

PETTICOAT RULE

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PART I
THE GIRL

PETTICOAT RULE
CHAPTER I
A FAREWELL BANQUET

"D'Aumont!"

"Eh? d'Aumont!"

The voice, that of a man still in the prime of life, but already raucous in its tone, thickened through constant mirthless laughter, rendered querulous too from long vigils kept at the shrine of pleasure, rose above the incessant babel of women's chatter, the din of silver, china and glasses passing to and fro.

"Your commands, sire?"

M. le Duc d'Aumont, Marshal of France, prime and sole responsible Minister of Louis the Well-beloved, leant slightly forward, with elbows resting on the table, and delicate hands, with fingers interlaced, white and carefully tended as those of a pretty woman, supporting his round and somewhat fleshy chin.

A handsome man M. le Duc, still on the right side of fifty, courtly and pleasant-mannered to all. Has not Boucher immortalized the good-natured, rather weak face, with that perpetual smile of unruffled amiability forever lurking round the corners of the full-lipped mouth?

"Your commands, sire?"

His eyes—gray and prominent—roamed with a rapid movement of enquiry from the face of the king to that of a young man with fair,

curly hair, worn free from powder, and eyes restless and blue, which stared moodily into a goblet full of wine.

There was a momentary silence in the vast and magnificent dining hall, that sudden hush which—so the superstitious aver—descends three times on every assembly, however gay, however brilliant or thoughtless: the hush which to the imaginative mind suggests the flutter of unseen wings.

Then the silence was broken by loud laughter from the King.

"They are mad, these English, my friend! What?" said Louis the Well-beloved with a knowing wink directed at the fair-haired young man who sat not far from him.

"Mad, indeed, sire?" replied the Duke. "But surely not more conspicuously so to-night than at any other time?"

"Of a truth, a hundred thousand times more so," here interposed a somewhat shrill feminine voice—"and that by the most rigid rules of brain-splitting arithmetic!"

Everyone listened. Conversations were interrupted; glasses were put down; eager, attentive faces turned toward the speaker; this was no less a personage than Jeanne Poisson now Marquise de Pompadour; and when she opened her pretty mouth Louis the Well-beloved, descendant of Saint Louis, King of France and of all her dominions beyond the seas, hung breathless upon those well-rouged lips, whilst France sat silent and listened, eager for a share of that smile which enslaved a King and ruined a nation.

"Let us have that rigid rule of arithmetic, fair one," said Louis gaily, "by which you can demonstrate to us that M. le Chevalier here is a

hundred thousand times more mad than any of his accursed countrymen."

"Nay, sire, 'tis simple enough," rejoined the lady. "M. le Chevalier hath need of a hundred thousand others in order to make his insanity complete, a hundred thousand Englishmen as mad as April fishes, to help him conquer a kingdom of rain and fogs. Therefore I say he is a hundred thousand times more mad than most!"

Loud laughter greeted this sally. Mme. la Marquise de Pompadour, so little while ago simply Jeanne Poisson or Mme. d'Étioles, was not yet *blasée* to so much adulation and such fulsome flattery; she looked a veritable heaven of angelic smiles; her eyes blue—so her dithyrambic chroniclers aver—as the dark-toned myosotis, wandered from face to face along the length of that gorgeously spread supper table, round which was congregated the flower of the old aristocracy of France.

She gleaned an admiring glance here, an unspoken murmur of flattery there, even the women—and there were many—tried to look approvingly at her who ruled the King and France. One face alone remained inscrutable and almost severe, the face of a woman—a mere girl—with straight brow and low, square forehead, crowned with a wealth of soft brown hair, the rich tones of which peeped daringly through the conventional mist of powder.

Mme. de Pompadour's sunny smile disappeared momentarily when her eyes rested on this girl's face; a frown—oh! hardly that; but a shadow, shall we say?—marred the perfect purity of her brow. The next moment she had yielded her much-beringed hand to her royal worshipper's eager grasp and he was pressing a kiss on each rose-tipped finger, whilst she shrugged her pretty shoulders.

"Brrr!" she said, with a mock shiver, "here is Mlle. d'Aumont frowning stern disapproval at me. Surely, Chevalier," she asked, turning to the young man beside her, "a comfortable armchair in your beautiful palace of St. Germain is worth a throne in mist-bound London?"

"Not when that throne is his by right," here interposed Mlle. d'Aumont quietly. "The palace of St. Germain is but a gift to the King of England, for which he owes gratitude to the King of France."

A quick blush now suffused the cheeks of the young man, who up to now had seemed quite unconscious of Mme. de Pompadour's sallies or of the hilarity directed against himself. He gave a rapid glance at Mlle. d'Aumont's haughty, somewhat imperious face and at the delicate mouth, round which an almost imperceptible curl of contempt seemed still to linger.

"La! Mademoiselle," rejoined the Marquise, with some acerbity, "do we not all hold gifts at the hands of the King of France?"

"We have no sovereignty of our own, Madame," replied the young girl drily.

"As for me," quoth King Louis, hastily interposing in this feminine passage of arms, "I drink to our gallant Chevalier de St. George, His Majesty King Charles Edward Stuart of England, Scotland, Wales, and of the whole of that fog-ridden kingdom. Success to your cause, Chevalier," he added, settling his fat body complacently in the cushions of his chair; and raising his glass, he nodded benignly toward the young Pretender.

"To King Charles Edward of England!" rejoined Mme. de Pompadour gaily.

And "To King Charles Edward of England!" went echoing all around the vast banqueting-hall.

"I thank you all," said the young man, whose sullen mood seemed in no way dissipated at these expressions of graciousness and friendship. "Success to my cause is assured if France will lend me the aid she promised."

"What right have you to doubt the word of France, Monseigneur?" retorted Mlle. d'Aumont earnestly.

"A truce! a truce! I entreat," here broke in King Louis with mock concern. "*Par Dieu*, this is a banquet and not a Council Chamber! Joy of my life," he added, turning eyes replete with admiration on the beautiful woman beside him, "do not allow politics to mar this pleasant entertainment. M. le Duc, you are our host, I pray you direct conversation into more pleasing channels."

Nothing loth, the brilliant company there present quickly resumed the irresponsible chatter which was far more to its liking than talk of thrones and doubtful causes. The flunkeys in gorgeous liveries made the round of the table, filling the crystal glasses with wine. The atmosphere was heavy with the fumes of past good cheer, and the scent of a thousand roses fading beneath the glare of innumerable wax-candles. An odour of perfume, of powder and cosmetics hovered in the air; the men's faces looked red and heated; on one or two heads the wig stood awry, whilst trembling fingers began fidgeting with the lace-cravats at the throat.

Charles Edward's restless blue eyes searched keenly and feverishly the faces around him; morose, gloomy, he was still reckoning in his mind how far he could trust these irresponsible pleasure-lovers, that descendant of the great Louis over there, fat of body and heavy of mind, lost to all sense of kingly dignity whilst squandering the nation's money on the whims and caprices of the ex-wife of a Parisian victualler, whom he had created Marquise de Pompadour.

These men who lived only for good cheer, for heady wines, games of dice and hazard, nights of debauch and illicit pleasures, what help would they be to him in the hour of need? What support in case of failure?

"What right have you to doubt the word of France?" was asked of him by one pair of proud lips—a woman's, only a girl's.

Charles Edward looked across the table at Mlle. d'Aumont. Like himself, she sat silent in the midst of the noisy throng, obviously lending a very inattentive ear to the whisperings of the handsome cavalier beside her.

Ah! if they were all like her, if she were a representative of the whole nation of France, the young adventurer would have gone to his hazardous expedition with a stancher and a lighter heart. But, as matters stood, what could he expect? What had he got as a serious asset in this gamble for life and a throne? A few vague promises from that flabby, weak-kneed creature over there on whom the crown of Saint Louis sat so strangely and so ill; a few smiles from that frivolous and vain woman, who drained the very heart's blood of an impoverished nation to its last drop, in order to

satisfy her costly whims or chase away the frowns of ennui from the brow of an effete monarch.

And what besides?

A farewell supper, ringing toasts, good wine, expensive food offered by M. le Duc d'Aumont, the Prime Minister of France—a thousand roses, now fading, which had cost a small fortune to coax into bloom; a handshake from his friends in France; a "God-speed" and "*Dieu vous garde, Chevalier!*" and a few words of stern encouragement from a girl.

With all that in hand, Chevalier St. George, go and conquer your kingdom beyond the sea!

CHAPTER II

THE RULERS OF FRANCE

Great activity reigned in the corridors and kitchens of the old château. M. le Chef—the only true rival the immortal Vatel ever had—in white cap and apron, calm and self-possessed as a field-marshal in the hour of victory, and surrounded by an army of scullions and wenches, was directing the operations of dishing-up—the crowning glory of his arduous labours. Pies and patties, haunches of venison, trout and carp from the Rhine were placed on gold and silver dishes and adorned with tasteful ornaments of truly architectural beauty and monumental proportions. These were then handed over to the footmen, who, resplendent in gorgeous liveries of scarlet and azure, hurried along the marble passages carrying the masterpieces of culinary art to the banqueting-hall beyond, whilst the butlers, more sedate and dignified in sober garb of puce or brown, stalked along in stately repose bearing the huge tankards and crystal jugs.

All of the best that the fine old Château d'Aumont could provide was being requisitioned to-night, since M. le Duc and Mlle. Lydie, his daughter, were giving a farewell banquet to Charles Edward Stuart by the grace of God—if not by the will of the people—King of Great Britain and Ireland and all her dependencies beyond the seas.

For him speeches were made, toasts drunk and glasses raised; for him the ducal veneries had been ransacked, the ducal cellars shorn of their most ancient possessions; for him M. le Chef had raged and stormed for five hours, had expended the sweat of his brow

and the intricacies of his brain; for him the scullions' backs had smarted, the wenches' cheeks had glowed, all to do honour to the only rightful King of England about to quit the hospitable land of France in order to conquer that island kingdom which his grandfather had lost.

But in the noble *salle d'armes*, on the other hand, there reigned a pompous and dignified silence, in strange contrast to the bustle and agitation of the kitchens and the noise of loud voices and laughter that issued from the banqueting hall whenever a door was opened and quickly shut again.

Here perfumed candles flickered in massive candelabra, shedding dim circles of golden light on carved woodwork, marble floor, and dull-toned tapestries. The majestic lions of D'Aumont frowned stolidly from their high pedestals on this serene abode of peace and dignity, one foot resting on the gilded shield with the elaborate coat-of-arms blazoned thereon in scarlet and azure, the other poised aloft as if in solemn benediction.

M. Joseph, own body servant to M. le Duc, in magnificent D'Aumont livery, his cravat a marvel of costly simplicity, his elegant, well-turned calves—encased in fine silk stockings—stretched lazily before him, was sprawling on the brocade-covered divan in the centre of the room.

M. Bénédicte, equally resplendent in a garb of motley that recalled the heraldic colours of the Comte de Stainville, stood before him, not in an attitude of deference of course, but in one of easy friendship; whilst M. Achille—a blaze of scarlet and gold—was holding out an elegant silver snuff-box to M. Joseph, who, without

any superfluous motion of his dignified person, condescended to take a pinch.

With arm and elbow held at a graceful angle, M. Joseph paused in the very act of conveying the snuff to his delicate nostrils. He seemed to think that the occasion called for a remark from himself, but evidently nothing very appropriate occurred to him for the moment, so after a few seconds of impressive silence he finally partook of the snuff, and then flicked off the grains of dust from his immaculate azure waistcoat with a lace-edged handkerchief.

"Where does your Marquis get his snuff?" he asked with an easy graciousness of manner.

"We get it direct from London," replied M. Achille sententiously. "I am personally acquainted with Mme. Véronique, who is cook to Mme. de la Beaume and the sweetheart of Jean Laurent, own body-servant to General de Puisieux. The old General is Chief of Customs at Havre, so you see we pay no duty and get the best of snuff at a ridiculous price."

"Ah! that's lucky for you, my good Eglinton," said M. Bénédic, with a sigh. "Your Marquis is a good sort, and as he is not personally acquainted with Mme. Véronique, I doubt not but he pays full price for his snuff."

"One has to live, friend Stainville," quoth Achille solemnly—"and I am not a fool!"

"Exactly so; and with an English milor your life is an easy one, Monsieur."

"Comme-ci! comme-ça!" nodded Achille deprecatingly.

"Le petit Anglais is very rich?" suggested Bénédict.

"Boundlessly so!" quoth the other, with conscious pride.

"Now, if perchance you could see your way to introducing me to Mme. Véronique. Eh? I have to pay full price for my Count's snuff, and he will have none but the best; but if I could get Mme. Véronique's protection——"

Achille's manner immediately changed at this suggestion, made with becoming diffidence; he drew back a few steps as if to emphasize the distance which must of necessity lie between supplicant and patron. He took a pinch of snuff, he blew his nose with stately deliberation—all in order to keep the petitioner waiting on tenterhooks.

Finally he drew up his scarlet and gold shoulders until they almost touched his ears.

"It will be difficult, very, very difficult my good Stainville," he said at last, speaking in measured tones. "You see, Mme. Véronique is in a very delicate position; she has a great deal of influence of course, and it is not easy to obtain her protection. Still, I will see what I can do, and you can place your petition before her."

"Do not worry yourself, my good Eglinton," here interposed M. Bénédict with becoming hauteur. "I thought as you had asked me yesterday to use my influence with our Mlle. Mariette, the fiancée of Colonel Jauffroy's third footman, with regard to your nephew's advancement in his regiment, that perhaps—— But no matter—no matter!" he added, with a deprecatory wave of the hand.

"You completely misunderstood me, my dear Stainville," broke in M. Achille, eagerly. "I said that the matter was difficult; I did not say that it was impossible. Mme. Véronique is beset with petitions, but you may rely on my friendship. I will obtain the necessary introduction for you if you, on the other hand, will bear my nephew's interests in mind."

"Say no more about it, my good Eglinton," said Bénédicte, with easy condescension; "your nephew will get his promotion on the word of a Stainville."

Peace and amity being once more restored between the two friends, M. Joseph thought that he had now remained silent far longer than was compatible with his own importance.

"It is very difficult, of course, in our position," he said pompously, "to do justice to the many demands which are made on our influence and patronage. Take my own case, for instance—my Duke leaves all appointments in my hands. In the morning, whilst I shave him, I have but to mention a name to him in connection with any post under Government that happens to be vacant, and immediately the favoured one, thus named by me, receives attention, nearly always followed by a nomination."

"Hem! hem!" came very discreetly from the lips of M. Bénédicte.

"You said?" queried Joseph, with a slight lifting of the right eyebrow.

"Oh! nothing—nothing! I pray you continue; the matter is vastly entertaining."

"At the present moment," continued M. Joseph, keeping a suspicious eye on the other man, "I am deeply worried by this proposal which comes from the Parliaments of Rennes and Paris."

"A new Ministry of Finance to be formed," quoth M. Achille. "We know all about it."

"With direct control of the nation's money and responsible to the Parliaments alone," assented Joseph. "The Parliaments! Bah!" he added in tones of supreme contempt, "*bourgeois* the lot of them!"

"Their demands are preposterous, so says my milor. 'Tis a marvel His Majesty has given his consent."

"I have advised my Duke not to listen to the rabble," said Joseph, as he readjusted the set of his cravat. "A Ministry responsible to the Parliaments! Ridiculous, I say!"

"I understand, though," here interposed M. Achille, "that the Parliaments, out of deference for His Majesty are willing that the King himself shall appoint this new Comptroller of Finance."

"The King, my good Eglinton," calmly retorted M. Joseph—"the King will leave this matter to us. You may take it from me that we shall appoint this new Minister, and an extremely pleasant post it will be. Comptroller of Finance! All the taxes to pass through the Minister's hands! Par Dieu! does it not open out a wide field for an ambitious man?"

"Hem! hem!" coughed M. Bénédicte again.

"You seem to be suffering from a cold, sir," said M. Joseph irritably.

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