A Sheaf of Bluebells

Baroness Orczy

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CHAPTER I

THE MASTERS OF FRANCE

I

Among the many petitions presented that year by émigrés desirous of returning to France under the conditional amnesty granted to them by the newly-crowned Emperor, was one signed by Mme. la Marquise de Mortain and by her son Laurent, then aged twenty-one years, and one signed by M. le Comte de Courson for himself and his daughter Fernande. Gaillard says in his memoirs of Fouché that the latter was greatly averse to the petition being granted; but that Napoleon, then on the point of starting for his campaign in Prussia, was inclined to leniency in this matter—leniency which roused the ire and contempt of the Minister of Police—the man who, of a truth, and above the Emperor himself, was virtual dictator of France these days.

"A brood of plotters and intriguers," he said scornfully. "I should have thought your Majesty had had enough of those *soi-disant* great ladies and gentlemen of Normandy and Brittany. I wouldn't have them inside these dominions if I had my way."

It seems that this phrase: "If I had my way," highly amused the Emperor. Was it not a well-known fact that in all matters pertaining to the internal organization of the new Empire of France, Fouché ruled far more absolutely than did Napoleon? He knew more. He suspected more. Minister of Police and Minister of the

Interior at this time, Fouché had made himself feared even—so it was said—by his imperial and capricious master.

And so—the obscure secretary who was present at this interview tells us—the Emperor laughed, and for once Fouché did not have his way. On the eve of the campaign which was to culminate in the humiliation of Prussia and the Peace of Tilsit, the soldier-Emperor had a throe of compassion, of mercy, a shrugging of the shoulders which meant immunity from exile for hundreds of men and women—a home for countless wanderers in foreign lands.

Fouché argued. "The Fouvielles I don't mind, nor yet Joubert, nor those Fumels. They won't do much harm. We might allow the Liancourts to return, though their property has been sold by the State, which always leads to trouble. But the Mortains!!! and the Coursons!!... Why! I would as lief grant the shades of Fox and Pitt a free permit to wander through France at will."

But we may take it that for once his arguments were of no avail. Napoleon's clemency was extended to the Mortains, as it was to the Coursons—this we know, seeing that both the young Marquis and the Comte de Courson, his maternal uncle, figured so prominently in the events which this true chronicle sets forth to record. As to the cause of this clemency, or, rather, as to the cause of Fouché not getting his way this once ... well, 'tis our turn to shrug our shoulders.

Had Fouché really desired to keep the Mortains and the Coursons out of France, Fouché would have had his way. Of this there can be no doubt, seeing that Napoleon left the country at the head of his army soon after the day when he had that interview with his Minister of Police, leaving the latter more absolutely master of

France than he had ever been before; so why should Fouché not have had his way with the Mortains and with Baudouin de Courson and his daughter Fernande?

Have we not cause for shrugging our shoulders? and for giving credence to the rumours which were current throughout France at this time—namely, that the dreaded Minister of Police had at this time begun to coquet with the Royalist party, as well as with the Jacobins and the English agents, with Talleyrand and with the Comte d'Artois—with any and every party in fact, who plotted against the master whom in his heart he had already betrayed.

II

The aforesaid obscure secretary who hath so aptly described the interview between the Emperor and Fouché, tells us that the latter, after he had bowed himself out of the Presence, returned to his private chamber in the ministry, and promptly sent for M. Dubois—then Chief Préfet of Police.

"M. Dubois," he commanded, "I want the dossier of the Mortains and also of the de Coursons now at once. The Emperor is inclined to grant them leave to return ... but I don't know ... I must consider...."

"I can tell you all about the Mortains and the Coursons without referring to their dossier," retorted Dubois gruffly.

"Well?"

"The ci-devant Marquise de Mortain...."

"Not ci-devant any longer, M. Dubois," broke in Fouché with a suave smile. "The lady is Mme. la Marquise now ... you yourself

are 'Monsieur,' are you not? We have left the 'citizen' and 'citizeness' of our revolutionary era well behind us, remember, since our illustrious Master placed the crown of Imperial France upon his own head. France is an Empire now, Monsieur Dubois. There are no ci-devants any more, and quite a number of aristocrats."

Dubois gave a growl of understanding. It was not easy for his rough, uncultured mind to grasp all the various subtleties of Fouché's irony. He hated Napoleon's all-powerful Minister, hated him all the more that Fouché's astute and tortuous mentality was beyond his comprehension and that he never knew whether the great man was laughing at him or not.

"Well," he said finally, with a shrug of his wide shoulders, "Marquise or ci-devant I care not; but, anyhow, she is not a woman I would care to trust, and the Emperor is very ill-advised...."

"The Emperor, my dear M. Dubois," once more broke in the Minister urbanely, "takes advice from no one. He starts next week for Prussia at the head of his army; he will return anon, having won fresh laurels for France and further undying glory for himself ... to-day he is inclined to clemency. Mme. la Marquise de Mortain and her son will be allowed to return to France, so will M. le Comte de Courson and his daughter Fernande; they will be allowed to retake possession of their château and of such of their lands as have not been sold by the State...."

"The lands have all been sold," rejoined the préfet curtly, "to worthy farmers whom it were a scandal to dispossess...."

"Are we dispossessing any one, my dear M. Dubois?" queried Fouché, with an indulgent smile directed at the other's Republican

ardour—"any one, I mean, who happens to have bought confiscated land?"

"Not yet," muttered the other under his breath; "but...."

"As you were saying, M. le Préfet?..." here interposed the Minister more haughtily, "Mme. la Marquise de Mortain is a widow, I think."

"Yes. For the second time."

"She was first the wife of Bertrand de Maurel...."

"Who would have been a good patriot had he lived."

"We must imagine so," said Fouché, with a smile.

"He died in '82—separated from his wife whom he hated."

"But there was a child of that marriage."

"Yes, Ronnay de Maurel, a loyal patriot ... a fine Republican...."

"Shall we say a fine Bonapartist, my good M. Dubois?" said the Minister of Police significantly. "I like and trust Ronnay de Maurel. I would not like to see him tarred with the worn-out brush of the past decade."

"Well ... Republican or Bonapartist—'tis all the same—what? I was one of those who voted for the proclamation and Ronnay de Maurel was another. First Consul for life, with all the splendours of past monarchies, or frankly Emperor of the French, there was not much to choose. You were an ardent Republican, too, at one time—eh, M. le Ministre?"

"Quite so—quite so. But we were not speaking of mine unworthy self, but of Mme. la Marquise de Mortain and of her son Ronnay de Maurel."

"Son, indeed!" retorted Dubois, with a gruff laugh. "M. de Maurel has been taught to execrate his mother. He was only four years old when his father died, but an uncle brought him up—old Gaston de Maurel—a magnificent patriot if ever there was one. Nothing of the whilom aristo about him ... eats peas with his knife and wears sabots and a blouse ... he voted for the death of the King ... just as you did—eh, M. le Ministre?"

"Just as I did, my dear friend—and I am proud of it. Gaston de Maurel and I sat in the Assembly of the Convention as representatives of the people of France, and in the name of the people we decreed that the tyrant Louis Capet, known to the world as Louis XVI., King of France, should die upon the scaffold as a traitor to the nation which he had set out to govern. Gaston de Maurel may eat peas with a knife, but he rendered the Republic and the Directorate infinite services in quelling the so-called Royalist risings in his own province of Normandy."

"Now he is old. Some say that he has not many months to live. Ronnay de Maurel dwells with him in his Château de la Vieuville, near Villemor. They both live like peasants in a couple of rooms in the sumptuous château. The old man is a miser: he has accumulated immense wealth in these past twenty years. Ronnay de Maurel, on the other hand, owns the sumptuous demesnes of La Frontenay, which he inherited from his father, together with the foundries, where he employs five thousand men and manufactures war material for the Grand Army. He is already one of the richest

men in France—and he is his uncle's sole heir; when old Gaston dies the de Maurel riches will be uncountable...."

"And he, too, eats peas with his knife," concluded Fouché, with a sardonic smile.

"And hardly knows how to read and write," assented the préfet of police. "A succession of tutors at La Vieuville testify to the rough temper and the obstinate savagery of this descendant of aristos."

"Yes, so I have been told," mused Fouché. "I understand that a de Maurel fought in the First Crusade, that another was Captain of Musketeers under Louis XIII.; but the present holder of the historic name is an ardent Bonapartist, as you say. He fought like a lion against the Royalists in Vendée; he crossed the Alps with Napoleon, and was wounded at Marengo and at Hohenlinden. At Austerlitz, where he accomplished prodigies of valour, an Austrian bullet lamed him for life. He is a Grand Eagle of the Legion of Honour. His religion is Bonaparte ... he knows no science save that of arms—reads no books and does not know the Carmagnole from the Marseillaise—he is illiterate, uncultured, almost a savage.... These are all facts, are they not, M. Dubois?"

"Aye! Ronnay de Maurel is all that and more. He lives at La Vieuville, not ten kilomètres from Courson, where Mme. la Marquise, his mother, will now be taking up her abode. Oh!" added the préfet of police with a malevolent grin, "how those two will execrate one another!"

"And watch over one another," commented Fouché with his enigmatic smile. "Ronnay de Maurel will act as a check on the intrigues which might be hatching presently in Mme. de Mortain's fertile brain."

"Nothing—and no one can act as a check on that woman's love of intrigue," growled Dubois surlily. "She and her son Laurent will give us all plenty to do until...."

He made a significant gesture with his hand against his neck. Fouché smiled. "We can always give them plenty of rope," he said. "How old is Laurent de Mortain?"

"Twenty-one or two ... but he has fought against his own country since he was sixteen. Mme. de Mortain favours a marriage for him with Fernande de Courson, his cousin."

"The daughter of Baudouin de Courson?"

"Yes. His only daughter. He is Mme. de Mortain's only brother. Their properties adjoin."

"I know. He, too, has been granted leave by the Emperor to return to France."

"A whole pack of those confounded émigrés," once more growled the préfet of police—this time with a savage oath, "settled down in the most disaffected province of France. Joseph de Puisaye still at large ... the department seething with discontent ... everything ready for rebellion ... the Emperor away.... Ah! we shall have a fine time down there, I reckon."

"Bah!" quoth Fouché lightly, "they are not very dangerous now. For one thing, the Mortains, the Coursons and the whole pack of them are as poor as church mice. Their lands and farms have all been sold; the Mortains have not even a château in which to live."

"The Château of Courson stands."

"A dilapidated barrack."

"Quite so—but large enough to harbour every rebel who chooses to hatch a plot against the safety of the Empire. The Mortains and Coursons will herd together there: Joseph de Puisaye, François Prigent and D'Aché will use it as their headquarters. From there their bands of brigands will be let loose upon both departments—highway robbery, intimidation, pillage and arson—those Chouans stick at nothing nowadays. England no longer supplies them with money for their so-called Royalist cause, and they must get money somehow. You remember their criminal outrage upon old M. de Ris, and their theft in his château of money, valuables and jewellery. You remember the murder of Andrein, the Constitutional Bishop of Quimper, and the abduction of the Bishop of Vannes—all for purposes of robbery.... Well, in my opinion, those exploits will sink into insignificance beside the ones which will be invented and organized in Courson under the presidency of Mme. la Marquise and her precious son and brother."

M. Dubois, préfet of police, had, while he spoke, worked himself up into a passion of fury. He gesticulated wildly with both arms, shrugged his wide shoulders, and banged his fist from time to time upon the desk in front of him, so that the inkstand and the papers rattled unceasingly and M. le Ministre's nerves were irritated beyond endurance. Now M. Dubois had perforce to pause for want of breath. He drew his large coloured handkerchief from his pocket and mopped his forehead, which was streaming.

"You exaggerate, my good M. Dubois," said Fouché soothingly. "You have an excellent colleague at Caen in the person of M. Vincent...."

"Bah!" ejaculated Dubois contemptuously. "He is hand in glove with the Royalists."

"And there's M. Caffarello, the préfet...."

Again an expressive shrug of the shoulders from M. Dubois, who apparently had not much faith in the capabilities of his subordinates.

"And in Ronnay de Maurel you will have a valuable adjunct," added the Minister, "unless...."

He paused, then continued with seeming irrelevance:

"Is Fernande de Courson pretty?"

"She has a reputation for beauty," replied Dubois. "Why do you ask?"

"Nothing ... nothing ... a passing thought ... a dart shot at random.... You will have to keep your eyes very wide open, my good M. Dubois."

"You may trust me to do that, M. le Ministre," rejoined Dubois, with a leer of comprehension; there was no subtlety about the suggestion, and he had understood it well enough this time.

"There's not much of the lady-killer about Ronnay de Maurel," he added, laughing.

"Perhaps not," rejoined Fouché dryly.

"And he may rejoin the army, after all."

"No. He cannot do that. The Emperor won't let him. He is far too useful in Normandy just now to be mere food for Prussian cannon."

There was a pause. The préfet of police was tacitly dismissed. M. le Ministre drew some papers close to him, and his delicate, blue-veined hand toyed with the pen.

"You don't want me any more?" queried Dubois abruptly. He was always thankful to shake the dust of the ministerial chamber from his feet.

"Well ... unless you have anything else to report, my good M. Dubois," rejoined Fouché pleasantly, "or any further information to impart to me about those Mortains—or the Coursons."

"There's nothing else. But I wish to God that the Emperor would reconsider his decision."

"The Emperor seldom reconsiders any decision, my dear Dubois ... once it is a decision. The Mortains and the Coursons have probably landed in France by now."

"May they break their necks on the gangway," growled Dubois.

"Amen to that," quoth Fouché lightly. "In the meanwhile, will you see M. de Réal on that subject and send special recommendations to the préfet and the commissary of police at Caen?..."

"And to Ronnay de Maurel, I should say."

"No," interposed the Minister peremptorily, "leave de Maurel alone. I will write to him myself."

Such in substance was the interview between the Minister of Police and the chief préfet. The secretary, among whose papers was found the above account, goes on to say that M. Dubois, having taken his leave, the great man was busy for the next half-hour writing a letter with his own hand. With his own hand also he folded it, sealed it