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978-1-108-04548-3 - Secret Memoirs of Robert, Count de Paradès on Coming Out of the Bastille: Containing an Account of his Successful Transactions as a Spy in England

Robert de Paradès

Excerpt

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A
S H O R T A C C O U N T
O F
M Y P R O C E E D I N G S .

From the First of JANUARY, 1778, to the PEACE in 1782.

AFTER a residence of four years in foreign countries, I came to Paris in the beginning of 1778. France was then making those preparations, which indicated an approaching war with England.

I had long had an inclination to enter into the service of government ; but it was rather too late for me to engage in that line of life, in the usual way, as I was 25 years old. I thought that the present time might be a favourable opportunity for a more rapid promotion, and I was sensible that all my fortune would depend upon my manner of first setting out.

After having well examined every thing, and considered how far my fortune would enable me to

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go,

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go, I fixed upon the plan of visiting England, in order to acquire a complete knowledge of that kingdom, of its sea and land forces, of its fortified towns and ports, and thereby to lay the foundation of my future advancement.

Accordingly I put this plan into execution. I repaired to England in the beginning of February; I visited the principal towns of that kingdom; inquired into, and made memorandums of every thing of importance. Furnished with these observations, I returned to France about the middle of March.

I drew up a short account of my journey, which I gave to M. de Sartine, and explained to him, at the same time, my motives for having undertaken this expedition. The minister approved of my zeal, promised me he would give an account of it to the king, and required a few days to look over my papers. When I had the honour to see him again, he told me he was pleased with them, but that he wished to have a more minute description of what they contained. In consequence of this, he charged me to go again into England, to observe more accurately every port and fortified place, to take exact plans, and draw up descriptions; to subjoin separate statements of the English navy, of the number of men of war fitted out, the number of

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of those in commission, and of those upon the stocks ; of the dock-yards if possible, and in general of every thing that related to the marine department.

I left Versailles, and came immediately to England. I went over all the places I had seen before, took an exact list of all the men of war, frigates, and other vessels ; I visited the dock-yards with the most scrupulous attention, and brought back to the minister a satisfactory account of every thing concerning which he wanted to be informed.

M. de Sartine expressed his satisfaction at the success of my journey, and promised to lay my account of it before the king. I waited upon him three days afterwards, when he asked me if I thought it possible to get faithful agents in the different ports of England, to give a daily account of what was going on. I told him I thought it might be done. He asked me, in the next place, if there was a possibility of procuring, on an emergency, an English vessel for his Majesty's service, to watch the motions of the English fleets, and to convey immediate intelligence to Breft, or any other place. I replied that I thought even this was possible, provided a sufficient sum of money was allowed.

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In consequence of this, he ordered me to return to England, to make the proper arrangements there, to secure a correspondence in case of war, and to know what would be the amount of the expences on the first setting out, and also how much would be afterwards required, in order to keep up the same establishment. He moreover ordered the sum of 25,000 livres to be paid me immediately, as a reimbursement of the expences which I had incurred in the course of the two former journeys.

On my return to England, I imparted to a friend there, some of the motives which brought me back, and requested his assistance. He refused it, from fear of the bad consequences that might result from it, to him and his business; but he directed me to a person who would answer my purposes. With regard to himself, he made me promise never to say any thing more about it, nor to mention his name in any way whatever.

I went to the person he had pointed out to me; and at the third visit, under pretence of different matters of business, I brought him at last to the subject I wished; after which we explained ourselves more fully, and soon came to an agreement.

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He engaged to procure me all that I asked, if I would pay him immediately a certain sum of money, and give him, besides, a hundred pounds sterling every month. This being settled, he recommended me to two Portuguese Jews, who were let into the secret, and with whom I left London, to take a third tour, more important, and much more hazardous than the two former.

By the assistance of my guides, and the letters they had, I formed an acquaintance in every sea port, with some officer in the marine department, in order to render my correspondence more general. They all engaged to send me once or twice a week, an exact journal of what passed in the port in which they were employed, as well as of the orders they might receive; each making his own terms according as his ambition led him.

It is proper that I should here relate what happened to me at Plymouth on this third tour. We got there at midnight, and though I had had no rest for many days, I did not go to bed, that, at the break of day, I might be able to reconnoitre the fort, which I had not sufficiently examined in my former journies.

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I took with me a man that I met with upon the key, and got to the fort a quarter of an hour after the gates were open. I passed the two first sentinels without interruption; when I got upon the parade, I turned upon the left, to mount the slope which leads to the ramparts. I first of all, went over every part of the fortifications which command the country; I then sat down upon the salient angle of the bastion, on the right side of the harbour, where I drew the sketches I wanted. An hour afterwards as I was going to the left bastion; and as I passed along the curtain (it is necessary to notice, that there was not a single sentinel all round the ramparts) I was observed by the sentinel before the guard-house, who, surpris'd at seeing two strangers walking upon the rampart so early in the morning, went and called out the guard. The serjeant came directly to me with two fuzileers. I found it necessary to be bold on this occasion, accordingly I went down to meet him as if my walk was over. We met at the bottom of the slope. He asked me, *What business I had in the fort*; and said I ought to know that nobody was allowed to come there. I answered, that being a stranger, I did not know that; but that the person who brought me, should have told me of it, since, living in the town, he ought to have been acquainted with the regulations. *Seize this rascal*, said the serjeant,

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jeant, and take him to the guard-house. The soldiers seized my guide by the collar, and carried him off. I immediately took ten guineas from my pocket, and offered them to the serjeant; and said, *Let the poor fellow go, if he has done wrong, it was certainly without knowing it.* He accepted the money, and said to the soldiers, *Turn him out, and don't let him come in any more;* then addressing himself to me in a milder tone of voice, *Perhaps, Sir, you wish to see the fort,* said he, *I am ready to attend you; I will just go and leave my firelock in the guard-house, and come back in a moment.* As I did not place much confidence in what he said, I put my papers into the mouth of one of the cannons, which I pretended to be examining (there were twelve pieces of ordnance mounted on the parade). However I need not have suspected him, for he came back, and went with me several times round the fort, and took me down to the batteries which defend the entrance of the harbour, and which are the finest I ever saw.

I observed that the walls before the batteries, for the space of fourteen yards, were only raised three, four, and five feet high above the rocks upon which they stand; that these rocks, which are very rugged and broken, slope towards the sea in a declivity of about one foot in every yard; so that it was a shore sufficiently favourable to land men

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upon, to scale the walls, and take possession of the batteries.

I observed, besides, that the great gate of the fort, which leads to the batteries, and through which five men might walk a breast, was made of planks only two inches thick, and that it was seldom shut.

I discovered under the salient angle of the left bastion, a postern-gate, through which there was a subterraneous passage to the fort (this passage, as I afterwards found, is an easy descent without steps). I took notice, also, that the tenaille of the curtain joined the *revêtement* of the body of the fort; that it was only twelve feet high, and its platform was made use of for a garden, to which there was a communication under the curtain, secured only by a slight door; that from the tenaille to the top of the *revêtement*, was only twelve feet, which circumstance made the passage by these steps a more convenient communication, whether that should be thought better than entering by the gates, or whether it should be determined to make use of both at the same time.

The water being lower at the end of my survey, I had the satisfaction to see that great boats might
land

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land at low water, upon a sandy bottom, and that it would be very easy for men to get up to the batteries, by means of the rocks, which the waves had nearly rubbed into steps.

After having made all my observations, I was shewn out of the fort, which I had entered at seven in the morning, and did not quit till four in the afternoon. The serjeant accompanied me to the inn, where I gave him two guineas more for his trouble. On taking leave of me, he protested he should be at my disposal ever afterwards. I must remark, that I took my papers out of the cannon, as soon as I perceived that I was in no sort of danger (it will be seen afterwards, how useful this man was to me, and how faithfully he served me).

I found my two Jews very uneasy about me, and very much alarmed at so long a stay. As soon as we had completed the important object, which brought us to Plymouth, we went back to London.

My principal agent had not been less active than myself, he had found a captain of a ship, unemployed, dissatisfied with government, and loaded with debts, who was prevailed upon to enter into my schemes, in consequence of the emolument he would receive from being appointed commander of the ship, which the French Minister wanted to procure.

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As I was not authorised to enter into any fixed agreement, I told him, that I could only receive his proposals, which were the following :

“ A privateering vessel must be purchased, which I will man with 75 sailors, or more if necessary; all the prizes I shall take from the Americans shall belong to me, the French government shall pay me 800 pounds sterling a month, to defray the expences of the crew, and to compensate me for the risk I shall run; the articles agreed upon to continue in force for one year, and a security to be given; a confidential person to be put on board my ship, whose directions I shall be bound to follow in all my proceedings; I shall conform entirely to the orders of the French ministry; I shall expect to be paid the same, whether I happen to be in any of the ports of England, or out at sea; if war should be declared between France and England, the terms of the agreement shall remain the same, and whatever prizes I take from the French, shall be divided amongst the ship's crew; if, contrary to the promise given, I should happen to be taken by a French vessel, and should be kept a prisoner in France, they shall be bound to make me amends in the sum of 6000 pounds sterling, to be paid in London; but if I am released with my whole crew, they shall make good to me, in addition to the standing agreement, all the losses I may sustain.”

The