

## THE DETENTION OF FLINDERS AT THE MAURITIUS.

BY A. MAULT.

To the passport dated at Paris the 4 Prairial, An neuf de la Republique Française, to the "corvette *Investigator*, its officers, crew, and effects, during their voyage, to permit them to land at the different ports of the Republic, as well in Europe as in other parts of the world, whether they be forced by bad weather to there seek refuge, or that they come to ask for succour and the means of repairs necessary to continue their voyage," there is added the proviso:—"It is well understood, nevertheless, that they shall not thus find protection and assistance, but in the case that they shall not have willingly turned out of the course they should follow; that they shall not have committed, nor announced their intention to commit, any hostility against the French Republic and its allies; that they shall not have procured, nor sought to procure, any succours to its enemies; and that they shall not have occupied themselves with any kind of commerce nor of contraband." It should be also borne in mind that in the preamble to the passport, Captain Matthew Flinders is named as commanding the *Investigator*. Flinders himself records that the Lords of the Admiralty directed him "to act in all respects towards French ships as if the two countries were not at war; and with respect to the ships and vessels of other powers with which this country is at war, you are to avoid, if possible, having any communication with them; and not to take letters or packets other than such as you may receive from this office, or the office of His Majesty's Secretary of State."

We all know that, the passport notwithstanding, when Flinders and some of his crew—the *Investigator* having been condemned and the *Porpoise* lost—came in the little sloop *Cumberland* to Port Louis in December, 1803, "to ask for succour and the means of repairs necessary to continue their voyage," to use the words of the passport, General De Caen, Governor of the Mauritius, refused the request, and made the captain and crew prisoners of war. Till recently this action of De Caen's has been as universally as righteously condemned. But in 1886, in an official, or quasi-official document, published by the New South Wales Government (a summary of the contents of the Brabourne Papers), the following passages occur:—"Much trouble had been taken to obtain this scientific passport for Flinders. Why, then, was it

not respected? We find a satisfactory answer here. . . . Captain Flinders was going home. Governor King took the opportunity of sending home some despatches, and these despatches, there is little doubt, were the cause of all poor Flinders' trouble. We have here (unfortunately, without a date) a memorandum from Captain Kent, of H.M.S. *Buffalo*, for Governor King, in which it is stated that the colony 'is admirably situated for sending forth a squadron against the Spaniards on the coast of Chili and Peru.' Governor King makes this idea the subject of a despatch. He enlarges upon the opportunities this most excellent harbour offers for the concentration of troops, which might at any time be sent against Spanish America. This despatch he entrusts to Captain Flinders, and this Governor De Caen finds when, his suspicion aroused by the peculiar appearance of the little *Cumberland*, he seizes her and detains all her papers. Now Flinders' passport was granted to an officer commanding a ship to be employed on scientific work only, and here Flinders was found conveying a despatch to England, England being at the time engaged in a life and death struggle with France, which, if delivered and acted on, would have the effect of placing points of vantage, and possibly valuable colonies, within easy striking distances. A despatch of this sort could hardly be considered as a document of purely international scientific interest. Governor De Caen did not so consider it, and having a natural animus against all Englishmen, considered himself justified in using the excuse this paper gave him to justify a rigorous imprisonment." And the writer goes on in a rather sneering style about "poor Flinders."

I confess that I have "a natural animus" against special pleading of this sort. If it had to be answered from information given by itself the task would be difficult, for the information given is so vague. The only one of the documents above referred to, which is specifically said to exist among the papers, is the memorandum "unfortunately without a date" from Captain Kent. But Governor King's despatch founded thereupon; is it among the papers? If so, why is it not to be published as Captain Kent's memorandum is? Again, what is the proof that Flinders took this despatch, and that it fell into the hands of De Caen, and when did he use "the excuse this paper gave him to justify a rigorous imprisonment?"

On the contrary there is much to prove that no such despatch was carried by Flinders, and that consequently none such could have been taken from him by De Caen. Flinders did take despatches from King to the Secretary of State in England, and those despatches were taken from him and never returned; but they could not have been of this contraband character, for in almost all certainty they were papers relative to Flinders' expedition, detailing the arrange-

ments the Governor had made, and the orders he had given in consequence of the abandonment of the *Investigator*. This is proved as clearly as such a fact can be by the conduct of both Flinders and De Caen. Flinders would not willingly have taken general despatches, much less such an one as this particular one of Governor King's is described to be, for he would not carry any from the ships at Madeira and the Cape. And he blames the captain of *Le Geographe* for taking some from Mauritius, which, had he been guilty of the same offence, he could hardly have done at the time he was claiming the benefit of his passport on the ground of not having broken its conditions. While the despatches were in De Caen's hands, Flinders writes to Admiral Linois, asking for his intervention, and says:—"I should willingly undergo an examination by the captains of your squadron, and my papers would either prove or disprove my assertions. If it be found that I have committed any act of hostility against the French nation or its allies, my passport will become forfeited, and I expect no favour, but if my conduct hath been altogether consistent with the passport, I hope to be set at liberty, or at least to be sent to France for the decision of the Government." Is it likely Flinders would have challenged this enquiry if he knew that De Caen had written proof that his conduct had not been "consistent with the passport?"

But it may be said that Governor King may have sent the despatch without letting Flinders know its contents. That is true. But if it had been among Flinders' papers De Caen would have found it, and it is certain, notwithstanding all that the author of the summary of the Brabourne Papers says about De Caen's finding it and acting upon it, he never did find anything of the sort. It was exactly the kind of thing he wanted to find, and had he found it, it would have afforded the only possible justification of De Caen's after conduct, and he would not have been driven to make the paltry excuses he was reduced to. But not finding any such thing he had to fall back on a passage in Flinders' journal, in which, after giving his main reasons for running into Port Louis rather than to the Cape, he adds, as a subordinate one, that it will give him an opportunity of making meteorological and other observations on the Mauritius. If De Caen had the despatch which would have constituted a real proof that the passport had been forfeited, would he have withheld it and put forward the fictitiously hollow reason that by the passport Flinders "was certainly not authorised to put in at the Isle of France to be able to observe the periodic winds, the port, the actual state of the colony, etc., that thus by this conduct he had violated the neutrality under which he had been indirectly permitted to land in this island." Such is the only excuse De Caen offers, not only to Flinders in his

captivity, but to the French Government at Paris. For in the *communiqué* of the Government in the *Moniteur* of the 22 Messidor, An. XII. (11th July, 1804) on the subject of the arrest, detention and falsely reported release of Flinders, it is said:—"In fine, the passport granted to M. Flinders did not admit of any equivocation upon the objects of the expedition for which it was given; but we read in one part of his journal that he suspected the war; and in another, that he had resolved to touch at the Isle of France as well in the hope of selling his vessel advantageously, as from the desire of knowing the present state of that colony, and the utility of which it and its dependencies in Madagascar could be to Port Jackson." Now is this language compatible with the existence of King's despatch among Flinders' papers? If Flinders had carried what was clearly contraband of war, would the French Government have been content with the above lame apology for his arrest? There can be but one answer.

No! De Caen's conduct admits of no palliation. It brands him with everlasting infamy. The finding of King's despatch after he had arrested Flinders, would not much exonerate him. When Baudin came to Sydney was he arrested, and his ship searched for compromising documents to justify the arrest? I am only sorry an Australian should attempt to whitewash De Caen by a method which, if successful, would tarnish the memory of Flinders.

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#### DISCUSSION.

MR. J. B. WALKER said that Mr. Mault had undoubtedly made out a good case, but there was independent evidence to show that Flinders did carry despatches to the Secretary of State. Amongst the State papers in the Record Office, lately copied by Mr. Bonwick for the Tasmanian Government, was a despatch from Governor King to Lord Hobart, dated 8th October, 1803, in which the Governor refers to previous despatches sent by the Cumberland. What was the nature of these despatches did not appear, but they probably related to Flinders' explorations, and were not in any way a violation of the conditions of his safe conduct from the French Government. Mr. Mault's strongest argument—indeed, an unanswerable argument—was, that if these despatches had been of the compromising character suggested by the writer of the pamphlet on the Brabourne Papers, Governor De Caen would have produced them in evidence against Flinders as a complete justification of the detention, and would not have been driven to find a paltry excuse in an entry in Flinders' journal. In any case Flinders' himself was without blame in the matter.