# THE NEW COMMISSION

C.J. Cutcliffe Hyne

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"I AM not in the French Army for the sheer sport of the thing," said the tall thin man that the others addressed as Major, or Colt, or Joseph, according to their degree of intimacy. He took the long clay pipe from his lips, and punctuated the sentences with its stem. "I'm here to learn the art of war from the best teachers, and to get a position. If possible, and if it can be done within the time, I intend to try what a marshal's *bâton* feels like for a riding switch."

"And then won't you give the girls a treat in Europe?" bantered the dandified little Colonel Paillard.

"No, sir," said Colt. "Once I get my education complete here, back I go to the United States to realise on it; and as for girls, I don't care for you to forget that I am affianced to a Miss Patience Collier, of No. 207 Pilgrim Avenue, Boston, Massachusetts." He mopped his brow and shifted his chair forward into the window to catch the breeze. "Miss Collier is at present following the occupation of schoolmarm, combined with that of historian, and it was she who suggested that, as I was set upon the military profession, I should come to Europe, and go through a regular college course in one of Emperor Bonaparte's armies. I am supplying her by mail with subject−matter for her 'Conduct of the Continental Wars.'"

Colonel Paillard took snuff with an air. "Pah!" he said; "you talk, you Americans, but you are not like those solid English; you do not mean all you say. You have tasted Europe; you will not go back again to your dark and savage America. Mademoiselle Collier must come to adorn France."

"It's little you know her. She's of the strictest Puritan stock. She'd as soon think of turning Mohawk as Frenchwoman."

"If she is a true sweetheart, my dear Joe, she will have regard for your prospects. Here you are, a field officer at twenty−seven, and two years ago you were a private soldier, just starting to learn the rudiments of war and the French language."

"I wasn't exactly new to war when Miss Collier had me come over to this side. I was raised on our frontier, Colonel, and out there a man can only quit Indian fighting when he ceases to sit up and breathe fresh air."

"Learning to steal one another's scalps," said the grizzled Captain Ricaud, "is not exactly war as the Emperor teaches it."

"Well," drawled Colt, rubbing his blue−black chin, "as the only man here who has sampled each brand, I say that both were originally baled out of the same keg. Now, General Dupont, that we're under right now here in Spain, is allowed by all judges to have his uniform as Marshal of France cut and ready for him in Paris against when he comes back. Well, gentlemen, I assisted him and you to sack Cordova last week, and I brought along a nice jewelled mayor's chain and that picture against the wall there, which you tell me is a Velasquez."

"I repeat my offer of the pair of black jennets for the portrait," said Paillard.

"Nope. I guess we got mules in the States already, but our future home, when I marry and we furnish one at Washington, could do with a Velasquez. I was going to tell you, though, that I was there when Ephraim Taylor's men sacked the Mohawk villages at Striped Rock."

"Never heard of either him, them, or it," laughed Colonel Paillard.

Colt thumped the table.

"There you have the whole case in a clamshell. Out of the Striped Rock fight I got a pack of beaver skins which turned out later to be full of moth. We have no titles chucked in out West. Here, for less work, I get named Major, and find the wherewithal to keep up my rank and style. As a Major in the French Service I'd step straight above Ephraim Taylor's head, for instance, in one push at home. That is what Miss Collier predicted at No. 207 the night before I sailed from Boston harbour."

But at this point the list of Major Colt's ambitions was cut short. There was no preliminary noise from outside to show that the outpost of General Dupont's army, of which they were officers, was being attacked. A bullet

hummed in through the window, and, hitting the plaster on the further wall diagonally, ploughed a great streak along it, and as a finale, dived behind the Velasquez, and blew out the face of the portrait into a mere star of rags and paint.

Colt, with the quickness of a conjurer, tipped his chair over and fell backwards on to the floor before the noise of the shot came to them, skillfully saving his long clay pipe from fracture. Grizzled old Ricaud sneered from the table.

"Pooh!" he said, "bullets don't kill, Major, though to beginners I believe they are startling. Now, at the Pyramids, where I had the honour to carry a musket ——"

Captain Ricaud broke off, and coincidental with his last syllable, a curious sharp squelching noise came from his head. As he pitched awkwardly off on to the floor, both observers commented on the accuracy with which the second bullet had struck the exact centre of his brow.

Colonel Paillard made a leisurely step to the shelter of the wall, and again took snuff. "But still, my dear Joe, in spite of the exception which has just been proved, I must maintain the theory that bullets do not kill. I fancy that Ricaud was going to point out that it is undignified for French officers to hurry out of their way."

"Ricaud is dead," snapped Colt. The window commanded most of the room, and through it other bullets were hopping, which scored further furrows in the plaster, and made other gaps in the Velasquez. Major Colt, on hands and knees, was keeping under the level of the window sill, and making for the door.

"And so, of course, you cannot challenge him," continued Paillard gently; "but as I'm sure you would not like to miss having satisfaction for what has been said, I shall be most pleased to assure you that his sentiments on the matter are entirely my own."

Colt got to the shelter of the doorway, stood up, and scratched his square black whiskers. "You wait till we're out of the present mess, and then I'll see about combing your hair for you if you still want it. My Land! They're scrapping downstairs now. Colonel, this post has been fairly rushed, and we've been caught talking instead of being out on the job."

When it came to the point Colonel Paillard was sufficiently alert to his duties. He snapped the snuff−box and crammed it into his pocket. Then he vaulted out of the window through which the bullets were arriving, and shouted fiercely for the troops to rally round the church.

Colonel Paillard had carried his first musket as a super on the Porte St Martin stage, and the actor's love of showy display still stuck to him. He brimmed with bravery; but his was the bravery which aches to show itself before an audience. Here, outside in the street, and in the ranks of the opposite houses, was an audience ready enough; but it was an hostile audience, with never a plaudit; throwing criticisms instead, in the form of more bullets. One chance shot took the florid little Colonel in mid−air, and he fell to the cobble−stones with a shriek, and one leg bone snapped in two like a pipe stem.

Forthwith from a dozen doors men came out knife in hand to finish him. Spain was raw then from the savageries of Zaragoza and the red cruelties of the sack of Cordova, and the Spaniards looked upon a Frenchman as people regard a rabid wolf — a creature beyond pity even though it be sick and pitiful, a wild beast to be exterminated.

But in the meanwhile, Major Colt was putting into use his Indian education. He crept and glided along, always silently, always in cover. His scheme was not only to preserve his own skin, but to leave the enemy unconscious of his existence. At the same time he was reconnoitring keenly and with swiftness.

He dived down the cool stone stairway, and at its foot came across the sentry limp and dead.

"Stalked and knifed," he commented. "Well, I've seen that before, only out there the chap was scalped as well. This is getting like old times. I must keep my eyes skinned, or they'll be lifting my hair next."

He swept through the temporary guard−room of the headquarters, and saw at a glance all the guard surprised and silenced for ever, and then through the doorway he saw Paillard drop helpless to the ground and a dozen men leaping out of cover to give him the *coup de grâce*.

Major Colt jumped out into the scorching sunlight, calling to imaginary troops to follow him. The Spaniards stopped, turned, and bolted: mere terror of the French soldiery was enough for them. The American clapped a long, thin, wiry arm round Colonel Paillard's middle, and started back with him to the guard−room.

But the Spaniards, though fluttered by the surprise, were, as men, brave enough. Quickly they returned to the attack, and as quickly Joseph Colt, on the threshold, turned to face them.

His sword lay stacked in a corner upstairs, but he had picked up a knife. Now the knife was the national weapon of the Spanish peasant, but it was native also to those American frontiersmen who were pushing the snake fences of the Eastern Settlements out towards the West. No Colonel Bowey had yet arisen to give the weapon glory and a name; but it was there in daily current use, alongside the tomahawk and the long rifle, and had been used by the red man down through history.

The Spaniards found Colt's knife play far in advance of their national science. The man jabbed upwards, and they knew no parry to that attack, and for their downward stabs he had always a point or a fist in readiness. And then not only was he as hard as a creature built out of rolled copper, but he was as powerful as any six men, and as active as a dozen wild cats. As an exhibition he was a marvel; as a man to fight against at close quarters they had no further use for him; so they retired to give the bullets once more a chance.

But Major Colt picked up the dapper Paillard again (who had by this time crawled to the doorway) and carried him through, and shot the bolts.

"Good man, Joe," said his friend, "I owe you for my skin there. I thought we'd those Spaniards well whipped, but they are looking ugly again. Now we must think of what to do next."

"No time to think," snapped Colt; "got to do."

He clutched hold of his friend's arm, thrust a shoulder under his stomach, and ran up the stairs.

"Thousand thunders!" screamed Paillard, "mind my leg!"

"I know all about broken legs. Crawled seventeen miles in three days with one after Great Snow's son got a shot into me, back of the Lakes. But I'd his hair at my belt, too, so that perhaps made the journey lighter."

"Why, man, you've come back to the very room where we were first shot at. It looks to me the most dangerous place in the house."

"That's why it's the least likely spot for them to hunt for us in. Now keep under cover, and don't let us have any more attitudinising before the window."

"I've my dignity to consider," said the plump little Colonel, and sat back against the wall and reached for his snuff−box.

"Now, see here. Do you want to be carved so full of holes that you'll look more like a ladder'n a man? Nope? Then, sir, you let me arrange the rest of this funeral."

There were two tables in the room, and Colt stood one on the other. "Now for a chair," he said, "and then I shall have a scaffold high enough to work from."

"What's the trick this time?" asked Paillard, dusting his uniform.

"Break a way through the plaster, get into the false roof, and so on to the next house; set fire to this one behind us to cover the retreat." Colt proceeded to climb.

But at this point a part of the panelled wall which happened to be a door, opened, and a little thin woman of thirty stepped gravely in to the room.

"I am sorry, *señor*, that a guest of mine should meet with such rough treatment in this village, especially a guest who has saved me and a hundred other women from so much indignity as you have done."

The American bowed from his perch. "I haven't the pleasure of recognising you, madam, but I presume you were one of those at the church. What little I did, madam, was merely what white men in my country consider it their privilege to do for any woman. The soldiers who insulted you were scum, and wanted a lesson, and, my Land! they got one."

"At your hands, *señor*. The French officers merely looked and laughed."

"It was my turn for duty, madame," said Colt stiffly. "In the French army it does not take two officers to do one job. You must excuse me now, please. There are some fellows below after our scalps, and we have got to quit. He climbed a storey higher on the scaffold.

"If it is all the same to you, *señor*, I would rather not have my house burnt; it has historical associations, and it is the only house I've got. You see, I've been listening to your plans. If you will permit me, I will take you to a room where you will be quite safe till the trouble has blown by."

Colt came to the ground, and promptly picked up Colonel Paillard.

"I did not invite your fiend," said the lady pointedly. "He was one of those that laughed when you rescued us."

The American pulled at his black whisker.

"Madam," he said, "I guess this firm can't entertain a dissolution. If your proposition is not to take it over as a going concern under the present directorate, I reckon the deal's off."

But at this point the house door below gave plain sounds that it was giving way under the repeated attacks, and the lady was startled out of her previous attitude.

"Well, Major, you may bring the other monsieur with you for the present. But for Colonel Paillard, until he has apologised —— Dear Mary! the man's fainted! There, bring him along."

Colt did not press for a more gracious permission. They slipped through into the passage. The door in the panelling was closed behind them, and they wound to the right and the left through the cool, dark alleyways of an old Spanish house; and gaining at last the attics of Colt's original design, stepped out presently on to a high roof garden with tall white walls, once the exercise ground for a Moorish harem.

"And here," said the lady, "I design that Major Colt shall stay till the prospect tires him. When the town calms we will have in a surgeon to set the other monsieur's leg, and afterwards we will pack him off to join General Dupont and the other prisoners at Baylen, according to the terms of the capitulation — him and his snuff−box."

Colt's black eyes snapped. "Prisoners! *Señora*? Capitulation! I have not heard from my General for three days, but he was sitting up and taking nourishment then, and seemed hearty enough to eat up all this section of Spain if his appetite went that way."

The little lady sat back in a chair and fanned herself. One saw that she had an ankle of the neatest and most trim. "Nevertheless, Major, I tell you of the plainest fact. The heavens do fall sometimes. If you had Spain cowed, why the *émeute* in the streets just now?"

"Merely, as you say, an *émeute*."

"Well, I had hoped you would stay merely because of my *beaux yeux* — I like you all the better, Major, for not making these obvious compliments — but as you are still the soldier first of all, permit me to hand you a dispatch from your General."

"It has been opened," growled Colt, taking the paper.

"Obviously," said the lady with much dryness. "And if you further mark, there is a hole in each corner where it has been nailed to the church door. Oh, there is no secret about the capitulation."

"No," said Colt gloomily. "I know that signature 'Dupont, General.' My Land! Here's a mess! Here's a thing to get into the history of the war; and I know Miss Collier will not leave out a spicy chapter like this just because I happened to be snarled up in it."

"Ah! here's Colonel Paillard come out of his faint once more. Now, gentlemen, your orders — as I read them on the church door — state that the capitulation includes all outposts. You are directed to march your detachment into Baylen and surrender your arms."

"I can't march," said the dapper little Colonel, smoothing out his uniform. "They'll have to provide transport."

"But you'll go?"

"Must obey the orders of a superior; it's one of a soldier's first axioms, my dear Joe."

"I don't know much about axioms," said Colt, scratching at his square whisker, "though a lady in Boston that I always consult did insist on my reading Euclid once, as one of the necessary ingredients for culture. But I do know that a Spanish gaol isn't going to be a healthy place for French troops after the way we've been harrying Spain. I guess I'm not going to risk standing up to any torture stake this trip."

Paillard dipped fingers in his snuff−box. "Oh, one will have an honourable imprisonment, and presently there will be an exchange. The Emperor does not forget his soldiers."

"Emperor Bonaparte," said Colt drily, "according to my mensuration, forgets his soldiers least when they're close at hand, and when they've got success hot and new in their pockets. I guess he'd have far more memory for me, personally, for instance, if he saw me whittling the butt of a Spanish ensign staff at his tent door than if he just read my name amongst ten thousand others in ex−General Dupont's list. Man, think! A whole French army capitulated, and to Spaniards! It's the Emperor's first great disaster."

Colonel Paillard shrugged his dapper shoulders. "If my General has capitulated, and I'm included in the capitulation, there's no choice in the matter."

"My Land! isn't there," snapped the American. "You watch, and you'll see me make a choice. If Dupont's got rattled, there's no reason why I should not want to save my own hair. There's that marshal's uniform we spoke about, waiting in Paris. Well, I guess Dupont won't want that now. Dupont's a short man" — Major Colt cast a

humorous glance over his own lengthy limbs — "but with letting out a bit, I don't see why that uniform should be wasted yet. In a year or so's time — eh? But I've got to light out of this, and quick."

But at this point the lady intervened.

"It seems I am listening to a scheme for robbing Spain of a most redoubtable and valuable prisoner. Well, there are limits to the obligation I am under to you, Major, and I tell you frankly that if I am to permit this escape you must bribe me further."

Major Colt gave an angular bow.

"I am in the *señora's* power — to a certain extent."

The lady laughed.

"The size of my bribe is a private matter, and as Colonel Paillard has still not given me that apology, I do not care for him to hear it." She tapped the American on the arm with her fan. "There is a seat beyond those lemon bushes at the further side of the garden. If you will come with me there we will talk."

"Oh, go, my dears," said the plump little Colonel. "Joe, *mon brave*, my congratulations on your conquest."

But when they came to the seat the lady's air changed. So far, her talk had carried a flavour of badinage, and her manner hinted at gentle admiration. But here, at once, was the woman of business, cold, and a trifle anxious.

"Major Colt," she said, and stood before him, "my condition is that you take me back to France with you."

The American was startled, and then (as a thought came to him) plainly shocked. "Certainly not, madam," he said. "In the first place, I shall travel too fast and too rough for any Spanish lady to keep pace, and in the second, I am a bachelor and a most unfitting escort."

The little woman remained stiffly before him under the glare of the sunshine, clicked her heels, and brought up her hand in military salute. "And I, my Major, am not of Spain. This is not my house. The woman of the house I met below. She babbled to me of the French, and how the American major had saved the women from a few French kisses."

"From insult, madam."

"Oh, she said insult. She said, too, that you would not so much as look at her when she tried to thank you. But at that point of her tale came the shots and the scuffling, and so I packed her into a wardrobe with her dressed and her jewels, and turned the key on her further babblings."

"Still, I do not understand how you, a Frenchwoman (as you say) came to be in this section."

"Yesterday I was *vivandière* to the 82nd regiment of the line at Baylen. To−day my regiment is disarmed, and I, like yourself, wish to get back to France to find another."

"Mademoiselle," said Colt doubtfully, "is a most accomplished actress."

The little woman flushed and bowed. "I have to thank Monsieur the Major for his generous appreciation, and to hope that some day he will repeat it to the Emperor. Before I was a *vivandière* in the army, I was an actress in Paris, and they told me I could act. But — but the Emperor thought differently."

"Oh, mademoiselle, I know you now. You are Mlle Clarice. You were famous, and one day the Emperor and his Court came to the theatre where you played, and he — well, these great men are somewhat crude in their manner. Even in America we have them."

"The Emperor came, and he hissed. Professionally I was dead from then on. As Emperor it was his right to judge. But I vowed I would make him praise me yet, and so I went to the army. My chance will come to me one of these days; I know it will come."

The American rubbed at his blue−black chin.

"I do not see that anyone involved in this beastly capitulation will have their chances of advancement made easy for some time ahead. That’s why I intend to run. But with deference, mademoiselle, I do not see that I can offer you escort. For one thing, the pace will be quick; and, for another" — he flushed awkwardly under his sallow skin — "for another, I am engaged to a Miss Patience Collier in Boston, and have to be most circumspect. You have no idea how tittle−tattle floats, even across the Western Ocean!"

"Dear Mary! And are those your only scruples, Major?" — she snapped her small brown fingers — "Against your first objection I believe I have shown you already that I own some power of ruse, and against your other, why, I am engaged to be married myself to Monsieur Charles le Sage, a man whose jealously is frightful, and so you see of necessity one must be most circumspect. Knowing your fighting skill, Major, you can judge whether I want to see Monsieur le Sage standing before your pistol."

"And there's Paillard to be considered first. He will not come, he said, but I must see him safe before I begin to run."

"Oh, ease your fears for him. The woman of the house adores him. The creature told me so, but I did not tickle his vanity by handing it on. Trust a barber's block of an actor for catching admiration. Faugh! Show me an actor, and I will show you something less than a man."

"But I thought mademoiselle had been an actress herself."

"And so, monsieur, I was forced to herd with those most detestable bipeds called actors, and can speak of their quality as I know it. We will drop the subject, if you please, and get to the matter of this escape. Have you a scheme?"

"I shall wait till nightfall and creep past their sentries, if they have any. If anyone discovers me, I shall have my knife. I told you it was no road for a lady."

"By nightfall, Monsieur the Major, this village will be the headquarters of the Spanish army to which ours has capitulated, and even with your Mohawk training that we have heard so much about, my Major, you will not creep through the sentries of an army. Will you hear a better plan?"

He nodded curtly, and she led him to the edge of the roof garden, and stood upon a green painted tub so that their heads were level. They looked over the parapet on to a swift river flowing past the old house, and on out through the town to the country beyond. "Can Monsieur the Major swim?"

"Like a beaver."

"Good. And I, before I joined the legitimate stage, exhibited in a tank as the Girl Mermaid. I was brought up to the profession very young, monsieur."

Colt's quick scout's eye scanned the chances. "Unless we could dive all the way we should never get through under this glare of sunshine. Look, mademoiselle, there, and there, and there again. All those men are armed, and some or other of them cannot help but look in the river; it must be after nightfall or not at all."

Mlle Clarice stamped a little foot. "And I repeat to you that after nightfall will be too late. This house will swarm with buzzing, stinging Spaniards. We must go now or stay and join the other prisoners. And if you want a method, look at those bunches of reeds. They are cutting reeds up above. For myself, I guarantee a head−dress of floating weeds, will be a make−up under which no Spaniard will see the actress."

The American thrust out a large hand.

"Put your's there, miss," he invited. "I've seen that trick done by Indians on the Lakes when they've been catching ducks, and never thought of trying it here. You've never heard of it in your life before, I lay a dollar, and yet you are the one to suggest it. You've invention, Miss Clarice, and I'm proud to enter into a partnership with you."

She took his hand in both hers and pressed it to her lips.

"Oh, how can I thank you," she murmured.

"Said partnership," the American added awkwardly, "to be terminated when the objects stated in the prospectus are carried through."

The lady dropped his hand.

"I will see to it," she said sharply, "that the interests of Miss Collier are thoroughly guarded. I think you said she was a Mademoiselle Collier? You see I have Monsieur le Sage and his so frightful jealously also to consider."

"Then," said Colt, still more awkwardly, "if that is fixed, I guess we'd better start in right now."

They released the lady of the house from her wardrobe, and under her direction took the dapper Paillard to a comfortable room inside, and there left him to an adoring attention under which he preened himself contentedly. Then they went into the basement of the house and found a water−gate with a miniature dock, inside which a boat might be moored. The boat was absent, but the walls of the dock gave them fine cover for their preliminary work.

By some eddy of the rapid stream the descending bunches of rush swept against the outer edges of this harbour, and these Colt proceeded quietly to capture, and to tow into the backwater of the dock. Between whiles, with some sticks and twine he found there, he fashioned a pair of frameworks, which presently he began to thatch with the rushes. He worked rapidly, neatly, and cleverly, as though the building of these quaint helmets was the one handicraft he had specialised on during all of a lifetime.

In the meantime Mlle Clarice had run back silently into the house, from which, after a very short interval, she emerged with a small skin of wine, a cheese, a dozen cakes and a flask of cognac.

"That's quick work," said Colt. "I can give you a certificate for knowing where to find things, mademoiselle."

"The earliest quality of a *vivandière* is a quick eye for foraging. We'll waste the wine," said she, and let the skin empty into the water. "And there you see is a bag for the victual and the cognac which when tied up again will be watertight. Monsieur the Major will notice further that I have brought none of your common cognac. This is *fine champagne*. There are degrees of palate even amongst foraging *vivandières*."

"These contraptions are almost done," said Colt, launching one of his rush rafts to see how it floated.

"So much the better, monsieur. The house was filling with Spanish soldiery as I came out, and they may look in on us here at any moment."

"And yet you never hurried me on! My Land, miss, but you have a nerve! I'd like," he added to himself, "to have that performance recorded in print. But I'm afraid it would cause misunderstanding if I wrote it to Boston."

She stepped down into the water. "Oh, I saw that monsieur was working his quickest. Now here is quite an admirable contrivance: a cross bar to rest the chin upon, and meshes of rush above that one can see through perfectly, and yet the whole thing looks no more than a floating rush−heap from the outside." She curtsied to him in the water: "I make monsieur my congratulations," she said, and put on the head−dress, and pushed off into the rapid stream of the river.

Major Joseph Colt followed her, and somewhat unnecessarily assured himself that though as a schoolmarm in peaceful Boston Miss Patience Collier had no opportunities for such a display of pluck and resource, still she had other qualities which made her more desirable than all the French *vivandières* in Europe.

The voyage down the river between the white houses of the town was no easy trip even for skilled swimmers. The current ran fiercely under a hot glare of sun, and swirled amongst frequent rocks; eddies circled one every minute or so in a giddy dance; there were shallows which scraped the knees, and overfalls which sucked one down; and with one thing and another it was a matter of the nicest art to keep the head snug and tight beneath the screening rushes.

Once they came across the enemy's sappers building a bridge of boats, but slipped through the central gap beneath the eyeglassed stare of an engineer officer, as the last craft was being swung into position. And once they drifted like some helpless salmon into a long seine of fishermen's nets, where Mlle Clarice was drawn under the surface, and was like to have been drowned before Colt could claw away from downstream up to her, and slash through the entangling meshes with his knife.

But they got clear through to the unpeopled country below the town in due time, and then with the warning roar of a heavy fall ahead of them, swam into the bank and lay there in the shelter of an osier bed to dry their clothes in a hot sunshine, and rest for the remainder of the afternoon.

With nightfall they took to the road, and presently came upon a farmhouse. This, after due reconnaissance, they took by storm, and to their surprise found unoccupied. They lifted from its scanty stores two suits of peasants' clothing, male and female, and then cremated one tell−tale French uniform and a gown of draggled silk brocade without ceremony. A rickety gig and cow−hocked mule from the same source took them along the next stage of their journey, and brought them down to the coast and a fishing village.

Here, a day later, Fortune seemed indeed to hold out both hands. A French frigate lay becalmed a mile from shore, sawing lazily over the dark blue Mediterranean swells. That night they stole a boat, took unscathed the fire of a dozen Spanish guardacostas who spotted the phosphorescence from their oar−blades in the purple darkness, and ran up alongside the frigate, just as she was trimming yards to the first zephyrs of an off−shore wind.

They climbed on board, and were received with suspicion, then with rough civility and compliments — the sea service of Bonaparte was never remarkable for its social polish — and presently, as the ship spanked off through the darkness, close−hauled to a snoring breeze, they heard a word which badly dashed their hopes.

"Nile, did I hear you say?" Colt rapped out. "Is this craft bound for Egypt?"

"Ay, Major, and we'll take you there safe enough unless we blunder up against one of John Bull’s cut−throats on the road."

To which Colt, in no very chosen sentences, blurted out his pressing desire to get north to France. Mademoiselle, in more polished, but hardly less vigorous French, backed him up.

But the captain of the frigate had his orders, which he repeated stiffly; and when Colt continued with more warmth and a minimum of compliment, to press his request for at least a boat to return in:

"If you don't care," said the captain, "to travel with me in civility, I can accommodate you with irons, and will

do on short notice. But whether you return to France or not, you may take it from me, monsieur and mademoiselle, that Egypt you visit first."

* * * * * * *

Without then recounting the details of each month of exasperation, it can be understood how half a year had passed before Major Colt and the *vivandière* at last made their way to the great military camp which stood beside Boulogne. And here their reception had something of strain in it. Hitherto the Bonapartist armies had been invulnerable; and so it may be readily gathered how the French soldiery spat on the name of General Dupont.

The terms of the capitulation had, it appeared, been broken by the Spanish. The French troops had not only been disarmed, but they had been herded on to hulks, where they had died off like flies, and by the latest news, the survivors — and these were not more than half of those who laid down their arms — had been packed off to Cabrera, a small islet in the Balearic group lying off the southern coast of Majorca. "And there," men told him, "the poor lads are gaoled safe enough. Those sacred swine of English keep the seas."

But with that marvellous organisation of the Bonaparte war machine which made it so effective, a very short time elapsed before Major Joseph Colt was identified, examined, praised (as he passed on up the scale of officers), gazetted as senior major to a new regiment recently raised, tried for flat refusal of duty, degraded to the ranks, and condemned to be shot, all within twenty−four hours. A rumour came to him as he sat and smoked a long clay pipe, and waited for his platoon, that Mlle Clarice, on the other hand, had been praised, and was presently to be decorated by the Emperor himself. And at this he was gratified. He had grown to like her vastly, though he was still of opinion that she was not a lady who would commend herself to Miss Collier, of Boston, and still omitted mention of her in all his letters to 207 Pilgrim Avenue, though thereby he felt that she was being defrauded out of her due niche in history.

It was not Joseph Colt's way, as has been pointed out, to despair unduly when he was in a tight corner. But there were two armed sentries in the room with him, old moustaches both of them, and escape was out of the question. Besides, his military career, so far as France was concerned, seemed over for good; that marshal's uniform which waited in Paris would never be altered to fit his figure, anyway; and it is always depressing to have one's hopes swept away. So he borrowed the Indian stoicism of his early upbringing, sat back with a wooden face, and smoked pipe after pipe from the cool yard of clay. When night came, he turned in on the plank bed of the guard−room, and, to outward appearance, at anyrate, slept placidly.

With morning he was roused in a hurry, and one of his guards genially mentioned a fear that he would have to be shot on an empty stomach. As they went out into a cold, damp, fog this guard further explained that the officer who had sent the command was usually in a hurry, and always saw to it that his hurry was attended to.

"Well," said Colt, buttoning his coat, "breakfast one can do without on occasion, though I should like to have had a pipe. But I always like to meet an officer who knows the meaning of hustle."

They marched rapidly on through the greyness, down the accurate streets of tents and the streets of huts which made the great military camp, and presently came to a cliff head, over which the fog was rolling in, raw and wet, from the unseen Channel beyond. Staring into the fog was a short, fat man with humped shoulders, who now and then muttered oaths to himself, and now and then shook a venomous fist towards the North.

The two guards and their prisoner waited and made no attempt to announce themselves, and so they remained for an hour, whilst the man before them forged his plans and hurled imprecations against England out into the grey obscurity. Major Colt had never seen the Imperial shoulders before, but he recognised them from hearsay.

Then the Emperor turned, strode abruptly up, and stared at the prisoner.

"Joseph Colt, ci−devant Major?" he snapped.

"That's my name and grade, sire."

"Well, you shan't be shot for another hour, at anyrate. Here, take this notebook and pencil. My fool of a secretary is not here; asleep, I suppose. And my writing —— Here, you, take down what I say."

Forthwith Colt, sitting on the wet grass, and using his knee for a desk, wrote with furious haste to the director of the Opera in Paris, to ministers of Justice and Police, to an administrator of ordnance stores about a faulty horseshoe, to the Empress Josephine about the vile colour of one of her new dresses, and the complexion of one

of her Maids of Honour. He wrote also to a painter condemning his picture, and to the Emperor of Austria about the moral arrangement of his household, and, to wind up with, dashed off a note to the American Ambassador, inviting him to join in a coalition against England, and offering him Canada as a fee.

"That will do," said the Emperor, and Colt stood up. "Now I will attend to your own matter. I don't want to shoot a soldier who has come to me voluntarily, but discipline must be upheld. Have you anything to say against the justice of your sentence?"

"Oh, if you come to justice, there's no justice about it. But I guess you hold the gun."

The Emperor smiled grimly. "I understand you gave a definite refusal to serve on the forthcoming expedition against Great Britain?"

"That's so, your Majesty. I enlisted in the French service expressly to fight against any continental enemies of France."

"My man, I do not take divided allegiance."

"Well, I reckon the officer who enlisted me was less particular. He just snapped up what he could get."

"Huh!" said Bonaparte. "Well, there's one Clarice de la Plage, late *vivandière* in the 82nd regiment of the Line, who has interested herself in your case. I offered yesterday to decorate her for past services, but she most impertinently asked to exchange the decoration for your pardon. I offered to give her a post in my own household, and forthwith she pleaded her engagement to some Monsieur Legrand."

"Le Sage, the gentleman's name is, your Majesty."

"I said Legrand," blared the Emperor. "That is what she told me, and I never forget. You will understand, monsieur, that my memory is acknowledged to be the most wonderful known in history. The girl was once an actress till I said she couldn't act, after which she very sensibly joined the army. Well, Monsieur Colt, I shall not shoot you this time. I like Americans and I wish to be friendly with the young United States. Besides, I have given a promise to the girl, de la Plage. But I can have no man for a soldier of mine who is a lover of England."

"What," fairly shouted Colt, "me love England! My Land! Emperor, you never made a bigger mistake. I'm here right now learning war because some day I foresee the United States will scrap with the Old Country, and I want a high command in our army. No, sir, there's no man hates England more'n me."

Bonaparte nodded thoughtfully. "Ay," he said, "you think you hate one another, you relatives, and each would like to see the other get a whipping, so that the stripes are not laid on too hard. But you will not help the man who carries the whip, and for ten *sous* I believe you would come and yap at his heels if his whipping showed over lusty."

Major Joseph Colt scratched thoughtfully at his square, black whisker, but made no further comment.

"As it happens," the Emperor went on, "there will be no invasion of Britain for the present. And for a reason, I give you the name of that cur Dupont — a man I trusted, a man I looked to one day making a Marshal of the Empire."

"That uniform could be put by in camphor for a bit, and then let out in the sleeves and legs later on to fit another man if he earned it."

The Emperor stared, and then his cold face relaxed into a momentary smile. "Maybe," he said drily, "But for the present, monsieur, I am confronted with the necessity of dismissing an officer who offers me imperfect service, and of finding a way of getting 5500 good troops from Cabrera" — the boom of a gun came to them faintly through the grey billows of the Channel fog — "whilst those d——d English command the Mediterranean."

"Why, sir," said Colt quickly, "the thing's easy. Give me the contract. You dismiss me from one grade, and I'll suggest another that would meet the case. Name me your Head Escape Agent. Surely I have shown ability in this matter of escaping. Mlle Clarice and I are just fresh from Spain, and I have not heard that others got away."

"Ay," said the Emperor doubtfully, "but what force would you want, and what money?"

"Oh, I've got two hands and a tongue, and I'll make shift with those. And for coinage, your Majesty, the *real* passes current in Spain, and, I believe, grows there. I'll make shift with *reales*."

"By God!" said the Emperor, "I'll give you the appointment. And you can take that girl Clarice with you to help. The wench is no actress, as I've said before. But she's the makings of a diplomatist in her. There, be off with you and tell her your news. And see here: the report of you that will please me best will be the report of soldiers who have been in Cabrera, and who have come back to join the Eagles. Au revoir, Monsieur Colt."

But to Mlle de la Plage, when he gave her his news, there was one point on which Colt seemed to lay somewhat undue stress.

"The Emperor made mention, mademoiselle, of the gentleman to whom you were affianced, a Monsieur — Monsieur—−"

"Legros."

"Legrand, he said."

"And I repeat, Legros. Dear Mary! it comes to a pretty pass when a girl's word cannot be taken without question as to the name of the man to whom she is engaged."

"But still, mademoiselle, it sticks most firmly in my memory that on the day in Spain when we first met, the fortunate gentleman's name was Le Sage."

"Dear Mary!" expostulated the *vivandière* with uplifted shoulders, "and is a poor girl to be restricted to one fiancé? Ah! Monsieur Joe, it is plain to see that you come from that so savage America. I can be assured of it without even looking at your barbarous delightful long clay pipe."