Baroness Orczy

Petticoat Government

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Table of Contents

Part 1 - The Girl

Table of Contents

Chapter 1
A Farewell Banquet

Table of Contents

“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 stauncher 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 2
The Rulers Of France

Table of Contents

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. Bénédict, 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. Bénédict, 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 Bénédict, 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. Bénédict.

“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. Bénédict again.

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

“Not in the least,” rejoined Bénédict hastily—“a slight tickling in the throat. You were saying, M. Joseph, that you hoped this new appointment would fall within your sphere of influence.”

“Nay! If you doubt me, my good Stainville—” And M. Joseph rose with slow and solemn majesty from the divan, where he had been reclining, and walking across the room with a measured step, he reached an escritoire whereon ink

and pens, letters tied up in bundles, loose papers, and all the usual paraphernalia commonly found on the desk of a busy man. M. Joseph sat down at the table and rang a handbell.

The next moment a young footman entered, silent and deferential.

“Is any one in the ante-room, Paul?” asked Joseph.

“Yes, M. Joseph.”

“How many?”

“About thirty persons.”

“Go tell them, then, that M. Joseph is not receiving to-night. He is entertaining a circle of friends. Bring me all written petitions. I shall be visible in my dressing room to those who have a personal introduction at eleven o’clock to-morrow. You may go!”

Silently as he had entered, the young man bowed and withdrew.

M. Joseph wheeled round in his chair and turned to his friends with a look of becoming triumph.

“Thirty persons!” he remarked simply.

“All after this appointment?” queried Achille.

“Their representatives, you see,” explained M. Joseph airily. “Oh! my ante-chamber is always full—You understand? I shave my Duke every morning; and every one, it seems to me, is wanting to control the finances of France.”

“Might one inquire who is your special *protégé*?” asked the other.

“Time will show,” came with cryptic vagueness from the lips of M. Joseph.

“Hem! hem!”

In addition to a slight tickling of the throat, M. Bénédict seemed to be suffering from an affection of the left eye which caused him to wink with somewhat persistent emphasis:

“This is the third time you have made that remark, Stainville,” said Joseph severely.

“I did not remark, my dear D’Aumont,” rejoined Bénédict pleasantly—“that is, I merely said ‘Hem! hem!’”

“Even so, I heard you,” said Joseph, with some acerbity; “and I would wish to know precisely what you meant when you said ‘Hem! hem!’ like that.”

“I was thinking of Mlle. Lucienne,” said Bénédict, with a sentimental sigh.

“Indeed!”

“Yes! I am one of her sweethearts—the fourth in point of favour. Mlle. Lucienne has your young lady’s ear, my good D’Aumont, and we all know that your Duke governs the whole of France exactly as his daughter wishes him to do.”

“And you hope through Mlle. Lucienne’s influence to obtain the new post of Comptroller for your own Count?” asked M. Joseph, with assumed carelessness, as he drummed a devil’s tattoo on the table before him.

A slight expression of fatuity crept into the countenance of M. Bénédict. He did not wish to irritate the great man; at the same time he felt confident in his own powers of blandishments where Mlle. Lucienne was concerned, even though he only stood fourth in point of favour in that influential lady’s heart.

“Mlle. Lucienne has promised us her support,” he said, with a complacent smile.

“I fear me that will be of little avail,” here interposed M. Achille. “We have on our side, the influence of Mme. Auguste Baillon, who is housekeeper to M. le Docteur Dubois, consulting physician to Mlle. d’Aumont. M. le Docteur is very fond of haricots cooked in lard—a dish in the preparation of which Mme. Baillon excels—whilst, on the other hand, that lady’s son is perruquier to my Eglinton. I think there is no doubt that ours is the stronger influence, and that if this Ministry of Finance comes into being, we shall be the Chief Comptroller.”

“Oh, it will come into being, without any doubt,” said Bénédict. “I have it from my cousin François, who is one of the sweethearts of Mlle. Duprez, confidential maid to Mme. Aremberg, the jeweller’s wife, that the merchants of Paris and Lyons are not at all pleased with the amount of money which the King and Mme. de Pompadour are spending.”

“Exactly! People of that sort are a veritable pestilence. They want us to pay some of the taxes—the *corvée* or the *taille*. As if a Duke or a Minister is going to pay taxes! Ridiculous!”

“Ridiculous, I say,” assented Achille, “though my Marquis says that in England even noblemen pay taxes.”

“Then we’ll not go to England, friend Eglinton. Imagine shaving a Duke or a Marquis who had paid taxes like a shopkeeper!”

A chorus of indignation from the three gentleman rose at the suggestion.

“Preposterous indeed!”

“We all know that England is a nation of shopkeepers. M. de Voltaire, who has been there, said so to us on his return.”

M. Achille, in view of the fact that he represented the Marquis of Eglinton, commonly styled “le petit Anglais,” was not quite sure whether his dignity demanded that he should resent this remark of M. de Voltaire’s or not.

Fortunately he was saved from having to decide this delicate question immediately by the reëntry of Paul into the room.

The young footman was carrying a bundle of papers, which he respectfully presented to M. Joseph on a silver tray. The great man looked at Paul somewhat puzzled, rubbed his chin, and contemplated the papers with a thoughtful eye.

“What are these?” he asked.

“The petitions, M. Joseph,” replied the young man.

“Oh! Ah, yes!” quoth the other airily. “Quite so; but—I have no time to read them now. You may glance through them, Paul, and let me know if any are worthy of my consideration.”

M. Joseph was born in an epoch when reading was not considered an indispensable factor in a gentleman’s education. Whether the petitions of the thirty aspirants to the new post of Comptroller of Finance would subsequently be read by M. Paul or not it were impossible to say; for the present he merely took up the papers again, saying quite respectfully:

“Yes, M. Joseph.”

“Stay! you may take cards, dice, and two flagons of Bordeaux into my boudoir.”

“Yes, M. Joseph.”

“Have you dismissed every one from the ante-chamber?”

“All except an old man, who refuses to go.”

“Who is he?”

“I do not know; he—”

Further explanation was interrupted by a timid voice issuing from the open door.

“I only desire five minutes’ conversation with M. le Duc d’Aumont.”

And a wizened little figure dressed in seedy black, with lean shanks encased in coarse woollen stockings, shuffled into the room. He seemed to be carrying a great number of papers and books under both arms, and as he stepped timidly forward some of these tumbled in a heap at his feet.

“Only five minutes’ conversation with M. le Duc.”

His eyes were very pale, and very watery, and his hair was of a pale straw colour. He stooped to pick up his papers, and dropped others in the process.

“M. le Duc is not visible,” said M. Joseph majestically.

“Perhaps a little later—” suggested the lean individual.

“The Duke will not be visible later either.”

“Then to-morrow perhaps; I can wait—I have plenty of time on my hands.”

“You may have, but the Duke hasn’t.”

In the meanwhile the wizened little man had succeeded in once more collecting his papers together. With trembling eager hands he now selected a folded note, which evidently had suffered somewhat through frequent falls on dusty floors; this he held out toward M. Joseph.

“I have a letter to Monsieur le valet de chambre of the Duke,” he said humbly.

“A letter of introduction?—to me?” queried Joseph, with a distinct change in his manner and tone. “From whom?”

“My daughter Agathe, who brings Monsieur’s chocolate in to him every morning.”

“Ah, you are Mlle. Agathe’s father!” exclaimed Joseph with pleasant condescension, as he took the letter of introduction, and, without glancing at it, slipped it into the pocket of his magnificent coat. Perhaps a thought subsequently crossed his mind that the timorous person before him was not quite so simple-minded as his watery blue eyes suggested, and that the dusty and crumpled little note might be a daring fraud practised on his own influential personality, for he added with stern emphasis: “I will see Mlle. Agathe to-morrow, and will discuss your affair with her.”

Then, as the little man did not wince under the suggestion, M. Joseph said more urbanely:

“By the way, what is your affair? These gentlemen”—and with a graceful gesture he indicated his two friends—“these gentlemen will pardon the liberty you are taking in discussing it before them.”

“Thank you, Monsieur; thank you, gentlemen,” said the wizened individual humbly; “it is a matter of—er—figures.”

“Figures!”

“Yes! This new Ministry of Finance—there will be an auditor of accounts wanted—several auditors, I presume—and—and I thought—”

“Yes?” nodded M. Joseph graciously.

“My daughter does bring you in your chocolate nice and hot, M. Joseph, does she not?—and—and I do know a lot about figures. I studied mathematics with the late M. Descartes; I audited the books of the Société des

Comptables of Lyons for several years; and—and I have diplomas and testimonials—”

And, carried away by another wave of anxiety, he began to fumble among his papers and books, which with irritating perversity immediately tumbled pell-mell on to the floor.

“What in the devil’s name is the good of testimonials and diplomas to us, my good man?” said M. Joseph haughtily. “If, on giving the matter my serious consideration, I come to the conclusion that you will be a suitable accountant in the new Ministerial Department, *ma foi*! my good man, your affair is settled. No thanks, I pray!” he added, with a gracious flourish of the arm; “I have been pleased with Mlle. Agathe, and I may mention your name whilst I shave M. le Duc to-morrow. Er—by the way, what is your name?”

“Durand, if you please, M. Joseph.”

The meagre little person with the watery blue eyes tried to express his gratitude by word and gesture, but his books and papers encumbered his movements, and he was rendered doubly nervous by the presence of these gorgeous and stately gentlemen, and by the wave of voices and laughter which suddenly rose from the distance, suggesting that perhaps a brilliant company might be coming this way.

The very thought seemed to completely terrify him; with both arms he hugged his various written treasures, and with many sideway bows and murmurs of thanks he finally succeeded in shuffling his lean figure out of the room, closely followed by M. Paul.

Chapter 3
Pompadour’s Choice

Table of Contents

M. Durand’s retreat had fortunately occurred just in time; men’s voices and women’s laughter sounded more and more distinct, as if approaching toward the *salle d’armes*.

In a moment, with the swiftness born of long usage, the demeanour of the three gentlemen underwent a quick and sudden change. They seemed to pull their gorgeous figures together; with practised fingers each readjusted the lace of his cravat, reëstablished the correct set of his waistcoat, and flickered the last grain of dust or snuff from the satin-like surface of his coat.

Ten seconds later the great doors at the east end of the hall were thrown open, and through the embrasure and beyond the intervening marble corridor could be seen the brilliantly lighted supper-room, with its glittering company broken up into groups.

Silent, swift and deferential, MM. Joseph, Bénédict, and Achille glided on flat-heeled shoes along the slippery floors, making as little noise as possible, effacing their gorgeous persons in window recesses or carved ornaments whenever a knot of gentlemen or ladies happened to pass by.

Quite a different trio now, MM. Joseph, Bénédict, and Achille—just three automatons intent on their duties.

From the supper-room there came an incessant buzz of talk and laughter. M. Joseph sought his master’s eye, but M. le Duc was busy with the King of England and wanted no service; M. Achille found his English milor, “le petit Anglais,”

engaged in conversation with his portly and somewhat overdressed mamma; whilst M. Bénédict's master was nowhere to be found.

The older ladies were beginning to look wearied and hot, smothering yawns behind their painted fans. Paniers assumed a tired and crumpled appearance, and feathered aigrettes nodded dismally above the high coiffures.

Not a few of the guests had taken the opportunity of bringing cards or dice from a silken pocket, whilst others in smaller groups, younger and not yet wearied of desultory talk, strolled toward the *salle d'armes* or the smaller boudoirs which opened out of the corridor.

One or two gentlemen had succumbed to M. le Duc's lavish hospitality; the many toasts had proved too exacting, the copious draughts altogether too heady, and they had, somewhat involuntarily, exchanged their chairs for the more reliable solidity of the floor, where their faithful attendants, stationed under the table for the purpose, deftly untied a cravat which might be too tight or administered such cooling antidotes as might be desirable.

The hot air vibrated with the constant babel of voices, the frou-frou of silk paniers, and brocaded skirts, mingled with the clink of swords and the rattle of dice in satinwood boxes.

The atmosphere, surcharged with perfumes, had become overpoweringly close.

His Majesty, flushed with wine, and with drowsy lids drooping over his dulled eyes, had pushed his chair away from the table and was lounging lazily toward Mme. de Pompadour, his idle fingers toying with the jewelled girdle of

her fan. She amused him; she had quaint sayings which were sometimes witty, always daring, but which succeeded in dissipating momentarily that mortal ennui of which he suffered.

Even now her whispered conversation, interspersed with profuse giggles, brought an occasional smile to the lips of the sleepy monarch. She chatted and laughed, flirting her fan, humouring the effeminate creature beside her by yielding her hand and wrist to his flabby kisses. But her eyes did not rest on him for many seconds at a time; she talked to Louis, but her mind had gone a-wandering about the room trying to read thoughts, to search motives or divine hidden hatreds and envy as they concerned herself.

This glitter was still new to her; the power which she wielded seemed as yet a brittle toy which a hasty movement might suddenly break. It was but a very little while ago that she had been an insignificant unit in a third-rate social circle of Paris—always beautiful, but lost in the midst of a drabby crowd, her charms, like those of a precious stone, unperceived for want of proper setting. Her ambition was smothered in her heart, which at times it almost threatened to consume. But it was always there, ever since she had learnt to understand the power which beauty gives.

An approving smile from the King of France, and the world wore a different aspect for Jeanne Poisson. Her whims and caprices became the reins with which she drove France and the King. Why place a limit to her own desires, since the mightiest monarch in Europe was ready to gratify them?

Money became her god.

Spend! spend! spend! Why not? The nation, the bourgeoisie—of which she had once been that little insignificant unit—was now the well-spring whence she drew the means of satisfying her ever-increasing lust for splendour.

Jewels, dresses, palaces, gardens—all and everything that was rich, beautiful, costly, she longed for it all!

Pictures and statuary; music, and of the best; constant noise around her, gaiety, festivities, laughter; the wit of France and the science of the world all had been her helpmeets these past two years in this wild chase after pleasure, this constant desire to kill her Royal patron’s incurable ennui.

Two years, and already the nation grumbled! A check was to be put on her extravagance—hers and that of King Louis! The parliaments demanded that some control be exercised over Royal munificence. Fewer jewels for Madame! And that palace at Fontainebleau not yet completed, the Parc aux Cerfs so magnificently planned and not even begun! Would the new Comptroller put a check on that?

At first she marvelled that Louis should consent. It was a humiliation for him as well as for her. The weakness in him which had served her own ends seemed monstrous when it yielded to pressure from others.

He had assured her that she should not suffer; jewels, palaces, gardens, she should have all as heretofore. Let Parliament insist and grumble, but the Comptroller would be appointed by D’Aumont, and D’Aumont was her slave.

D’Aumont, yes! but not his daughter—that arrogant girl with the severe eyes, unwomanly and dictatorial, who ruled

her father just as she herself, Pompadour, ruled the King.

An enemy, that Lydie d’Aumont! Mme. la Marquise, whilst framing a witticism at which the King smiled, frowned because in a distant alcove she spied the haughty figure of Lydie.

And there were others! The friends of the Queen and her clique, of course; they were not here to-night; at least not in great numbers; still, even the present brilliant company, though smiling and obsequious in the presence of the King, was not by any means a close phalanx of friends.

M. d’Argenson, for instance—he was an avowed enemy; and Marshal de Noailles, too—oh! and there were others.

One of them, fortunately, was going away; Charles Edward Stuart, aspiring King of England; he had been no friend of Pompadour. Even now, as he stood close by, lending an obviously inattentive ear to M. le Duc d’Aumont, she could see that he still looked gloomy and out of humour, and that whenever his eyes rested upon her and the King he frowned with wrathful impatience.

“You are distraite, ma mie!” said Louis, with a yawn.

“I was thinking, sire,” she replied, smiling into his drowsy eyes.

“For God’s sake, I entreat, do not think!” exclaimed the King, with mock alarm. “Thought produces wrinkles, and your perfect mouth was only fashioned for smiles.”

“May I frame a suggestion?” she queried archly.

“No, only a command.”

“This Comptroller of Finance, your future master, Louis, and mine—”