"Bring the letter," Rayne ordered.

Phileas cautiously approached, handing over the missive.

As Rayne read, his brows furrowed.

"Well, well! Impoverished scoundrels, relying on me for sustenance, dare negotiate? These rabble, I could find a thousand more like them on the streets merely by whistling!"

With these remarks, Rayne stood up. "Melissa, fetch my coat. I need to visit the office."

As his wife brought the coat, Rayne instructed Phileas, "Take my card, go to the police station, find Chief Clark, invite him to my residence tonight."

Phileas hurried off to prepare the carriage as Rayne swiftly arrived at the office, summoned several managers for a meeting, then returned home, engaging Chief Clark in lengthy discussions that evening...

The next morning, workers, following routine, arrived at the factory gates, only to find armed police guarding it. Members of the factory's security team were there too, informing them that all workers who had put their thumbprints on the petition addressed to Rayne had been dismissed. Their work permits were revoked.

The petition bore twelve hundred thumbprints, nearly a third of Rayne's workforce. But to Rayne, this wasn't a concern. Unemployment was rampant, and textile labor required no extraordinary skills. New workers could be hired anytime.

As a renowned economist in the future would caution against any intervention in free markets, warning that without market freedom, implementing public ownership or similar heretical approaches would confine workers' labor to a single buyer, leading them down the "path to slavery."

But in a free market, could workers avoid enslavement due to their freedom to choose? Ha! How could that be true when the average lifespan of British textile workers was lower than that of slaves? No factory owner would willingly raise wages, for it increased costs, putting them at a disadvantage in competition. In a free market, capital was scarce, and labor was surplus. Just like there were few companies making Marvel movies while countless artists who could draw comics or write stories had no rights. Those dismissed workers couldn't find a more benevolent capitalist elsewhere. For if such a capitalist existed, assuming this world had one, they'd have gone bankrupt due to costs in competition.

A worker representative stepped up, rallying all workers to strike. This time, the London Textile Workers Mutual Aid Society played a pivotal role, almost all workers standing outside the factories.

Chapter 330: Strike

"We oppose the unreasonable actions of the factory, and for the benefit of all workers, we declare a strike!" A worker representative raised a tin megaphone and shouted to everyone, "Comrades, brothers, our days have been tough enough, the wages we get now barely put food on the table. Let me ask you, have you seen anyone working as a laborer for six or seven years? Have you?"

The crowd below fell silent. After a while, they all shouted together, "No, no one!"

"Why not? Why?" the worker representative shouted.

"Because they either went to America or died from exhaustion in the factories!" another worker representative yelled loudly, "Isn't that right?"

"Yes, it is!" the workers shouted.

"Brothers, brothers! In the past, we could hope to save enough for a ticket to America before we worked ourselves to death. That was our only hope in this painful life. But with these wages, can we save enough for that ticket before we die of exhaustion? What will be our fate in the end? Right now, even if we're miserable, at most, we'll end up dead. But brothers, accepting these wages is also a kind of death, isn't it? If both paths lead to death, why should we work ourselves to death? Why should we let them, these factory owners, these venomous beasts, these bloodsuckers, build their estates and mansions on our corpses?"

"Yes, no more, no more!"

"We strike, we strike!"

"We won't let them thrive on our dead bodies!"

More people joined in the outcry.

"Hmph, let them starve! These lazy lot, if they weren't so lazy or dumb, how could they starve? They deserve to starve!" a manager-looking man said fiercely.

"Yes, let these lazy lot starve!" another follower-like person echoed.

"We just need to turn around, and we can find as many or even more workers on the streets!" the stout manager said.

At this point, the worker representative on the other side said something, and the crowd started shouting again. Finally, thousands of workers together sang a song:

"Arise, ye prisoners of starvation!

Arise, ye wretched of the earth!

..."

"What are they trying to do? Revolt?" the stout manager turned pale, "Quick, close the gates, don't let those ruffians come in and damage the machines!"

During this era, conflicts between workers and factory owners were pronounced. Incidents of workers storming factories and wrecking machines were not uncommon. So, upon sensing something amiss outside, the stout manager immediately issued such an order.

Police and factory guards swiftly retreated into the factory, and the gates, clad in iron, slammed shut. The police and guards climbed onto the walls, holding guns, facing the agitated crowd below.

However, the crowd didn't disperse; they continued to gather outside the factory gates, still singing. Some pointed and cursed vehemently at the stout manager on the wall.

The stout manager remained unresponsive, but the follower beside him spat viciously downwards and flipped off the people below.

"You bastards!" some furious workers picked up stones from the ground and hurled them at the follower. With someone leading the charge, more people started throwing stones at those on the wall, and some even approached the gates.

"Brothers, calm down, calm down!" shouted the worker representative from the London Textile Workers' Mutual Aid Society, "Don't engage in direct conflict, it'll cost us..."

But the enraged workers were in no mood to listen. They yelled, "Charge in, charge in, beat these bastards to death!" and started closing in on the gates.

"Stop them, stop them!" the stout manager's face turned white, "Shoot, shoot!"

"Bang, bang..." gunshots rang out. At such close range, almost no shots missed, and the workers below immediately fell in large numbers.

"Run, run!" someone yelled.

"They're shooting, they're killing!" someone else shouted.

The crowd scattered, some fell, trampled by the fleeing masses.

"Keep firing, let them know our power!" the stout manager yelled.

Gunshots continued...

In a room on Petticoat Lane, Fekin, the leader, was bandaging the wounded Iron Tooth.

"You're lucky, Iron Tooth, didn't hit anything vital. But be cautious, don't let the wound touch water. Also, pray to God, hoping there won't be an infection," Fekin said after finishing the bandaging.

"Boss, what's our next move?" asked the butcher beside him.

"We'll organize the workers first, stop them from hiring more, halt their production. Each day they stop, they'll suffer losses—bank loans, contractual compensations from buyers—it'll suffocate that wretch in Rayne," Fekin replied.

"What about those scum who shot us? Are we letting them off?" the butcher asked.

"How could we?" Fekin sneered, "Hurt my brothers, and if we let it slide, how will we survive here? How will we carry on? Ha, that old man Rayne hides in the rich district, lots of cops, lots of bodyguards. It won't be easy to touch him for a while. But that one who ordered the shooting—have you found out who he is?"

"We have. He's the business manager at the factory, called Sinclair, lives on Wendell Street."

Wendell Street was an area where moderately affluent people lived, fewer cops than in the real rich district but more than Petticoat Lane. People like Sinclair mostly had a servant or two, but no personal valets or bodyguards—they looked wealthy but were far from the real elite.

"Are we sure we can make him vanish without a trace?" Fekin asked.

"No problem," the butcher said, "Tie a stone to him and throw him in the river."

"Good," Fekin nodded, then cautioned, "Be careful before making a move, don't get tricked."

...

The factory guards and police shot and killed over twenty workers. Such an event might have caused an uproar in later times, but in this era, human lives were not considered precious. Of course, even in later times, there was no fundamental change. For instance, the lives of workers were never as significant as stock market indices. But because of the appearance of a heresy called the Soviet Union in later times, there was more hypocrisy compared to this era. Although, with the disappearance of the Soviet Union, people gradually forgot its existence.

None of the official newspapers prominently covered this incident, neither the Whig Party's papers nor the Tory Party's nor even the papers of the New Tory Party. It wasn't because the royal government ordered a blackout on such matters but because, in their eyes, this incident hardly qualified as news.

What's news? A dog biting a man isn't news; a man biting a dog is. Although this saying came from later Americans, in the British news industry, they long followed this standard. Factory workers being shot wasn't news; it was a commonplace occurrence. Just a few dozen workers dead? Which street in London's poorer districts doesn't have several times that number of dead workers? What's the big deal?

Moreover, the Whigs, Tories, and New Tories had severe disagreements on many issues, but when it came to dealing with striking

workers, they were remarkably aligned. Be it the aristocrats, factory owners, or bankers, all thought that killing those daring to strike was a much-needed relief.

Just like in later years in the Beacon Country, although Fox and CNN considered each other fake news, their attitudes towards reporting on the "Occupy Wall Street" movement were remarkably uniform.

Similarly, the French-backed newspaper, the Seven-Penny Alliance, with a French background, also didn't report this incident. Because the Frenchmen, friends of those in the Whig Party, also stood in support of suppressing the striking workers.

It seemed like this incident would pass calmly. But soon, Rayne received reports that hiring new workers wasn't going smoothly because many were spreading rumors about him and his factory: those who enter his factory live at most five years, worked to death; the wages he boasts about seem good, but the contracts have numerous clauses for wage deductions. After a week's work, they don't even earn a penny, perhaps even end up owing the factory money. On average, the pay isn't enough for food, let alone savings for America. Some people even stationed themselves at their hiring spots, grabbing any approaching worker, advising them not to join. In short, various rumors severely impacted recruitment efforts.