

## CHAPTER ONE

It was luck at cards that started the trouble, and enlistment in mad invasion that seemed the way out of it. I won a trinket and almost lost my life, so take lesson. Gambling is a vice.

It's also seductive, social, and as natural, I would argue, as breathing. Isn't birth itself a roll of the dice, fortune casting one babe as peasant and another as king? In the wake of the French Revolution the stakes have simply been raised, with ambitious lawyers ruling as temporary dictators and poor King Louis losing his head. During the Reign of Terror the spectre of the guillotine made existence itself a matter of chance. Then, with the death of Robespierre came an insanity of relief, giddy couples dancing on the tombs of St-Sulpice Cemetery to a new German step called the *waltz*. Now, four years later, the nation has settled into war, corruption, and the pursuit of pleasure. Drabness has

given way to brilliant uniform, modesty to *décolletage*, and looted mansions are being reoccupied as intellectual salons and chambers of seduction. If nobility is still an offence, revolutionary wealth is creating a new aristocracy. There's a clique of self-proclaimed 'wonderful women' who parade Paris to boast of their 'insolent luxury amid public wretchedness'. There are balls that mock the guillotine, where ladies wear red ribbons at their throat. The city counts four thousand gambling houses, some so plain that patrons carry in their own folding stools, and others so opulent that *hors d'oeuvre* are served on sacramental plate and the privy is indoors. My American correspondents find both practices equally scandalous. The dice and cards fly: *creps, trente-et-un, pharaon, biribi*. Meanwhile armies tramp on France's borders, inflation is ruinous, and weeds grow in the deserted courtyards of Versailles. So to risk a purse in pursuit of a nine in *chemin de fer* seemed as natural and foolish as life itself. How was I to know that betting would bring me to Bonaparte?

Had I been inclined to superstition, I might have made note that the date, April 13<sup>th</sup>, 1798, was a Friday. But it was springtime in revolutionary Paris, meaning that under the Directory's new calendar it was the twenty-fourth day of the month of Germinal in the Year Six, and the next day of rest was still six days distant, not two.

Has any reform been more futile? The government's arrogant discard of Christianity means that weeks have been extended to ten days instead of seven. The revision's intent is to supplant the papal calendar with a uniform alternative of twelve months of thirty days each, based

on the system of ancient Egypt. Bibles themselves were torn up to make paper gun cartridges in the grim days of 1793, and now the biblical week has been guillotined, each month instead divided into three *decades* of ten days, with the year beginning at the autumn equinox and five to six holidays added to balance idealism with our solar orbit. Not content with regimenting the calendar, the government has introduced a new metric system for weight and measurement. There are even proposals for a new clock of precisely 100,000 seconds each day. Reason, reason! And the result is that all of us, even I – amateur scientist, investigator of electricity, entrepreneur, sharpshooter, and democratic idealist – miss Sundays. The new calendar is the kind of logical idea imposed by clever people that completely ignores habit, emotion, and human nature and thus forecasts the Revolution's doom. Do I sound prescient? To be honest, I wasn't used to thinking about popular opinion in such a calculating manner yet. Napoleon would teach me that.

No, my thought was focused on counting the turn of cards. Had I been a man of nature I might have left the salons to enjoy the year's first blush of red bud and green leaf, perhaps contemplating the damsels of the Tuileries Garden, or at least the whores of the Bois de Boulogne. But I'd chosen the card cozies of Paris, that glorious and grimy city of perfume and pollution, monument and mud. My spring was candlelight, my flowers courtesans of such precariously suspended cleavage that their twin advertisements teetered on the brink of escape, and my companions a new democracy of politician and soldier,

displaced nobleman and newly rich shopkeeper: citizens all. I, Ethan Gage, was the salon's American representative of frontier democracy. I had minor status thanks to my earlier apprenticeship to the late, great Benjamin Franklin. He'd taught me enough about electricity to let me amuse gatherings by cranking a cylinder to impart a frictional charge to the hands of the prettier ones and then daring the men to try a literally shocking kiss. I had minor fame from shooting exhibitions that demonstrated the accuracy of the American longrifle: I had put six balls through a pewter plate at two hundred paces, and with luck had cut the plume from a sceptical general's hat at fifty. I had minor income from trying to forge contracts between war-pressed France and my own infant and neutral nation, a task made damnably difficult by the revolutionary habit of seizing American ships. What I didn't have was much purpose beyond the amusement of daily existence; I was one of those amiably drifting single men who wait for the future to start. Nor did I have income enough to comfortably support myself in inflationary Paris. So I tried to augment it with luck.

Our host was the deliberately mysterious Madame d'Liberté, one of those enterprising women of beauty and ambition who had emerged from revolutionary anarchy to dazzle with wit and will. Who had known females could be so ambitious, so clever, so alluring? She gave orders like a sergeant major, and yet had seized on the new fad for classical gowns to advertise her feminine charms with fabric so diaphanous that the discerning could detect the dark triangle pointing to her temple of Venus. Nipples peeped over the top of her drapery like soldiers from a trench,

the pair of them rouged just in case we might overlook their boldness. Another mademoiselle had her breasts exposed entirely, like hanging fruit. Was it any wonder that I'd taken the risk of returning to Paris? Who cannot love a capital that has three times as many winemakers as bakers? Not to be outdone by the women, some of the male peacocks sported cravats reaching as high as their lower lip, cod-tailed coats that descended to the back of their knees, slippers as dainty as kittens' paws, and golden rings that glittered on their ears.

'Your beauty is eclipsed only by your cleverness,' one drunken patron, an art dealer named Pierre Cannard, told Madame after she cut off his brandy. It was her punishment for his having spilt on her recently acquired oriental carpet, which she'd paid ruined royalists too much for in order to acquire that impossible-to-imitate threadbare look that proclaims the penny-pinching ancestry of the rich.

'Compliments will not clean my rug, monsieur.'

Cannard clutched his heart. 'And your cleverness is eclipsed by your strength, your strength by your stubbornness, and your stubbornness by your cruelty. No more brandy? With such feminine hardness, I might as well buy my spirits from a man!'

She snorted. 'You sound like our latest military hero.'

'You mean the young general Bonaparte?'

'A Corsican pig. When the brilliant Germaine de Staël asked the upstart what woman he could most admire, Bonaparte replied, "The one who is the best housekeeper."'

The gathering laughed. 'Indeed!' Cannard shouted. 'He's Italian, and knows a woman's place!'

‘So she tried again, asking who is the woman most distinguished among her sex. And the bastard replied, “The one who bears the most children.”’

We roared, and it was a guffaw revealing our uneasiness. Indeed, what was a woman’s place in revolutionary society? Women had been given rights, even of divorce, but the newly famous Napoleon was no doubt just one of a million reactionaries who would prefer repeal. What, for that matter, was a man’s place? What had rationality to do with sex and romance, those great French passions? What had science to do with love, or equality with ambition, or liberty with conquest? We were all feeling our way in year six.

Madame d’Liberté had taken as an apartment the first floor above a millinery shop, furnished it on credit, and opened it so hastily that I could smell wallpaper paste alongside the cologne and tobacco smoke. Couches allowed couples to entwine. Velvet drapes invited tactile sensation. A new piano, far more fashionable than the aristocratic harpsichord, provided a mix of symphonic and patriotic tunes. Sharps, ladies of pleasure, officers on leave, merchants trying to impress the gossips, writers, newly pompous bureaucrats, informers, women hoping to marry strategically, ruined heirs: all could be found there. Those ranked around the game’s shoe included a politician who had been in prison just eight months before, a colonel who had lost an arm in the revolutionary conquest of Belgium, a wine merchant getting rich by supplying restaurants opened by chefs who’d lost their aristocratic employers, and a captain from Bonaparte’s Army of Italy, who was spending his loot as quickly as he’d nabbed it.

And me. I'd served as a secretary to Franklin for his last three years in Paris just before the French Revolution, returned to America for some adventures in the fur trade, made some living as a shipping agent in London and New York at the height of the Terror, and now had returned to Paris in hopes my fluent French might help me cement timber, hemp, and tobacco deals with the Directory. There's always a chance to get rich during war. I also hoped for respectability as an 'electrician' – a new, exotic word – and by following up on Franklin's curiosity about Masonic mysteries. He'd hinted they might have some practical application. Indeed, some claimed the United States itself had been founded by Masons for some secret, as yet unrevealed, purpose, and that ours was a nation with a mission in mind. Alas, Masonic lore required tedious steps toward degree advancement. The British blockade impeded my trade schemes. And one thing the Revolution had not changed was the size and pace of France's implacable bureaucracy; it was easy to get an audience and impossible to get an answer. Accordingly, I had plenty of time between interviews for other pursuits, such as gambling.

It was a pleasant enough way to spend one's nights. The wine was agreeable, the cheeses delectable, and in candlelight every male face seemed chiselled, every woman a beauty.

My problem that Friday the thirteenth was not that I was losing, but that I was winning. By this time the revolutionary *assignats* and *mandats* had become worthless, paper rubbish and specie rare. So my pile consisted of not just gold and silver francs but a ruby, a deed to an

abandoned estate in Bordeaux I had no intention of visiting before unloading on someone else, and wooden chips that represented promises of a meal, a bottle, or a woman. Even an illicit gold louis or two had found their way to my side of the green felt. I was so lucky that the colonel accused me of wanting his other arm, the wine merchant lamented he could not tempt me to full drunkenness, and the politician wanted to know who I'd bribed.

'I simply count cards in English,' I tried to joke, but it was a poor joke because England was reportedly what Bonaparte, back from his triumphs in northern Italy, was trying to invade. He was camped somewhere in Brittany, watching the rain and wishing the British navy would go away.

The captain drew, considered, and blushed, his skin a proclamation of his thought. It reminded me of the story of the guillotined head of Charlotte Corday, which reportedly reddened with indignation when the executioner slapped it before the crowd. There has been scientific debate since about the precise moment of death, and Dr Xavier Bichat has taken corpses from the guillotine and tried to animate their muscles with electricity, in the same manner that the Italian Galvani has done with frogs.

The captain wanted to double his bet, but was frustrated by his empty purse. 'The American has taken all my money!' I was the dealer at the moment, and he looked at me. 'Credit, monsieur, for a gallant soldier.'

I was in no mood to finance a betting war with a gambler excited about his cards. 'A cautious banker needs collateral.'

‘What, my horse?’

‘I’ve no need of one in Paris.’

‘My pistols, my sword?’

‘Please, I would not be complicit in your dishonour.’

He sulked, peeking again at what he held. Then the kind of inspiration struck that means trouble for everyone within range. ‘My medallion!’

‘Your what?’

He pulled out a large and heavy trinket that had hung, unseen, inside his shirt. It was a gold disc, pierced and inscribed with a curious tracery of lines and holes, with two long arms like twigs hanging beneath. It seemed crude and hammered, as if forged on Thor’s anvil. ‘I found it in Italy. Look at its weight and antiquity! The jailer I took it from said it came from Cleopatra herself!’

‘He knew the lady?’ I asked dryly.

‘He was told that by Count Cagliostro!’

This piqued my curiosity. ‘Cagliostro?’ The famed healer, alchemist, and blasphemer, once the darling of the courts of Europe, had been imprisoned in the Pope’s Fortress of San Leo and died of madness in 1795. Revolutionary troops had subsequently overrun the fortress last year. The alchemist’s involvement in the affair of the necklace more than a decade ago had helped precipitate the Revolution by making the monarchy look greedy and foolish. Marie Antoinette had despised the man, calling him a sorcerer and a fraud.

‘The Count tried to use this as a bribe to escape,’ the captain went on. ‘The jailer simply confiscated it and, when we stormed the fort, I took it from him. It has power, perhaps, and is very old, passed down for centuries. I will

sell it to you for . . .’ – he eyed my pile – ‘a thousand silver francs.’

‘Captain, you jest. It’s an interesting bauble but . . .’

‘It comes from Egypt, the jailer told me! It has sacred value!’

‘Egyptian, you say?’ Someone spoke with the purr of a big cat, urbane and lazily amused. I looked up to see Count Alessandro Silano, an aristocrat of French-Italian descent who’d lost a fortune to the Revolution and was rumoured to be trying to build another by turning democrat, plying devious roles in diplomatic intrigues. Rumour had it that Silano was a tool of the recently reinstated Talleyrand himself, France’s minister of foreign affairs. He also professed himself a student of the secrets of antiquity, on the model of Cagliostro, Kolmer, or Saint-Germain. A few whispered his rehabilitation in government circles owed something to the black arts. He thrived on such mystery, bluffing at cards by claiming his luck was augmented by sorcery. He still lost as often as he won, however, so no one knew whether to take him seriously.

‘Yes, Count,’ the captain said. ‘You of all men should recognise its value.’

‘Should I?’ He took a seat at our table with his usual languid grace, his strong features saturnine, his lips sensual, his eyes dark, his brows heavy, exhibiting the handsomeness of a Pan. Like the famed hypnotist Mesmer, he put women under a spell.

‘I mean your position in the Egyptian Rite.’

Silano nodded. ‘And my time at studies in Egypt. Captain Bellaïrd, is it not?’

‘You know me, monsieur?’

‘By reputation as a gallant soldier. I closely followed the bulletins from Italy. If you will honour me with your acquaintance, I would join your game.’

The captain was flattered. ‘But of course.’

Silano sat and women gathered, drawn by his reputation as adept lover, duelist, gambler, and spy. He was also reputed to adhere to Cagliostro’s discredited Egyptian Rite of Freemasonry, or fraternal lodges that inducted female adherents as well as male. These heretic lodges played at various occult practices, and there were juicy tales of dark ceremonies, naked orgies, and lurid sacrifice. Perhaps a tenth of it was true. Still, Egypt was reputed to be the source of ancient wisdom, and more than one mystic had claimed to have discovered mighty secrets in mysterious pilgrimages there. As a result, antiquities were in vogue from a nation closed to most Europeans since the Arab conquest eleven centuries before. Silano was reputed to have studied in Cairo before the ruling Mamelukes began harassing traders and scholars.

Now the captain nodded eagerly to cement Silano’s interest. ‘The jailer told me the arms on the end could point the way to great power! A man of learning such as you, Count, might make sense of it.’

‘Or pay for a piece of nonsense. Let me see it.’

The captain lifted it off his neck. ‘Look how odd it is.’

Silano took the medallion, exhibiting the long, strong fingers of a fencer, and turned it to examine both sides. The disc was a bit larger than a communion wafer. ‘Not pretty enough for Cleopatra.’ When he held it to a candle, light

shone through its holes. An incised groove extended across its circle. 'How do you know it's from Egypt? It looks as though it could be from anywhere: Assyrian, Aztec, Chinese, even Italian.'

'No, no, it's thousands of years old! A gypsy king told me to look for it in San Leo, where Cagliostro had died. Though some say he still lives, as a guru in India.'

'A gypsy king. Cleopatra.' Silano slowly handed it back. 'Monsieur, you should be a playwright. I will trade you two hundred silver francs for it.'

'Two hundred!'

The nobleman shrugged, his eye still on the piece.

I was intrigued by Silano's interest. 'You said you were going to sell it to me.'

The captain nodded, now hopeful that two of us had been baited. 'Indeed! It is from the pharaoh who tormented Moses, perhaps!'

'So I will give you three hundred.'

'And I will trade you five,' Silano said.

We all want what the other wants. 'I will trade you seven hundred and fifty,' I responded.

The captain was looking from one to the other of us.

'Seven-fifty and this *assignat* note for one thousand livres,' I amended.

'Which means seven-fifty and something so worthlessly inflated that he might as well use it on his ass,' Silano countered. 'I'll trade you the full thousand, captain.'

His price had been reached so quickly that the soldier looked doubtful. Like me, he was wondering at the count's interest. This was far more than the value of the

raw gold. He seemed tempted to slip it back inside his shirt.

‘You’ve already offered it to me for a thousand,’ I said. ‘As a man of honour, consummate the exchange or leave the game. I’ll pay the full sum and win it back from you within the hour.’

Now I’d challenged him. ‘Done,’ he said, a soldier in defence of his standard. ‘Bet this hand and the next few and I’ll win the medallion back from *you*.’

Silano sighed hopelessly at this *affaire d’honneur*. ‘At least deal me some cards.’ I was surprised he’d given up so easily. Perhaps he only wanted to help the captain by bidding me up and reducing my pile. Or he believed he could win it at table.

If so, he was disappointed. I couldn’t lose. The soldier drew into an eleven, and then lost three more hands as he bet against the odds, too lazy to track how many face cards had been dealt. ‘Damnation,’ he finally muttered. ‘You have the devil’s luck. I’m so broke I’ll have to go back on campaign.’

‘It will save you the trouble of thinking.’ I slipped the medallion around my own neck as the soldier scowled, then stood to get a glass and display my prize to the ladies, like an exhibit at a rural fair. When I nuzzled a few the hardware got in the way, so I hid it inside my shirt.

Silano approached.

‘You’re Franklin’s man, are you not?’

‘I had the honour of serving that statesman.’

‘Then perhaps you’ll appreciate my intellectual interest.’

I'm a collector of antiques. I'll still buy that necklace from you.'

Alas, a courtesan with the fetching name of Minette, or Pussycat, had already whispered about the handsomeness of my trinket. 'I respect your offer, monsieur, but I intend to discuss ancient history in the chambers of a lady.' Minette had already gone ahead to warm her apartment.

'An understandable enquiry. Yet may I suggest you need a true expert? That curiosity had an interesting shape, with intriguing markings. Men who have studied the ancient arts . . .'

'Can appreciate how dearly I hold my new acquisition.'

He leant closer. 'Monsieur, I must insist. I'll pay double.'

I didn't like his persistence. His air of superiority rankled my American sensibilities. Besides, if Silano wanted it that badly, then maybe it was worth even more. 'And may I insist that you accept me as the fair winner, and suggest that my assistant, who also has an interesting shape, supplies precisely the kind of expertise I require?' Before he could reply, I bowed and moved away.

The captain, now drunk, accosted me. 'It isn't wise to turn Silano down.'

'I thought you told us it had great value, according to your gypsy king and papal jailer?'

The officer smiled maliciously. 'They also told me the medallion was cursed.'

## CHAPTER TWO

It was a pathetic attempt at verbal revenge. I bowed to Madame and made my leave, coming outside to a night made dimmer by the era's new industrial fogs. To the west was a red glow from the rapidly expanding mills of the Paris suburbs, harbinger of the more mechanical age at hand. A lantern bearer was near the door and hoping for hire, and I congratulated myself on my continued luck. His features were obscured by a hooded cape but were darker than a European's, I noticed; Moroccan, I guessed, seeking the type of menial employment such an immigrant might find. He bowed slightly, his accent Arabic. 'You have the look of a fortunate man, monsieur.'

'I'm about to get even more fortunate. I would like you to guide me to my own apartment, and then to a lady's address.'

'Two francs?'

‘Three, if you keep me out of the puddles.’ How wonderful to be a winner.

The light was necessary since revolution had produced fervour for everything except street cleaning and cobblestone repair. Drains were clogged, street lanterns half-lit, and potholes steadily enlarging. It didn’t help that the new government had renamed more than a thousand streets after revolutionary heroes and everyone was continually lost. So my guide led the way, the lantern hung from a pole held by two hands. The staff was intricately carved, I noticed, its sides scaled for a better grip and the lantern suspended from a knob in the shape of a serpent’s head. The reptile’s mouth held the lantern’s bail. A piece of artistry, I guessed, from the bearer’s native country.

I visited my own apartment first, to secrete most of what I’d won. I knew better than to take all my winnings to the chamber of a trollop, and given everyone’s interest I decided it best to hide the medallion as well. I took some minutes to decide where to conceal it while the lantern bearer waited outside. Then we went on to Minette’s, through the dark streets of Paris.

The city, glorious though it remained in size and splendour, was, like women of a certain age, best not examined too closely. Grand old houses were boarded up. The Tuileries Palace was gated and empty, its dark windows like sightless sockets. Monasteries were in ruins, churches locked, and no one seemed to have applied a coat of paint since the storming of the Bastille. Except for filling the pockets of generals and politicians, the Revolution had been an economic disaster, as near as I could see. Few Frenchmen dared complain too boldly,

because governments have a way of defending their mistakes. Bonaparte himself, then a little-known artillery officer, had spattered grapeshot on the last reactionary uprising, earning him promotion.

We passed the site of the Bastille, now dismantled. Since the prison's liberation, twenty-five thousand people had been executed in the Terror, ten times that had fled, and fifty-seven new prisons had been built to take its place. Without any sense of irony, the former site was nonetheless marked with a 'fountain of regeneration': an enthroned Isis who, when the contraption worked, streamed water from her breasts. In the distance I could see the spires of Notre Dame, renamed the Temple of Reason and reputedly built on the site of a Roman temple dedicated to the same Egyptian goddess. Should I have had a premonition? Alas, we seldom notice what we're meant to see. When I paid off the lantern bearer I took little note that he lingered a moment too long after I stepped inside.

I climbed the creaking, urine-scented wooden stairway to Minette's abode. Her apartment was on the unfashionable third floor, right below the attic garrets occupied by servant girls and artists. The altitude gave me a clue to the middling success of her trade, no doubt hurt by the revolutionary economy almost as much as wig makers and gilt painters. Minette had lit a single candle, its light reflected by the copper bowl she'd used to wash her thighs, and was dressed in a simple white shift, its laces untied at the top to invite further exploration. She came to me with a kiss, her breath smelling of wine and liquorice.

'Have you brought my little present?'

I pulled her tighter to my trousers. ‘You should be able to feel it.’

‘No.’ She pouted and put her hand on my chest. ‘Here, by your heart.’ She traced where the medallion should have lain against my skin, its disc, its dangling arms, all on a golden chain. ‘I wanted to wear it for you.’

‘And have us risk a stabbing?’ I kissed her again. ‘Besides, it’s not safe to carry such prizes around in the dark.’

Her hands were exploring my torso, to make sure. ‘I’d hoped for more courage.’

‘We’ll gamble for it. If you win, I’ll bring it next time.’

‘Gamble how?’ She cooed, in a professionally practiced way.

‘The loser will be the one who gains the summit first.’

She let her hair drift along my neck. ‘And the weapons?’

‘Any and all that you can imagine.’ I bent her back a little, tripping her on the leg I had wrapped against her ankles, and laid her on the bed. ‘*En garde.*’

I won our little contest, and at her insistence for a rematch, won a second and then a third, making her squeal. At least I think I won; with women you can never truly tell. It was enough to keep her sleeping when I rose before dawn and left a silver coin on my pillow. I put a log on the fireplace to help warm the room for her rising.

With the sky greying and the lantern bearers gone, common Paris was getting out of bed. Garbage carts trundled through the streets. Plankmen charged fees for temporary bridges laid over stagnant street water. Watermen

carried pails to the finer houses. My own neighbourhood of St Antoine was neither fine nor disreputable, but rather a working-class place of artisans, cabinetmakers, hatters, and locksmiths. Rent was kept down by a confusion of smells from the breweries and dye works. Enfolding all was the enduring Parisian odour of smoke, bread, and manure.

Feeling quite satisfied with my evening, I mounted the dark stairs intending to sleep until noon. So when I unlocked my door and pushed inside my dim quarters, I decided to feel my way to my mattress rather than bother with shutter or candle. I wondered idly if I could pawn the medallion – given Silano’s interest – for enough to afford better habitation.

Then I sensed a presence. I turned to confront a shadow among the shadows.

‘Who’s there?’

There was a rush of wind and I instinctively twisted sideways, feeling something whistle by my ear and collide with my shoulder. It was blunt, but no less painful for that. I buckled to my knees. ‘What the devil?’ The club had made my arm go numb.

Then someone butted me and I fell sideways, clumsy from agony. I was not prepared for this! I kicked out in desperation, connecting with an ankle and drawing a yowl that gave some satisfaction. Then I skidded on my side, grabbing blindly. My hand fastened around a calf and I pulled. The intruder fell on the floor with me.

‘*Merde,*’ he growled.

A fist hit my face as I grappled with my assailant, trying to get my own scabbard clear of my legs so I could draw

my sword. I was awaiting a thrust from my opponent, but none came. Instead, a hand groped for my throat.

‘Does he have it?’ another voice asked.

How many were there?

Now I had an arm and a collar and managed to land a blow on an ear. My opponent swore again. I yanked and his head bounced off the floor. My thrashing legs flipped a chair over with a bang.

‘Monsieur Gage!’ a cry came from down below. ‘What are you doing to my house?’ It was my landlady, Madame Durrell.

‘Help me!’ I cried, or rather gasped, given the pain. I rolled aside, got my scabbard out from under me, and started to draw my rapier. ‘Thieves!’

‘For Christ’s sake, will you help?’ my assailant said to his companion.

‘I’m trying to find his head. We can’t kill him until we have it.’

And then something struck and all went black.

I came to with a mind of mutton, my nose on the floor. Madame Durrell was crouched over me as if inspecting a corpse. When she rolled me over and I blinked, she jerked.

‘You!’

‘*Oui*, it is I,’ I groaned, remembering nothing for a moment.

‘Look at the mess of you! What are you doing alive?’

What was *she* doing leaning over me? Her flame-red hair always alarmed me, erupting in a wiry cloud like escaping

watch springs. Was it time for rent already? The warring calendars kept me in constant confusion.

Then I remembered the assault.

‘They said they were reluctant to kill me.’

‘How dare you entertain such ruffians! You think you can create a wilderness here in Paris as in America? You will pay for every sou in repairs!’

I groggily sat up. ‘Is there damage?’

‘An apartment in shambles, a good bed ruined! Do you know what my kind of quality costs these days?’

Now I began to make sense of the muddle, scraps pulsing through the gong that was my head. ‘Madame, I am a victim more than you.’ My sword had disappeared with my assailants. Just as well, since it was more for show than utility: I’d never been trained to use the thing and it banged annoyingly on the thigh. Given a choice, I’d rely on my longrifle or Algonquin tomahawk. I’d adopted the hatchet during my fur-trading days, learning from the Indians and voyageurs its utility as weapon, scalper, hammer, chopper, shaver, trimmer, and rope cutter. I couldn’t understand how Europeans did without one.

‘When I pounded on the door, your companions said you were drunk after whoring! That you were out of control!’

‘Madame Durrell, those were thieves, not companions.’ I looked about. The shutters were now open, admitting full morning light, and my apartment looked like it had been struck by a cannon ball. Cabinets were open, their contents spilt like an avalanche. An armoire was on its side. My fine feather mattress was flipped and torn, bits of

down floating in the air. A bookcase was toppled, my small library splayed. My gambling winnings were gone from my hollowed copy of Newton's treatise on optics that Franklin had bestowed as a gift – surely he hadn't expected me to read the thing – and my shirt was ripped open to my belly button. I knew it hadn't been torn to admire my chest. 'I've been invaded.'

'Invaded? They said you invited them!'

'Who said?'

'Soldiers, ruffians, vagabonds . . . they had hats, capes, and heavy boots. They told me there'd been an argument over cards and you would pay for damages.'

'Madame, I was almost murdered. I was away all night, came home, surprised thieves, and was knocked unconscious. Though I don't know what I had to steal.' I glanced at the wainscoting and saw it had been pried loose. Was my hidden rifle safe? Then my eye strayed to my chamber pot, as rank as before. Good.

'Indeed, why would thieves bother with a shabby fellow like you?' She looked at me sceptically. 'An American! All know your kind has no money.'

I set a stool upright and sat down heavily. She was right. Any neighbourhood shopkeeper could have told robbers I was behind on my debts. It must have been my winnings, including the medallion. Until the next game, I'd been rich. Someone from the cozy followed me here, knowing I'd leave shortly for Minette's. The captain? Silano? And I'd caught them with my dawn return. Or had they waited because they hadn't found what they were looking for? And who knew of my amorous plans? Minette, for one.

She'd pressed herself against me quickly enough. Was she in league with a scoundrel? It was a common enough ploy among prostitutes.

'Madame, I take responsibility for all repairs.'

'I would like to see the money to back that up, monsieur.'

'As would I.' I stood unsteadily.

'You must explain to the police!'

'I can best explain after questioning someone.'

'Who?'

'The young woman who led me astray.'

Madame Durrell snorted, and yet showed a glimmer of sympathy. For a man to be made a fool by a woman? Very French.

'Will you allow me the privacy to right my furniture, repair my clothes, and dress my bruises, madame? In spite of what you think, I'm modest.'

'A poultice is what you need. And keeping your breeches belted.'

'Of course. But I am also a man.'

'Well.' She stood. 'Every franc of this goes on your rent, so you'd better get back what you lost.'

'You can be certain of it.'

I pushed her outside and closed the door, setting the big pieces to right. Why hadn't they just killed me? Because they hadn't found what they were looking for. What if they returned, or a snoopy Madame Durrell decided to do her own cleaning? I put on a new shirt and fully pried open the wainscot by my washbasin. Yes, my Pennsylvania longrifle was safe: it was too obvious to carry about in a Paris street

and too conspicuous to hock, since it might be identified with me. My tomahawk was also there, and this I tucked into my favourite place, the small of my back beneath my jacket. And the medallion? I went to the chamber pot.

There it was under my own sewage. I fished it from its hiding place, washed myself in my basin, and threw waste and soiled water out the window to the night garden.

As I'd expected, it was the one place a thief wouldn't look. I slipped the cleansed medallion around my neck and set off to confront Minette.

No wonder she'd let me win our sexual contest! She was expecting to get the medallion another way, by distracting me!

Back I went the way I'd come, buying bread with the few coins I had left in my pocket. With full morning, Paris had erupted with people. Entrepreneurs accosted me with brooms, firewood, brewed coffee, toy windmills, and rat traps. Gangs of young louts lounged near fountains, where they extorted money for water. Children marched in uniformed troops to school. Draymen unloaded barrels into shops. A pink-cheeked lieutenant stepped from a tailor's shop, resplendent in the uniform of the grenadiers.

Yes, there was her house! I galloped up the stairs, determined to question her before she awakened and stole away. Yet even as I came up to her landing I sensed something was wrong. The building seemed curiously empty. Her door was slightly ajar. I rapped, but there was no answer. I looked down. The knob was askew, the stop splintered. When I swung it wide a cat darted out, its whiskers pink.

A single window and the coals of the fireplace gave adequate light. Minette was on the bed as I had left her, but with the sheet pulled from her naked body and her belly cut through with a knife. It was the kind of wound that killed slowly, giving its victim time to plead or confess. A pool of blood had formed on the wooden floor beneath the bed, and the cat had been lapping.

The slaying made no sense.

I glanced around her room. There was no sign of robbery. The window, I saw, was unlatched. I opened it to peer out at the muddy yard behind. Nothing.

What to do? People had seen us whispering together at the cozy, and it had been plain I'd intended to spend the night with her. Now she was dead, but why? Her mouth was agape, her eyes rolled back.

And then I spied it, even as I heard the heavy boots of men pounding up the stairs. The tip of her forefinger was bright with her own blood, and with it she had drawn something on the planks of pine. I tilted my head.

It was the first letter of my last name, the letter G.

'Monsieur,' a voice said from the landing, 'you are under arrest.'

I turned to see two gendarmes, a police formed by the revolutionary committees in 1791. Behind was a man who looked as if his suspicions had been confirmed. 'That's the one,' the swarthy fellow said with an Arab accent.

It was the man I'd hired as lantern bearer.

If the Terror had abated, French revolutionary justice still had a tendency to guillotine first, investigate later. Better

not to be arrested at all. I left poor Minette by springing to her chamber window, vaulting its frame, and dropping lightly to the muddy patch below. Despite the long night I hadn't lost my agility.

'Halt, murderer!' There was a bang, and a pistol shot sizzled by my ear.

I bounded over a picket fence to the alarm of a rooster, kicked my way past a territorial dog, found a passageway to an adjoining street, and ran. I heard shouts, but whether of alarm, confusion, or commerce I cannot say. Fortunately, Paris is a maze of six hundred thousand people and I was soon lost under the awnings of the markets of Les Halles, the damp earthiness of wintered apples, bright carrots, and shiny eels steadying my senses after the fantastic shock of the butchered body. I saw the heads of two gendarmes hurrying by the cheese aisle, so I went the other way.

I was in the worst kind of trouble, meaning I was not entirely sure what the trouble is. That my apartment had been ransacked I could accept, but who had killed my courtesan – the thieves I thought she was in league with? For what? She had neither my money nor my medallion. And why would Minette implicate me with a bloody fingertip? I was as baffled as I was frightened.

I felt especially vulnerable as an American in Paris. Yes, we'd depended on French aid to achieve our independence. Yes, the great Franklin had been a witty celebrity during his years as our nation's diplomat, his likeness reproduced on so many cards, miniatures, and cups that the king, in a rare display of royal wit, had him painted inside one ardent female admirer's chamber pot. And yes, my own connection

to the scientist and diplomat had won me a few well-placed French friends. But relations had worsened as France interfered with our neutral shipping. American politicians who welcomed the idealism of the French Revolution became disgusted by the Terror. If I had any usefulness in Paris, it was trying to explain each nation to the other.

I'd first come to the city fourteen years before, age nineteen, as a means for my shipping merchant father to disentangle my emotions (and his fortune) from Annabelle Gaswick and her socially ambitious parents. I didn't know for certain that Annabelle was with child, but I'll allow it was theoretically possible. It was not a match my family desired. A similar dilemma had reportedly driven young Ben Franklin from Boston to Philadelphia, and my father gambled that the ancient statesman might sympathise with my plight. It helped that Josiah Gage had served in the Continental Army as a major and, more importantly, was a third-degree Mason. Franklin, a longtime Freemason in Philadelphia, had been elected to the Paris Lodge of the Nine Muses in 1777, and the following year was instrumental in getting Voltaire initiated into the same august gathering. Since I'd made early trading trips to Quebec, spoke passable French, and was reasonably gifted with letters (I was in my second year at Harvard, though I'd already grown impatient with musty classics, the scholarly self-absorbed, and debates over questions for which there is no answer), my father suggested in 1784 that I might be an assistant to the American ambassador. In truth Franklin was seventy-eight, declining in vigour, and had no need of my naïve counsel, but he was willing to help a fellow Mason.

Once I was in Paris the old statesman took an odd liking to me, despite my lack of clear ambition. He introduced me to both Freemasonry and electricity.

‘In electricity is the secret force that animates the universe,’ Franklin told me. ‘In Freemasonry is a code of rational behaviour and thought that, if followed by all, would do much to cure the world of its ills.’

Freemasonry, he explained, had emerged in England at the dawn of our eighteenth century, but traced its origins to the guild of masons who wandered Europe building the great cathedrals. They were ‘free’ because their skills allowed them to find employment wherever they wanted and demand a fair wage when doing so – no small thing in a world of serfs. Yet Freemasonry dated itself even older than that, finding its roots in the Knights Templar of the Crusades, who had their headquarters at Jerusalem’s Temple Mount and later became the bankers and warlords of Europe. The medieval Templars became so powerful that their fraternity was crushed by the king of France and their leaders burnt at the stake. It was the survivors who reputedly were the seed of our own order. Like many groups, Masons took a certain pride in past persecution.

‘Even the martyred Templars are descendants of yet earlier groups,’ Franklin said. ‘Masonry traces its ancestry to the wise men of the ancient world, and to the stone workers and carpenters who built Solomon’s temple.’

Masonic symbols are the aprons and levelling tools of the stonemason, because the fraternity admires the logic and precision of engineering and architecture. While membership requires belief in a supreme being, no creed is specified, and

in fact its fellows are forbidden to discuss religion or politics in the lodge. It is a philosophical organisation of rationality and scientific enquiry, founded in freethinking reaction to the religious wars between Catholics and Protestants in earlier centuries. Yet it also plays with ancient mysticism and arcane mathematical precepts. Its emphasis on moral probity and charity, instead of dogma and superstition, make its commonsense teachings suspect to religious conservatives. Its exclusivity makes it a subject of jealousy and rumour.

‘Why don’t all men follow it?’ I asked Franklin.

‘Too many humans would gladly trade a rational world for a superstitious one if it calms their fears, gives them status, or gains them an advantage over their fellows,’ the American philosopher told me. ‘People are always afraid to think. And alas, Ethan, integrity is always a prisoner of vanity, and common sense is easily eclipsed by greed.’

While I appreciated my mentor’s enthusiasm, I was not a notable success as a Mason. Ritual tires me, and Masonic ceremony seemed obscure and interminable. There were a good deal of long-winded speeches, memorisation of tedious ceremonies, and vague promises of clarity that would come only when one advanced in Masonic degree. In short, Freemasonry was a bore, and took more effort than I was willing to give. It was with some relief that I left with Franklin to the United States the following year, and his letter of recommendation and my proficiency in French caught the attention of a rising New York fur trader named John Jacob Astor. Since I was advised to keep some distance from the Gaswick family – Annabelle had been married to a

silversmith in hurried circumstances – I leapt at the chance to experience the fur business in Canada. I rode with French voyageurs to the Great Lakes, learning to shoot and hunt, and at first thought I might find my future in the great West. Yet the farther we got from civilisation the more I missed it, and not just that of America, but Europe. A salon was a refuge from swallowing vastness. Ben said the New World was conducive to plain truth, and the Old to half-forgotten wisdom just waiting to be rediscovered. He was torn his whole life between the two, and so was I.

So I descended the Mississippi to New Orleans. Here was a miniature Paris, but hot, exotic, and newly decadent, a crossroads of African, Creole, Mexican, and Cherokee, of whores, slave markets, Yankee land speculators, and missionary priests. Its energy whetted my appetite for a return to urbanised comforts. I took ship to the French sugar isles, built on the back of restive slave labour, and had my first real introduction to the horrid inequity of life and the soothing blindness of societies built atop it. What sets our species apart is not just what men will do to other men, but how tirelessly they justify it.

Then I rode a sugar ship to Le Havre in time to hear of the storming of the Bastille. What a contrast were the Revolution's ideals to the horrors I'd just seen! Yet the growing chaos forced me out of France for years, while I made a living as a trade representative between London, America, and Spain. My goal was uncertain, my purpose suspended. I'd become rootless.

I finally returned to Paris when the Terror subsided, hoping to find opportunity in its chaotic, feverish society.

France boiled with an intellectual sophistication unavailable at home. All of Paris was a Leyden jar, a battery of stored-up sparks. Perhaps the lost wisdom that Franklin longed for could be rediscovered! Paris also had women with considerably more charm than Annabelle Gaswick. If I lingered, fortune might find me.

Now the police might instead.

What to do? I remembered something Franklin had written: that Freemasonry ‘made men of the most hostile feelings, the most distant regions, and diversified conditions, rush to the aid of each other.’ I was still an occasional participant because of its social connections. France had thirty-five thousand members in six hundred lodges, a fraternity of the able so powerful that the organisation had been accused of both fomenting the Revolution and conspiring to reverse it. Washington, Lafayette, Bacon, and Casanova had all been Masons. So had Joseph Guillotin, who invented the guillotine as a way to alleviate the suffering of hanging. In my country the order was a pantheon of patriots: Hancock, Madison, Monroe, even John Paul Jones and Paul Revere, which is why some suspect my nation is a Masonic invention. I needed advice, and would turn to my fellow Masons, or to one Mason in particular, the journalist Antoine Talma, who had befriended me during my irregular lodge visits because of his bizarre interest in America.

‘Your red Indians are descendants of ancient civilisations now lost, who found serenity that escapes us today,’ Talma liked to theorise. ‘If we could prove they are a tribe of Israel, or refugees from Troy, it would show the path to harmony.’

Obviously he hadn't seen the same Indians I had, who'd seemed cold, hungry, and cruel as often as they were harmonious, but I could never slow his speculations.

A bachelor who didn't share my interest in women, Antoine was a writer and pamphleteer with lodgings near the Sorbonne. I found him not at his desk but at one of the new ice-cream cafés near the Pont Saint-Michel, nursing a lemonade he claimed had curative powers. Talma was always faintly ill, and continuously experimenting with purgatives and diets to achieve elusive health. He was one of the few Frenchmen I knew who would eat the American potato, which most Parisians regarded as fit only for pigs. At the same time, he was always lamenting that he'd not lived life fully enough and longed to be the adventurer he imagined me to be, if only he didn't have to risk a cold. (I'd somewhat exaggerated my own exploits and secretly enjoyed his flattery.) He greeted me warmly as always, his young features innocent, his hair unruly even after being cut short in the new Republican fashion, his day coat rose-coloured with silver buttons. He had a broad forehead, wide, excited eyes, and a complexion as pale as cheese.

I nodded politely at his latest remedy and asked instead for a wickeder drink, coffee, and pastry. The black brew's addictive powers were periodically denounced by the government to obscure the fact that war made the beans hard to come by. 'Could you pay?' I asked Talma. 'I've had something of a mishap.'

He took a closer look. 'My God, did you fall down a well?' I was unshaven, battered, dirty, and red-eyed.

'I won at cards.' I noticed Talma's table was littered

with half a dozen failed lottery tickets. His luck at gambling didn't match my own, but the Directory relied on his kind of dogged optimism for much of its financial support. Meanwhile the café's gilt-bordered mirrors, reflecting endlessly, made me feel entirely too conspicuous. 'I need an honest lawyer.'

'As easy to find as a scrupulous deputy, vegetarian butcher, or virginal prostitute,' Talma replied. 'If you tried lemonade, it might help correct such fuzzy thinking.'

'I'm serious. A woman I was with has been murdered. Two gendarmes tried to arrest me for the deed.'

He raised his eyebrows, not certain whether I was joking. Once more, I had trumped his voyeuristic life. He also wondered, I knew, whether this was a tale he could sell to the journals. 'But why?'

'They had as witness a lantern bearer I'd hired. It was no secret her chamber was my destination; even Count Silano knew.'

'Silano! Who'd believe that rascal?'

'Perhaps the gendarme who discharged a pistol ball past my ear, that's who. I'm innocent, Antoine. I thought she'd been in league with thieves, but when I went back to confront her, she was dead.'

'Wait. Thieves?'

'I surprised them tearing apart my own apartment and they clubbed me. I won some money at the tables last night, and an odd medallion, but . . .'

'Please slow down.' He was patting his pockets looking for a scrap of paper. 'A medallion?'

I took it out. 'You can't write about this, my friend.'

‘Not write! You might as well say not breathe!’

‘It would only make my situation worse. You must save me with secrecy.’

He sighed. ‘But I could expose injustice.’

I put the medallion on the marble table, shielding it from the view of the other patrons with my torso, and slid it to my companion. ‘Look, the soldier I won it from said it was from ancient Egypt. Silano was curious. He bid on it, and even wanted to buy it, but I wouldn’t sell. I don’t see that it’s worth killing over.’

Talma squinted, turned it over, and played with its arms. ‘What are all these markings?’

I looked more closely for the first time. The furrow across the disc, as if marking its diameter, I have already described. Above, the disc was perforated in a seemingly random way. Below were three series of zigzag marks, the way a child might draw a mountain range. And beneath them, scratches like hash marks that formed a little triangle. ‘I have no idea. It’s extremely crude.’

Talma spread the two arms that hung down to make an upside-down V. ‘And what do you make of this?’

He didn’t need to explain. It looked like the Masonic symbol for a compass, the construction tool used to inscribe a circle. The order’s secret symbolism often paired the compass with a carpenter’s square, one overlying the other. Spread the medallion arms apart to the limit of their hinge and they would draw the circumference of a circle about three times the size of the disc above. Was this some kind of mathematical tool?

‘I don’t make anything of it,’ I said.

‘But Silano, of the heretical Egyptian Rite of Freemasonry, was interested. Which means that perhaps this has something to do with our order’s mysteries.’

Masonic imagery was said to be inspired by that of the ancients. Some were commonplace tools such as the mallet, trowel, and trestle board, but others were more exotic such as the human skull, pillars, pyramids, swords, and stars. All were symbolic, and meant to suggest an order to existence I’ve found hard to detect in everyday life. In each degree of Masonic advancement, more such symbols were explained. Was this medallion some ancestor of our fraternity? We hesitated to speak of it in the ice-cream café because lodge members are sworn to secrecy, which of course makes our symbolism all the more intriguing to the uninitiated. We’ve been accused of every kind of witchcraft and conspiracy, while mostly what we do is parade around in white aprons. As one wit declared, ‘Even if that is their secret – that they have no secret – still, it is an achievement to keep that a secret.’

‘It suggests the distant past,’ I said as I put it back around my neck. ‘The captain I won it from claimed it had come with Cleopatra and Caesar to Italy and was owned by Cagliostro, but the soldier thought so little of it that he gambled it away in *chemin de fer*.’

‘Cagliostro? And he said it was Egyptian? And Silano took interest?’

‘It seemed casual at the time. I thought he was simply bidding me up. But now . . .’

Talma pondered. ‘All this is coincidence, perhaps. A card game, two crimes.’

‘Perhaps.’

His fingers tapped. ‘Yet it could also be connected. The lantern bearer led the police to you because he calculated that your reaction to the ransacking of your apartment would be to unwittingly plunge yourself into the scene of a horrific murder, making you available for interrogation. Examine the sequence. They hope to simply steal the medallion. Yet it is not in your apartment. It has not been given to Minette. You are a foreigner of some standing, not assaulted lightly. But if charged with murder and searched . . .’

Minette had been killed merely to implicate me? My head was whirling. ‘Why would anyone want this so badly?’

He was excited. ‘Because great events are in motion. Because the Masonic mysteries you irreverently mock may at last have an effect on the world.’

‘What events?’

‘I have informants, my friend.’ He loved to be coy, pretending to know great secrets that somehow never made their way into print.

‘So you agree I’m being framed?’

‘But naturally.’ Talma regarded me gravely. ‘You have come to the right man. As a journalist, I seek truth and justice. As a friend, I presume your innocence. As a scribe who writes about the great, I have important contacts.’

‘But how can I prove it?’

‘You need witnesses. Would your landlady attest to your character?’

‘I don’t think so. I owe her rent.’

‘And this lantern bearer, how can we find him?’

‘Find him! I want to stay away from him!’

‘Indeed.’ He thought, sipping lemonade. ‘You need shelter, and time to make sense of this thing. Our lodge masters may be able to help.’

‘You want me to hide in a lodge?’

‘I want you safe while I determine if this medallion could give both of us an unusual opportunity.’

‘For what?’

He smiled. ‘I’ve heard rumours, and rumours of rumours. Your medallion may be timelier than you think. I need to speak to the right people, men of science.’

‘Men of science?’

‘Men close to the rising young general Napoleon Bonaparte.’