

Admiral Villeneuve and Berkshire.

BY ERNEST W. DORMER.

IN the year 1926 were discovered among the Wheble papers at Bulmershe some interesting letters written by Admiral Villeneuve, who commanded the combined French and Spanish Fleets at the Battle of Trafalgar and who was taken captive in Nelson's immortal action and brought as a prisoner to England. For some time Villeneuve was lodged in Reading, on parole, and stayed for a while at Mr. Rich's house in Sonning. He appears to have been on visiting terms with many of the neighbouring county families. The following two letters were written from Reading to Mr. James Wheble at Woodley Lodge, now Bulmershe Court :—

“ L'amiral Villeneuve est infiniment sensible a l'honnetete de Mr. et Mde. Wheble il aura l'honneur de se rendre a leur invitation mardi au soir, il regrette de n'avoir pas encore pu avoir l'honneur d'aller leur rendre ses devoirs chez eux il les pris d'en agréer ses excuses. Reading. 11 janvier.”

“ L'amiral Villeneuve prie Mr. et Mde. Wheble de vouloir bien agréer les excuses de ce qu'il ne scauroit se rendre ce soir a l'assemblée a laquelle ils ont eu la bonté de l'inviter, il est atteint depuis plusieurs jours d'un rhume qui ne lui permet pas de quitter son appartement ; il sera très empressé d'aller présenter ses devoirs à M. et Mde. Wheble, aussitot qu'il lui sera possible. Reading. Mardi 14 janvier.”

But the most interesting of the letters is that addressed to Buonaparte and dated from Rennes on the 26th April, 1806, the day of his death. It appears to be one of the copies sent to certain naval officers of France. How it reached Bulmershe is not clear. To introduce it a note regarding its author may be appended. Pierre Charles Jean Baptiste Silvestre de Villeneuve commenced his career as a “ garde du pavillon ” under the royalist regime and escaping the fate of the majority of the corps of noble officers embraced the republican cause. Details of his life may be found in other places, notably James' “ Naval

History " and Troude's " *Batailles navales de la France.*" This is not the place to comment on the course European history might have taken if Napoleon had been content to leave to the conduct of his naval advisers the line of naval strategy following the Battle of the Nile. The following is a translation of the Admiral's letter :—

" Letter of Admiral Villeneuve to Buonaparté,
Rennes, 26 April, 1806.

" Monsieur,

" You will remember, when La Touche died at Toulon, I was in command at Rochefort and that I refused to succeed him in his command, which you offered to me.

" I was then quite convinced that whoever undertook to command the adventurous and badly conceived expedition of the combined fleets of France and Spain would be defeated and dishonoured, if his misfortune made him survive an almost inevitable battle with an enemy who covered the seas with his vessels and who seemed to have victory in chains! These were the expressions I used in my answer to the Minister of Marine.

" When, against my wish, I set sail from Barcelona and Cadiz and when I saw in what manner the Spanish Fleet was equipped and manoeuvred, my first despatch was accompanied by my resignation, which I again sent successively from Martinique, Ferol and Cadiz.

" The order of 26 September last, to ' return to Toulon ' with the combined Fleet, even if we had to force our way through the English Fleet, reached me ; and I answered that I would obey ; but I reminded the Minister of Marine that I had several times sent him my resignation and reminded him of my fears over the uncertainty of sea-fights, and I announced to him my firm resolution to renounce for ever a dangerous post which my principles and your violent and cruel character made almost impossible to fill.

" The misfortunes of Trafalgar should not be attributed to any fault ; still less to any want of courage. My official account of this battle leaves no doubt upon this fact. Why

was it not published in the *Moniteur*, while my rivals and enemies had the privilege of filling the columns of this journal with their calumnies and outrageous defamations?

“When my account reached you in the midst of the happy career of your ambition in Germany, did you not say, with your usual petulance and cruelty, ‘I see that the example of a French Byng is absolutely necessary to put in my navy, victory “a l’ordre du jour.”’ A thousand voices have repeated these barbarous expressions. This sentence of death, pronounced by a foreign and ferocious usurper against a French Admiral, devoted to his country, while no attention was paid to my despatch, so that one never heard it spoken of, and that, perhaps, it was not even read. It contained, however, certain severe truths which would have added nothing to your maritime talents, but would have proved that ‘he whose incapacity and ambition alone caused the destruction of the French Fleet at Aboukir, had also caused that of another French Fleet at Trafalgar.’

“In my last conversation with you, you were obliged, yourself, to admit that if France was absolute mistress of the Continent her exterior power would be precarious, her interior situation uncertain, her commerce would stagnate, her industry be without supplies, and her population in misery, as long as she could not force Great Britain to submit to her wishes.

“What have you done to remedy these evils, to preserve the resources of France? Under only a few years of your tyranny my country and her allies have lost more ships of the line than the Royal Marine possessed during a great part of the long reigns of Louis XIV and Louis XV, and if France must still groan much longer under your iron sceptre the Military Marine will find herself on a level with the Merchant Marine, and in her ports will only be seen ruined merchants and pirates.

“But has France derived any advantage or any honour from your fortune in war? Is she more free under your

Lettre de L'Amiral Villeneuve!
à 'Buenaparte'.

Paris 26' avril 1806'

Monsieur;

Vous devez vous rappeler que, lorsque La Roche mourut à Toulon
je commandais à Rodasfort, & que je refusai de lui succéder dans son
commandement que vous m'offrîtes. J'étois alors bien convaincu que quiconque
se chargeroit de conduire & de commander l'expédition avoulerait & mal conçu

des Villes combinées de France & d'Espagne, seroit venue à l'assaut, si l'on
malheur le faisoit survivre à une bataille presque inévitable avec un ennemi qui
couvrait les mers de ses vaisseaux & qui sembloit avoir enchaîné la victoire;
ce seroit les propres expéditions dont je me serois sans ma épouse au
Ministre de la Marine). Lorsque, entre mon devoir, je fis choix de l'Amérique
et de l'Asie, & que je vis de quelle manière la flotte espagnole étoit équipée
& manœuvroit, ma première détermination fut accompagnée d'un dessein
que j'envoyai encore successivement... De la Martinique, Du Fort & de Cadix
l'ordre 'Jule' Du 24 Septembre dernier, portant de retourner à Toulon
« avec la flotte réunie, depuis nous nous fîmes pour aller à la flotte anglaise, me portant;
je répondis que j'obéirais: mais je rappelai au Ministre de la Marine que je
lui avois envoyé plusieurs fois ma démission; je lui rappelai mes craintes d'un

unlimited authority? Overburdened with taxes, oppressed under a military despotism, which never relaxes, the French hardly dare to sigh over the inevitable ruin of their country; while you, your family and your creatures alone profit by the conquests acquired at the price of the blood and riches of France.

“Considered from the political point of view, have your usurpations, your devastations, your indemnities, your changes, your pacifications, procured any glory, any advantage to the French? Have other people gained anything by it for their safety? What advantage was it for them to see a sanguinary adventurer clothed in the imperial purple, his infamous prostitute sharing the throne, his obscure relations raised to the rank of kings and princes and his accomplices to that of dukes and marshalls?

“You have chained the arm of French men, but you have not been able to destroy their reason; and the presence of 20,000 Austrian and Russian prisoners can only remind them that a larger number of their fellow-citizens are prisoners in England as the consequence of your provocations and your ambition. When they see these strangers returning to their country, must they not weep more bitterly over the absence of much-loved relations whom they are condemned not to see again as long as they have to submit to your tyranny? They know that England is too wise and too powerful to sign a fresh treaty with a man who she knows is more dangerous to her in peace than in war, who will conspire more brazenly against her independence under the mask of a friend than he would dare to attack it as a declared enemy; with a man in whose hands the olive branch of peace is transformed into a brand of discord, who continually offers peace in war time and who meditates and plans destruction only in peace time.

“You will easily judge, by the tone of this letter, that I no longer fear your ferocious vengeance, that I no longer fear your dungeons, your tortures, your poisoners, your executioners. The order of your Minister, not to approach

your capital without an order from you, has delayed your punishment, and the human race will not yet be delivered from its curse. Had it not been for that order I thought of avenging my country before punishing myself for having been the instrument of your tyranny and for having sacrificed, for you, my honour and duty as a Frenchman and a soldier.

“Your existence is a new proof of the injustice of blind fortune which permits the continuance of your barbarous tyranny. Be, however, well convinced, of a truth that will confirm to you the enormity of your innumerable crimes ; which is, that your end, like those of all the great criminals, will be terrible and premature. The dagger of an assassin, or the axe of the executioner, will terminate a career of evil doing, which, to the shame of humanity and of our century, has already been too long.

“So that a severe posterity who will condemn a part of my public life, may also know the sincere repentance and the patriotic sentiments in which I die, I have addressed copies of this letter to several French officers of the different naval stations. In spite of what your vile flatterers say, if your death had preceded mine, not only the present generation, but also future generations, would have proclaimed me their liberator. They would have raised altars, they would have erected statues to my memory !

“Tremble, tyrant ! Thou livest abhorred of the human race and the maledictions of the Universe will follow thee beyond the tomb.”

The 26 April—the day of his death.”

It is commonly believed that Villeneuve committed suicide and the foregoing letter would seem to confirm this ; but some authorities say he was assassinated by Buonaparte's orders and that he was found in an inn at Rennes on the morning of the 23rd April, 1806, with six dagger thrusts through his heart. There is an indication also that had he succeeded in interviewing Buonaparte in Paris he would have attempted the Emperor's life.
