

CHAPTER THREE

SOME ACCOUNT OF THE LATE OPERATIONS OF THE FRENCH AT THE MARQUESAS--PRUDENT CONDUCT OF THE ADMIRAL--SENSATION PRODUCED BY THE ARRIVAL OF THE STRANGERS--THE FIRST HORSE SEEN BY THE ISLANDERS--REFLECTIONS--MISERABLE SUBTERFUGE OF THE FRENCH—DIGRESSION CONCERNING TAHITI--SEIZURE OF THE ISLAND BY THE ADMIRAL—SPIRITED CONDUCT OF AN ENGLISH LADY

IT was in the summer of 1842 that we arrived at the islands; the French had then held possession of them for several weeks. During this time they had visited some of the principal places in the group, and had disembarked at various points about five hundred troops. These were employed in constructing works of defence, and otherwise providing against the attacks of the natives, who at any moment might be expected to break out in open hostility. The islanders looked upon the people who made this cavalier appropriation of their shores with mingled feelings of fear and detestation. They cordially hated them; but the impulses of their resentment were neutralized by their dread of the floating batteries, which lay with their fatal tubes ostentatiously pointed, not at fortifications and redoubts, but at a handful of bamboo sheds, sheltered in a grove of cocoanuts! A valiant warrior doubtless, but a prudent one too, was this same Rear-Admiral Du Petit Thouars. Four heavy, doublebanked frigates and three corvettes to frighten a parcel of naked heathen into subjection! Sixty-eight pounders to demolish huts of cocoanut boughs, and Congreve rockets to set on fire a few canoe sheds!

At Nukuheva, there were about one hundred soldiers ashore. They were

encamped in tents, constructed of the old sails and spare spars of the squadron, within the limits of a redoubt mounted with a few nine-pounders, and surrounded with a fosse. Every other day, these troops were marched out in martial array, to a level piece of ground in the vicinity, and there for hours went through all sorts of military evolutions, surrounded by flocks of the natives, who looked on with savage admiration at the show, and as savage a hatred of the actors. A regiment of the Old Guard, reviewed on a summer's day in the Champs Elysees, could not have made a more critically correct appearance. The officers' regimentals, resplendent with gold lace and embroidery as if purposely calculated to dazzle the islanders, looked as if just unpacked from their Parisian cases.

The sensation produced by the presence of the strangers had not in the least subsided at the period of our arrival at the islands. The natives still flocked in numbers about the encampment, and watched with the liveliest curiosity everything that was going forward. A blacksmith's forge, which had been set up in the shelter of a grove near the beach, attracted so great a crowd, that it required the utmost efforts of the sentries posted around to keep the inquisitive multitude at a sufficient distance to allow the workmen to ply their vocation. But nothing gained so large a share of admiration as a horse, which had been brought from Valparaiso by the Achille, one of the vessels of the squadron. The animal, a remarkably fine one, had been taken ashore, and stabled in a hut of cocoanut boughs within the fortified enclosure. Occasionally it was brought out, and, being gaily caparisoned, was ridden by one of the

officers at full speed over the hard sand beach. This performance was sure to be hailed with loud plaudits, and the 'puarkee nuee' (big hog) was unanimously pronounced by the islanders to be the most extraordinary specimen of zoology that had ever come under their observation.

The expedition for the occupation of the Marquesas had sailed from Brest in the spring of 1842, and the secret of its destination was solely in the possession of its commander. No wonder that those who contemplated such a signal infraction of the rights of humanity should have sought to veil the enormity from the eyes of the world. And yet, notwithstanding their iniquitous conduct in this and in other matters, the French have ever plumed themselves upon being the most humane and polished of nations. A high degree of refinement, however, does not seem to subdue our wicked propensities so much after all; and were civilization itself to be estimated by some of its results, it would seem perhaps better for what we call the barbarous part of the world to remain unchanged.

One example of the shameless subterfuges under which the French stand prepared to defend whatever cruelties they may hereafter think fit to commit in bringing the Marquesan natives into subjection is well worthy of being recorded. On some flimsy pretext or other Mowanna, the king of Nukuheva, whom the invaders by extravagant presents had cajoled over to their interests, and moved about like a mere puppet, has been set up as the rightful sovereign of the entire island--the alleged ruler by prescription of various clans, who for ages perhaps have treated with each other as separate nations. To reinstate this much-injured prince in

the assumed dignities of his ancestors, the disinterested strangers have come all the way from France: they are determined that his title shall be acknowledged. If any tribe shall refuse to recognize the authority of the French, by bowing down to the laced chapeau of Mowanna, let them abide the consequences of their obstinacy. Under cover of a similar pretence, have the outrages and massacres at Tahiti the beautiful, the queen of the South Seas, been perpetrated.

On this buccaneering expedition, Rear Admiral Du Petit Thouars, leaving the rest of his squadron at the Marquesas,--which had then been occupied by his forces about five months--set sail for the doomed island in the Reine Blanche frigate. On his arrival, as an indemnity for alleged insults offered to the flag of his country, he demanded some twenty or thirty thousand dollars to be placed in his hands forthwith, and in default of payment, threatened to land and take possession of the place.

The frigate, immediately upon coming to an anchor, got springs on her cables, and with her guns cast loose and her men at their quarters, lay in the circular basin of Papeete, with her broadside bearing upon the devoted town; while her numerous cutters, hauled in order alongside, were ready to effect a landing, under cover of her batteries. She maintained this belligerent attitude for several days, during which time a series of informal negotiations were pending, and wide alarm spread over the island. Many of the Tahitians were at first disposed to resort to arms, and drive the invaders from their shores; but more pacific and feebler counsels ultimately prevailed. The unfortunate queen Pomare,

incapable of averting the impending calamity, terrified at the arrogance of the insolent Frenchman, and driven at last to despair, fled by night in a canoe to Emio.

During the continuance of the panic there occurred an instance of feminine heroism that I cannot omit to record.

In the grounds of the famous missionary consul, Pritchard, then absent in London, the consular flag of Britain waved as usual during the day, from a lofty staff planted within a few yards of the beach, and in full view of the frigate. One morning an officer, at the head of a party of men, presented himself at the verandah of Mr Pritchard's house, and inquired in broken English for the lady his wife. The matron soon made her appearance; and the polite Frenchman, making one of his best bows, and playing gracefully with the aiguillettes that danced upon his breast, proceeded in courteous accents to deliver his mission. 'The admiral desired the flag to be hauled down--hoped it would be perfectly agreeable--and his men stood ready to perform the duty.' 'Tell the Pirate your master,' replied the spirited Englishwoman, pointing to the staff, 'that if he wishes to strike these colours, he must come and perform the act himself; I will suffer no one else to do it.' The lady then bowed haughtily and withdrew into the house. As the discomfited officer slowly walked away, he looked up to the flag, and perceived that the cord by which it was elevated to its place, led from the top of the staff, across the lawn, to an open upper window of the mansion, where sat the lady from whom he had just parted, tranquilly engaged in

knitting. Was that flag hauled down? Mrs Pritchard thinks not; and Rear-Admiral Du Petit Thouars is believed to be of the same opinion.