*Z.F.Smith*

**LAFITTE, THE PIRATE OF THE GULF,**

**AND HIS SEA-ROVERS,**

**LOYAL TO THE AMERICAN CAUSE.**



 The informant was the celebrated Captain Jean Lafitte, the leader of the reputed pirates of the Gulf, who had been outlawed by an edict of our Government. The circumstances were so romantic and displayed such a patriotic love for and loyalty to our country, that they are worthy of brief mention. As Byron wrote, he

*“Left a corsair's name to other times,*

*Linked with one virtue and a thousand crimes.”*

But this does injustice to these *marauders of the sea*, who put in a plea of

extenuation. The disparity of their virtues and their crimes is overwrought in the

use of poetic license. Before the period of the conquest of Guadeloupe by the

English, the French Government in force on that island had granted permits to

numerous privateersmen to prey upon the commerce of the enemy, as our own

Government had done in two wars. Now they could no longer enter the ports of

that or of any other of the West India islands, with their prizes and cargoes.

Lafitte and his daring sea-rovers made of the Bay of Barataria, on the Gulf coast

sixty miles south of New Orleans, a place of rendezvous and headquarters for

their naval and commercial adventures. From this point they had ready and

almost unobserved communication by navigable bayous with New Orleans and

the marts beyond. They formed a sequestered colony on the shores of Barataria,

and among the bold followers of Lafitte there were nearly one hundred men

skilled in navigation, expert in the use of artillery, and familiar with every bay

and inlet within one hundred miles of the Crescent City. Their services, if

attainable, might be made invaluable in the invasion and investment of New

Orleans contemplated by the British, who through their spies kept well informed

of the conditions of the environment of the city. The time seemed opportune to

win them over. If not pirates under our laws, they were smugglers who found it

necessary to market the rich cargoes they captured and brought in as

privateersmen. Barred out by other nations, New Orleans was almost the lone

market for their wares and for their distribution inland. Many merchants and

traders favored this traffic, and had grown rich in doing so, despite the severity

of our revenue laws against smuggling and the protests of other nations with

whom we were friendly.

One of the Lafitte brothers and other leaders of the outlawed community were

under arrest and held for trial in the Federal Court at New Orleans at this time.

From Pensacola, Colonel Nichols sent Captains Lockyer, of the navy, and

Williams, of the army, as emissaries to offer to the Baratarian outlaws the most

enticing terms and the most liberal rewards, provided they would enlist in the

service of the British in their invasion of Louisiana. Lafitte received them

cautiously, but courteously. He listened to their overtures, and feigned deep

interest in their mission. Having fully gained their confidence, they delivered to

him sealed packages from Colonel Nichols himself, offering thirty thousand

dollars in hand, high commissions in the English service for the officers, and

liberal pay for the men, on condition that the Baratarians would ally themselves

with the British forces. After the reading of these documents, the emissaries

began to enlarge on the subject, insisting on the great advantages to result on

enlisting in the service of his Britannic Majesty, and the opportunity afforded of

acquiring fame and fortune. They were imprudent enough to disclose to Lafitte

the purpose and plans of the great English flotilla in the waters of the Gulf, now

ready to enter upon their execution. The army of invasion, supported by the navy

of England, would be invincible, and all lower Louisiana would soon be in the

possession of the British. They would then penetrate the upper country, and act

in concert with the forces in Canada. On plausible pretexts the emissaries were

delayed for a day or two, and then returned to their ship lying at anchor outside

the pass into the harbor. Lafitte lost little time in visiting New Orleans and laying

before Governor Claiborne the letters of Colonel Nichols and the sensational

information he had received from the British envoys.

It was this intelligence which was borne in haste to General Jackson at Mobile,

by the couriers mentioned previously. The Lafittes promptly tendered the

services of themselves, their officers, and their men, in a body to the American

army, and pledged to do all in their power, by sea and land, to defeat and repel

the invading enemy, on condition that the Government would accept their

enlistment, pardon them of all offenses, and remove from over them the ban of

outlawry. This was all finally done, and no recruits of Jackson's army rendered

more gallant and effective service, for their numbers, in the stirring campaign

that followed. They outclassed the English gunners in artillery practice, and

showed themselves to be veterans as marines or soldiers.

On receipt of this information of Lafitte, confirmed from other secret and

reliable sources, the citizens were aroused. A mass-meeting was held in New

Orleans and a Committee of Safety appointed, composed of Edward Livingston,

Pierre Fouchet, De la Croix, Benjamin Morgan, Dominique Bouligny, J.A.

Destrahan, John Blanque, and Augustine Macarte, who acted in concert with

Governor Claiborne, and with the Legislature called into session.

*This chapter is an excerpt from “The Battle of New Orleans” by Z.F. Smith*