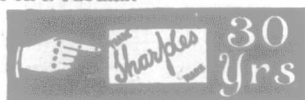


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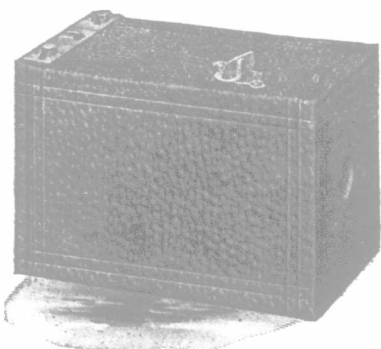
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Bigot had fettered himself with a lie, and had to hide his thoughts under degrading concealments. He knew the Marquise de Pompadour was jealously watching him from afar. The sharpest intellects and most untiring men in the Colony were commissioned to find out the truth regarding the fate of Caroline. Bigot was like a stag brought to bay. An ordinary man would have succumbed in despair, but the very desperation of his position stirred up the Intendant to a greater effort to free himself.

He walked gloomily up and down the room, absorbed in deep thought. Cadet, who guessed what was brooding in his mind, made a sign to De Pean to wait and see what would be the result of his cogitations.

Bigot, gesticulating with his right hand and his left, went on balancing, as in a pair of scales, the chances of success or failure in the blow he meditated against the Golden Dog. A blow which would scatter to the winds the inquisition set on foot to discover the hiding-place of Caroline.

He stopped suddenly in his walk, striking both hands together, as if in sign of some resolution arrived at in his thoughts.

"De Pean!" said he, "has Le Gardeur de Repentigny shown any desire yet to break out of the Palace?"

"None, your Excellency. He is fixed as a bridge to fortune. You can no more break him down than the Pont Neuf at Paris. He lost, last night, a thousand at cards and five hundred at dice; then drank himself dead drunk until three o'clock this afternoon. He has just risen; his valet was washing his head and feet in brandy when I came here."

"You are a friend that sticks closer than a brother, De Pean. Le Gardeur believes in you as his guardian angel, does he not?" asked Bigot with a sneer.

"When he is drunk he does," replied De Pean; "when he is sober I care not to approach him too nearly! He is a wild colt that will kick his groom when rubbed the wrong way; and every way is wrong when the wine is out of him."

"Keep him full then!" exclaimed Bigot; "you have groomed him well, De Pean! but he must now be saddled and ridden to hunt down the biggest stag in New France!"

De Pean looked hard at the Intendant, only half comprehending his allusion.

"You once tried your hand with Mademoiselle de Repentigny, did you not?" continued Bigot.

"I did, your Excellency; but that bunch of grapes was too high for me. They are very sour now."

"Sly fox that you were! Well, do not call them sour yet, De Pean. Another jump at the vine and you may reach that bunch of perfection!" said Bigot, looking hard at him.

"Your Excellency overrates my ability in that quarter, and if I were permitted to choose—"

"Another and a fairer maid would be your choice. I see, De Pean, you are a connoisseur in women. Be it as you wish! Manage this business of Philibert discreetly, and I will coin the Golden Dog into doubloons for a marriage portion for Angelique des Meloises. You understand me now?"

De Pean started. He hardly guessed yet what was required of him, but he cared not in the dazzling prospect of such a wife and fortune as were thus held out to him.

"Your Excellency will really support my suit with Angelique?" De Pean seemed to mistrust the possibility of such a piece of disinterestedness on the part of the Intendant.

"I will not only commend your suit, but I will give away the bride, and Madame de Pean shall not miss any favor from me which she has deserved as Angelique des Meloises," was Bigot's reply, without changing a muscle of his face.

"And your Excellency will give her to me?" De Pean could hardly believe his ears.

"Assuredly you shall have her if you like," cried Bigot, "and with a dowry such as had not been seen in New France!"

"But who would like to have her at any price?" muttered Cadet to himself, with a quiet smile of contempt.—Cadet thought De Pean a fool for jumping at

a hook baited with a woman; but he knew what the Intendant was driving at, and admired the skill with which he angled for De Pean.

"But Angelique may not consent to this disposal of her hand," replied De Pean, with an uneasy look; "I should be afraid of your gift unless she believed that she took me, and not I her."

"Hark you, De Pean! you do not know what women like her are made of, or you would be at no loss how to bait your hook! You have made four millions, they say, out of this war, if not more."

"I never counted it, your Excellency; but, much or little, I owe it all to your friendship," replied De Pean, with a touch of mock humility.

"My friendship! Well, so be it. It is enough to make Angelique des Meloises Madame de Pean when she finds she cannot be Madame Intendant. Do you see your way now, De Pean?"

"Yes, your Excellency, and I cannot be sufficiently grateful for such a proof of your goodness."

Bigot laughed a dry, meaning laugh. "I truly hope you will always think so of my friendship, De Pean. If you do not, you are not the man I take you to be. Now for our scheme of deliverance!"

"Hearken, De Pean," continued the Intendant, fixing his dark, fiery eyes upon his secretary; "you have craft and cunning to work out this design and good will to hasten it on. Cadet and I, considering the necessities of the Grand Company, have resolved to put an end to the rivalry and arrogance of the Golden Dog. We will treat the Bourgeois," Bigot smiled meaningly, "not as a trader with a baton, but as a gentleman with a sword; for, although a merchant, the Bourgeois is noble and wears a sword, which under proper provocation he will draw, and remember he can use it too! He can be tolerated no longer by the gentlemen of the Company. They have often pressed me in vain to take this step, but now I yield. Hark, De Pean! The Bourgeois must be insulted, challenged, and killed by some gentleman of the Company with courage and skill enough to champion its rights. But mind you! it must be done fairly and in open day, and without my knowledge or approval! Do you understand?"

Bigot winked at De Pean and smiled furtively, as much as to say, "You know how to interpret my words."

"I understand your Excellency, and it shall be no fault of mine if your wishes, which chime with my own, be not carried out before many days. A dozen partners of the Company will be proud to fight with the Bourgeois if he will only fight with them."

"No fear of that, De Pean! give the devil his due. Insult the Bourgeois and he will fight with the seven champions of Christendom! so mind you get a man able for him, for I tell you, De Pean, I doubt if there be over three gentlemen in the Colony who could cross swords fairly and successfully with the Bourgeois."

"It will be easier to insult and kill him in a chance medley than to risk a duel!" interrupted Cadet, who listened with intense eagerness. "I tell you, Bigot, young Philibert will pink any man of our party. If there be a duel he will insist on fighting it for his father. The old Bourgeois will not be caught, but we shall catch a Tartar instead, in the young one."

"Well, duel or chance medley be it! I dare not have him assassinated," replied the Intendant. "He must be fought with in open day, and not killed in a corner. Eh, Cadet, am I not right?"

Bigot looked for approval from Cadet, who saw that he was thinking of the secret chamber at Beaumanoir.

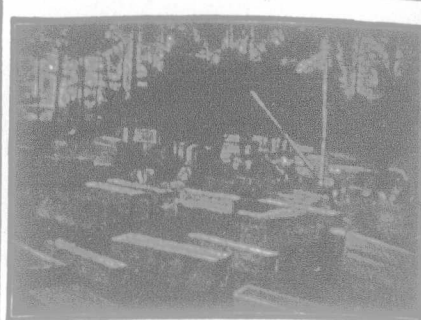
"You are right, Bigot! He must be killed in open day. t in a corner. But who have we as capable of making sure work the Bourgeois?"

"Leave it to me," replied De Pean. "I know one partner of the Company who, if I can get him in harness, will run our chariot wheels in triumph over the Golden Dog."

"And who is that?" asked Bigot eagerly.

"Le Gardeur de Repentigny!" exclaimed De Pean, with a look of exultation.

(To be continued next week.)



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