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British American Colonies, 1764-84.

CHAPTER L.

It was evident that the Rockingham administration, being determined to have peace at any price, the claim of independence set up by the revolted Colonies would present no obstacle—their value to Great Britain had been persistently underrated by the political philosophers of the Whigs, and the public mind, wearied of the contest which the same patriots taught them to believe to be hopeless, were satisfied to let them govern—such a matter as the loss of a continent to the Empire being of small moment compared with the Whigs claim to place and power.

One of the last (and it would be well for Great Britain had it been the first) acts of the late administration was to appoint General Sir Guy Carleton, the able Governor of Canada, Commander-in-Chief in America, superseding Sir Henry Clinton, and the new administration continued him in power but with such instructions that an actual suspension of hostilities was observed between the two armies in the neighborhood of New York.

The contest had resolved itself into a struggle for supremacy on the high seas, and England was gradually but surely beating her adversaries, whose only chance of success lay in maintaining immense armaments considerably out numbering the British fleet. The naval power of Great Britain being employed in looking after its varied and diversified national interests, could not be concentrated, but were sapping and steadily the naval powers of France, Spain, and Holland by beating them in detail. As it would be impossible for France to maintain its large fleet in the West Indies any longer, notwithstanding its success, it was arranged by the Courts of Versailles and Madrid that a combined attack should be made on Jamaica, which,

once conquered, the remainder of the British possessions in the West Indies would fall an easy prey, and that power being effectually crippled the confederates could easily divide the spoil if not enforce their own terms on the revolted Colonies.

Nor were those projects so visionary as might be supposed—the divisions in the English House of Commons were no secret; the party who recently attained to power under the Marquis of Rockingham were known to be engaged in treasonable correspondence with the rebel leaders in the Colonies, it was notorious that they had persuaded the people that the war would involve national bankruptcy—that they were determined to have peace at any price, and that the Colonies were only sources of danger, expense, and annoyance. A successful descent on the chief island in the West Indies would have the same effect on the Whig party as the surrender at Yorktown—all their force would be withdrawn, and amidst the scramble for the spoils of the British Empire the confederates who could bring the largest force into the field would be sure to secure the largest share.

The revolted Colonists were of no account in this case,—possessed of no naval force they could offer no resistance to demands backed by a powerful fleet, and would have to accept such terms as their masters would dictate. It was a strange situation—between the rebels and slavery the only power capable of interposing was that against which they rebelled, and they would assuredly be saved from French dictation if not from French rule by the bravery and good conduct of the British Admiral alone.

Intelligence of the contemplated movement reached England happily before the change of administration took place, and Sir George Rodney, who had returned from the West Indies, was despatched to resume his command with a reinforcement of twelve sail of the line. He sailed from the channel in January and arrived at Barbadoes on the 19th of February. In consequence of the intelligence there received of the attack on St. Christophers (the news of its surrender not having arrived) he put to sea at once with the intention of joining Sir Samuel

Hood and attempting its relief. On the passage he fell in with the British fleet returning, as the island had surrendered, and the Comté de Grasse had sailed for Martinique.

Upon the receipt of this intelligence the British Admiral sailed for Ste. Lucie, that being the most convenient station for watching the motions of the French fleet, and for this purpose his frigates were so stationed as to give the earliest intelligence of any movement while the rest of the fleet took in water and provisions for five months.

As the safety not only of Jamaica but of all the British West Indian possessions depended on the exertions made to bring the Comté de Grasse to an action before a junction with the Spanish fleet could be effected, the intervening space of time must have been a period of much anxiety and disquietude to the British Admiral.

On the 5th of April intelligence was received that the French fleet were embarking troops on board their ships of war,—a stupid proceeding which rendered them useless in action from being overcrowded,—and must have satisfied Rodney of assumed victory if he could succeed in bringing them to action. At daybreak on the 8th of April a signal from the Andromache frigate announced that the French fleet had weighed anchor and were standing out of Port Royal bay bearing to the northwest. The signal was at once made for the British fleet to weigh anchor, which was obeyed with such alacrity that the whole, consisting of thirty-six sail of the line, were clear of Gros Islet Bay and proceeding under a press of sail in pursuit of the enemy by noon. Before daybreak next morning they were discovered under Dominique, and in this situation both fleets were becalmed for some time. At length the enemy got the breeze and stood towards Guadaloupe. It next reached the van of the British, commanded by Sir Samuel Hood, who immediately stood after them with a press of sail, while the centre and rear divisions were still becalmed. Although it was obviously the interests of the Comté de Grasse to avoid an action the opportunity which presented itself of crushing the van of the British fleet was too tempting to be resisted, especially as the vessels com-