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ENCYCLOPÉDIE,
 O U
 DICTIONNAIRE RAISONNÉ
 DES SCIENCES,
 DES ARTS ET DES MÉTIERS,
 PAR UNE SOCIÉTÉ DE GENS DE LETTRES.

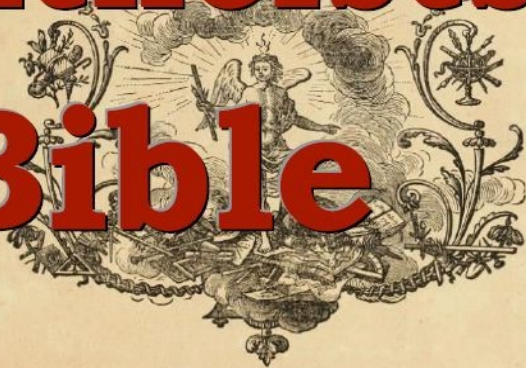
Mis en ordre & publié par M. *DIDEROT*, de l'Académie Royale des Sciences & des Belles-Lettres de Prusse; & quant à la PARTIE MATHÉMATIQUE, par M. *D'ALEMBERT*, de l'Académie des Sciences de Paris, de celle de Prusse, & de la Société Royale de Londres.

An

*Tantum series juncturaque pollet,
 Tantum de medio sumptis accedit honoris! HORAT.*

THOME PREMIER
Atheists'

Bible



A PARIS,

Chez { *BRIASSON, rue Saint Jacques, à la Science.*
DAVID l'aîné, rue Saint Jacques, à la Science.
LE BRETON, rue de la Harpe, au Griffon.
DURAND, rue Saint Jacques, à Saint Landry, & au Griffon.

Kurtis Sunday

M. DCC. LI.

AVEC APPROBATION ET PRIVILEGE DU ROY.

AN ATHEISTS' BIBLE

Paris, during the bloodiest days of the Revolution: a book entitled *An Atheists' Bible* is discovered by the authorities. Though it is considered 'profoundly reactionary and perversely pornographic', it is published as an example of how decadent and corrupt life under the Old Regime had been. But what is *An Atheists' Bible* and who wrote it? It is set in 1759 when the government of Louis XV was in the process of banning Diderot's great *Encyclopédie* and the Seven Years War was raging. It purports to be a true account of how the printer Bageuret discovers a secret cache of twenty sets of the *Encyclopédie* in a Parisian warehouse and teams up with the aristocratic twins, Gilles and Sophie-Françoise d'Argenson, to sell them. But finding buyers and smuggling the books out of Paris proves more difficult than anticipated. The *Encyclopédie* has many enemies, including the Jesuit General and the fanatic Brass Head de la Haye, who are determined to see the death of the abomination. And Paris is a city of spies and informers, a heaving metropolis where the notorious *cabinet noir* tries to keep tabs on everything that happens in the so-called *philosophy trade*, the black market in illegal books.

AN ATHEISTS' BIBLE

A NOVEL

KURTIS SUNDAY

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Front cover image: Title page of Diderot's *Encyclopédie*.
Back cover image:
Figurative System of Organisation of Human Knowledge from
Diderot's *Encyclopédie*,
also known as Diderot's *Tree of Knowledge*.

AN ATHEISTS' BIBLE

A truthful and philosophical history, unabridged and unexpurgated, of the year 1759, in which the comet the Englishman Mister Halley predicted would reappear did reappear; and concerning a conspiracy involving the late Monsieur Diderot's

Encyclopédie

ou

Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers.

This updated and annotated edition includes a list of personages featured, and the Author's original historical notes.

First edition:

□ IMPRIMÉ CHEZ WILLIAM TELL, AOÛT 1789 □

This edition:

□ IMPRIMÉ À PARIS, PAR L'IMPRIMERIE BEAUZÉE □

□ PRAIRIAL, L'AN REPUBLICAIN II □

* **ENCYCLOPAEDIA** The purpose of an encyclopaedia is to gather the knowledge that is scattered over the earth and to expose its general system to the men with whom we live, and to transmit it to the men who will come after us; so that the labours of past ages will not have been in vain for succeeding ages; so that our descendants, becoming more educated, will be more virtuous and happier; and so that we should not die without having deserved well of the human race. ... The universe is intelligible from an infinity of points of view by which it can be represented, and the number of possible systems of human knowledge is as great as that of these points of view. ... [The cross-references in this encyclopaedia] are the most important part ... where necessary ... they will attack, shake and secretly overturn ridiculous opinions which one would not dare to openly insult. This encyclopaedia is ... by necessity ... a bizarre compound of sublime qualities and shameful weaknesses.

– Definition of ENCYCLOPAEDIA
in Diderot's *Encyclopédie*

(* indicates that the article was written by Diderot)

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MID-18TH-CENTURY WAGES, PRICES AND CURRENCY
IN FRANCE

In the 1750s, a run-of-the-mill unbound ‘philosophical work’ or a ‘bad book’ cost between 2 or 3 livres.

A compositor in a good print shop could hope to earn about 15 livres a week when employed.

A skilled locksmith or joiner could earn 50 sous a day, a mason, 40 sous, a labourer might earn 20 sous.

Lawyers and low-ranking magistrates in lower courts could make between 2,000 to 3,000 livres a year.

In a good year, a loaf of bread cost 8 or 9 sous.

12 deniers = 1 sou

20 sous = 1 livre tournois or 1 franc

3 livres = 1 écu,

10 livres = 1 pistole

24 livres = 1 louis.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER, COMPOSED BY THE EDITOR

Argenson, Gilles d' – *a civil servant under the Old Regime*

Argenson, Sophie-Françoise d' – *a kept woman & pornographer, sister to Gilles d'Argenson*

Abyssinie, the Chevalier d' – *a Moor*

Bageuret, Christophe – *an innocent child*

Bageuret, Sebastien – *a bookmaker*

Blanche, Emilie – *a mother & victim of injustice*

Bossuet, Pierre Simon – *a secret agent & a cripple*

Breton, Le – *the printer of the ENCYCLOPÉDIE*

Brogie, Abbot de – *a cleric & servant of the Old Regime but not entirely lacking in humanity*

Charpentier, Christine – *owner of IMPRIMERIE CHARPENTIER, widow of Jacques Charpentier*

Charpentier, Jacques – *deceased, previous owner of IMPRIMERIE CHARPENTIER*

Columbier, Mademoiselle du – *a hypocritically pious acquaintance of Brass Head de la Haye*

Damiens, Robert Françoise – *a friend of Liberty & an enemy of tyrants*

Desforges – *Pierre Simon Bossuet's long-lost friend & victim of Old Regime injustice*

Diderot, Denis – *the illustrious encyclopédiste*

Gourdan, Madame – *an infamous bordelière & purveyor of diletto*

Graffigny, the Abbé Honoré de – *a book smuggler, drunkard & atheist, given to unnatural vice*

Graffigny, the Jesuit François-Antoine de – *an enemy of Reason & Liberty*

Grammarians, the – *a ne'er-do-well book smuggler turned police agent*

Guesclin, Vicomte du – *a friend of Diderot, a lecher & factory owner*

Haye, Brass Head de la – *a zealous persecutor of the ENCYCLOPÉDIE*

Holbach, Baron Paul Heinrich d' – Denis Diderot's
collaborator on the ENCYCLOPÉDIE

Klopstock, Stefan von – *a young man from Westphalia*

Longchamp, Jean-Baptiste – *Diderot's secretary, a
man with radical ideas on the composition of society*

Möllendorf, Margrave von – *a German aristocrat & prisoner
of war*

Möllendorf, Professor von – *the Margrave von Möllendorf's
uncle*

Orieux – *a lawyer*

Raynal, Adélaïde – *the Baron d'Holbach's secretary
& a femme savante*

Roguin – *comptroller of the Rue de Nicot bureau of
the cabinet noir*

Sade, Comte de – *as a young cavalry officer & friend of the
Revolution*

Vereaux, Madame Isabelle de – *a Jesuit spy & whore*

Walsh, Madame de – *an older lady & a student of Nature*

*And also featuring Voltaire, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the
father of the late tyrant Louis Capet, and assorted historical
personages, aristocrats, churchmen, whores, police agents,
nightsoil collectors, scribblers, servants and lackeys.*

EDITOR'S PREFACE

An Atheists' Bible first appeared in the dying days of the Old Regime – printed CHEZ WILLIAM TELL, an obvious allusion to Neuchâtel – both its author and publisher were anonymous, as was the custom in those unenlightened days. Today, under the Republic of Virtue, no man but the most scurrilous fails to put his name under his own words or shrinks from public scrutiny. The type was sloppily composed, only a small quantity of copies printed and it did not sell well – perhaps because in those heady days of the Dawn of the New Age, men's eyes were on the Future rather than the Past. The book then more or less disappeared from view, its brief life lived, and fated, like most books, deservedly or undeservedly, to slowly fade from memory. It would probably never have seen the light of day again had not Providence decreed that Citizen Beauzée come across a copy of it during the course of his duties for the Public Safety Committee and decide to re-present it to the public, albeit in a new and revised edition.

As a trusted Citizen and True Patriot, Citizen Beauzée – and I trust the modest man will not censor these words of deserved praise – has the onerous duty of disposing of the libraries of traitors condemned by the Revolutionary Tribunal, some of which contain books of not inconsiderable value or indeed merit. Many a returned émigré, renegade aristocrat and spy has read his Rousseau and Voltaire. The enemies of the Revolution are neither uneducated nor stupid, and all the more dangerous for it; and their knowledge of the ideas from which the Revolution sprang enables them both to manipulate public opinion and to mingle surreptitiously among us. Citizen Beauzée's duties call for the utmost integrity – like the Incorruptible himself, Citizen Robespierre, he lives in the modest circumstances that true devotion to the Revolution calls for – and for commercial expertise; the widows and orphans of the Republic, to whom the proceeds of the sales of all the effects and chattels of traitors are donated, depend upon it. Many of these confiscated books, with the aid of Citizen Beauzée's astute sense of commerce, fetch high prices. Others, for which an honest market is unlikely to be found, and which no honest citizen would be overly inclined to read, or which are simply unreadable – tastes have become

considerably more discerning since the Revolution – are simply pulped. Paper, like much these days, is scarce and the demand high. And it was thus, while carrying out these duties, in a roundabout way, that Citizen Beauzée first came across the first edition of the book that you, Citizen Reader, now have before you.

But to begin at the beginning: In Messidor, Year I of the Republic, the Convention ordered the arrest of Citizen Caritat, or rather, to call him by his true name, the Marquis de Condorcet – for, as Citizen Robespierre has pointed out, only those loyal to the Republic can truly be considered citizens, and those who flee, those who fear public examination, cannot be considered innocent. And de Condorcet did flee, initially ferreting himself away in a so-called safe house in Paris, that since notorious den of scheming émigrés, Madame Vernet's on the Rue Servandoni. His presence there was detected but before he could be apprehended he managed to escape. However, his effects, mainly papers but also a quantity of books, were confiscated by the Revolutionary Tribunal. In the normal course of events, these would have been placed under seal and stored in the archives of the Public Safety Committee until such time as he could be secured, questioned and examined, or failing that, tried *in absentia*. But the Committee's archives, including the records of the Revolutionary Tribunal, were becoming considerable, and the storage of documents that it was not absolutely essential to safeguard for future reference was becoming problematic. (The Palais National is a spacious building but has to house not only the Convention itself and its numerous offices but also the various committees and subcommittees of the Revolutionary Government.¹ At the time, the Public Safety Committee had only been allocated the apartments where the Baker's Wife – Marie-Antoinette Capet – had been lodged after the women of Paris had brought the tyrants back from Versailles, and had not yet been allocated the apartments where the Baker himself – Louis Capet, the last French king, and tyrant – had been lodged, so things were rather cramped. De Condorcet, it will be remembered, actually voted for the acquittal of Capet.) So Citizen Beauzée was asked to store de Condorcet's papers and books at his print works until such time as the case could be brought to a conclusion, and the books could be legally disposed of, or not, depending on the outcome of the legal proceedings against de Condorcet.

¹ For readers unfamiliar with the new Paris: The Palais National was known as the Palais des Tuileries under the Old Regime.

Many of de Condorcet's books were potentially, under normal circumstances, readily saleable – he was, after all, an *académicien*. The most valuable among them was a complete set of Diderot's *Encyclopédie des sciences et des arts* (the Lausanne–Berne 1778–82 octavo edition, including plates), to which de Condorcet contributed some articles for the later volumes, in near-virgin condition; plus a miscellaneous collection of other volumes, all expensively bound in green morocco, on social mathematics, a branch of that queen of sciences which concerns itself with methods of interpreting statistics, and on the mathematics of chance. And also, bound and in very good condition (Citizen Beauzée has insisted that for accuracy's sake I list them): 8 copies of de Condorcet's own *Sur l'admission des femmes au droit de Cité*; 6 first-edition copies of his *Réflexions sur l'esclavage des nègres*, published in Neuchâtel under a pseudonym, a book which exposed one of the worst abuses of the natural rights of man in our time (de Condorcet was not a man without humane qualities, as were not a small number of our enemies before their selfish and ineradicable attachments to privilege caused them to become enemies of the Revolution); and 13 copies of his *Essai sur la constitution et les fonctions des Assemblées provinciales*, a book whose questionable tenets are only rendered more questionable by the praise heaped upon it by numerous so-called federalists. And there were two other books: a first-edition copy of *The Treatise of the Three Imposters* – an atheist tract, penned by the Irishman Toland circa 1750 (the three alleged imposters being Moses, Jesus and Mahomet);² and a copy of *An Atheists' Bible*. Among de Condorcet's effects too was a document entitled *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain* which Citizen Beauzée initially thought to be a book circulating in manuscript; however, on closer examination it turned out to be the uncompleted draft of something that de Condorcet, incorrigible scribbler that he was, had been working on. Eventually, in Vendémiaire, Year II, de Condorcet was tried – *in absentia* – along with de Brissot, de

² John Toland alias Janus Junius alias Seán Ó Tuathaláin actually claimed that *The Treatise of the Three Imposters* was a very old manuscript and that he had merely stumbled across a copy of it and felt obliged to bring it to the attention of the public etc. Some took the claim seriously. Toland, it has to be admitted, was prolific and much of his work is not without merit (one of his early books was publicly burned by the authorities in Dublin). He is also credited with first coining the word *pantheism*.

Verniaud, de Gensonné and de Valozé, found guilty of conspiring against the Unity of the Republic and was condemned to death. Not being in custody, he was officially declared an émigré, outlawed and the remainder of his considerable property was finally confiscated, including the above. Citizen Beauzée informs me that, as yet, at the time of writing, all these items have yet to be disposed of.

But back to our tale: Citizen Beauzée, one of our Republic's most knowledgeable men in the world of books, had heard of *An Atheists' Bible* – it is not a title one easily forgets – but had never actually held a copy of it in his hands. On a close and critical reading of it, he immediately recognised the book as a valuable document – despite much of its content being, not to put too fine a point on it, profoundly reactionary and perversely pornographic. If correctly handled, he believed, republished, it could find a market among men who wish to paint themselves a picture of how life was in philosophe and aristocratic circles – and the machinations of power – at a time when the Old Regime was still solidly in place. (Though to the discerning eye even then, thirty years ago now, the cracks in the corrupt feudal social and political edifice were visible, at least to those with discerning eyes who wished to use them.)

So, after much consideration, Citizen Beauzée decided to print a new edition of the work, and when he requested that I pen a preface, expand and elucidate the footnotes, do some essential editing and correction, provide a *dramatis personae*, and generally cast an editor's eye over the text, I was of course honoured. There was much to do: the original was peppered with typographical and orthographical inaccuracies, and at times the tale rambles more than a bit, especially concerning current events of the time, and what is less interesting than last year's news-sheet? (Unless one lives in Tahiti!) And it reads at times a little peculiar – almost, on occasion, as if the text were translated from another language, not that there is any reason for thinking that it might be the case; so some stylistic tidying up was also called for. At times too, the author's attention to detail borders on the pedantic – he claims to have been a librarian, a claim which rings true – so some judicious pruning was also called for.

But Citizen Beauzée also had an additional request: that I attempt to investigate the origin of the book and ascertain the identity of the author. My first thought was: Did de Condorcet himself actually write it? But *An Atheists' Bible* describes events which took place early in 1759 and de Condorcet was born in 1743, which meant he would have been barely fifteen years of age at the time,

and his file in the archives of the Revolutionary Tribunal records him as studying mathematics at the Collège de Navarre then. Of course, it is possible that *An Atheists' Bible* is entirely a work of fiction and that he wrote it on the basis of things he had been told and things he had imagined. But Citizen Beauzée, immeasurably more erudite in these matters than myself, dismisses that as highly implausible: the style and content is simply so much at odds with de Condorcet's other works; and, in addition, were it the work of a man of Condorcet's wealth, he would hardly have had the text composed by a near-illiterate compositor and printed on the equivalent of re-pulped handbill paper. No, a man of de Condorcet's means and with his unabashed penchant for self-publicity would have had it published on the best paper, bound by the best binders, and would have let the world know it had been written by him while all the while denying it. "I am convinced," Citizen Beauzée assured me, "the only reason that de Condorcet had it in his effects is because of his atheist sympathies. Nothing else. The clue to the identity of the author of this work lies elsewhere." But where? "Perhaps, Citizen Delille," Citizen Beauzée suggested, "you will have to do some literary detective work in the manner of Lorenzo Valla."³ My task, however, was not to uncover who the manuscript was *not* written by but by whom it *was* written. "A book like this needs perspective, or rather the reader of it does," Citizen Beauzée pointed out, "if the identity of its author were known ... well, what a man writes is better judged if we know who he is. This book bears upon our history, on the Revolution. A lot is at stake. This is not a time to take men's words at face value."

Embellishment, indeed falsification, is an attribute of much, if not most, Old Regime literature; and, again and again, we come across works which claim to be true *mémoires* or histories but are in fact nothing of the kind. Some, of course, are so transparently fictional that their claim to verisimilitude is obviously nothing more than a literary conceit, and there is no attempt to deceive in

³ Lorenzo Valla, a quattrocento Italian, proved by literary analysis that the Donation of Constantine, a forgery that purportedly gave the popes temporal dominion over the Western Roman Empire and various islands, could not have been written in the time of Constantine and was in fact written centuries later; not that that mere detail prevented the Papacy from doling out undiscovered lands to Spain and Portugal a hundred years later, when Columbus was sailing the ocean blue and plundering the New World.

the real meaning of the word. But there are no end of works, texts of history, of religion and political philosophy which, like the Donation of Constantine, were written with nothing else in mind but purposeful deceit, and whose principal, if surreptitious, aim was the preservation of the way of thinking which justified the privileges of the few and the servitude of the many. *An Atheists' Bible* cannot be said to neatly fall into that category but it was written in an epoch imbued with – how should one put it? – besides corruption of the purely venal kind, a corruption of the spirit which, like the tentacles of the giant Portuguese jellyfish, inevitably injected a feudalistic toxicity into all thought and social intercourse of the time. Some men were corrupt and knew it; others were corrupt and did not know it. And both are still among us. *An Atheists' Bible* is not free from this corruption, despite its subject matter and many of the unquestionably laudable ideas some of its protagonists profess. (Though at times, it should be noted, one can detect quiet and not-so-quiet sneers at men who have visions of a better world.) So, while one cannot claim that it holds the banner of Truth high above the barricades of History – that is a claim that can be made for few works written under the shadow of the jellyfish of the Old Regime – the book is of some value. If we wish to learn about conditions under the Old Regime, and not forget why the Revolution, painful, bloody and fearful as at times it undoubtedly is, had to take place, it is necessary that we study critically what is worth studying of the literature and histories we have inherited from that time. Approached in the correct spirit, such works can help us understand how Providence cried out for the Revolution from the depths of peasants' hovels and workers' tenements; and they remind us who the enemies of the People are and how they held sway for centuries, and that if the Revolution is not successfully defended, how society could slip again into centuries of darkness. And in this case, both Citizen Beauzée and I believed we could learn most fruitfully from *An Atheists' Bible* if we knew who the author was, what his motives were and whose interests he served, knowingly or unknowingly.

And the tale *is* embellished. The author himself, or herself (although he does describe himself as a Man of Letters, I did not entirely dismiss the possibility that we could be dealing with an authoress), says as much. No *storyteller*, he confesses, *is privy to everything and the faculty of memory, even at the best of times, is imperfect*, and that *even the driest of history-tellers must of necessity use his imagination and even phantasy may be necessary*. But after several weeks reflecting on the text, I came to the

conclusion that, though embellished, *An Atheists' Bible* was written by somebody intimately involved in the events described in such detail in its pages, and also that it was actually written by one of the characters portrayed in it; for the simple reason that no one not involved in the story could possibly have knowledge of all the details and the ins and outs of the events described. But the question was: Which character could this be? The character who was present on all occasions and partook in all the action and conversation would be the obvious suspect; but there is no character that fulfils that condition. The author himself further admits that the names of characters been *invented or changed* – but he does not say that he invented characters outright, which, all things considered, I tend to believe is the case. The personages in *An Atheists' Bible* given their real names and those who played a significant role in the history are now in their graves. Those mentioned in passing, such as the Abbé Raynal – now Citizen Raynal, at the ripe old age of eighty and more, and living in retirement at Montlhéry – were highly unlikely to be informative (or so I thought, but more about that anon). However, it did occur to me that even though the names of the principal protagonists had been *invented or changed*, it might be possible, using clues in the text, to actually identify some of them; and if they were still living, seek them out in the hope that they might be able to shed some light upon the matter.

Firstly, I thought that perhaps Imprimerie Charpentier might still be in existence, and on visiting the Rue Paradis I found four bookshops; but there was no sign of any Imprimerie Charpentier and nobody I questioned could remember any; but then perhaps – indeed, it is more than likely – the name was fictional. The market described still takes place every Duodi and Octidi (under the old calendar it used to be every Tuesday).

My second thought was that there was one person in the history of whom there might be a still extant official record: the enigmatic Pierre Simon Bossuet – and perhaps his family name was actually real, for much is made of it in the text. Perhaps there were *cabinet noir* records which mentioned him; though that institution, rightly called *one of the most absurd and most infamous inventions of despotism*, has now been abolished, the Convention having proclaimed the inviolability of all personal correspondence except in the case of real and present dangers to the safety and wellbeing of the Republic. But it seems, or so I was informed, the *cabinet noir* records for the years in question had been stored in the basements of the Bastille and had been destroyed with it on the

historic day when it was stormed by the People. It also proved impossible to find any records relating to Bossuet's alleged attachment to the Marquis de l'Hôpital's Embassy to Saint Petersburg. However, the dates of Bossuet's employment at the Compagnie des Indes were reasonably precise and since his time there had not been entirely uneventful, perhaps there were Compagnie records still extant which might cast some light. But the Compagnie no longer existed. Investigated for counter-revolutionary activity and corruption, it was finally suppressed in Vendémiaire, Year II, its ships and other properties nationalised (valued at over 24,500,000 livres), and most of its directors eventually brought to answer before the Revolutionary Tribunal. I say *most* because, during the course of my enquiries, it came to my attention that many of these criminals had actually escaped justice – by means of a conspiracy which is being investigated as I write – and are still at large, in a manner of speaking. This requires some explanation, and the telling of it will, I hope, prove salutary.

There exist within our midst, within Paris itself and in the suburbs, certain institutions which are called Maisons de Santé – known under the Old Regime, more accurately, it could be argued, as *pensions bourgeoises* – institutions which unscrupulous individuals have set up in order to profiteer from the essential humanity of the Republic itself. Just as the Republic has abolished barbaric methods of execution – of the kind graphically illustrated in *An Atheists' Bible* – it also does not put on trial those suffering from mental troubles which would render them unfit to speak in their own defence. But abusing this laudable dispensation, numerous suspects – those of sufficient means, let it not go unsaid – have bribed medical men and police officials in order to procure for themselves certificates of mental incapacity; and have thus had themselves interned and placed under *medical supervision* in these so-called Maisons de Santé, in circumstances which the word *lenient* does not describe. One of the most notorious of these – and one currently under investigation – is run, or rather was run, by a certain *Doctor* Belhomme, a one-time mirror-maker whose medical qualifications are more than questionable, in several spacious and luxurious houses on the Rue de Charonne. And it was there that I was informed that several of the directors and higher functionaries of the Compagnie des Indes had ferreted themselves away, among a motley collection of marquises, *comtes*, duchesses, priests, royalist army officers, rich lawyers, corrupt bankers, common embezzlers, a sprinkling of celebrity actors from the Comédie Française, and some genuine lunatics kept for

appearances' sake. Some even had their families with them. In theory, when a *patient* is *cured*, a certificate to this effect is issued and the suspect returned to the regular prison authorities: but as long as they are paying good money for their daily board, lodging and *treatment* ... the reader can imagine the abuses that follow. We are surrounded by conspiracies plausible and seemingly implausible, some of them so outlandish that it strains one's sense of reality to believe that they exist.

Getting access to the rogue Belhomme's Maison de Santé did not present any great difficulties. Citizen Gauthier, who has the honour of serving as a juror at the Revolutionary Tribunal, is a good friend and knows how to open doors. Indeed, without his assistance, this investigation would have been greatly less satisfactory than it has been.

"The mentally troubled," Belhomme informed me on my arrival at his establishment, "find solace in the harmless rituals of daily life. Routine is a great healer." *The mentally troubled!* I held my tongue. I shall not describe the luxury of the place, besides noting that while the People of Paris are queuing for bread and the essentials of life, *Doctor* Belhomme's *patients* were gorging themselves on all manner of delicacies, and were allowed the services of barbers and all sorts.

A fellow, powdered and rouged to the hilt, with that supercilious manner of speaking typical of the most useless species of popinjay-aristocrat – though he didn't say much – and the bearing of a pageboy despite the fact he must have been in his forties, was asked to escort me to the room where the three directors of the Compagnie des Indes had been assembled for interview. They were a sorry-looking lot. One of them, a liberty bonnet on his head, was crouched on a stool rocking himself into some sort of trance. However, the other two seemed quite *compos mentis*. One, although he had the effrontery to introduce himself as Citizen *de Vergennes* but was the only one who had the decency or wherewithal to stand up as I entered, was sixty if a day; I immediately recognised him as the cock of the village triumvirate. The other was a younger man, perhaps approaching thirty, big-boned, with that pup-ish well-fed look so typical of his class, oozing that ingrained assumption that the world was created primarily for him and his likes. But he was too young – the events I was interested had probably taken place before he was born. So I addressed myself to the older man.

"God knows where any of the records are kept," he said, after I had explained my business, "the seizure of the of the Compagnie's

assets was not as orderly as ... well, let us say, as it could have been."

"The Revolution cannot always concern itself with bureaucratic niceties," I felt obliged to point out.

"But," he said, "I do remember something ... something that might fit with what you have told me ..."

Needless to say, I was immediately all ears.

"Of course, it's a long time ago now ..." he began to ramble a bit, and I let him go on, as it seemed to be helping him to remember, "... another world, young man, another world entirely." I felt like saying there was only one world. One hears it so often, this idea that things were so different before, that one cannot judge them by the standards of today, and so on. Excuses, nothing but excuses! I thought for a moment he was under the influence but then I remembered that alcohol was the one thing forbidden the inmates of these rest homes, indeed strictly so. "There was a chap – he'd been with the Compagnie a few years before my time – who applied for a pension. Nothing unusual about that of course, but I remember it because the application came from Saint Petersburg and it was not really a pension, but a demand for a recompense from the Compagnie for injuries received during his service with us in Pondicherry ... claimed he'd been lamed and disfigured or something ... and that it had been due to the Compagnie's negligence. And he'd got a good character reference from the Ambassador to the Tsar at the time, the Marquis de l'Hôpital if I remember correctly – or is one supposed to refer to him as Citizen Hôpital these days, or perhaps Delôpital?"

I let him guffaw at his inane joke.

"Can't remember his name," he continued. "But anyway, to cut a long story short, I think he was given something. We did try to be fair." The extent these people go to justify themselves – and, what's worse, I'm sure they believe their own justifications – has to be experienced to be believed. *Tried to be fair!* Forced labour, legal robbery, slavery, torture, utter contempt for the common man, barbaric punishments, lettres de cachet, book burning and arbitrary censorship, religious intolerance, persecution of Jewish citizens ... I shall not even try and produce a comprehensive list. And they have the nerve to accuse us of being immoderate. But I held my anger in check. The director's little trip down memory lane had shed no light on who the author of *An Atheists' Bible* might be, but it did lead me to the conclusion that if our unknown author had taken such pains to be accurate in the minor details of his history, then surely he had been even more conscientious with regard to the

details of the larger tale.

The prancing pageboy escorted me back to Belhomme's office, but this time he was more talkative.

"Did they talk, sir?" he asked me. "The truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, and all that? Must be difficult to find out what's really going on. Impossible probably. Especially in these exciting times."

"That's what tyrants want us to believe," I retorted. "That we can't really know what is really going on. Men are becoming less ignorant."

As Belhomme escorted me to the guard post, which was manned by two lounging tricolour-cockaded guards smelling of garlic and drink, I enquired the pageboy's name and of what he'd been accused.

"Nothing," he said. "Philippe's been with us for years. Totally incurable. Tragic really. He thinks he somebody important but won't tell us who."

As I made my way back to the city centre, it occurred to me how sometimes it is indeed difficult to separate the insane man from the evil man; perhaps, even, that real evil is a sort of wilful insanity.

Belhomme's racket was exposed shortly afterwards. He was arrested in Pluviôse, Year II, and charged with among other things, supplying his *patients* with alcohol. At the time of writing, he is awaiting trial. Though I have reason to believe that other Maisons de Santé continue to exist. A hundred livres or more a month is reported to be the going rate, in the *cheapest* of them.

The third possible avenue of enquiry was Adélaïde Raynal. Perhaps the author had simply neglected, out of some sort of literary absent-mindedness, to rename her – if indeed that was her real name. So many ifs! Or perhaps he wanted, for some reason, to emphasise her relationship to her illustrious uncle, Abbé Raynal. (The character given the name Jean-Baptiste Longchamp had also come to mind but I was told that most of Diderot's papers – and thus any possible record of Longchamp's time with Diderot – had been sold along with Diderot's library to the tyrants in Saint Petersburg.)

Tracking down Citizen Raynal at his Montlhéry retreat was easy enough. Despite his age – he's eighty if a day, as I've said – and the rumours that he was senile, he seemed as bright as a button to me, if not quite steady on his feet. We took a walk in the surrounding countryside, at his insistence.

"I remember quite a bit of those days," he told me after the usual politenesses. "More than I do of the years after. They were

memorable times, and all the more so in hindsight. It's when the seeds were sown, I suppose, when it all started."

"It?" I asked.

"Our Revolution," he said. He pronounced the word in the typical accent of his class, and I must admit that my ears always detect a hint of irony, disrespect even, when it and other words from our new vocabulary issue from aristocratic lips. But I also thought I detected a sense of ... perhaps disillusionment, despair even. These are difficult times, and who has not on occasion felt momentarily overwhelmed by the historic challenges we face, the inevitable black moments? The common man might have been born in a state of natural virtue – *free, but everywhere in chains*, as the Great Rousseau put it – but centuries of oppression and being nurtured into a state of the darkest ignorance and leeched of all sense of natural *fraternité* has worked its corrupting power and degraded his natural and wholesome passions, at times almost to the level of the bestial. The righteous rage in the People's hearts is a terrifying thing to behold; but without the Terror, blunt instrument that it is, this rage would burn more like a fever that kills the patient rather than one that purges the sickness from the body and brings the relief of a new dawn. Sanson's guillotine is a necessity, not a cause for joy. As for those who claim that liberty is being destroyed in the fervour to safeguard the Revolution: I call on them to name any dictator or king who could walk the streets as casually as Citizen Robespierre strolls from the artisan's quarters that is his home to the Convention and the Committees, unescorted by armed men, unguarded! Men of Raynal's class have not got reason to complain; but then, self-indulgence was always an aristocratic trait, and old habits die hard. The People cannot afford such intellectual luxuries. "The irony of it," he went on, "is that if Diderot, d'Holbach, Montesquieu, Voltaire, even Malesherbes and the rest, had been successful ..." – he had obviously not heard that Malesherbes had come under suspicion, but I let it pass – "... the Bastille would still be standing and there'd still be a King of France."

I did not understand what he was talking about and told him so. There is no point in beating around the bush with these matters.

"They wanted reform," he said. "But things were not reformed, neither the feudal system nor the treasury. And if Louis had not run out of money and been forced to convene an Estates-General ... Very bad accounting is what has got us into the current ..."

"That world was irreformable," I found myself saying, "rotten to the very core. It needed to be swept away, eradicated from the face of the earth. Reform, or what might have been taken by reform by

those who practice the arts of self-delusion, would have only breathed new life into the Hydra, or tried to, or seemed to. You should know that, Citizen Raynal, they burned your book.”

His *Histoire des deux Indes* was burned by Sanson's father – or maybe it was his grandfather – in 1781.

“Made my reputation,” he said. “There were fifteen editions you know.”

Each edition had been more outrageous than the one preceding it, at least in the beginning; and they say that Diderot had written more than a bit of it. It was the third edition that had really got him into trouble; he'd actually put his name and an engraving of himself on the frontispiece. He had narrowly escaped arrest and hadn't been allowed back into the country for five years, and even then, only on condition that he kept out of Paris. The book, as he had said, had made his reputation, though his letter to the *Assemblée nationale* in which he's written of *the errors of the people* had not left that reputation unscathed.

“Was there something in particular you wanted to ask me if I remembered, Citizen Delille?” he asked.

I explained. There was a woman, I said, who had worked for d'Holbach in the capacity of a sort of secretary, who was possibly related to him, and whom he'd possibly recommended to d'Holbach; and that if she was still alive I should like to question her about a book.

He asked me what kind of book it was, what it was about.

“Atheism?” he repeated when I told him. “The aristocratic creed, as I believe Citizen Robespierre calls it. What possible interest can it be to anyone what a secretary did or said thirty years ago?”

“History,” I said. “We need to understand the past if we are to shape the future.”

“No,” he said, “I can't recall.”

“But you say you remembered that time well.”

“Did I? Well, maybe I just think I remember it well. The mind is always playing tricks on us, you know.”

Not entirely satisfied with his reply, I pressed him a bit as we walked back to his house, or his *cottage* as he called it. In the distance, high above the trees, the Montlhéry castle tower loomed over what had once been the Noailles domain. The Comte de Noailles, Duc de Mouchy, Prince de Poix, Duc de Poix – the titles these people gave themselves! – and the rest of his clan were under lock and key in the Luxembourg, and the castle and the domain were now the property of the Republic. But Raynal swore he remembered nothing. I won't say he was telling an untruth but I

did have the distinct feeling that he just didn't want to talk any further with me. As I left, he enquired how the preparations for the Festival of the Supreme Being were coming along.

The next morning, on the Quartidi, I made my way back to Paris. It's a full day's journey from Montlhéry, so it was Sextidi evening before I managed to get around to the Jacobins. The new sign, with our new name, La Société des amis de la liberté et de l'égalité, had been erected on the arch above the gate to the courtyard in my absence. There I learnt that de Condorcet had fled the safe house on the Rue Servandoni – the ring around Madame Vernet's little den was tightening – but had been apprehended at a hamlet called Clamart in Fontenay-aux-Roses. My first thought was that it might just still be possible to interview him in the Luxembourg, so I immediately sought out Citizen Gauthier. The justice of the Revolution is swift, and determined – as it should be, for what is at stake is immeasurable; we are engaged in a merciless war and must be merciless in turn – but even in a revolution, prisons are bureaucratic institutions. Citizen Gauthier informed me that de Condorcet had not yet been brought to Paris and related the circumstances of the fugitive's capture. He had been arrested due to an incident that really shows how far removed these aristocrats and *académiciens* are from the daily circumstances and lives of common men. Disguised as a worker, he had ordered an omelette at an inn, but when the owner asked him how many eggs he wanted, the man who lectured the Assemblée nationale on *the errors of the people* replied: *a dozen*. A dozen! A dozen eggs in an omelette! You couldn't make it up! Well, as one can imagine, the innkeeper was somewhat taken aback, but was on his toes; and he immediately informed the local authorities. De Condorcet was asked to produce his papers – he didn't have any – was questioned, tried to pull off some cock-and-bull story about being a carpenter but one look at his hands, hands that never known a day of honest physical labour in his life, betrayed that tale for the fabrication that it was. Eventually he admitted who he was and was clapped in irons, as they say, and conveyed to Bourg-la-Reine.

Two days later however, on the Octidi evening to be precise, I was at the Jacobins again; and, as is the custom when important news arrives or an important political development needs to be reported, the Club Secretary made an announcement from what used to be the chapel pulpit – from when the building still served as a Dominican cloister – which shattered my hopes of interviewing de Condorcet. The Secretary informed us that de Condorcet had been found dead in his cell, poisoned by his own

hand. Apparently, he had been carrying poison at the time of his arrest, secreted on his person. With that my investigations came to an abrupt end and, with the publication date approaching, there was no time left to explore any further possible avenues of enquiry, not that Citizen Beauzée or I saw any that might be remotely fruitful.

So, what can be said in conclusion? At the very least that the identity of the author of *An Atheists' Bible* has remained elusive, and that perhaps the best course of action is to leave it to you, Citizen Reader, to solve the mystery – if you can. But I must admit, as your Editor, that I have come to certain very tentative conclusions of my own; but as Citizen Beauzée has pointed out, to reveal them would perhaps spoil the pleasure of the literary chase. However, I will say that, whoever the author of *An Atheists' Bible* may be, it should be borne in mind that he was a man of his time and not free of the prejudices of that time; though on many an occasion, indeed very often, he does seem to see through these prejudices, through a glass darkly, as it were; also, it must be admitted that he does have a tendency to see virtue where there was none and is not free of a certain contempt for the common man. And then there is the all-important question: What were his aims and motivations? Was he a voyeur, what the English call a Peeping Tom? A man whose main aim was to titillate under the guise of philosophising? Or simply a more or less honest man living in a corrupt and decadent epoch, attempting to the best of his ability to recount events which took place around him? And, last but not least, perhaps the reader should also ask himself: Was the author a virtuous man or a *bad character*? And if the latter: Why should we read what bad characters write?

Citizen Delille
Septidi, 27 Floréal, Year II of the Republic

CHAPTER I

THE RETURN OF THE COMET

It took Sebastien Bageuret the best part of an hour to walk from the bookshop on the Rue Paradis to the Quai des Potiers. Being a Sunday afternoon, the Parisian waterside was deserted. A few barges lay idly at their moorings and a half-dozen tethered carthorses were grazing on a heap of hay. He was a small, spindly, middle-aged, sharp-featured man, and bald, but his impish skull was hidden by a wig that had seen several years of service and smelled more than faintly of printer's ink.

His employer, Christine Charpentier, was waiting for him in a hired carriage. As she paid the coachman and instructed him to return an hour later, Bageuret attempted unsuccessfully to assess her mood. The widow, who by rights should have been in widow's weeds, was dressed in a fawn dress and a brown cloak; a black diamond-shaped patch on the cloak's lapel was the only indication of her state of mourning. Thick round spectacles made her eyes appear bigger than they actually were and gave her a somewhat owlish look. She had inherited the bookshop, and Bageuret with it, on the death of Jacques Charpentier. Bageuret had spoken to her only twice before, once when he had offered her his condolences at the funeral, and then later again when they'd met with Dreyfus, the lawyer, to make arrangements regarding the banking of the monthly take. He'd got the impression she knew next to nothing about the book trade and, for some reason he could not quite put his finger on, that she was pious to boot. But since then, she had simply let him get on with things. Which was just as well, the book trade was not a trade for Holy Marys.

"How can I be of service, *madame*?" he asked, when they were finally alone, hoping his politeness would not be mistaken for servility.

"It's better I show you," she said, indicating one of the warehouses.

The building was about three storeys high and, like most of the buildings along this stretch of the waterfront, had been built in the late 1600s. Bageuret suppressed a mild feeling of unease on seeing that it was the number 13.

She slammed the wrought-iron knocker on the door in the

wooden-gated, Roman-arched entrance several times. The clang reverberated across the river. The *gardien*, a fat man who smelled of garlic and looked as if they had woken him up, appeared at the door. She showed him a pair of keys. He looked at them cursorily – both were stamped with the letters QdP and the number 13 – and let them in.

Inside there was a roofed courtyard, stacked high with sacks of corn and sugar. And beyond that, an arched passageway led into a second roofed courtyard, just as large, and also crammed with goods: bales of cloth on one side and, on the other, dozens of those distinctive wooden boxes from the royal porcelain works at Sèvres. The smell of spices, packing straw and something sweet and earthy, perhaps tobacco, permeated the dusty air. Bageuret followed her to a side door that led to some wooden stairs. Halfway up these, they came to a landing and another two flights of stairs, and then another landing, until they arrived at a double-locked door. She opened it with the keys.

The attic room contained four wooden crates.

“The lid of that one under the window is not fastened,” she said.

The crate was packed with books, large books, which did not surprise him that much; he’d guessed that Jacques Charpentier had his hiding places. Every bookmaker did. But he was surprised by what they were: more than a dozen of what looked like complete seven-volume sets of Diderot’s and d’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie* – in mint condition. Or rather, incomplete sets – a dozen or so further volumes were planned, or rather had been planned – it was becoming increasingly doubtful if they would ever be printed.

“There are twenty sets,” she said.

He picked up one of the volumes and felt its weight. He had to use both hands to hold it properly. His printer’s eye took in the dimensions: sixteen inches long, eleven inches wide and about two and a half inches thick. It was bound in quarter-of-an-inch thick card covered in light tobacco-brown leather. A red vertical block along the spine bore the words *Dictionnaire des sciences*; and underneath that, in a smaller green block, the lettering set horizontally, was the number of the volume and the letters indicating the articles within. The volume he had picked up was the first, the one with the articles on the subjects starting with the letter A. He opened it and for a moment savoured the smell of virginal paper and leather, the smell of a new book. The craftsmanship was superb. There had been no shoddiness in the making of these. The inside covers and the endpapers were marbled: a whirling pattern of bright red, green, yellow and blue

ink. He turned to the title page, almost to convince himself he was actually holding the real thing in his hands:

*ENCYCLOPÉDIE, OU DICTIONNAIRE RAISONNÉ DES
SCIENCES, DES ARTS ET DES MÉTIERS, PAR UNE
SOCIÉTÉ DES GENS DE LETTRES.*

Mis en ordre & publié par M. *DIDEROT*, de l'Académie
Royale des Sciences & des Belles-Lettres de Prusse; &
quant

à la Partie Mathématique, par M. *D'ALEMBERT*, de
l'Académie Royale des Sciences de Paris, de celle de Prusse,
& de la Société Royale de Londres.

*Tantum series juncturaque pollet, Tantum de medio sumptis
accedit honoris! Horat.*

TOME PREMIER

A PARIS,

Chez *BRIASSON*, *rue Saint Jacques, à la Science.*
DAVID l'aîné, rue Saint Jacques, à la Plume d'or.

LE BRETON, Imprimeur ordinaire du roy,
rue de la Harpe.

DURAND, rue Saint Jacques, à Saint Landry, & au Griffon.

M. DCC. LI.

AVEC APPROBATION ET PRIVILÈGE DU ROY.

He leafed through the gilt-edged pages slowly, almost with reverence, stopping at the ones marked by the bright green bookmark ribbon. The printing was tidy, the paper of a quality meant to last, the type larger than usual; it was a book designed to be easily read by candlelight or by older eyes. The text was set in two columns per page. The letters indicating the articles – ARI and ART on the page he was looking at, number 663 – were printed above each column. The articles were annotated with references to other articles, many of which were in all probability now fated never to see the light of day. A letter at the end of each article indicated its authorship, the key being found at the front: O for d'Alembert, K for d'Argenville, S for Rousseau de Genève and J for de Jaucourt. Those by Diderot, and these were many, were simply preceded by an asterisk. There were about nine hundred pages in each volume. He thought of the sheer amount of the work involved in composing the type and made the sort of calculation that was second nature to him: eight words per column line, seventy-five lines per column, two columns, twelve hundred words per page, nine hundred pages. Over a million words per volume.

And on top of that, the proofs and corrections, and the printing and the binding of it. It was hard to believe that the result of such workmanship could be seen as a threat, put on the same level as a cheap pamphlet or a seditious tract, but it was, and perhaps rightly so. That a book was beautiful did not mean that it could not be a danger to religion or the decent order of society – though the details of those matters were best left to theologians.

“Yes, they are very beautiful,” she said.

She was at the other side of the crate with her back to the light. The river and the grey towers of Notre Dame were visible through the grime-covered panes of the window behind her.

“And exceedingly valuable,” he added, putting down the volume he had been looking at and picking up another. “Does anyone else know of this?”

“No, not that I know of. My husband was renting this attic. He was paying a year in advance. The owner sent me a letter asking me if I wished to continue with the lease. The crates were nailed shut when I found them. The servant I had crowbar them open cannot read. The keys were among my husband’s belongings. No, I am fairly sure no one else knows of them. My husband was a man who could keep secrets when he wanted to.”

Jacques Charpentier must have been collecting them as they came out. He could think of no other explanation.

“I want to be rid of them,” she said, her tone less of an employer to an employee, more that of one conspirator to another. “You can take half of what they fetch.”

Half. He was somewhat taken aback by her directness. But there were possibilities here, his little voice told him – if he played his cards right. But risks too. His getting the position as master of the bookshop at Imprimerie Charpentier, then the accident and the funeral, and having to deal with the widow, had all happened with astonishing speed. At times he had half-expected it all to go wrong. But it hadn’t. He had his salary, his commissions and the lodgings above the shop. And the proceeds, less the cost of the paper, from the under-the-counter jobs he was beginning to put through the two presses but not the ledger, not something he had been able to do when Jacques Charpentier had been around.

“I will see what I can do but in the meantime I suggest we nail this crate shut,” he said, looking around for something to use. There was a crowbar in the corner. “We don’t want to tempt your *gardien* to start sniffing around. It would not do for anyone else to find out about these, not do at all.”

For a moment, he had a fleeting vision of a chain gang being

marched from one of the city's prisons to the Marseilles road by the soldiers. It was a sight he'd seen often enough: a procession of shame and despair – and every now and again, what seemed like some perverse pride on a prisoner's gaunt unshaven face. He suppressed the thought, but not before thinking that perhaps all that separated him – or any man – from those unfortunates was a moment of madness, a hand in a drawer ... or the wrong kind of book.

“There, that will do,” he said, hammering in the last of the nails.

As far as he knew, the *Encyclopédie* was being published with a tacit permission rather than a *privilège*. He had not been following closely what was going on recently, though he had a copy of the original prospectus in his papers somewhere. He would have a look at that.



The last slivers of daylight had disappeared when the post-chaise reached the inn. As he stepped onto the frozen ground, Stefan von Klopstock looked up, and there it was. The comet the Englishman had predicted would return had returned, its white nebulous tail clearly visible in the moonless sky. For a moment, neither of his two fellow travellers spoke.

“Ferrying the souls of the damned,” the Abbé Honoré de Graffigny said eventually, “between the sun – where they are slowly roasted – and some frozen and desolate place beyond the orbit of Saturn.”

The coachman made a sign of the cross.

The Comte grunted.

“From the article on HELL in Diderot's *Encyclopédie des sciences et des arts*, I believe,” said von Klopstock. “Written by the Abbé Edeme Mallet.”

The Abbé nodded.



The next morning the countryside sparkled gloriously under a mid-winter sun though the road itself, winding endlessly through woods of russet-leaved oaks, was an uninspiring white-brown mixture of frozen slush and mud.

The Abbé Honoré de Graffigny, wrapped in a woollen blanket, had the seats on his side of the post-chaise to himself. It one of those little courtesies that the wearing of the black short mantle, white collar and tabs, and the distinctive tonsured wig of his office often brought.

"I am very much looking forward to Paris," Stefan von Klopstock said in his somewhat stiff but correct French. He was equally well wrapped up, his blue velvet jacket hidden by a new-looking greatcoat, and his black boots – the left one of which had a four-inch thick heel and sole and was reinforced up the sides, to accommodate what the Abbé supposed must have been a clubfoot of some sorts – had definitely seen no more than a month of wear. "One hears so much. The Comédie Française, the Opera, the Jardin des Plantes, Versailles, Notre Dame, the Republic of Letters." The latter of which, he secretly nursed hopes of one day being a citizen.

He thought of the two letters von Möllendorf, his professor at Halle, had given him, tucked safely in his inside breast pocket. One was for the professor's nephew, the Margrave von Möllendorf, a prisoner of war of some nobleman in Paris; but the other was no less than a letter of introduction to the *encyclopediste*, the Baron Paul Heinrich d'Holbach. And on the roof of the carriage was the trunk of mineral samples the professor had also entrusted him with, also for the Baron.

"And street lanterns so the authorities can keep an eye on what the criminal classes are up to at night," said the Comte, emerging from a blanket he had pulled over his head earlier and actually seemed to have managed to sleep under. He was a man well into his embittered sixth decade. His sword and scabbard looked like a family heirloom. As did his wig. "Not that it makes much difference. The place is a den of thieves and whores." He was also missing a few teeth.

"Tut, tut, Monsieur Comte," said the Abbé, winking at von Klopstock. "I forbid you to dampen the enthusiasm of our young *monsieur*. The young must learn some things for themselves. And Paris is a great educator of young men."

"Aye, syphilis is a canny schoolmaster," countered the Comte.

"The Good Lord has put temptation into the world for a purpose. It's what makes a man's character. Learning to resist it, of course, that is."

"Jesuit casuistry!" the Comte retorted.

"And those whom He has chosen to excel above all others He calls to Paris," the Abbé added and winked at von Klopstock. The youth had sympathetic eyes. It was a pity about his deformed foot of course, but all men had their deformities. It was just that some men's were clearly visible. "They say there's not a temptation that has been lodged in the human soul that one cannot learn to resist. Though few do ... resist that is."

Von Klopstock blushed. He had read of *abbés* – a peculiar,

confusing and uniquely French institution – but not come face-to-face with one before. In principle, the holders of the office had taken vows to take holy orders – usually to gain access to some college or office – but in reality, they rarely did become priests. While using the title they were not allowed to marry. Somehow, he doubted that the Abbé de Graffigny was a typical example of the species.

“Madame Gourdan’s Château,” the Abbé went on, “on the Rue de Deux Portes is an establishment which caters for ...”

But the Comte cut him short.

“With the roads in this state it’ll be another three days before we get there, and another three nights of turnip stews and flea-infested beds.”

“And the midnight howling of country dogs,” added von Klopstock.

“Dogs my arse,” said the Comte. “They were wolves. The Roast Beefs have rid themselves completely of the vermin. Probably the only thing about the English worth emulating.”

“The French love nothing better than a wolf hunt,” said the Abbé, winking at von Klopstock again. “But to hunt the creatures to extermination deprives one of the pleasure of ever hunting them again. That does not seem very logical. And they are God’s creatures, after all. To go to the extent of killing all of them does seem somewhat excessive.”

The Comte grunted, pulled his blanket over his head again, and withdrew from the conversation as abruptly as he had entered it.

The Abbé found himself remembering his own first days in Paris. One of the first things he had done was climb to the top of one of the bell towers of Notre Dame. His memory of it was surprisingly clear: following the sexton up the stone stairwell, the sudden light and the flurry of pigeons as he had stepped out onto the battlement, and then the panorama of the city’s roofscape and plumes of grey smoke drifting upwards from tens of thousands of chimneys. *The most sensual city in the world*, Montesquieu had called it in his *Lettres persanes*. He had been able to make out the Palais Royal, the Sorbonne, the distinct line of the Farmers-General Wall, the suburbs beyond it, and the tower of the Château of Vincennes in the distance. Everything had looked like a miniature copy of itself: the streets and squares, even the bridges over the Seine and the barges and small boats sailing slowly up and down it. It was as if he was looking down on a three-dimensional version of the *Plan de Turgot*, that incredibly detailed isometric atlas of Paris drawn up in the ’30s by Louis Bretez at Turgot’s behest.

“That’s the road to Versailles,” the sexton had said, pointing to a straight line leading east into the mist on the horizon. “Best road in the kingdom. On a clear day, you can see the royal palaces.”

The market stalls on the great square directly below, which had seemed so haphazardly arranged when he had wandered among them earlier, were suddenly laid out in a pattern. And the people wandering among them had been reduced to the size of ants. He’d had to remind himself that they were real and that only minutes before he had been down there himself staring up at the grinning gargoyles on the façade of the cathedral. Was this how the God saw the world, he remembered thinking at the time.

“And that? That building there?” he’d asked the sexton, pointing out a fortress to the east. “The one with the round towers?”

“The Bastille,” the sexton had replied, adding with an air of mock conspiracy, “you go in there, you don’t come out,” and then laughed at his own joke.

One of the stone carvings decorating the battlement had been of an elephant.

The Comte began to snore.

The Abbé could have done with a drink. But he had taken the precaution of securing his flask of Hennessy-Charante in his valise, and that was mercifully on the roof and out of reach. Not drinking on the job was one of his few rules, and one he usually observed.

“A few minutes to stretch the legs, *messieurs*,” the voice of the coachman called out from above them in a rough country accent as they unexpectedly pulled up by some trees at the side of the road.

Both the Abbé and von Klopstock descended. The Comte slept on.

The Abbé, being a shy man when sober, saw to his needs behind a bush. A château and a village surrounded by cultivated fields were visible in the distance, and a windmill on the brow of a hill, its skeletal rigging bare and motionless against the blue of the near-cloudless sky. When he was done, he approached the coachman, who was watering the horses from a wooden bucket.

“If my memory is anything to go by, Château de Foe is only a few miles more?” the Abbé said, hoping the query came across as mere traveller’s curiosity. “Any chance we’ll get there before the sun goes down?” He was fairly sure they would not reach the toll until the morning but he wanted to be certain. As it was a toll, not a customs post, there were unlikely to be any *douaniers* there, but one could never be sure.

“No, sire, it’s a way yet,” the coachman replied, without looking

at him. "We'll not reach the toll 'til tomorrow morning."

The Abbé nodded perfunctorily. He wondered if he suspected anything. Coachmen, and the lower orders in general, were usually more observant than they were given credit for.



The next day, after about two hours on the road, they arrived at the Château de Foe toll gate. One of the two keepers, both elderly men in old army greatcoats, exchanged some incomprehensible words in the local patois with the coachman, took his coins, raised the whitewashed pole and waved them through. The Abbé could not help thinking that the road probably made a tidy profit for whoever owned the seigneurial rights to it, probably the seigneur of the local demesne, though these days prosperous bourgeoisie were buying up a lot of *privilèges* and land from the old families. There had been no *douaniers*, just as he had expected.

There would be only one more actual customs post before they reached Paris, not counting the one at the Farmers-General Wall. His dress and rank would most likely speed him through both unchallenged. It usually did. The *douaniers* invariably concentrated on the less prosperous bourgeoisie and travelling artisans. As long as they were able to collect enough in duties to keep the Farmers-General happy, they were more than happy to pocket a bribe. Carrying contraband complicated things, but not that much, most of the time. Especially out here. And *Candide*, subtitled *The Optimist*, of which three hundred copies were packed into his two wooden travelling chests strapped securely to the back of the post-chaise, was such an innocent sounding and – pocket-sized, barely a slim hundred pages – such a little book. And even if he did have the bad luck to come across a *douanier* who was literate, he had taken the precaution of putting two layers of breviaries on top. It was an old trick but worked often enough. The book was unknown as yet. And who was to know that the unknown German author on the title page was Monsieur François Marie Arouet de Voltaire, the Monkey himself. They had cost him a sou a sheet and he would sell them for at least thrice that. But speed was of the essence, as soon as word got out that a book was selling well in Paris, the foreign presses – and even a few Parisian ones – would be working non-stop to churn out cheap editions of it. He had also managed to get a hundred copies of a new and outrageously touched-up edition of Voltaire's *La Pucelle d'Orléans*.

By mid-morning, with the Comte snoring lightly beneath his blanket again, von Klopstock took the opportunity to probe the Abbé about potentially controversial matters.

“I believe that the future of the great *Encyclopédie* is currently a matter of much dispute,” he said rather awkwardly, thinking of the letter of introduction in his breast pocket – and the doors it might open. For a moment he imagined himself showing his own humble manuscript to Denis Diderot himself, and the great man recognising the sense of what he had written, its harmony with the new spirit of clarity and reason, and perhaps offering him some words of fatherly advice on matters of style and on his slightly foreign-sounding French ...

“Was there ever a time when it was not?” The Abbé pointed at his wig. “Do you mind? It’s beginning to itch.” He removed the tonsured horsehair, revealing his closely shaven skull.

“At Halle,” von Klopstock said, “in Saxony, at my Alma Mater, the Martin Luther University, there are those who say it is the most important book of our time perhaps. Or will be when it is completed ...”

“If,” said the Abbé. “If.”

“... and every educated man with a copy in his possession will be as learned in any subject as any other except for those who specialise in that particular subject.”

The phrase sounded familiar. The Abbé wondered if this young man from Westphalia – he could not help being reminded of the naive and optimistic hero of the books in his chests on the back of the post-chaise – had any original thoughts in his head. He couldn’t remember having any at that age himself, not that he considered himself having acquired proficiency in that regard since.

“Human knowledge has become so considerable in modern times,” von Klopstock went on, “that collecting the best of it, distilling it and fitting it into two dozen volumes that can be placed on a single bookshelf ...”

“A rather large and sturdy bookshelf,” the Abbé interjected.

“... must surely be the greatest scholarly undertaking of our age. The *Encyclopédie* will be the world atlas of knowledge, and Diderot and d’Alembert its Mercators.” Von Klopstock’s voice, in its enthusiasm, had suddenly gone up a pitch. “Educated men will be able to navigate the world of knowledge with an ease that has never before been possible.”

The Abbé knew little of the Germanies, that land of three hundred duchies, princedoms, prince-bishoprics, landgraviates, margraviates, electorates and wolf-infested forests, notionally

united in an empire that, as Voltaire had so succinctly put it in the little books he was illicitly transporting, was neither Holy, Roman nor indeed much of an Empire.

“The *Encyclopédie des sciences et des arts* is hardly the first enterprise of its kind,” the Abbé said. The urge to dampen the young Westphalian’s enthusiasm was irresistible. “Pierre Bayle’s *Dictionnaire historique et critique* was also ordered alphabetically and copiously cross-referenced. Not small either. Over three thousand folio pages. Four volumes. Published in Rotterdam. A mine of details on the history of the world, both ancient and modern, and on mythology and geography. Bayle was one of our, now rare, French Protestants. And there’s James’s *Dictionnaire universel de médecine*, and Walch’s *Philosophisches Lexikon*, printed in the ’20s. And when the Jesuits are not condemning Diderot’s volumes they are accusing him of plagiarising their own *Dictionnaire de Trévoux*, which, it must be said, has been appearing regularly for half a century. The last edition, in ’52, was seven volumes in folio – ordered alphabetically, but then they say, officially, it’s a dictionary, not an encyclopaedia. Nine-tenths plagiarism, according to Diderot. But what isn’t? And Diderot is hardly an angel in that regard himself. But Diderot’s work is, one must admit, on a far more ambitious scale – and more amusing.”¹

The Comte moved under his blanket, readjusted his position and stopped snoring.

“And there’s Cecco d’Ascoli,” the Abbé continued, “burned at the stake in thirteen-something or other, in Florence, at the age of threescore years and ten, the flames fanned, they say by the pages of his encyclopaedia, written in the form of a poem, in *sesta rima*. And even the ancients were given to encyclopaedising. Pliny, of course. And Aulus Cornelius Celsus, after whom Paracelsus took his name, wrote a thirty-something-volume encyclopaedia in the first century. Not to be confused with Celsus the Platonist however, a second century opponent of the True Church – no disrespect intended – I am assuming that you are of the *reformed* persuasion. Westphalia is ...”

“... Catholic. But my family are Lutherans. I myself am quite open-minded in matters of religion.”

“A deist perhaps?” suggested the Abbé conspiratorially.

Von Klopstock attempted an innocent smile.

“You seem to be a man with a great knowledge of books,” he said.

“Let us say that it is my business to be so,” the Abbé replied.

The comment had been irresistible. He hoped it had not sounded

too cryptic.

"In fact," said von Klopstock, "I myself am writing a book."

"About what?"

"It's called *On the Re—*"

"*Cacouac-cacouac*," said the Comte, emerging from his blanket. The Abbé laughed.

"I do not understand," said the Westphalian.

"A little joke. The lovers of wisdom, the philo-sophes," the Abbé explained, pronouncing the two syllables distinctly, "our strivers after wisdom, are sometimes called *cacouacs*."

"I am confused even more," von Klopstock said.

"*Cacouac-cacouac*." The Abbé placed his hands on his chest and started waving his elbows about. "*Cacouac-cacouac*."

The young man looked as if he half-understood. Quack-quack, it was the sound of a duck. But he still did not get the joke.

"They are called *cacouacs* because they go *cacouac-cacouac* all the time, like ducks," said the Comte. He had an uncanny ability to put a halt to any remotely interesting conversation.



Later that afternoon the post-chaise came to a sudden halt.

The three passengers put their heads out the windows to see what was going on. There were two men at the side of the road, one armed with a battered-looking musket, the other with a truncheon, both in patchwork uniforms of grey coats and brown pantaloons. The one with the musket wore a battered beaver-fur tricorne on his head, the other a woollen bonnet. They had a prisoner, a young peasant, his hands bound in front of him with rough twine. He was barefoot but his captors wore wooden clogs with leather uppers, and socks.

"They say that he robbed a man and killed him," the Comte explained to von Klopstock. The conversation going on outside was in the local patois. "They want us to give them a lift to the next town."

The young peasant's terrified eyes settled on the Abbé and he became uncomfortably aware that the youth was seeing in his dress, his office, and in his tenuous connection to the world of power, a hopeless possibility of some reprieve.

"Don't you know it's wrong to kill a man?" the Comte said, addressing the youth while the coachman and guards chatted. He spoke in correct French, a language that the youth gave no sign of understanding, pronouncing the words slowly. "Why did you do

such a thing?" The youth simply kept looking at the Abbé in silence. Receiving no reply – not that he expected one – the Comte shook his head.

The coachman refused to take them and the post-chaise began to move again.

Outside, as the dusk of a cloudless sky was beginning to settle over the landscape, von Klopstock caught a glimpse of a heron in grey majestic flight, following the line of a river. It looked like it would freeze again during the night.



"I suppose there's no need for me to count it," the Grammarian laughed, pocketing the moneybag. "Joke, Monsieur Bageuret. Joke."

Bageuret made a half-hearted guffaw. The Grammarian's fake joviality was a chilling reminder of the dangers that could arise in trying to find customers for the twenty sets of the *Encyclopédie* that Jacques Charpentier had ferreted away. He wondered was it worth the risk. And indeed, what was actually the risk? A bookmaker or a bookseller could be expelled from the Guild, fined, and in more serious cases imprisoned – or worse, for something really grievous. Strictly speaking, of course, Bageuret was not a member of the Guild; the rights had gone to the widow. Which meant it could even go worse for him. Books sellers – and writers – regularly ended up in the Bastille or Vincennes. For those with connections, the conditions of detention could be quite decent. Some writers were even allowed ink and paper. When they locked up Diderot in Vincennes in '49, it had only been for few months; and, because he was detained under a *lettre de cachet*, they had been obliged, by law, to imprison him in conditions in keeping with his station in life. They said he'd dined regularly at du Châtelet's – the governor's – table, had been allowed to take constitutionals in the park beyond the wall, and even to edit and write articles for the *Encyclopédie*. It had certainly not been a case of chaining him to a wall in a pit and leaving him to rot. In fact, a period of *embastillement* could even give an upcoming writer a certain distinction. He would have to speak to Gilles d'Argenson about it. Gilles would know his way around the politics of it, the real dangers involved – and he would have connections with people who could afford what books like that would cost. Gilles was due to bring by one of his *oeuvres* at the end of the week. He would talk to him then.

“Cosy leettle bookshop,” the Grammarian said. “You don’t mind if I perusey around a bit, Monsieur Bageuret. I likes a good read on occasion.”

The police agent was a fat man, with the blotched face of a serious drinker, and wore an ancient grime-stained wig, but there was something in his amber-coloured eyes that belied the outward image, a cat-like shrewdness of some sort. Bageuret could have sworn that his ridiculous accent and mispronunciations were affectations, or at least deliberately exaggerated. He had no idea what the nickname ‘the Grammarian’ was supposed to signify, if anything. He usually came with his other half, a rake-thin Gascon. But today he’d come alone.

Jacques Charpentier used to joke that without laws that were near impossible for booksellers to abide by if they were to make any kind of living, the upholders of the law would have no incomes of any consequence, that bad laws paid for the enforcement of good laws. Most of the city’s printers were in the crowded Faubourg Saint Antoine, but he had set up shop and put up his sign – two overlapping black discs on a white background – on the Rue Paradis. The sign of the printer’s bollocks they called it. Charpentier had liked that. Other shops had followed and now a half a dozen of the shops in the street were booksellers.

The Grammarian picked up one of a set of three red morocco-covered gilt-edged volumes on the display table by the window.

“*Les Femmes de douze Césars* by a Jacky-boy Roergas de Serviez,” he said, reading the title. “Juicy, I bet. Scribblers are becoming more and more prolific. Must be a thousand pages in the three of this lot. Used to be in the trade meself – in an ’umble way. Poacher turned gamekeeper now, you might say. Saw the error of me ways.” He laughed at the last statement.

Bageuret nodded, pretending to be busy with the ledger.

But the Grammarian’s confession, if that’s what it was, didn’t surprise him. Half the police spies in the city were impoverished hacks or book-hawkers.

Imprimerie Charpentier, like most of the smaller bookmakers in the Guild, could not have survived without selling unlicensed books, and occasionally printing them; though of course, and for appearances’ sake, they sold a respectable quantity of licensed works as well. At least half the trade was dependent on the market in shady books: printers, engravers, binders, papermakers, ink makers, writers – and even, in a way, the police themselves. And long as religion wasn’t mocked and nobody personally insulted, Bageuret saw little harm in it. Personal insults, even veiled, in

printed matter were taken most seriously by the authorities. If the Director of the Book Trade failed to act against them, people might assume – with some justification – that they were somehow approved of. There was a joke, not entirely inaccurate, that if the edicts of the King were enforced, the Mediterranean galleys would be rowed exclusively by bookmakers and men of letters. But the price of arrangements had gone up since Sartine had become the Lieutenant of Police. He'd paid a hundred thousand livres for the privilege – Versailles had originally wanted two hundred and fifty thousand – so it was only to be expected. It was just as well he did not have to rely on the book trade to recoup it all.

But, in fact, the Guild was often more of a problem than the police. The *Communauté des libraires et des imprimeurs de Paris* – to give it its official title – consisted of thirty-six master printers and just over a hundred master booksellers. As one of the corporations of the University of Paris, the Sorbonne, it was free from all taxation and was one of the city's most lucrative monopolies. Several times a year, the whole august body of them, in a not unimpressive display of their importance, paraded through the streets behind their baton-wielding beadle, decked out in their ceremonial robes: velvet gowns trimmed with gold lilies. Counterfeit copies of books for which they held *privilèges* were their pet hate. A royal *privilège*, in theory at least, gave the Guild member holding it the exclusive right to print a book for ten years. Only Guild members were entitled to apply for one, and once granted – or rather purchased: *privilèges* did not come cheap – they were jealously guarded, and often divided up into portions and sold off to other Guild members. Illegally printed copies of books which had been awarded a *privilège* were confiscated and sold, the proceeds given to the bookseller who owned the *privilège*. But anything illegal ate into the Guild's monopoly. Not even authors were allowed to print their own books. In theory, a man could find himself locked up and fined five hundred livres for selling a sheet of printed paper. The trade was governed by at least three thousand ordinances, enforced by the syndics. Each print shop was supposed to contain four presses and nine fonts of type, both Roman and italic. The edict of '23 had even stipulated the size of fonts to be used. How Jacques Charpentier had wangled his way into the Guild was anybody's guess. Unlike most of its members, he had regularly sold illicit books – under the counter rather than under the cloak – and even printed a fair few. Not pirated books of other Guild members though; that was one thing the Guild never turned a blind eye to. But about only three hundred royal *privilèges* and tacit

permissions were granted a year. And that was not enough to support the bookmakers of Paris, let alone those of the whole kingdom.

The Grammarian turned his attention to one of the bookshelves and extracted a volume.

“*Theoria philosophiae naturalis redacta ad unicam legem virium in natura existentium*,” he read out. “A theory of natural philosophy based on a single law of natural forces. By Boscovich.”

“All the way from Vienna,” Bageuret said, forgetting for a moment that the man was not a customer.

“Good books, bad books,” the Grammarian said, replacing the volume. “Not a vocation for men endowed with overtly finicky conscientiousnesses, this, is it? But at the going down of the sun, we reckon – for a bookseller – there is really only one type of bad book: a book that doesn’t sell.”

“Hence arrangements,” Bageuret reminded him.

Not that the arrangements he had with the Grammarian would cover Jacques Charpentier’s cache of *Encyclopédies*.

Jacques Charpentier had dealt in both *not-permitted books* and *prohibited books* – selling them anyway, though probably not printing them, *prohibited books*, that is. And there was a difference, a big difference.

A *prohibited book*, strictly speaking, was a book which has been formally condemned by the Parlement. It happened four or five times a year – with great ceremony – and it created demand like nothing else for the book in question. Nothing like a crackling auto-da-fé in the courtyard of the Palais de Justice presided over by Sanson to get the customers lining up – though, in fact, usually dummy copies were burned. The magistrates realised this and hence kept ceremonial anathematisations to a minimum, but they needed to give some appearance of diligence. Most prohibitions were actually informal – issued by the police and the Guild Inspectors. The usual grounds were that a book was seditious, irreligious or theologically damaging, or obscene. But there were nuances of obscenity. Bageuret estimated that in fact one in five of all books prohibited, in one way or another, were merely pornographic; the number of what could be called political pornography, the really dangerous stuff, was considerably less. Pornographic books were known in the trade, not without some irony, as *philosophical books*, and the trade in them known as *the philosophy trade*. The Guild, the courts, the priests and the police simply called them, and any anything else they disapproved of, *bad*

books. But licentious *bad books* – especially if tastefully bound and illustrated – were lucrative, and more so if they were satirical. Though care was called for when it came to satire. There were limits as to how far one could go. A good bookmaker knew those limits like the back of his hand; and there was no substitute for experience. *Not-permitted* books, on the other hand, were basically books which had not received some sort of permission.

The most desirable and expensive category of licence, aside from an actual *privilège*, was a tacit permission; in reality, a sort of legal ruse. The Guild member received an assurance, verbal of course, that no action would be taken if a particular book was printed and sold, with some imaginary printer in Amsterdam or Switzerland on the title page and, more often than not, under a fictitious name – not that a *nom de plume* guaranteed much anonymity nowadays. Tacit permissions were usually granted to works which were considered harmless but which, if they were published with *Avec Privilège et Approbation du Roi* on the title page, might be embarrassing. Tacit permissions were required for serious works and an official list was kept by the Director of the Book Trade. Obtaining either a *privilège* or a tacit permission was a convoluted, long, drawn-out and expensive process. Negotiations, corrections, re-corrections and favours were required. Manuscripts needed to be transcribed. Writers were not generally amenable to surrendering the only extant copies of their masterpieces to censors. Printed proofs had to be set, and these too sent to the censors, corrected again, rewritten, pages renumbered. All of which took time and money. Books with more frivolous contents – cooking recipes, guidebooks, light novels and the like – could usually be sold quite safely with a mere *permission simple*, a *permission de police* or a *tolérance*. But licences and permissions did not guarantee immunity. Helvétius' tacit permission for his *De l'esprit* hadn't stopped it being condemned.

But, all in all, the whole system helped keep French money in France and contributed in no small measure to the continued existence of the trade. As it was, half of everything read in the country was printed abroad. Legally imported books were delivered by *douaniers* to the Guildhall to be inspected every Tuesday and Friday. The *not-permitted* books among them were even sometimes returned to sender by the Guild Inspectors – if judged reasonably harmless. Imported *prohibited books*, if they ever got near a Guild Inspector, were of course – officially – destroyed. But the bulk of imported books were contraband; the book-smuggler gangs sucked a great deal of money out of the

kingdom. Filth in, money out, as they said. The reading public had an appetite for the exotic, in the provinces as much as in Paris. Once a taste for bad books has been acquired, men would go to extraordinary lengths to sate it. And once a customer, always a customer. While hardly laudable, such works, as well as those of a devotional nature or histories – the reading public loved tales of bygone ages – were the bread and butter of the trade. The rates at which books could be exchanged for each other was an accurate indication of demand. A book with some sort of licence could usually be exchanged for one without at the rate of two sheets for three, or three for four. A *prohibited book* could be exchanged at the rate of one sheet for two, even more.

The Grammarian was beginning to get on his nerves. He wondered if the man actually wanted something and was biding his time to broach the subject. But then suddenly he said, “I must stop by someday and have a proper look around,” as if he had been reading Bageuret’s thoughts, made an exaggerated bow and disappeared into the street.

For a moment Bageuret wondered if the creature had actually pocketed something. But the three-volume de Serviez sets were still intact and the Boscovich was still on the shelf. And if he had ... well, he could hardly go running out onto the street after him crying thief. This whole *Encyclopédie* business was making him jumpy. He needed to calm down. Gilles would know what to do. ¹¹

CHAPTER II

A PANDORA'S BOX

“This *Encyclopédie* is a Pandora’s box, *monsieur*,” said François-Antoine de Graffigny, the Provincial-General of the Society of Jesus in France. He had his back to Gilles d’Argenson and was looking out the newly installed plate-glass windows of the Jesuit’s Versailles’ palace. The few remaining brown leaves on the geometrically arranged rows of bushes in the palace’s English garden were still frozen from the previous night’s frost; half a dozen peacocks were grazing on the sparse and frosted winter grass. The Jesuit turned around.

“We tried to nip it the bud before,” he continued, “but the regrettable *laissez-faire* attitude of some of His Majesty’s servants has allowed it to grow wings.” In fact, there had been a time when the Society had hoped of taking it over, of taming it. The Jesuit was a handsome man, in his early forties, with an imposing Roman nose and his clean black cassock had obviously not been cut by some cheap ecclesiastical tailor. His horsehair wig was silver-grey, profusely powdered and pig-tailed – *à la chinoise*.

Gilles d’Argenson said nothing.

The Jesuit’s bureau was airy, spacious, and elegantly furnished; but chilly, the fire in the marble fireplace could have done with a few more logs. Two green-leaved orange trees in brass tubs by the windows added to the general sense of ... *pious luxury* was the phrase that came to mind. Gilles wondered if the new-looking telescope on its tripod, its lens protected by a velvet cap, was merely Jesuitical decoration or actually used; ’58 had been a good year for lens makers.

The Jesuit sat down at his leather-inlaid desk, the slim dossier Gilles had come to collect unopened in front of him. The air was heavy with the smell of beeswax-polish. Every now and again, the sound of distant footsteps echoed through the corridors of the palace.

“This man Diderot pokes fun at us,” the Jesuit continued. He was not impressed by d’Argenson: a slovenly dressed man in a shabby wig, with bushy eyebrows the colour of a pipe smoker’s whiskers. And who somehow appeared larger than he actually was; perhaps

it was the glutton's belly on him. The Jesuit would have felt more reassured if Malesherbes had sent someone of more consequence. "The board of censors has proved itself to be inordinately inept," he went on. Boyer, the Archbishop, had selected the theologians who sat on it, most of whom were idiots. "Diderot boasts that he uses their *imbecility* to sow confusion. When he wrote pornography, he ridiculed chastity – the virtue that differentiates us from the beasts. Now he ridicules the very foundations of religion itself."

The Jesuit had never spoken to Denis Diderot, but the *encyclopédiste* had been pointed out to him once at the Comédie, a wigless, unassuming figure in a black suit. Jean Le Ronde d'Alembert, Diderot's – until recently – collaborator, with whom he had once exchanged pleasantries, cut another figure entirely. That puffed-up foundling spent a fortune on his wardrobe; and he'd had the gall to change his name from *Dammbert*, then to *Dalenbert*, finally ending up with *d'Alembert*. And, despite his dubious paternity, had managed to get himself elected to the Académie des Sciences; though admittedly, he did have an obvious gift for mathematics. No fool in the ways of the world either, getting out of the *Encyclopédie* venture while the going was good; the reason he had put around was that he was getting bored with the work!

Gilles felt it would be impolitic to remind him that there were Jesuits on the board of censors as well, and that Diderot had also once turned his pen to the writing of sermons.

"These *encyclopédistes* practice a form of idolatry," the Jesuit continued. "They worship knowledge. No, they worship facts. What they consider to be knowledge is hubris, a travesty of true knowledge."

"True knowledge?" Gilles repeated.

"Humble participation in the divine mind."

"Thinking divine thoughts ... humbly."

"In a way, yes. But accompanied by an equally humble acceptance of the divine will. As revealed to us through the mystery of divine grace under the guidance of Christ's Church. A very different matter from the endless collection of facts to serve merely human ends that Messieurs Diderot and d'Alembert engage in."

"But surely the amassing of facts is ..."

"The Gospels are sublime not because they contain a collection of correct facts. Augustine warns us against being deceived by an unreasonable and misguided love of reason. The so-called holy

book of the infidels is not reprehensible simply because it contains errors of fact. The moral law, God's law, is not learnt by studying the facts. Indeed, one could argue that all good ideas are revelations. Even Descartes had what he called his Angel of Truth."^{III}

"As did the author of the holy book of the infidel. He too had an angel ..."

"Or a demon ..."

"Is it so easy to tell the difference?"

"On the contrary. If it was, there would be little sin in the world."

"Galileo Galilei deduced his theories from the facts he saw in his telescope," Gilles ventured.

"Or merely confirmed," the Jesuit suggested, "what Kopernikus, who had not been in possession of any new facts, had imagined."

Perhaps, Gilles admitted to himself.

"Facts can be used to confirm or invalidate many of our ideas," the Jesuit went on. "But without revelations we are lost, and the source of all true revelation, ultimately, is the divine. Though to what extent Signor Galilei was divinely inspired is another question."

"Perhaps his case will be reconsidered in time," Gilles said, wondering if he dared mention Giordano Bruno, a man who had certainly been inspired, divinely or otherwise.

"We are not here to discuss *The Starry Messenger*," the Jesuit almost snapped.

Gilles found himself speculating if the Jesuit socialised with the most famous member of the de Graffigny clan, Madame Françoise de Graffigny herself. The Abbé had said they were distantly related. Her *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* were making Duchesne, her printer, a tidy fortune. There had been a new edition every year since '52. Heroines, like her Zilia, possessing neither gold nor land nor an occupation, having implausible adventures in exotic settings – in this case, the Inca Empire – were all the rage.

"Diderot and his coterie believe that knowledge is an unmitigated good," the Jesuit continued, "that the search for knowledge for its own sake is the most noble of human endeavours. Natural philosophy is the only sort of knowledge they recognise – and they believe there are no limits to what it can reveal, or should reveal, and that there is nothing beyond Nature. Therein lies their essential wrongness. The sins of the flesh – lust, drunkenness, gluttony, sloth and such – are paltry things beside the sins of the mind, of the soul, of that part of Man which approaches the divine. The belief that the world is nothing but Nature and a plaything for humanity is hubris

and arrogance.”

“But a seductive creed,” Gilles ventured. He had a sneaking suspicion that intellectual pride was a sin that the Jesuit himself was prone to, and knew it.

“The proper role of philosophy on the Tree of Knowledge is to act as the handmaid of theology. The Church has never opposed the pursuit of natural and experimental philosophy or natural theology per se.”

A rather rose-garden version of ecclesiastical history, Gilles thought, though he was sure that the Jesuit was as much aware of that as he was, and no doubt better versed in the details.

“Except on rare occasions,” the Jesuit continued, detecting a hint of scepticism in Gilles’s demeanour. “Natural philosophy may describe the world, but it does not explain the world.” He extracted a rather exquisite enamelled Limoges snuffbox from an inside pocket of his cassock. Gilles could not help thinking that de Conti was reputed to have a collection of eight hundred snuffboxes; but he did have a thousand paintings as well, which was some evidence of taste; though his five thousand rings ... one could be forgiven for thinking that the country was ruled by men with the souls of magpies. “The elevation of reason beyond its proper place is the worst kind of heresy.”

Gilles could see what lay behind the Provincial-General’s thinking, his own Jesuit education had not gone amiss. According to Augustine, humanity and the world were means to divine ends, not ends in themselves; but divine ends are not accessible to human reason, human reasoning taking place within time and space, as opposed to divine reason, which took place beyond time and space. That was the gist of it anyway.

“Without grace, human reason is ...” the Jesuit paused for a moment and sneezed into his purple handkerchief, “... *though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.* Paul to the Corinthians. And Monsieur Voltaire can call that fanaticism if he so wishes.”

“The bulk of the articles are on the sciences and the mechanical arts,” Gilles ventured. He searched for an example. “Plate glass is surely ...”

“... hardly an excuse to wax lyrical about the making of apricot jam and ignore the Great Augustine,” countered the Jesuit. Augustine was, in fact, mentioned often enough, but the absence of an article dedicated specifically to Christianity’s greatest theologian could hardly be put down to an accidental oversight or,

especially when – to add insult to injury – there was an article entitled AUGUSTINE on the book of that name written by Cornelius Jansenius himself, and referring the reader to as yet unwritten articles on JANSENISM & JANSENISTS.^{IV} Bayle, Diderot's spiritual father, if he could be said to have one, had played the same game. He'd given every minor character in world history a walk-on part in his *Dictionnaire historique et critique* except Jesus and the popes – but devoted twelve pages to the fictitious Pope Joan. Under MARY he had managed to mention a Queen of Hungary, the sister of Moses, and some saint he'd described as a famous Egyptian whore, but managed to avoid even mentioning the Mother of God. The article on MAÇON had been a pretext to disparage miracles and the one on CONSTANCE an argument for the wholesale toleration of heresy. “And I suppose anthropophagy is an art, or perhaps a science,” the Jesuit added.

Gilles was lost for a second.

“Cannibalism,” the Jesuit explained. The amethyst ring on his finger shimmered in the light as he fidgeted with his snuffbox. Gilles was reminded of its crystalline texture against his lips when, on arrival, he had knelt on the palace steps and the Jesuit had casually extended his hand for him to kiss it. “I am referring to the article entitled ANTHROPOPHAGY. See EUCHARIST, see HOLY COMMUNION, see CANNIBALISM. More than half the blasphemy is in the cross-references – and with the most outlandish reduction ad absurdums. And, one presumes, that fool Edeme Mallet's scholarly speculations on the exact dimensions of Noah's Ark are supposed to be of use to naval engineers.”

The Abbé Mallet had been the Royal Professor of Theology, and naivety personified. He'd contributed four hundred and eighty-four articles before he had died – from diphtheria, it was said. He'd also written on the possible locations of hell and on the physics of the Ascension; and in one of his articles he had pointed out that there were, in fact, thirty-four gospels, naming and describing them in some detail, both the Gnostic and apocryphal, including a so-called Judas Iscariot gospel – composed by some sect called the Cainites who had believed that the true revelation had come down from Cain via the Sodomites – and a so-called Gospel of Eve.

“Diderot's *Encyclopédie* is devoid of any sense of *pietas*,” the Jesuit said.

“*Pietas*?”

“Piety, respect in the presence of the sacred.”

Gilles grunted. Some of his mannerisms did nothing to assuage his lack of looks.

“The sacred function of knowledge,” the Jesuit continued, “is not to be entrusted to any upstart with a printing press who thinks he knows it all, believes in nothing and is responsible to no one.” He knew that much of what he was saying must sound like a recitation from a catechism, but he hoped it conveyed conviction. “And these matters are not without political implications.”

No, indeed they were not, Gilles silently agreed.

“God has entrusted the keeping of the peace and the waging of war to lawful princes. Imagine how much more dreadful war would be if the knowledge of that art – on which there are numerous articles in Monsieur Diderot’s volumes – were available to all? This *Encyclopédie* sows confusion. It turns men’s heads. Men need guides and clear maps to find their way, not the endless prattle of clever men who have clever opinions on everything under the sun. The worst of it will be copied by every illegal printer in France and on our borders – spiced up to suit the basest tastes – and sold at two sous a sheet by the hordes of book peddlers that infest this country. Bad books are a curse. Most of them are little more than odes to onanism and madness.”

Gilles was reminded of a passage from *Thérèse philosophe*, an unashamed ode to onanism, if there ever was one: *There is no law, either human or divine, which urges – much less requires – us to work for the multiplication of the species ... giving rise to hordes of underemployed monks and useless nuns...*

“And there is nothing more dangerous than a good bad book,” he suggested.

The Jesuit looked at him, but then decided to say what he was about to say anyway.

“The edifice of civilisation is built on thin ice. Without a sense of the divine order, we have nothing.”

“*The value of there being a divine order is so incalculably high that not to believe in its existence is a losing bet,*” Gilles said. The quote had just come out.

“Blaise Pascal, the gambler’s friend,” said the Jesuit, referring both to the author of the quote and his mathematical investigations into chance. “And the inventor of a mechanical device capable of performing arithmetic calculations which nobody has ever found a use for.”

“La Pascaline,” said Gilles, naming the machine. It was not quite true that nobody was finding a use for it – he seen advertisements for the device in the *Mercure* – but he let it pass.

“And a Jansenist,” the Jesuit added.

The Jesuit opened one of his desk drawers and took out a large

brown envelope, a stick of purple sealing wax and a brass seal. He had first come across the havoc Jansenism was capable of causing in '31, his first year as a schoolboy in Paris. The so-called *convulsionnaires* had taken over the cemetery of Saint-Médard and turned Pâris's tomb into a shrine. Demented souls who believed they were possessed by the spirits of the martyrs used to regularly cajole the crowd to horsewhip them. He had seen one crackpot actually eating a copy of the Bible, stuffing the pages into his mouth one after the other. Lunatics of both sexes had mimicked fornication, the women rolling around the ground with their skirts hitched up, their privates exposed. There had even been a few madmen, wearing crowns of thorns and scourging themselves, who were convinced they were possessed by Christ Himself. There had been mock crucifixions. And the so-called good and the great had flocked to see it, blocking the Rue Mouffetard with their gilded carriages. Eventually de Fleury had ordered all the entrances to the cemetery bricked up. They were still sealed. Admittedly Jansenism had become far more restrained and even quasi-respectable in the interim, and the Parlements were now packed with Jansenists and their sympathisers. But it still retained its levelling tendencies and its hold upon the common people – and calls for the Mass to be said in the vernacular were still heard. The Jesuit felt the need to speak again.

“If knowledge were an unmitigated good, God would not have caused men to be born with a limited ability to comprehend the mysteries of the world. That is an essential principle of religion. Yet, God gave Man reason. And obviously, He intended that men use it. It is a balancing act that requires fine judgement, informed judgement – and the wisdom of tradition.”

That, Gilles had to admit, seemed – on first appearances at any rate – an argument difficult to refute without actually questioning the existence of a divinity. He made a mental note to think about it sometime.

“But to return to the matter in hand.” The Jesuit's tone suddenly became formal. “The Society of Jesus, following consultation with the Holy See, recommends to the Conseil du Roi the suppression of the *Encyclopédie raisonné des sciences, des arts and des métiers* by Messieurs Denis Diderot and Jean Le Ronde d'Alembert, and that the sale of the volumes already printed be declared unlawful, and that no licence – tacit or otherwise – be granted for the printing of any further volumes. The suppression of this work is necessary for the spiritual wellbeing of the Catholic community both in France and beyond.”

The Parlement was determined to finish its deliberations before Versailles itself issued a decree. Delivering the coup de grâce to Diderot's monstrosity had become a sort of loyalty contest. But this time the Parlement and the Jansenists were not to be given an opportunity to accuse the Society of being lacking in zeal. Earlier that day, he'd learnt that Iron Head Machault had even contrived the appointment of the Comte de la Haye, a fop who everyone called Brass Head, to liaise between Sartine and Malesherbes, but in reality to keep an eye on both of them. The Lieutenant of Police and the Director of the Book Trade were known to be far too chummy with Diderot to be considered trustworthy. De la Haye might be a fop but he had a reputation, an unpleasant one. And he was no friend of the Society.

"The procedures necessary to place the book on the Index are under way," he added. "That will take time. The deliberations of the Holy Office are thorough and thoroughness cannot be rushed. But it will be done."

Then he got up and walked towards the fireplace, took a candle from the mantelpiece and, bending down, lit it from the parsimonious fire.

"I am confident, Your Excellency," said Gilles, contemplating the priest's cassocked posterior, "that the Church's wishes will be given every consideration."

"I dare say they will," the Jesuit said absent-mindedly, returning to his desk.

He slid the dossier into the envelope and, immersed for a moment in his own thoughts, began to melt the purple sealing wax with the flame of the candle. Louise XV, Bien Aimé though he may be, was a weak king, and under the thumb of the so-called *maîtresse-en-titre*. He spent half his time carving ivory trinkets or concocting new chocolate recipes in the royal laboratory – when he wasn't being entertained by his harem of nubile whores at the Parc-aux-Cerfs. It was common knowledge that the Pompadour was more enthusiastic about the war. The *École Militaire* was her doing. The Pompadour hated the Society. And her confessor, de Sacy, who might be a Jesuit but who was also a zealot and an idiot, was not helping matters. A more judicious man would have been satisfied with her statement that she was no longer sharing the King's bed and not continue insisting that she actually leave Versailles – and give up wearing rouge. The sermons on the moral duties of kings by de Neuville after the Damiens affair had not helped either. Unlike the Sun King, his grandfather, Louis XV was unlikely to request that his heart be buried in the Jesuit motherhouse in Paris.

But in this matter, the *maîtresse-en-titre* was unlikely to have any say. And, besides, the *philosophes* had recently lost her favour. The condemnation of the *Encyclopédie* had gathered too much momentum, and even if Louis had no strong opinions on the matter, he was likely to go whichever way the wind was blowing. They said at the time that Louis had been reluctant to hand Damiens over to the judiciary. Perhaps he had wished to be merciful; but one could also interpret it as his not having the strength of will to enforce that charitable impulse. The virtue of mercy and the lack of the strong stomach that a king needed to rule were often not so easily distinguished.

“The Turk forbids all printing presses,” the Jesuit said, letting the sealing wax drip onto the flap of the envelope.

“But surely ...” Gilles began, though not quite sure what objection he was going to make.

“Gutenberg’s invention was not an unmitigated good. The printing press fanned the flames of the so-called Reformation and a hundred years of barbaric religious wars.” The Jesuit pressed the brass seal bearing the imprint of the Society – the letters IHS in a stylised sunburst – into the hot wax. “You are an educated man. I presume you have yourself dipped into Monsieur Diderot’s volumes?”

For a moment Gilles found himself fumbling for an answer.

“I have delved on occasion,” he admitted.

“Deeply?”

Gilles made a gesture of disavowal, something he was not used to doing.

“Man is a curious animal,” he said.

It would have been impudent to have asked the priest if he had done some delving himself but Gilles suspected he had, and more than most. He looked over at the book cabinet and glanced over the four shelves of leather-bound volumes behind the glass doors, but he was not able to make out any volumes. But then, he mused, it was hardly likely to be on open display.

“Ordering knowledge alphabetically,” the Jesuit went on, “a technique understandable in a dictionary,” – such as the *Dictionnaire de Trévoux* Gilles felt like saying – “but hardly necessary in an encyclopaedia, undermines the distinction between the significant and the trivial, between the sacred and the profane. Knowledge is hierarchic. The alphabet is merely a mnemonic device. Only Kabbalists and necromancers claim that it has a deeper meaning. This *Encyclopédie* makes the claim to be a new book of books, more than the sum of its parts – as Monsieur

Diderot himself confesses, or rather boasts.”

It was also exceedingly well written, he thought. And it described the world better than anything previously composed. That was his greatest fear: not that Diderot was wrong in believing that Man could analyse Nature – or as the Englishman Bacon had said, *put her on the rack and torture her for her secrets* – control its forces and bend it to his will, but that he might be right. And that God might allow Man to approach this godlike state. Had not Satan been allowed to rebel? Was not Lucifer, the bringer of light, also the caster of shadows?

“An atheists’ bible,” Gilles suggested. He had heard it called that on several occasions.

“Indeed.”

The Jesuit handed Gilles the now sealed envelope. The Society had been founded to fight error with argument rather than fire. *Regimini Militantis*, the papal bull which had instituted the order in 1540, had declared that its ends were to be *accomplished by reasoning with the public*. There were those who still believed that the rigour of the past had been more effective. Perhaps they had a point. Ends were not invalidated by the means used to achieve them. And who now remembered the Bogomils and the Cathars, still less what they had preached? Loyola had favoured the Inquisition in Rome where he thought it would work. *And the Lord said unto the servant, Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled.* Luke 14. But he had argued against compulsion in the Empire, where he did not think it would work. Compulsion was not an option in France in 1759. Times had changed, and besides the Inquisition had never taken root in French soil. But that did not mean that one did not have a responsibility to use the law to safeguard men and women from dangerous influences.

“Your Excellency can be assured,” said Gilles, “that I shall deliver the Society’s learned opinion in person to Monsieur Malesherbes. It will be in his hands this afternoon.” Not quite the truth, but giving the impression that he was on familiar terms with the Director of the Book Trade would do no harm.

The Jesuit had met Chrétien Guillaume de Lamoignon de Malesherbes several times. Once Malesherbes had actually said to him, in a slightly hushed tone at some reception in Versailles, “the trouble is if a man only read books with my official seal on them, he would be behind his contemporaries by a hundred years in everything.” “Except Catholic theology,” the Jesuit had countered, adding – with some sarcasm – that it was also said that one would

know little of current affairs if one did not read the scurrilous handwritten *nouvelles à la main* that were sold under the cloak in the cafés and the streets around the Palais Royal. But Malesherbes had a point, more than a point. He knew too that Malesherbes had more or less instructed the police to turn a blind eye to books which were deemed *merely licentious* but to come down hard on the real filth. But the path from the *merely licentious* to the obscene was an easily travelled one.

The Jesuit rose, indicating that the conversation was over.

“Allow me to accompany you to your carriage,” he said

Just as they were about to leave, Gilles looked at the telescope and let his curiosity get the better of him.

“It returned,” he said.

“The comet? Yes. Mister Halley’s prediction was correct. The Englishman did his sums well enough. It will be difficult to argue against the periodicity of comets now.”

Gilles thought he detected a hint of disappointment. The periodicity of comets was another nail in the coffin of the Cartesian universe. Descartes had maintained that, in his vortex universe, comets were only visitors, originating as degenerate stars, passing from one vortex to the next; if they stayed in a vortex, they became planets. The return of the comet discredited this idea. But it was wholly compatible with Newton’s cosmology. And now too, du Châtelet-Laumont’s translation of Newton had just been published. They used to call her Newton-Pompom. They said her death, years ago now, in childbirth, had broken the Monkey’s heart.

“Quite,” Gilles said, at the same time noticing that the book cabinet did, in fact, contain the first seven volumes of the *Encyclopédie*, and beside them several volumes of de Chaumeix’s *Préjugés légimites contra l’Encyclopédie*, the on-going and thorough volume-by-volume critical commentary on the six volumes of the *Encyclopédie* which had appeared so far, with another one on the seventh volume no doubt in the making.

Outside, they waited in an uneasy silence on the palace steps. The fresh air was a welcome contrast to the odour of ecclesiastical polish. Garden birds flitted to and fro from an ornate bird table on the frost-white lawn.

The carriage arrived and they parted with a handshake. The final glimpse Gilles had of the Jesuit was of him walking towards the bird table, his stride at once both authoritative and pensive. A pompous bore, Gilles thought, but not a man to be taken lightly. An *éminence grise* in his way, even if the grey on his head was horsehair. The last sight Gilles had of the handsome priest was of

him extracting a paper bag from the depths of his cassock and spreading some crumbs or seeds from it onto the bird table.

The carriage went through the red iron gates and onto the earthen road, still frozen solid. Gilles poked at his tooth with his tongue. He prayed it was not going to flare up again. A nip of Hennessy-Charante from his pewter flask simultaneously numbed his mouth and sent a shiver of warmth through him. Perhaps it would pass. But he didn't want to overdo it. He and Sophie-Françoise had a rendezvous with the lawyers later, to try and figure out some way to stall their creditors again, and he needed a clear head.



A mile or so outside Sucy-en-Brie, Stefan von Klopstock's carriage reached the demesne gate just as another one was leaving, and he caught a quick glimpse of its black-jacketed passenger: a wigless, stocky-looking man, with more the air of tradesman than a gentleman about him, his receding dark hair revealing an expanse of forehead. For a moment he wondered if it was, in fact, the Baron; but the idea was ridiculous; the carriage, like von Klopstock's own, looked hired, and the Baron surely had his own. A toothless watchman in d'Holbach livery – light grey with silver braid on the collar and cuffs – waved them through the gate and von Klopstock found himself, at last, being driven through Château de Grand-Val's spacious grounds. Leafless chestnuts lined the gravelled driveway on both sides; and pheasants grazed on the sparse and frosted-over grass of the landscaped fields, the plumage of the males shimmering in the winter sunlight.

The contours of the white three-story edifice of the sixteenth-century château, set in an expanse of lawn, finally came into view. For a moment, the geometrically rigid block-like structure, with its rows of shuttered windows and towering, languidly-smoking chimneys, looked vaguely unsubstantial in the winter air. It was not what he had imagined, not at all. Only the columned portico was vaguely reminiscent of what he had imagined: something neo-Greek, exuding Greek virtue, or Roman – before oriental effeminacy and countless Neros and Caligulas had sapped the ancient world of its manly vitality and sense of destiny – something more modern.

A white-wigged man, attired in exquisitely tailored brown velvet, silver-buttoned jacket, fawn *culottes*, and matching silver-buckled boots, ornately-crafted walking stick in his hand, was standing on the steps leading up to the entrance. Von Klopstock knew

immediately from his unmistakable proprietorial stance it could only be the Baron, the Baron Paul Heinrich d'Holbach. He must have seen the carriage approaching and decided to sate his curiosity as to who his unannounced visitor might be.

"Enchanted, *monsieur*, absolutely enchanted," the Baron said after von Klopstock had introduced himself, presented his letter of introduction and informed the Baron that he had also brought him a truck of mineral samples from the Professor von Möllendorf in Halle. "How is my dear old friend?"

"Well, *monsieur*, very well."

"To my study, post-haste!" the Baron said to the two liveried lackeys who had appeared as if out of nowhere, indicating the trunk roped to the rear of the carriage, before turning to von Klopstock again: "Shall we?"

Von Klopstock hobbled up the stone steps after him.

The Baron's study, at the end of the carpeted hallway, was surprisingly bare, or rather lacking ornament – there was nothing spartan about it. The walnut *escritoire* was open, the tools of the Baron's trade – if they could be called that – bottles of different colour inks, brass-nibbed quills and the best virgin paper, were laid out neatly on the Prussian blue leather-inlaid writing surface. There was a single picture on the wall above it, a small portrait of a young man, Italian-looking.

"I suspect it might be an early Anguissola," the Baron explained. "And I suspect, done for love rather than money. The face of that unknown young man is that of an individual, not a god, not a saint, not a hero, not even that of a posing lord. It is of an individual human being. We will never meet him in the flesh. The indecipherable mysteries of time will see to that. But something of his spirit touches us, reaches out to us through the centuries. Don't you think? But please take a seat."

"A gifted painter," von Klopstock said as he sat down.

There was a single bookshelf, containing mainly of dictionaries of various sorts, and incongruously, a copy of *Don Quixote*.

"Paintress," the Baron corrected him. "If it is by her, that is."

A female servant appeared with bowls of chocolate, followed by the two lackeys heaving the trunk.

Von Klopstock had thought the Baron would lapse into his native German after the politesses were done with but he did not. His French was almost accentless.

"Samples from the bowels of the earth," the Baron said, as the lackeys manoeuvred the unwieldy trunk into place under the window. "I'd open it now and we could have a peek ... we *were*

fashioned from mud, from minerals, that at least is true ... but ... well, I've a lot on my plate right now, as they say, legal matters, political matters, time presses, as they also say ..."

"The *Encyclopédie* ...?"

"What else! Wish I could say I was confident of a positive outcome ..." – he took a sip from his bowl of chocolate – "... but, sadly, I cannot."

"The Professor von Möllendorf is a great admirer ..."

"Reason is the great emancipator," the Baron went on, oblivious to von Klopstock's attempt to contribute to the conservation, "but some men fear it. Some because, like our ecclesiastical brothers and sisters, they have a vested interest in ignorance – they've deposited all their treasures in the Bank of Ignorance, as it were – and others fear it for inexplicable reasons I have never quite been able to fathom. And it's not always easy to tell the difference between them, one masquerades as the other and vice versa. Power has a lot to do with masquerading – pretenders pretend to thrones – maybe it, power that is, is nothing but a masquerade ..."

He had the voice of a self-obsessed man – or rather of a man obsessed with his own ideas, or perhaps it was simply ideas per se, of a man whose thoughts were perpetually racing ahead of his words. But there was irony in his eyes and in the faintly seductive smile with which he punctuated his sentences.

"You missed His Holiness," he said, changing tack completely.

"His Holiness?"

Von Klopstock had no idea what he was referring to.

"The Pope of Reason himself."

"The Pope of Reason?"

"Monsieur Diderot. Your respective conveyances must have passed each other on my driveway. Ships passing in the night."

The fleeting glance he caught of the wigless tradesman-like figure in the carriage at the gate flashed through the young Westphalian's mind. If he'd left Paris an hour earlier he might have been sitting here exchanging chitchat with Denis Diderot himself ... but the Baron was speaking again.

"Not that I believe in popes," the Baron went on. "Not even a deist if the truth be told. Well, on Mondays maybe. Nobody's perfect. But the rest of the week I don't believe in anything. And it's hard work, keeping the unfaith. Sometimes I think our lives are like mere lines drawn in the sand – predestined, futile - and sometimes I think all things are possible. But isn't only by thinking things are possible that enables us to soar the heights?" It was almost, but not quite, as if he was talking to himself. "Yes, we must

plough forward, plough on, cast off ignorance, cast off the traditions of ignorance, the shackles of tradition, the shackles of moralities grounded on ignorance, the remnants of the mud and minerals from which we've sprung ... or been fashioned ... We educated men must nurse the fragile beast of reason, we need to train our minds in the ways of reason. The reasoning faculty in Man must become an instinct. There is a purity in the life impulse, in Man, but it is twisted and corrupted by the world. Education, or what passes for education these days, destroys it ..." – he had opened the letter of introduction and was glancing through it as he spoke – "... Man must dare, we must have the courage to dare if we are to soar. Our enemies' attempts to hold us back must be opposed at all costs, at all costs. Our good Herr Professor says you have a manuscript you wish to have printed? The theme?"

Von Klopstock was about to explain but the Baron had taken his quill and a small sheet of paper and had begun to write something – and to speak again.

"Gilles d'Argenson: he might be able to help. He has some printing connections. Here is his address."

Von Klopstock didn't remember much of the rest of the conversation – though it was more of a monologue than a conversation – and it seemed as if no time had passed before he found himself being accompanied to the front door and his waiting carriage, the Baron still talking about the need "to fight the good fight" and excusing his haste.

"Sundays and Thursdays we give informal dinners at our pied-à-terre in the Rue Royale. A gathering of enlightened and likeminded spirits, so to speak. My dear wife and I cannot ourselves attend at the moment ... but you are more than welcome to drop by!"

He didn't wait to wave von Klopstock off, a lapse of etiquette which von Klopstock forced himself to believe was entirely unintentional. The man obviously had a lot on his mind.

As the carriage departed he caught sight of a dishevelled-looking priest and an odd-looking man, wearing one of those old-fashioned musketeer's hat with a feather in it, walking across the lawn.

The sun was low in the sky on the way back from Sucy-en-Brie to Paris. Travelling through the bare woodland, he once caught a glimpse of a herd of deer scattering at the sound of their approach, the silent fragile creatures disappearing into the undergrowth. He was reminded of the Baron's reference to the fragile beast of reason.

It was dark when they reached the city but the moon was nearly full. It was going to be another bitter cold night. The smells of the

city were more noticeable than usually in the rapidly freezing air. The streets were deserted, save for the few shadowy figures he caught glimpses of from the window of the moving carriage. Wrapped up against the cold, they had the air of being on clandestine missions, surreptitiously seeking whatever it was that each man – and woman – truly sought, as they scurried to their private destinations. The Baron's words on casting off the shackles of moralities grounded on ignorance came back to him. Maybe there was a synchronism in things.

The carriage came to a halt.

“Rue de Deux Portes,” the coachman announced.

Von Klopstock got out and paid him. It was more than he could in truth afford. The day was proving to be expensive, and it wasn't over yet.



The left side of Pierre Simon Bossuet's face was riddled with a scattering of pockmarks, but the other side showed the profile of a once handsome man. His profession was also Janus-like, an irony that was not lost on him. For, not to put too fine a point on it, and to use the word he used himself, privately, he was a spy. His injured arm was on the left side too, as was his injured leg. Another of his idiosyncrasies was that he did not wear a wig. He had got out of the habit in Pondicherry, mainly because of the oven-like heat in the hot season. A munitions explosion had caused his injuries, lacerating the left side of his face, as well as his scalp. After that, it had seemed pointless to attempt to beautify himself. He had also let his hair grow long. It was grey and more than slightly greasy. That few looked further than the oddness of his appearance was useful at times: the oddness lay in the unnatural asymmetry, not the pockmarks, which resembled the scars of childhood smallpox. He was usually taken for a clerk in some government office, who had travelled a bit, seen military action, but was well read enough to be amusing in polite circles. All of which was true – except for seeing military action. Sometimes he believed that he even came across as an interesting man, once one got used to his appearance and his habit of turning the good side of his face towards whomever he was listening to – for the explosion had also left him practically deaf in one ear – but certainly not as a man of substance, or of any real consequence.

His place of work was a nondescript four-story building on the Rue de Nicot, one of the Paris offices of the *cabinet noir*. That was not its official appellation; it had none. For the King did not

officially open his subjects' private correspondence or keep secret files on them – such as those composed on the antics of clergy in the city's brothels, which the Bien Aimé, reportedly, took an enthusiastic interest in, above and beyond the call of duty, as it were. Or those Bossuet was working his way through now in the building's cellar. The meticulous Joseph d'Hemery, the police inspector responsible for keeping an official eye on the book trade from '48 to '53, had put together files on nearly every hack in Paris, from *encyclopédistes* to Jansenist scribblers to dernier-a-word hacks. Bossuet had been sifting through these collected works for more than six months now, whenever he could think of a pretext to spare a few minutes from the copying room on the second floor.

There were over five hundred of them, all in d'Hemery's careful hand, and they looked like they had not been consulted in years; though for some reason, they were not in alphabetical order. Most followed the same format: a one-line description of the subject, followed by initialled anecdotes – the initials probably the names of the informants, who were numerous. Many of the files were annotated with d'Hemery's own assessment of his subjects and their literary abilities, along the lines of *has a style which shows promise – but is repeatedly unfaithful to his spouse*. Of de Jaucourt he had written: *the Chevalier, a physician by profession, who makes a point to exercise that profession for the benefit of the poor and has given away much of his wealth to charitable causes, is a prolific pen-wielder with a dedication to his chosen themes that borders on the pedantic, but, alas, the knight is no great stylist; it then went on to describe him as a man so without vice that he would be considered an excellent example of a Christian gentleman if it were not for his irreligion and the company he keeps*. D'Hemery had described Diderot as *a dangerous boy* and noted that it was widely believed that he wrote *Thérèse philosophe*. And then, of course, there had been the file – one of the first of the more interesting ones Bossuet had come across – on the Baron Paul Heinrich d'Holbach, the Personal Enemy as his intimates called him, though usually simply the Personal; the opportunity to find out the origin of the nickname had never presented itself. D'Hemery had described the Baron as *possibly an atheist, but with a reputation for altruism, perhaps often misplaced, and by all accounts completely faithful to the Baroness in matters conjugal*. Bossuet had been able to make a copy of it one evening when working late, and the Baron had been quite appreciative when he had presented him with it – despite its being five years out of date – and an invitation to the Grande Synagogue had followed. But

Bossuet had not yet found what he was looking for: the file on Jean-Baptiste Desforges – a search that lately had become almost an obsession, an attempt to salvage something meaningful from the past, perhaps because his life had passed that point where it had become more past than future, considerably more past than future. But he'd absented himself from the copying room for long enough, it was time to get back.

As he made his way up the steps from the cellars, he heard voices. Roguin, the Rue de Nicot office comptroller, was escorting somebody to the front door. As Bossuet crossed the hallway to mount the stairs, he got a glimpse of who it was and recognised him immediately. It was Brass Head de la Haye, in his unmistakable shiny ginger wig. For a moment their eyes met and Bossuet made a cursory bow as the aristocrat's clear blue eyes looked him over a few moments longer than was necessary, his young and unpockmarked face menacingly expressionless. The man, whose angelic good looks made him appear younger than he actually was, was unnerving; and there was something feline about him, like a cat just waiting to pounce. The nickname 'Brass Head' came from his penchant for shiny ginger wigs and his association with Iron Head Machault, one of the most powerful enemies of Diderot's *Encyclopédie*, though officially he worked for Malesherbes, one of its most powerful supporters. He had a reputation for ruthlessness, Jansenist sympathies and a loathing of the Jesuits.

There was a letter on Bossuet's desk, its distinctive purple Jesuit seal carefully prised open. That was Lepoitevin's job in his cubbyhole on the third floor. The letters were then read, or more likely, glanced at by Roguin, who spent most of his time secluded in his private office, occasionally receiving mysterious visitors. If Roguin thought they merited it, he passed the letters on to the four clerks working in the copying room, of whom Bossuet was one. Afterwards, the letters were resealed by Lepoitevin before being delivered back to the postal service, or to whichever courier had brought them in. It was amazing that anyone with anything even remotely compromising to communicate used the public post at all, but they did. Thousands of files were generated and housed in several basements of government buildings around the city. Little of it was ever used, just amassed, as if the sheer quantity of it would somehow ensure order on the streets. All the government officers were in love with scribbling. A new word had even been invented for it: *bureau-cracy*, the rule of the scribes. Some of the transcribed letters did make their way to the King, who was reported to find

the indiscretions of his more respectable subjects a source of amusement. But, for the most part, it was tedious work. Saint Petersburg, that insane city on the Baltic, had been much more to his liking. In winter the Russias had been cold beyond description, but their tiled-brick stoves, double-windows and shutters made the buildings there warmer than most in Paris, including the copying room of the *cabinet noir*.

“Needs to be done before lunch, Monsieur Bossuet,” Roguin said, referring to the letter before popping back into his lair. “Needs to be back on the road to where all roads lead as soon as poss.”

The letter was addressed to a Cardinal Lorenzo de Corsini at an ecclesiastical-sounding address in Rome. It had obviously been brought in by one of the couriers who delivered clerical correspondence. Absent-mindedly, Bossuet began to copy it:

The Duc de Choiseul is reported to have approved a plan to launch an invasion of Britain. I have been informed that the plan involves landing two armies. One force of 20,000 is to sail from the Atlantic ports, escorted by navy warships, circumnavigate Hibernia & land at a place in the north-west of England called Clide. The warships are then to sail around Scotland & escort a larger force of 50,000 across the German Sea from the ports in the Austrian Netherlands to land somewhere in the east of England. 125 ocean-going barges are being constructed at Le Havre.

Bossuet found himself stopping, quill in hand, reading instead of transcribing the words. There had been rumours for several weeks now, but he was somewhat taken aback by the details, if there was anything to them. He knew from experience that all informants put a considerable effort into making their tales sound plausible.

Of course, it may be all a ruse to induce the English to allocate forces for the protection of their own coasts & thus effectively render them hors de combat elsewhere. But on the other hand, it is equally believable that the intention is to launch an invasion & the preparations have simply been impossible to conceal. The earliest time at which it could be attempted is probably in May. Needless to say, a successful invasion, or even an effective landing in Britain which forced the English to sue for terms, could lead to a Catholic victory.

A Catholic victory! Bossuet shook his head inwardly. The alliance of Catholic France and Catholic Austria – and not-so-Catholic Sweden and the Russias – against Protestant Britain,

Hanover, Brandenburg-Prussia, Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel and Hesse-Kassel and not-so-Protestant Ireland and very Catholic Portugal – was purely fortuitous. And as for victory; if Rossbach was anything to go by, it was not so assured – eight thousand French in Saxony graves against six hundred Prussian, though the figures were not widely known, even now, a year later. And at Leuthen, six months previously, the Prussians had captured twenty thousand Austrians, and left as many for dead, at the loss of no more than a thousand of their own troops. In New France, the reputedly impregnable island fortress of Louisbourg had been captured by the British. He had seen an engraving of it once: a colossal and impregnable-looking stone edifice surrounded by a treacherous Arctic sea. And now Quebec was being threatened. And the news had just come in of the Comte d'Âche's fleet having been chased from the Indian seas by the British, though de Lally still had a substantial army in Pondicherry. Bossuet touched his face and felt his scars. What he remembered was not the explosion but, for some odd reason, the old Indian on the docks who had sold him Molière. He had no idea why he had given the monkey that name, but it seemed to fit. It had died on the voyage back. Sickened and died, like a little man. The Indian priests believed that there was little difference between the soul of man and that of a monkey, or any other beast; or indeed, between the soul of a beast and that of a god. Hence their monkey- and elephant-headed gods, he supposed, as he turned his attention back to the letter.

The rise of the Duc de Choiseul, with the help of the Marquise de Babylon, to present heights is remarkable. He is no friend of the Society, but that should not lead us to underestimate his abilities. He is currently Minister of War, Navy & Foreign Affairs. He has not been named First Minister. The wits have it, with some justification, that that is a position that the Marquise de Babylon has reserved for herself.

Referring to the Pompadour as the Marquise de Babylon was sailing a bit close to the wind but, Bossuet had to admit, it was a rather apt description.

The pitiful state of French sea power can in some measure be put down to the fact that before the war the royal household, due to her extravagance, was consuming more of the state revenue than the entire navy.

The midday Angelus began to ring, the bells of Notre Dame

distinctive above those of the other churches. The clerks began to get up from their desks and put on their coats, and Roguin emerged from his office. His midday meals were invariably long and washed down with a bottle or, often enough, two.

"I can take lunch later," Bossuet said. "The King's business must come first."

"Indeed it must, Monsieur Bossuet," said Roguin, winking ambiguously. "And where should we be without it. I shall mention you in dispatches." Bossuet wondered if he had actually read the letter. Perhaps he had. Perhaps not. You could never tell with Roguin.

Other news: Final condemnation of the Helvétius book is pending. Helvétius' association with Diderot does no favour to the cause of the Encyclopédie; they both move in the same circles (Helvétius keeps open house for libertines & is reputedly a soft touch for poverty-stricken scribblers). The rumours that Diderot wrote the most dangerous passages in the Helvétius book (& the most obnoxious of the footnotes) cannot be discounted. The most pernicious argument in the book is that morality is possible in a Godless universe, that one can 'make an ethics as one would make an experimental physics', & that divine grace, revelation & the guidance of religion are superfluous. Like all these modernists, he denies the possibility of the miraculous – the most insidious tendency among writings of this type, for it is through the miraculous that God reveals Himself as personal & differs from that reasonist idol of the deists, that cold, infinitely distant & indifferent 'Supreme Being'. Everything he writes is an attempt to seduce his readers with reasonableness & humanity, & his arguments are all the more insidious because they are directed at those who aspire to the good.^v

I have no doubt that the Parlement will force him to make a solemn retraction & after due deliberation order the book burned, but nothing much more will come of it. He is a rich man – he used to be a Farmer-General – & has connections – he was maître d'hôtel to Her Majesty (a purely honorific title but indicative of his position) until the book came out. But Diderot is of course a far graver menace. All of this is more grist to the Jansenist mill. A recent article in the Nouvelles Ecclésiastiques, which the Jansenists have managing to print uninterrupted for the last twenty years – a feat hardly possible without parliamentary & police collusion, namely that of de Conti & his accomplice, Le Paige – describes Diderot & Helvétius & 'their ilk' as 'the spawn of Jesuit

nurseries'. 5,000 copies of the Nouvelles Ecclésiastiques are distributed every week, mainly in Paris, & it is read by, & read to, many more.

The letter was signed, *Your Servant in Christ, François-Antoine de Graffigny, SJ*. And there was a postscript:

No sign yet of Monsignor Verri from the Holy Office to discuss what he referred to as a 'minor embarrassment'. But I imagine he has probably already left Avignon so should be here soon.

Bossuet had no love for the Jesuits. But then they had no love for his kind either. When he had finished transcribing the letter, he checked the time by the clock. It was not yet half-past twelve. He thought for a moment: there were possibilities here. Eking out a living in the lower echelons of the *cabinet noir* was not the royal road to riches. But passing on information to the spied-upon could pay, pay well even – and the Jesuits were not short of a silver sou or two – though one had to be careful. He took out four sheets of paper and he began to make another copy.

CHAPTER III

THE PEARLS OF DEBAUCHERY

“So how many volumes are in each of the sets?” Gilles d’Argenson asked.

“All seven that have been printed to date,” Bageuret said. “The eighth is still at the Le Breton’s.”

They were in Bageuret’s office-cum-cubbyhole at the Imprimerie Charpentier. It was as cramped a space as one could imagine, and smelled. Printing ink was made from soot and linseed oil, and the only thing that got the blackening pads clean was human urine; the smell of it penetrated the cubbyhole and even the bookshop out front.

“A hundred and forty books,” Gilles mused, pouring himself another Hennessy-Charante from his pewter flask. Bageuret was not drinking. He rarely did. “How much are they actually worth?”

An internal window in the wall of his cubbyhole allowed Bageuret to keep an eye on the goings-on in the workshop, an annex to the main building which extended out into the yard behind and was amply lit by two skylights and a large bay leaded window, and where the compositor-printers worked. The two bears – press operators, who had to be big men to operate the heavy presses, were called bears in the trade – and their apprentices were working at the two presses. Patrick, his well-fed belly wrapped in an ink-stained leather apron, had just positioned a block of type in the forme on one of the press beds and was inking it with a blackening pad. Maurice, his apprentice, was taking down and sorting printed sheets which had been pegged up to dry on one of the numerous lines strung across the ceiling. The three compositors – compositors were called monkeys – were at work in the alcove, their backs to the light flooding through the bay window. Once, Bageuret had himself laboured among them.

Print workers were renowned for being perpetually in debt, drinking like fishes, whoring, gluttony, filthy argot and contempt for the practice of religion. Their unannounced *débauches* – a time honoured tradition among them and during which all these vices were indulged in with a vengeance – often lasted up to week. But they did possess a code of honour of sorts. Any bear, monkey or

apprentice who ratted, or divulged that something forbidden was being printed, found himself on a blacklist distributed to all the shops in Paris and even the provinces. It was the only real rule they had. That they were never sober long enough to amount to anything, Bageuret had recognised shortly after he had taken the apron himself. Alcohol in any quantity simply made him sick and he had wanted more than to spend his life setting type and recovering from *débauches*. It had taken him five years to earn his journeyman's papers, the right to be called a *monsieur* and admitted to a *chappelle*.

"The original plan, as stated in the prospectus, was for a total of ten volumes," Bageuret explained. "Eight of articles – one to be printed every six months – and two of plates. It cost sixty livres to get on the subscription list. Then, as they came out, thirty-six livres for the first volume, twenty-four livres each for the subsequent seven, and forty livres each for the two volumes of plates." He extracted his pencil from his waistcoat, inserted a lead, licked it and began to do some calculations on a piece of scrap paper. "Two hundred and eighty-four livres in toto – for a set of ten."

"That was a bit optimistic," Gilles said. "They're not even halfway through the alphabet yet, are they?"

"The eighth volume only reaches the letter G, I think?" Bageuret said. "Anyway, based on those figures – if one does not differentiate between text and plate volumes – a single volume would come to about twenty-eight livres and a bit. Twenty-eight livres and eight sous to be exact."

Gilles grunted.

"That would make twenty seven-volume sets worth about three thousand nine hundred and twenty livres," Bageuret continued. "Officially. What they would actually fetch is another matter entirely. Somewhere between twenty-something to forty livres per volume I should imagine."

"Which would be between just under two hundred up to three hundred livres per set."

Gilles did some more mental arithmetic. Ten times two hundred was two thousand. And add another two thousand if they were sold at three hundred a set. A possible total of three thousand livres. Serious money. And he and Sophie-Françoise could do with some serious money. The meeting with the lawyers could have gone better but at least they'd gained some more time.

"If the risk and consequences of being found in possession of them were perceived to be too high, they might be worth less," Bageuret said. "Though if they are in demand, they

might fetch more.”

In fact, prices for illicit books generally started high. Condemnations pushed them up further and so did police raids. The main thing that drove down prices was the market being flooded by pirated editions of a book in high demand. An unlikely eventuality in the case of the *Encyclopédie*.

“A problem for our friends the economists to sink their teeth into,” said Gilles, topping up his glass again. Gilles seemed to have a bit of a bee in his bonnet about the physiocrats, whom he invariably called the *economists*. “It would make a change from the political arithmetic of grain prices.” He put his hand to his jaw. “This fucking toothache is killing me.”

“Can’t you get anything for it?”

“Hasn’t been a gramme of opium at the apothecary’s for months,” Gilles said. “No opium. No laudanum. And when there is, the price is outrageous. The war, as one is wont to say, has interrupted the trade.”

“Have you spoken to Labussière?” Labussière was a physician. Gilles had told Bageuret that he would speak to him about variolating Bageuret’s son, Christophe. Some said the procedure was flying in the face of God. But if it was, didn’t all medicine? He and Thérèse had had two boys and one girl. Christophe was the only one who had survived.

“Teeth are not his speciality,” Gilles said, missing the point, “but it might just be possible to find someone not totally incompetent at Versailles. Your average medico is as useless as a bum-boy without an arse. They’ve been cutting up cadavers now for two hundred years and still can’t cure anything. As the Monkey says, they put pills they know nothing about into bodies they know even less about.”

Gilles took another sip of his Hennessy-Charante.

“The progeny of the average peasant has a greater chance of growing to maturity than a Prince of the Blood,” he continued. “Baby peasants do come from more robust stock, but I think it’s more to do with their begetters not being able to afford the exorbitant ministrations of our medico friends. I suppose I should have it pulled. But, in the meantime, I’ll trust myself to good old Doctor Hennessy.”

Charpentier’s *Encyclopédies* were a chance to make some money. Not a fortune, but far more than Bageuret had ever before made at once, and which, if prudently put to use ... Money made money. A cliché, but none the less true for that. Gilles was forever moaning about what he called the meagre stipend that went with

his position – a position that he'd had to work hard at getting, as the saying went, rather than at – and which had cost him a not insignificant sum, and, as he also complained, was not even hereditary. He also had an annuity of some sort, though it was probably rather modest for a man of his rank. Nevertheless, a few hundred livres a year gratis was nothing to be sniffed at. But Gilles did have a point. Bageuret made less money than he did, but he did not have appearances to keep up. Or the expense of keeping himself liberally supplied with Hennessey-Charante.

Money – metal discs stamped with the beautified countenances of princes, as Gilles on occasion referred to it – had always been part of their relationship. Gilles usually supplied and Bageuret sold, but sometimes it was the other way around; Gilles, on occasion, found customers for the more expensive *philosophical books* that came his way. Gilles's position – he never called it an employment – as an aristocratic dogsbody to more aristocratic aristocrats had its perks. The last time it had been a dozen boxes of oranges. The once-used and then discarded commodities and leftovers from Versailles – chocolates, patisseries, blotting paper, half-used bars of soap, barely singed sticks of sealing wax – were commonplace items on the market stalls, not that Gilles offloaded that kind of detritus on him. Bageuret was in fact somewhat mystified by Gilles's attitude to money, which oscillated between a disdainful contempt for it and a boyish glee when presented with the least opportunity to make some. Bageuret knew there were debts, a mortgage of some sort, secured against the family lands in Normandy, and that Gilles and his sister were forever keeping their creditors at bay. Every single member of the aristocracy seemed to be in debt, even the King himself – yet they spent money as if it were water. But Gilles did have the chance – though probably not great – of inheriting something, a *seigneurie* even, if the right relative died at the right time. Or he could marry. That was another advantage of rank. If all else failed, a man with blood could always marry money. In fact, these days matrimony with the well-dowried daughters of the nouveau riche was almost becoming de rigueur for the men in Gilles's circumstances.

“So,” Gilles suggested, returning to the subject of the *Encyclopédies*, “while it might be wiser to delay trying to sell until things have cooled down, selling them now might bring in a greater profit.” Perhaps, he thought, Sophie-Françoise might have some ideas. His other half usually did when it came to this sort of thing.

“But when the current fuss dies down,” Bageuret asked, “will Monsieur Diderot and his associates be allowed to continue?”

There were many imponderables in this whole business, perhaps too many.

“The subscribers are for the most part rather esteemed personages,” Gilles said. “Their financial outlay has not been inconsiderable. It’s common knowledge that half the magistrates and bishops are on the subscribers’ list. They have property rights, and the institution of property, if nothing else besides the person of King himself, is never to be interfered with. And it’s not as if these books are going to cause a revolution. This *is* France, not England.”

“So a renewal of the tacit permission is a possibility?”

“In time. Perhaps.”

Bageuret nodded again.

“But in the meantime ...” said Gilles, opening his leather bag and taking out a sheaf of folio-sized sheets. “My latest clandestine contribution to French letters.” He handed the manuscript to Bageuret. “The matter of the title I leave to your astute commercial imagination. I quite liked the last one. *The Pearls of Debauchery* does have has a certain ring to it.”

And it was selling well, thank God, Bageuret thought. He had already started printing another batch.

Bageuret flicked through the manuscript, stopping at a page about a third of the way through. The handwriting was neat, almost feminine. He knew it was not Gilles’s, which was little better than a scrawl. He must have hired a secretary. But a woman? It was possible, he supposed, considering the circles Gilles mixed in. He glanced at a passage at random.

... enjoyed the bodies of those who were in equal measure his victims and his lovers in a manner not dissimilar to the way in which a gourmet enjoys the textures, tastes and scents of exotic fruits ... a navel was to him as a date, a fruit enjoyed more for its texture than its taste or scent. His palate was cosmopolitan, and he prided himself on his ability to enjoy all the fleshly delights that his victim-lovers could offer him. The first thing he noticed when Mademoiselle de Cerdans stretched up to pluck a pear from a tree in the château orchard was the fine musculature of her hairless armpit ...

Hoping it was not all going to be in this vein, Bageuret had a look at another page about three-quarters of the way through. Things had usually become a bit saucier by then.

... his eyes fixed on the pale melons of Mademoiselle de Cerdans’s buttocks raised and exposed, her nether jewels displayed for pleasuring, he began to unbutton his culottes ...

That was more like it.

"It gets a trifle philosophical in places," said Gilles.

Bageuret was not surprised. Most pornographers had literary pretensions. Liked to think of themselves as potential Diderots, he supposed. *Thérèse philosophe* had been doing consistently well for years. A cruel book. To tempt men with such visions of unattainable debauchery – an oriental heaven – was heartless. That was the real sin in it. He would have to think of a good title though. *Margot the Camp Follower* was doing well at the moment, mainly because of the title, as was *The Nose – the Shameless Confessions of a Parisian Parfumeur*, probably for the same reason. And Gilles's last two *oeuvres* had actually sold well. Bageuret had arranged the printing. At Imprimerie Dominic he had been able to print limited quantities of them at night – and they had shared the profits. But now that Bageuret had a more or less free run of Imprimerie Charpentier, he could print as many as the market could take and pretty much for the cost of the paper.

"A little philosophy does no harm," said Bageuret. "Elevates the subject matter. As long as one doesn't overdo it."

He found one of the *philosophical* bits near the front. That was where they usually were.

"There is nothing more human than the pornographic, the erotic, even the filthy imagination," said the aged libertine as he opened his snuffbox. "The beasts may perform the sexual act with regularity and abandon, but they perform it without imagination or variation; only Man – and Woman – can imagine it in all its variation. Vice, more than virtue, raises us above the level of the animal kingdom."

There were times when he found it hard to believe that Gilles actually wrote this stuff, but then one never did know what went on in the depths of another man's mind. However, the demand for it had proved reasonably substantial and money was money. And it was more profitable than oranges. They were sharing the profits between them but, in general, writers were paid very little. Madam de Graffigny made a lot of money from her plays but practically nothing from her Peruvian-letters book. The garrets of Paris were full of would-be Diderots and d'Alemberts – *the riff-raff of literature* as Voltaire called them. And Voltaire himself reportedly made very little money from his books. But Gilles somehow managed to sell most of what Bageuret had printed in the past through his contacts in aristocratic circles. But they needed to be

careful. Print too many and one could be left with unsold stock. But if one didn't print enough of a book that turned out to be popular, the market could be flooded with cut-price pirated editions before one had time to print more.

"No anagrams, I hope?" Bageuret said.

"Word of honour," Gilles assured him.

A few years back some scribbler had convinced a bookmaker to print the imagined memoirs of – to put it mildly – a lady of loose morals, a dusky Oriental, a Turk of some sort, by the name of Melotta Ossonpi. But MELOTTA OSSONPI equalled LA MOTTE-POISSON, the original family name of the Pompadour. The scribbler was still in the Bastille, chained to a wall most likely.

"Do you know how Diderot ended up writing *Les bijoux indiscrets*?" Gilles asked him.

Bageuret shook his head.

"His mistress, Madeline de Puisieux, put him up to it. Something to do with a wager. An ugly woman they say, but intellectual. Like myself, I suppose."

Bageuret had not read the book, but he had a vague idea of the story. A sultan of the Congo had a magic ring by which he could make the sexes of the women in his harem speak – which they did, no doubt on a variety of *philosophical* subjects.

"I'd better be going," Gilles announced. "I need to use your pisspot before I go, though, if I may?"

"Be my guest."

"I have not forgotten about Labussière," Gilles said as Bageuret showed him onto the street. "I haven't had a chance to speak to him yet, but I will. I should be seeing him next week."

It was market day and the Rue Paradis was lined with stalls selling second-hand clothes, vegetables, old furniture, prints in frames, cheap rosary beads, candles and second-hand horsehairs. As usual, it was crowded. The smell of wood smoke, vegetal decomposition, and the sweet whiff of fresh horse droppings – the city's habitual odour – was a refreshing relief from the stink of the Bageuret's cubbyhole. And, for once, the semi-permanent smell of the city's overflowing latrines was barely detectable – the last half-decent sewer had been constructed by the Sun King.

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Sophie-Françoise d'Argenson and her lover, the Margrave Siegfried von Möllendorf, were whiling away another rainy afternoon in the luxurious four-poster bed in his apartment in the

Hôtel de Walsh de Serrant en Irlande et en Poitou.

She was prettier than her other half – they were not identical twins – but could not be described as pretty per se. Her features were slightly too round, a roundness accentuated by her short black hair; in public she wore a coiffure, a Pompadour bouffant. The Margrave was resting his hand on one of her lavish breasts, running his middle finger lazily around her large brown nipple. He was a prisoner of war, captured by the Marquis Antoine-Marie-Alphonse de Choiseul, a cousin of the Duc de Choiseul, and now his guest. The Duc had arranged for him to have the top-floor apartment in the Hôtel de Walsh.

“The requested arrangements with the Amsterdamsche Wisselbank necessary to support you during your Babylonian captivity have been made,” Sophie-Françoise read.

The letter was from the Margrave’s uncle, a professor at the Martin Luther University in Halle, in Saxony.

“Sarcastic bastard!” the Margrave commented.

He, by contrast, was a good-looking man, grey-eyed, fair-skinned, blond-haired, possessing a mouthful of exceptionally good teeth, and well-, but not overly, well built. Out of uniform, there was not a hint of the military man about him.

“Why men go to war is beyond me,” she continued reading, *“though I will admit that many bookish men – myself not excepted – have a surreptitious interest in military strategy and the chess-like intricacies of the sanguine business.”*

“Men go to war for many reasons,” the Margrave said, half to Sophie-Françoise and half to his absent uncle. “Glory. Glamour. Pillage. Some because it is expected of them. Some because they have no choice.”

“And into which category did you fall?” she asked.

“It was expected.”

He tweaked her nipple in an attempt to make it harden.

“No hankering after glory?”

She could feel his cock, solid and warm against her thigh.

“It would be a dull world if the principal aim of a man’s life was simply to prolong it.”

The Margrave was not the first lover she’d had, but he was the most attentive, which was ironic: because, more than any man she had been with, the word *love* – neither of the undying kind or any other variety – never passed his lips. She had early on discovered that for men desire was an almost daily urge, a recurring itch, more like an amoral hunger than a discerning appetite, however much they may deny it; and, when in the mood, she revelled in the

precarious power it gave her over them.

“And pillage and rape?” she asked.

“I’m too rich to find pillage a great attraction,” he said. As for rape: he remembered how a fellow officer had once explained to him over brandy that, according to the customs of war, if a city refused to surrender after a breach had been made in the walls, the ladies were entirely, and legally, at one’s disposition. “As for the other: I only take advantage of those whose nature is to want to be taken advantage of.”

“I will never understand how one persuades men to march like wind-up toys onto a battlefield,” she read on, “and fire at each other – aiming not even at a particular target but at a similarly massed formation, machine-like – without even taking cover? They say that at Zorndorf last August both sides lost 10,000 each and neither side won.”

“*Esprit de corps*, my dear Uncle Klaus,” he said to his absent uncle. “Drill. Drill. And more drill. Men learn by repetition, by rote. Uniforms, flags and drums. Never underestimate the power of music, the rat-tat-tat of the drumstick and colours fluttering in the breeze. Pomp and pageantry. There’s a reason officers spend two hours a day on their toilette. The modern soldier’s got to be drilled, wound up like a clock. Drill’s the key.”

Sophie-Françoise took a sip of wine from a long-stemmed glass on the bedside table.

“News of the prohibition of the Encyclopédie is reaching us,” she read on. “In fact, the more the Encyclopédie suffers persecution in France, the more fashionable it becomes here.”

Gilles had said something about some volumes for sale – in that cryptic, pseudo-conspiratorial manner of his, as if he expected her to be able to read his mind. Something about that Jansenist printer, whose piety became as invisible as divine grace as soon as the slightest whiff of an opportunity to fill his grubby purse arose, having a pile of unclaimed sets ferreted away in some crockery warehouse. Could be worth a pretty packet, Gilles had said. She read on.

“Of course, we have our own tradition of encyclopaedising in Halle. Zedler compiled his Grosses vollständiges Universal-Lexicon aller Wissenschaften und Künste in his shop on the Grimmaische Straße. 3/4 of a million articles. Over 60,000 pages. 64 volumes. He was 20-something when he started it and finished it when he was 60-plus. Some problems with the ecclesiastics of course, but mere hiccups in comparison to Diderot’s. I have no doubt that Good Old Fritz ... Good Old Fritz?”

“Frederick II, King of Prussia and Elector of Brandenburg.”

“... would be pleased to offer Diderot the use of the royal press in Berlin should he be unable to continue his work in France – both Diderot and d’Alembert are, after all, members of Fritz’s pride and joy: the Prussian Académie des Sciences. And in the present climate, I can think of few greater expressions of patriotic sentiment than to have a copy of the great work – an oeuvre which so displeases the government of la grande nation – in one’s bookcase for one’s guests to peruse.”

“Have you seen this *Encyclopédie*?” the Margrave asked.

“Of course. It’s possible there might be a set here in the Duc’s library. You should have a look at them. They are impressive. Check out the article on CLITORIS.”

His fingers began to tiptoe along the inside of her thigh.

“*Good Old Fritz’s latest demonstration,*” she read on, pretending not to notice, “*of his enlightened sentiments is his decision that capital punishment is only to be applied in cases of murder, and henceforth, all death warrants are to be written on pink paper so they will stand out from the usual documents that cross his desk.*”

He began to massage her clitoris slowly and firmly.

“*So, nowadays far fewer miscreants end up on the gallows in Brandenburg-Prussia than in France; or in England, where they are reputed to hang boys for stealing apples – a strange anomaly for a nation otherwise renowned for its liberality.*”

She closed her eyes, the letter clutched in her hand.

“Faster,” she said.

He put his free arm around her and gripped her as if restraining an animal. A few minutes later she orgasmed.

“Sweet Jesus,” she said.

“Amen.”

“*Do you remember the Herr Doktor Amo?*” she read on, pretending to pretend that nothing had happened. “*The blackamoor? Do you?*”

“Vaguely. I was introduced to him when I was a nipper. Scared me to death. There is a portrait of him in the library at Halle. So you think there could be a set of this Diderot thingy in the library here?”

“Possible. Are you thinking something?”

“Read on,” he said and began to suck her nipple.

“*He was an impressive speaker, though with more than a trace of a Dutch accent in both his German and his Latin; and erudite, but not particularly witty. I once attended a public lecture he gave on the reform of weights, measures and currency in which he*

advocated a universal system based on the number 10. An interesting but impractical notion.

“But to cut a long story short: he was born near a place called Axim, which is somewhere on the south coast of that part of Africa which bulges out into the Atlantic Ocean and which is known as the Gold or Slave Coast and from where he was taken to the Dutch colonies in the Americas as an infant. Then at the age of six or seven, he was brought halfway back across the world again to Amsterdam, eventually ending up in the household of the Herzog von Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel. A clever dissertation, De jure Maurorum in Europa, (on the laws concerning the Moors in Europe), launched him on his academic career. Then out of the blue, about 8 years ago, he decided to up and return to Africa. He was in his 50s then, an extraordinary decision for a man who had passed most of his adult life in the monkish corridors of Halle and Wittenberg. Now, sadly, news has reached us that he died at a Dutch fort on the coast some three years ago. (The Schloßgroßfredericksburg? – constructed by the Great Elector in an attempt to give Brandenburg-Prussia a foothold in the African trade, but which he subsequently sold to the Netherlanders. We Germans have little talent for either trade or empire building.)”

She came to the last page.

“Your father’s senility has neither abated nor grown worse since you were last here. Otherwise, Haberkern informed me the last time we met, he is in perfect health (Haberkern also related to me details of a most curious poltergeist incident ... but the telling of that is another day’s work). A poltergeist?”

“There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your ...”

“I’m sure there are. Convey my best wishes to the d’Holbachs. In fact, I have provided the bearer of this letter, Monsieur Stefan von Klopstock (an ex-student of mine) with a letter of introduction to the same, and some samples of ore from the silver mines in Silesia – one of the major causes of the current madness – and other mineral curiosities. Your uncle and servant, Klaus von Möllendorf.”

“My uncle is somewhat verbose,” said the Margrave.

“Did you meet him?” she asked.

“Who?”

“This von Klopstock.”

“No, I was out.”

She laid the letter aside, put her hand under the quilt and brushed the tip of his erect penis with her fingers. It was wet. She

cupped his balls.

“Do something imaginative and I’ll let you come all over my tits,” she said.

Sophie-Françoise was not a virgin – she had been young and foolish once – but keeping up the pretence that she was one and wished to remain one was a sure-fire way of avoiding pregnancy and syphilis. The notion of a standing cock in a linen sleeve tied with a pink ribbon might be amusing ... but she doubted its efficacy against the infectious qualities of either semen or the pox; though lamb’s gut was thought to be more impermeable, and certainly more efficacious than the powders the Palais Royal apothecaries cooked up in their cellars – *éponges* did not bear thinking about. Some women dreamed of having a rich man’s bastard and the pension that went with it, but she shared the opinion expressed in *Thérèse philosophe* by the Abbé T that women had only three things to worry about: *fear of the devil, their reputations, and pregnancy*. Besides, marital bliss with Siegfried von Möllendorf was hardly likely. The von Möllendorfs were rich, jealous of their bloodline, and Protestants. But the unmarried life, she had decided – not that there was any money for a dowry – had its advantages.

“Something that I can weave into the fabric of my literary endeavours,” she said, tickling his scrotum gently.

“Are you not afraid of being found out?” he asked, half seriously
“That kind of literature is not very lady-like.”

“I’d rather sell my soul than my cunt,” she said, giving him an answer she had once given Gilles.

“These Diderot books,” he said. “Suppose one wanted to purchase a few sets ...”

“A booty of French wit in place of one of French gold?”

“Perhaps,” he said.

CHAPTER IV

A CUCKOO-CLOCK RELIGION

Adélaïde Raynal arrived, in a yellow carriage drawn by a pair of matching grey horses, at the house on the Rue Taranne on the corner of the Rue Saint Benôit in the heart of the Latin Quarter. The coat of arms on the carriage doors – three flying geese on a blue and red shield – was that of the Baron d’Holbach. Use of the Baron’s carriage was one of the privileges that came with her position as the Baron’s secretary. Her uncle, the Abbé Raynal, a man more interested in his *Mercure de France* than engaging in the rigmarole of marrying her off, considered procuring her the employment more than ample fulfilment of any familial duties he had towards her. A lackey in grey and silver d’Holbach livery opened the carriage door and escorted her to the front door. She was a diminutive, boy-like figure and the blue, hooped dress she was wearing did not succeed in disguising it; and nor did her carefully applied maquillage succeed in softening the features of her strong-boned face. The house was where Denis Diderot lived with his wife and two daughters, and where he worked.

“Monsieur Longchamp will be back shortly,” the servant who escorted her up the stairs to the fifth-floor apartment informed her, leaving her to wait alone in Diderot’s famous, or rather infamous, library.

A heavy oak table dominated the centre of the room, stacked with what she assumed were some of Denis Diderot’s famous files, half of which Jean-Baptiste had already packed into three tub-like newly made barrels. There were two desks, the smaller one obviously being Jean-Baptiste’s. The larger one, presumably Diderot’s, was ominously bare except for a bottle of ink, a pot of sand, a rack of quills and an abacus. The box-shelves behind it were half empty except for some files and two sets of the *Encyclopédie*. A brass nautical telescope, about a foot-and-a-half long, stood on a tripod at one of the open windows – it was quite a warm day for January. She had expected the nerve centre of the encyclopaedia of encyclopaedias to be somehow somewhat grander. But the books – as she gradually became aware of them – the sheer number of them ... they were everywhere, and of every conceivable shape and

size. Thick volumes, thin volumes, books of a size that one could slip into one's pocket, others so large that they could only be read comfortably on a lectern. The shelves covered every inch of each of the four walls, were under the windows, and even above the fireplace. There were supposed to be three thousand books in all.

The light was good enough this height above the street to read the lettering on the spines without squinting. There was Hume's *A Natural History of Religion* and Defoe's *Some Considerations upon Street-Walkers*, and beside that a copy of the first ever French dictionary, the *Thresor de la langue françoise tant ancienne que modern* by Aimar de Ranconnet and Jean Nicot, the smoker – whom Linnaeus had recently honoured by naming the tobacco plant *Nicotiana* after him – first published in 1606. Further along, she noticed a recent edition of *Vénus dans le Cloître ou la Religieuse en Chemise*. She wondered if there was a copy of Diderot's own contribution to the genre of erotic letters, *Les Bijoux indiscrets*, somewhere. Next to these was a new-looking copy, in English, of Fontenelle's *A Conversation on the Plurality of Worlds*, and beside it *Letters: Leibniz Clarke*. She extracted the latter slim volume and read the title page: *A collection of papers, which passed between the late learned Mr. Leibniz, and Dr. Clarke, in the years 1715 and 1716*. Diderot's fluency in English was well known. He maintained religiously – if that adverb could be applied to any of his activities – that the key to mastering languages was to study them through the medium of Latin. She had tried to learn to speak English herself but found that nearly everyone in London society wanted to practise their French. However, she had learnt to read it. On another shelf she noticed Poulain de la Barre's *De l'inégalité des deux sexes* and further along there was a copy of a *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité* by Jean-Jacques Rousseau – a man she had never met but whom people seemed to love to hate, and he them. The whole room was a Babel of French, Latin, English, Spanish, the Gothic type of the Germanies and the airy script of the Greeks.

On the table, she noticed Montesquieu's *De l'esprit des lois* which she had read at least three times. Arranging its publication was one of the first things Malesherbes had done on his appointment as Royal Librarian. It had already been printed anonymously in Geneva in '48. Montesquieu advocated what he calls the separation of the various powers of the state – the legislative, the executive and the judicial – as well as more equitable land distribution; the abolition of tax farming and slavery; and religious tolerance, even for Israelites. He makes the

distinction between three types of constitutions: monarchies and republics, both being types of states in which the sovereign or sovereign body is subject to a rule of law; and despotisms, those states subject to the arbitrary rule of a prince, such as the Russias and the Turkish sultanate. Beside it was a copy of the *Principi di una Scienza Nuova* by Giambattista Vico, which she had only vaguely heard of; and beneath it was a copy of Pierre Bayle's *Lettre sur la comète*. The city was being flooded with cheap Swiss editions of the latter, first published over seventy years previously, the last year the Englishman's comet had appeared. And beneath that, a copy of *Thérèse philosophe*. Some said this *oeuvre* of philosophical pornography – or of pornographic philosophy – was the work of the Comte d'Argens; others attributed it to Diderot. It had been officially condemned in the '40s and ceremoniously burned in the courtyard of the Palais de Justice – an honour not granted to works of pornography that were merely pornography. She picked it up and opened it, noted it was illustrated, though rather crudely, and flipped through the pages until a passage caught her eye:

He lingered for some time in this devotional position and inspected the altar with glowing eyes. He seemed to be undecided how to effect his sacrifice, since there were two inviting openings. His eyes devoured both and it seemed as if he were unable to make up his mind. The top one was a well-known delight for a priest, but, after all, he had also promised a taste of Heaven to his penitent. What was he to do? Several times he knocked with the tip of his tool at the gate he desired most, but finally, I must do him justice, I saw his monstrous prick disappear the natural way, after his priestly fingers had carefully parted the rosy lips of Eradice's lovepit.

For an instant, the printed letters seemed to swim on the page; and for a fraction of a moment she was both Eradice in her shamelessness and the voyeur-narrator savouring the utter lecherousness of the scene. She almost didn't hear the door opening and a tall and earnest-looking young man come in.^{VI}

She quickly grabbed another book and opened it.

"You look flushed," Jean-Baptiste Longchamp said, looking down at her.

"Flushed?" she said, suddenly aware of the blood in her cheeks.

Unshaven and wigless, he was wearing his habitual shabby black suit, a style of dress Diderot also sported, though the latter's suits

were marginally better cut, which she had always thought was an odd choice of colour for men who disapproved so much of the clergy.

Jean-Baptiste was Diderot's secretary, or 'dogsbody' as he was wont to say. He had landed the position through a cousin who knew Diderot's sister, Mademoiselle Denise, whose artificial nose, made from wood, made her rather unforgettable. Decent situations were not easy to come by in Paris for Montpellierians of the Protestant persuasion, no matter how unpersuaded they might actually be. He had imagined that the hub of Diderot's momentous enterprise would have been a hive of busy scribes all scribbling away, but it was mainly Diderot on his own, drowning in a sea of paper, despite his having various assistants around town. Jean-Baptiste's work consisted mainly of filing and cataloguing, but also some copying and proofing; and writing polite rejection letters. When he'd joined the enterprise, they'd been preparing the articles beginning with the letter E, and there'd been no end of unsolicited articles from a plethora of marquises, *comtes* and chevaliers who were sending in unsolicited articles on etiquette, enamel, Eros and Eskimos. Many of these uninvited would-be *encyclopédistes* were not people one wanted to offend – or they knew people whom one did not want to offend. And one never really knew who knew who. They used a little of the material sent in but the bulk of it was either drivel or, if not outrightly criminal, legally risky. Though there had been some gems.

"He argues that the brain is the centre of all consciousness," Jean-Baptiste said, indicating the book in her hand, La Mettrie's *Histoire naturelle de l'âme*, "of both the intellect and the emotions and that it only appears that we feel with our guts, our diaphragms."

When they had first met, he had found her strong-boned face severe. She was a quiet woman, but her directness, when she did speak, made her the kind of woman men found it easy to open their hearts to. And when it came down to it, he had to admit to himself, she was the only real friend he had. There was something about her – which he'd felt when they'd first met at Grande Synagogue – that drew him to her. He found his fellow creatures ... *difficult* was the only word he could think of, though it did not really describe the perpetual gulf he felt between others and himself. Mostly he felt as if the world did not seem to touch others in the way it touched him; as if they were blind to its intolerableness, its injustices, and were capable of drifting through it with a lightness – a sort of obliviousness to the seriousness of it all – he could not find within himself. Not that Adélaïde saw the world the way he did – or even

approved of the way he saw it; and, he suspected, thought his hopes for a better world, a far better one, even foolish – but she lacked that lightness too. Maybe that was what they essentially had in common.

“His *L’Homme Machine* is also here,” he added. “An argument for the mechanistic view over the vitalist. The physicians were outraged. He was obliged to seek refuge in Berlin.”

“The medical profession is not immune to hysteria,” she said, feeling in control again. “Despite their lack of wombs.”

“Met his end from a bout of overindulgence in pheasant pâté,” he said, with more than a hint of disapproval, which she put it down to Huguenot puritanism. But there was something about his severity that appealed to her, a vague and admirable loftiness about it.

“So this is the dragon’s lair,” she said, reaching up to offer first one and then the other cheek for him to kiss. The sudden scent of her femininity unnerved him momentarily.

“Where the conspiracy was hatched,” she added.

“*A collaboration between men of knowledge*,” he corrected her, quoting from d’Alembert’s Preliminary Discourse published in the first volume.

“From Diderot,” she said, handing him a sealed envelope.

He opened it immediately:

M has informed me that we must prepare for the worst. He says a decision against us by the Conseil du Roi will be followed by an immediate search and the confiscation of all papers. We need to prepare for this eventuality. H will send word when the time is ripe. He has also warned me that Brass Head is buying for blood. The man is the worst kind of fanatic and a real danger. I could not impose on M’s generosity any further – but I’m sure the alternative arrangements will be more than satisfactory.

Yours, D

“Here,” he said and gave it to her to read.

H was obviously the Baron.

“Who’s M?” she asked.

“Where better to hide compromising documents than in the Royal Librarian’s, the chief censor’s, filing cabinet?”

“Malesherbes?”

He nodded.

“Diderot has influential friends,” she said.

“And influential enemies.”

“Is that where this lot is going?” she asked, indicating the stacks

of files on the table and the barrels.

“No. Alternative arrangements have been made. But Malesherbes has taken a lot. Drafts of *Encyclopédie* articles for the most part. Of the more potentially controversial ones. By rights, Le Breton should be storing this stuff; but he’s going through one of his nervous phases. Near enough to half of the files are still here. He’s hidden his personal papers elsewhere. Scribblings that even the liberally-minded Monsieur de Malesherbes might not approve of. My master’s fear of being sent back to Vincennes is very real. He has nightmares about that piece of paper he signed.”

The sound of music, indistinct and distant, was coming in through the open window. The sky, a blue expanse above the familiar roofs and chimneys of the city, was almost cloudless.

“They say the comet is affecting the weather,” she said. “Have you no fear?”

“I am a mere clerk,” he said. “A humble opener of letters, a filler of ink pots, a sharpener of quills and pencil leads. Or at least one hopes that that is how the relevant authorities, whoever the relevant authorities may be in the current confusion, see my humble role.”

If only it were as simple as that. His chances of landing a half-decent situation if the *Encyclopédie* was completely suppressed, a possibility looking more likely every day, were slim, to say the least. He cringed at the thought of it, of having to take up some mind-destroying employment with some nobody of a lawyer, or become a copier in some merchant house or, even worse, a secretary-cum-lapdog to some aristo socialite. He could draw on the goodwill of the connections he’d made by virtue of his working for Diderot but these probably offered limited possibilities. He was too low down in the pecking order of the social henhouse. And the prospect of being excluded from Diderot’s and d’Holbach’s circle was depressing. Despite the fact that perhaps Rousseau was right when he said that most of the philosophes were dilettantes who merely played with ideals but were too much reliant on the favours of the so-called good and the great to really attempt to change things. An opinion perhaps half-shared by Voltaire, who had set up his own printing press at Ferney and was producing a *Dictionnaire philosophique portatif*, a single portable volume, something any tradesman could buy at less than a hundredth of the price of the *Encyclopédie*. And he had his own ideas. Ideas which would never be realised in ink-stained poverty or as some idiot’s lapdog. Jacques Charpentier had promised him a portion of the proceeds from the sets of the *Encyclopédie* in the Quai des Potiers. He’d done more than his share of what had been expected from him. He

had taken risks. He was owed. And now Jacques was dead. But he still had the copies of the keys that Jacques had given him. And he was sure nobody else knew anything about the secret cache. But what to do? That was the question. He wondered if now was a good time. When it came down to it, Adélaïde was the only person he could trust, the only person he could confide in.

“Who is this Brass Head?” she asked.

“A certain Comte de la Haye. Not what I would call an influential man in his own right, but he’s Iron Head Machault’s aristocratic dogsbody, his man at Versailles. And Iron Head is an influential man. Officially, Brass Head is employed by Malesherbes, but his connections make him more or less a free agent – one who wields royal authority. Has a bit of a reputation as an amateur theologian – he wrote something once. And was once kicked out of a Jesuit seminary because of some scandal, I’ve heard. A man with all the virtues of a Torquemada. And right now he’s smelling blood, Diderot’s blood.”

The music on the street below had become a deafening rum-tum-tum. He walked over to the window, brought the telescope to his eye and focused it at the marching column below.

“Fresh recruits by the look of them,” he said, half shouting, thinking how otherworldly and alluring an army band marching through a city could be, the magic of its music filling the narrow streets. “One wonders if they even have the slightest inkling of the occasion, not to mind the reasons for the current slaughter. Or into what mountain cave their piper is leading them.”

She took a turn at the telescope. At the rear of the blue-uniformed column, half a dozen soldiers were pulling a gun carriage over the cobbles, its weight apparent from their straining young faces. Human beasts of burden, she thought, as her eye rested on one particular face for a moment.

“Have a look at the character on the corner,” Jean-Baptiste said. “The one in the brown coat.”

She aimed the telescope in the direction of a man in his late twenties and focused on his unsuspecting, unshaven, weather-beaten face. He was watching the last of the parade as it turned into the Rue Saint Benôit with a half-curious, half-apathetic expression on his face. He had that indefinable Parisian proletarian look, vaguely forlorn and vaguely threatening. If she’d passed him in the street she would barely have noticed him, thinking him just another of the idlers and layabouts that infested the city.

“One of our watchers,” Jean-Baptiste explained. “Brass Head’s idea. Did it off his own bat. Sartine has assigned some of his bully

boys to him. Malesherbes was not pleased but could hardly call them off.”

“There’s more than one?”

“Four. They take turns. They’re not there all the time but it’s impossible to tell when they will be.”

“So how are you going to get these barrels of files out of here without being seen?”

“On that,” he said, nodding in the direction of a donkey-drawn night-soil wagon making its way down the street with two urchins on the back.

She looked at him disbelievingly.

“Desperate times require desperate measures. Courtesy of the Vicomte du Guesclin, one of Diderot’s cronies. His main business is silk, but he’s also cornered a hearty slice of the market in ...”

“Parisian shit?”

It was not the first time he’d heard her utter an obscenity. He wondered if there was another side to her besides that of the slightly awkward intellectual socialite.

“In more ways than one,” he said.

Du Guesclin also had a reputation as a pornography purveyor.

“But before you go,” he said, picking up a brown cloth-covered volume, “here is that book I wanted to show you: *Le Code de la Nature ou le véritable Esprit de ses Lois*.”

It was now too late now to talk to her about the Jacques Charpentier’s *Encyclopédie*.

“Post-Montesquieu, I presume,” she said.

“Commonly believed to be the work of Diderot.”

“Is it?”

“No.”

“So, who is the culprit?” she asked, flicking through the pages.

“A mysterious Abbé Morelly.”

“*The only vice*,” she began to read the opening paragraph, “*that I perceive in the universe is avarice; all the others are only variations and degrees of this ...*”

“May I,” he said, taking the book from her and turning over to the next page, “... *I believe that no one will contest the justness of this proposition: that where no property exists, none of its pernicious consequences could exist ...* he goes on to expound what he calls a *model of legislation that conforms to the intentions of Nature*, a plan – if you like – of how a just society would be constituted. You can borrow it.”

“Thanks,” she said and held on to it. She was not quite sure why she found his ideas about *changing society* and *improving men* –

his own words – so intriguing; or about the wisdom of his obsession with them.

“But now I have to see to these barrels,” he said.

He put the lids on the barrels and started to nail them shut with surprising adeptness. Just as he was done, there was a knock on the door and one of the Diderot maids let in three incongruous figures who were inexplicably reeking of cheap perfume.

The night-soil collector was a wizened creature who looked as if he had been born to the job, and seemed oddly at ease in what must have been totally unfamiliar surroundings.

“His Lordship said to inform your good self that the wagon’s been scrubbed and scented,” he said, laying the obsequiousness on with a trowel. “Everything’s smelling of roses. Including my two little turds here. Beggin’ your pardon for the language, ma’am.”

The two urchins, the elder of them no more than twelve or thirteen and the other not much younger, looked equally unimpressed by their surroundings.

“Excellent,” said Jean-Baptiste.

Ж

“My Teutonic Knight,” Sophie-Françoise said to Gilles, “has expressed a sort of vague interest in acquiring a few sets of the *Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*. Thinks it might make a passable substitute for the war booty that has so far evaded him.”

They were in the Procope. The café, situated opposite the Comédie, it was a meeting place for theatre-goers, actors, and chess players.

“And,” she added, “I need hardly to point out that he has the Mammon to pay for the objects of his desire.”

A lady of more than middle age, her hair put up in a blue-tinged Pompadour bouffant and missing a front tooth, smiled in their direction from one of the tables near the wooden statue of the two nude and slightly larger than life muses – Melpomene, the muse of tragedy, and Thalia, the muse of comedy. Her companion, a young man in a blue uniform with scarlet facings, which Gilles recognised as that of the Marquis de Poyanne’s Regiment of Foot, doffed his tricorne to them.

“One of your victims?” Gilles asked, acknowledged the salutes with polite exaggeration.

“Clientele,” she corrected him, doing likewise, but more discreetly. “And no, they are not. A Madame de Sa-*quelque-chose*

... I forget the name. She was introduced to me at Mass the Sunday before last. From Avignon or thereabouts. The inheritor of a haunted château, some vineyards, and the rents and seigneurial dues that go with it, I should imagine. The sprog with her looks just as dull and provincial, despite his plumage.”

“The Comtesse de Sade and Marquise de Mazan, I believe,” Gilles said, “and the sprog is her son.”

“Yes, that’s the name,” she said.

“They own half of Provence. Your gift for sniffing out the good and the great is deteriorating. They have *several* draughty châteaux *and* an estate outside Paris. They go back to the fifteenth century at least. The Comte is very, very high up in the diplomatic service. Royal blood, light blue, but blue nonetheless. Indebted up to their arses ...”

“Aren’t we all?”

“... but there’s oodles of land to cover it. I’ve heard the sprog, the young marquis, is on the market.”

They both made a point of saluting again, this time with more enthusiasm. The mother reciprocated. The young man merely grinned.

“How I hate hypocrisy,” Sophie-Françoise said, happily not meaning a word of it.

“Dreadful vice,” Gilles agreed. “You must introduce me sometime. It never hurts to make an additional acquaintance in the circles of the elevated. And besides, she might be an amusing conversationalist.”

“And the sprog a young philosophe in the budding,” she sneered light-heartedly.

“He’s a regular at Madame Gourdan’s,” Gilles said as he filled his glass from the carafe for the third time, spilling some red wine onto the white tablecloth in the process.

“The Château?”

“And frequents the Salon de Vulcan ... They say his tastes run in that direction. This month’s act at the Château has Diderot bugging Iron Head Machault with a *diletto* ... or maybe it’s the other way around ...”

“You are disgusting,” she said, referring to the spilt wine. “And rapidly becoming a drunk.”

At the next table some German – obviously a prisoner of war – was causing fits of laughter with complaints that his captor was repeatedly asking to borrow money from him, requests he felt honour bound to oblige.

“Exactly how much interest has your Teutonic Knight

expressed?"

"He got a letter from some erudite relative of his at some German university singing the praises of the great enterprise. Apparently, Diderot is thought well of there. That's what put the idea into his head. And he brought it up again the other day ... but I think his appetite needs to be whetted."

Gilles made one of his characteristic grunts.

"Well, the news is of little else," he said and extracted a copy of the *Mercur*e from an inside pocket and unfolded it. "De Fleury has been addressing the Parlement again. The *Mercur*e has actually published most of his speech on the front page."

He began to read from the news-sheet: "*Society, religion and the state present themselves today at the tribunal of justice in order to submit their complaints. Their rights have been violated, their laws disregarded. Impiety walks the land with head held high. Et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. Humanity shudders, the citizenry is alarmed ...*"

"Christ, keep your voice down," she said.

"The words of the Attorney General can hardly be considered seditious. Some would say they should be bellowed from every pulpit in the land."

"You are drunk."

Gilles started to read again, but did lower his voice.

"*It is with grief that we are forced to say it. Can one conceal from oneself that there is a project formed, a society organised, to propagate materialism, to destroy religion, to inspire a spirit of independence, and nourish the corruption of morals? No, I suppose one can't. He then goes on to attack the Helvétius book and some of the Monkey's latest communiqués.*"

"So what outpourings of the Monkey's are to experience Sanson's pyrotechnical skills this time?"

"His *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne* for one," he said. "Forty-thousand sinners chastised in one sweep of the divine hand. On All Saints' Day to boot. Half of them crushed under the rubble of collapsing churches – He with the capital H is not deceived by outward appearances of piety – and the slackers mopped up by the tidal wave."

"Well, I am sure whoever is responsible for procuring copies of subversive poetry to burn won't have too much trouble finding a few exemplars of that slim volume. However, I should imagine a copy of Diderot's tomes will not be as easy to come by. Unless the Pompadour donates hers."

Gilles put the *Mercur*e away.

“You said his appetite might need to be whetted?”

“He hasn’t made up his mind yet.”

“I was under the impression that was a department you excelled in ... helping men make up their minds.”

“If it was only a set we were talking about I’m sure my skill in that department would suffice but ...”

“So how many sets might your devoted one be interested in?”

“Ten has been mentioned.”

Gilles was silent for a moment.

“I see,” he said eventually and took a sip from his wine.

There was more laughter at the table behind them.

“We could introduce him to Diderot,” she suggested. “He’s usually at the Grande Synagogue. Have him sell his own wares unawares, as it were.”

“He’s skedaddled to Grand-Val. Paris is getting a bit hot for him. But his factotum, that Longchamp fellow ... what’s his name?”

“Jean-Baptiste.”

“He’ll probably be there.”

“So?”

“It shouldn’t be too difficult to get him going on the subject, fill in the background, give the whole thing a heroic twist. And with Diderot and the Personal *in absentia*, there’ll be only a handful of people there. I imagine it will be a right cosy gathering.”

Gilles’s glass was empty. He looked around and caught the eye of one of the waiters, something he was good at.

“I don’t quite see what you are getting at?” Sophie-Françoise said when the waiter had disappeared again.

“Sometimes men like to buy things they know the story of, the origin of,” Gilles continued. “Not always, depends on the merchandise. Nobody wants to know where sugar comes from ... but when it comes to things like books, and paintings, well, provenance is all.”

“What sort of price would one be talking about?” she said. “Assuming of course that he took the bait.”

“I have always found it difficult to put a price on anything. And the ramblings of the economists only confuse me. Bageuret’s your man for that dark art.”

Gilles’s wine appeared.

“You never told me how your Jansenist bookworm managed to come into possession of twenty sets?” she said. “I presume he has told you?”

“Well, it’s a bit more complicated than that. Bageuret doesn’t actually have them, not in his possession that is.”

“Go on!”

“He has access to them. Officially they belong to his employer but she ...”

“She?”

“Yes. She wants to get rid of them and has asked him to look for customers.”

“Which he is hardly in a position to do.”

“No.”

“So this is where you come in.”

“Yes.”

“That does complicate things a bit.”

“How so? If she wants to sell them?”

“It means that the proceeds – of what’s left over when this widow has had her cut – will have to be shared three ways, between you, me and your Jansenist bookworm.”

“My bookworm is a shrewd old goat. He’ll get a good price from her.”

“We need the money.”

“If we can keep the wolves at bay until the harvest, we’ll be in the clear.”

“Monsieur d’Argenson,” a voice behind them said before she could reply.

It was Stefan von Klopstock.

“Herr von Klopstock is newly arrived in our beloved Babylon,” Gilles said, introducing him.

Sophie-Françoise extended her hand. Von Klopstock bowed and kissed it.

“My sister and I were just discussing the root of all evil,” said Gilles.

“Mammon,” Sophie-Françoise explained.

“Yes, the power to acquire property and the power to compel the less fortunate to labour in one’s kitchen, field and bed,” Gilles explained, oscillating between seriousness and faux pomposity. “The concept of the just price. An inevitable component of any ethics worth its name, I would argue. Are not we labourers in the palaces of the great entitled to our fair share of the public purse? Or will the Comte de Bon Goût have paid a just price for the pleasure – alas, soon to be no more – of sitting on the stage this evening and showing off his new companion, the Marquise de Questionable Taste to the scented unwashed in their boxes and unscented unwashed in the lower depths? And, as for her new dress: will the half a dozen seamstresses who spent a month in a garret sewing it have been paid a just wage for their labours and

the ruination of their eyes? Or will the *demoiselles de la nuit* be recompensed justly for the pleasures they will dispense when the play is done? That sort of thing.”

“You are disgusting!” said Sophie-Françoise.

“*Position ridiculous, pleasure momentary, price exorbitant.* A Roast Beef wit said that. Lovely word. *Ex-orbit-ant.*”

She could not resist smiling.

Gilles laughed.

Von Klopstock smiled but could not quite bring himself to laugh.

“My brother finds it difficult to resist lowering the tone of conversations,” said Sophie-Françoise, making a half-hearted and pretended show of looking around to make sure nobody had overheard.

“Is not a just price simply the price agreed on between the buyer and seller?” von Klopstock said.

“Elegantly put,” said Sophie-Françoise.

“A conclusion conveniently reached by the Jesus Men of Salamanca,” said Gilles, “at about the same time that Monsieur Calvin was preaching the virtues of penny-pinching and inventing his cuckoo-clock religion. It assuaged the consciences of the merchants of Catholic Europe. But those with ears to hear heard Tommy Aquinas struggling to turn in his grave.”

“Money is a game,” she said. “There is no point in trying to find a sense in it. The point is both to play well and, if possible, to win.”

“But *if one is one's brother's keeper,*” Gilles went on, “is it honourable to haggle, to try and diddle him? Would an honourable man behave thus with his real brother? With his cousin? Or even with a distant relative? Would my sister behave thus with me? Probably. But then she is a special case.” Despite his tone, Gilles was being serious in his way; though anyone who didn't know him would have been hard-pressed to believe it.

Von Klopstock said he was waiting for the Comédie to open.

“You must share our box,” Sophie-Françoise said to von Klopstock.

He accepted the invitation graciously.

“Do you know what I love about the theatre?” said Gilles. “It's the forgetfulness it induces, the communion, the sharing in the imagined tragedy being played before us, forgetting for a moment our own individual mediocrity.”

“Self-pity does not become you,” said Sophie-Françoise. “And besides, it's supposed to be a comedy.”

“Well, I hope it is not too comical,” he said. “I much prefer tragedy. I love it when the handkerchiefs come out. Nothing like a

good communal rending of garments and shedding of tears. Comedies have happy endings – which makes them rather absurd. Which is why you have got to laugh at them, I suppose. What other reaction can one have to a work of art that portrays human life as having any kind of happy ending? In tragedy, most of the participants end up dead, in comedies, married! Tragedy is the real thing.”

Sophie-Françoise could only shake her head and pretend to disapprove again.

Suddenly a well-dressed man in his fifties, who had an unpleasant-looking growth of some kind on the side of his nose, was standing beside their table waiting to be noticed.

Gilles stood up and introduced him to his sister and von Klopstock.

The Vicomte du Guesclin was a big man. He even made Gilles look rather diminutive.

“The best play I ever saw at Comédie was the Monkey’s *Le fanatisme*,” du Guesclin said. His accent was distinctly patrician. “In my happy misspent youth, in ’42 or thereabouts.”

“His masterpiece, say some,” said Gilles.

“The house was packed to the seams,” du Guesclin said. “We were like herrings in a proverbial barrel. The only persons missing were Their Majesties. Even then the Monkey had a scandalous reputation. There were standing ovations all round. It was only the next morning it began to sink in what it had all been about. Not, as on first appearances, an attack on the tyranny and hypocrisy of the infidel, no, it was an attack on all religion, on the tyranny and hypocrisy of all religion ...”

“To point out the ludicrousness of one religion is to point out the ludicrousness of them all,” suggested von Klopstock, obviously quoting something or somebody.

“There was a fucking riot,” du Guesclin went on. “Our beloved Paris mob loves nothing better than to go on the rampage. The doors and windows of our beloved Comédie Française were pelted with rotten vegetables and eggs – and no small quantity of proletarian turds. Jansenist crowds made a bonfire of copies of the thing and consigned an effigy of the blasphemous author to the flames. After the third performance, it was banned. The Monkey was furious and announced he would dedicate the play to the pope. Which he did. Sent a specially printed copy of it off to the good Benedict who, surprisingly enough, accepted it and the dedication, and in his thank-you epistle to the Monkey, said he had *read it with great pleasure*.”

“The Hermit says it is a play more likely to incite religious fanatics rather than dissuade them,” said Gilles.

“Just the kind of thing he would say,” du Guesclin said. “But I must go. Pleasure calls.”

“One of your drinking companions?” Sophie-Françoise asked when du Guesclin was out of earshot.

“He has some silk factories,” Gilles said. “Bale and bond.”

Von Klopstock had heard the expression before. It was some sort of legal loophole that enabled the nobility to carry on commerce, no doubt quite lucratively.

“Thick with the Personal and Diderot,” Gilles added. “Wouldn’t trust the man as far as I’d throw him – which is not very far. He also has a *disgustingly* profitable – pun intended – interest in night-soil collection, though that is not something he publicises. People pay him to take it away and then he sells it to market gardeners. Makes money at both ends, one could say.”

“You *are* disgusting!” Sophie-Françoise said again.

Von Klopstock was getting used to people talking to each other as if he were not there. It didn’t happen often but now and again it seemed as if they had forgotten that he could understand much more than his sometimes-strained accent would lead one to believe.

“They say he’s trying to negotiate a monopoly,” Gilles went on, “the exclusive rights to the produce of every anus in Paris, human and equine. Though they do say he gives a decent price to the horse-turd urchins.”

Gilles turned to von Klopstock.

“Have you had a word with Monsieur Bageuret?” he asked.

“Yes, he has my manuscript and says he will look at it,” von Klopstock said, smiling weakly.

Handing over his *oeuvre* to Bageuret had been a rather humiliating experience. He’d waited until the shop was empty before entering; but less than a minute into his conversation with the bookseller the doorbell had rung and a woman-customer, plastered in maquillage and reeking of new money, came in to collect half a dozen copies of some expensive books she’d ordered. Bageuret had instantly cut off their conversation, asking von Klopstock to simply leave his *oeuvre* on the counter, as if it were a bundle of cheap advertising pamphlets.

“Monsieur von Klopstock is a budding writer, I recommended the Imprimerie Charpentier to him,” Gilles explained.

“I think it’s time to go,” Sophie-Françoise said.

They made their way out into the darkness, followed by von Klopstock, who had the feeling that he had suddenly acquired the

near invisibility of a hanger-on. He was not sure if Gilles had drunk too much or was merely pretending to have.

They began to cross the busy street to the Comédie Française.

“There is one other issue,” Sophie-Françoise said to Gilles as they waited for a carriage to pass, “which might require some thinking about.”

“Yes,” he said.

“If my Teutonic Knight can be convinced to purchase several sets of Diderot’s book of books, they will need to be delivered to somewhere in the Germanies. He can hardly have them delivered to his rooms at the Hôtel de Walsh ...”



The Jesuit was so certain the moment he saw him that the Janus-faced creature with his walking stick and mop of unkempt greasy hair was a harbinger of nothing good that he forgot to offer him his ring to kiss. He simply continued to crumple the stale remains of a loaf of white bread into the crude wooden box on his desk. There was a jackdaw in the box, half-concealed in straw.

“It has a broken wing,” he said, and then added for no particular reason. “Animals do have souls. Not eternal ones of course, but souls none the less. A fact often forgotten. Like us, they suffer. Take a seat.” It was more of a command than an invitation. Though he really should have let the man stand.

Bossuet limped forward with the aid of his stick and sat down.

The Jesuit put the box aside and asked quite bluntly, “And how may I be of service, *monsieur*?”

“It concerns the security of the realm, Your Eminence,” Bossuet said, turning his good side and good ear towards the priest, which had the effect of making it seem he was deliberately hiding his pockmarked face. “And the welfare of the Society of Jesus.”

“Yes,” said the Jesuit. The man had simply turned up, knocked at the front door and said he wanted to speak to him *privately*. It was the height of insolence, to say the least; but from time to time giving a hearing to men who eked out a living on the borders of respectable society – and this Bossuet was obviously one of that category of men – kept one in touch with the world beyond. The scriptural injunction not to shun strangers lest they be angels in disguise hardly applied in this case.

“Your Eminence’s correspondence is being intercepted.”

The Jesuit said nothing.

“Epistles to the Romans.” Bossuet found himself saying.

“So, you are a spy, *monsieur*.” The Jesuit’s words had spat themselves out of their own accord. “And what dreadful secrets about me or the Society have you wheedled out?” The *Romans* Bossuet had referred to was obviously Lorenzo de Corsini. “Who is your master?”

“I am not at liberty to reveal who my superiors are.”

The Jesuit decided to let it pass. He would find out eventually.

“In my official capacities I am obliged to read documents,” Bossuet added. The statement did not quite come out as he had intended.

“I presume you are referring to the privileged communications between the Society and its correspondents.” The sarcasm in the Jesuit’s voice was caustic. “Go on.”

“I am a religious man, I felt I had a duty ...”

The Jesuit could see that if he wanted to find out more he would have to humour this Monsieur Bossuet.

“The government is very concerned about the conveyance of sensitive information to foreign powers in these troubled times,” Bossuet went on.

“Naturally.”

“Your Eminence has ...”

“Your Excellency,” the Jesuit corrected him.

Bossuet made a derisory head bow.

He paused for a moment, not quite sure how to continue.

“There are two broad categories of kinds of spies,” he went on. “The openers of letters, the decipherers; and those like the man who merely sits in the harbour noting the coming and going of ships, or the so-called fly who notes the comments made in salons and taverns. I believe your correspondence might lead my superiors to believe Your Excellency is one of the latter kind. While I, I suppose – in the line of duty and in order to uncover other spies – am of the former category.”

The Jesuit regarded Bossuet intensely for a moment. He was not used to insolence. This was not someone merely carrying out his duties – like that slovenly character from Malesherbes’s office who had visited him at Christmas. This man wanted something. Money probably. But maybe not just that. His antagonism was almost personal, or even that of the fanatic.

“What leads you to believe that I am willing to discuss privileged correspondence with you, *monsieur*?” the Jesuit asked.

Bossuet extracted some neatly folded sheets of paper from his waistcoat. The Jesuit was expecting him to hand them to him, but instead, he slowly opened them and, as if deliberately giving the

Jesuit time to examine his Janus-like face again, began to read from them aloud.

“The Duc de Choiseul is reported to have approved a plan to launch an invasion of Britain ... He has not been named First Minister. The wits have it, with some justification, that that is a position that the Marquise de Babylon has reserved for herself. The pitiful state of French sea power can in some measure be put down to the fact that before the war the royal household, due to her extravagance, was consuming more of the state revenue than ...”

The Jesuit made an effort not to cringe outwardly.

“I have taken the liberty of preparing this copy for your perusal,” Bossuet added, and handed him the three sheets.

The Jesuit suppressed his distaste at touching any object that this disgusting man had touched, and took them.

He could see at a glance that it was a complete copy of his last letter to Lorenzo de Corsini. He looked at Bossuet and wondered if it was indeed true that the defects with which the Almighty marked certain men mirrored the conditions of their souls. But he dismissed the speculation. The important question was what did this man actually want? And perhaps how he could be put to use?

“You quote my words out of context, Monsieur Bossuet,” he said, feeling it would be perhaps as well to try and introduce some civility to the conversation.

He laid aside the copy of the letter and took out his snuffbox.

Bossuet said nothing.

“Your sense of duty is laudable,” the Jesuit said, managing to suppress the urge to sarcasm. The possibilities of what Bossuet – or his masters, if indeed he was acting on somebody else’s behalf – might want went through his mind. To confess to the great Jesuit conspiracy half the nobility and the secular clergy believed in? To reveal the identities of his informants? The jackdaw moved noisily in its box as if detecting his agitation.

“Your epistle ...” Bossuet said, “if I may call it that ... should it should fall into the hands of certain persons in the Parlement ... could be used to damage the Society. Versailles might be obliged to take measures ...” Bossuet’s tone was almost that of someone one who had already been taken into confidence.

The Jesuit stopped fidgeting with his snuffbox. The man did not stand on ceremony nor hesitate to get to the point, he would give him that.

The Society had been expelled from Brazil already. And that had happened under Benedict’s pontificate. And the news from Lisbon was hardly auspicious. Pombal was accusing them of instigating

the attempted assassination of the Portuguese king. And the new pope was procrastinating just at a time when a strong pope was needed, one who knew the value of a religious order answerable to him alone, but ... The Templars came to mind, extinguished overnight by an avaricious king and the silence of a weak pope. Though now, in France, the danger was from a weak king who lacked the guts to impose his will on a Jansenist-infested Parlement.^{VII}

“So how do you think you may be of service to us?” he asked, aware that Bossuet was as aware of his insincerity as he was of Bossuet’s.

Bossuet cleared his throat.

“I am in a position to keep Your Excellency informed of developments.”

“And naturally, you would expect a recompense for your labours?”

He could have let Bossuet bring the subject up and seen him squirm a bit but he was not feeling particularly patient. He consoled himself by not wording the offer more graciously.

Bossuet raised his eyes and tilted his head to one side in a gesture which said: of course, naturally, regrettably even.

“Any recompense,” he said, checking the urge to say *the labourer is worthy of his hire*, “would be greatly appreciated. I am not a rich man. There are risks, expenses.”

The Jesuit nodded. The man was a blackmailer, but he could be a useful one. In a way, he had already rendered a service. He had known that the Society was being watched. It was only to be expected. But now he knew that their post had been compromised. They had been careless. He flipped his snuffbox open, was about to take a pinch, changed his mind and snapped it shut again. Two questions came to mind.

“How long has this tampering with our correspondence been going on?”

“This is the first instance that has come to my attention.”

The second question was the more important.

“Besides yourself,” said the Jesuit, picking up the copy of the letter and examining it again, “who else has read this? For whose eyes was this intended?”

“For the King’s, through his ministers.” This was precisely what Bossuet had wished for. He had become useful. “Every week a selection of correspondence is made for the King. They say he reads it personally. Pour des raisons d’état. Selecting which letters are deemed worthy for the royal eyes to gaze upon is a many-tiered

process.” Roguin made the first selection, but Bossuet did not know to whom the letters were subsequently passed on. “As to who makes the final selection, it is difficult to say. I could make discreet enquiries.” The chances of him learning who made the final selection was slim, but he had no intention of saying that. He was not even sure that Roguin had done more than glance at the letter he had just given the Jesuit a copy of. It was possible – though unlikely – that it had simply disappeared into the files.

“It would be appreciated if you could find out,” said the Jesuit, adding, with deliberate hesitation. “Financially appreciated.” He was aware that this Bossuet was drawing him into his web, but he saw little alternative. Besides, he would initiate a little investigating himself. He would have a word with his favourite informant – Madame Isabelle de Vereaux, the so-called Society’s Mistress, who also, from time to time, supplied him with scandalous books – it was, after all, his duty to keep up to date with the latest threats to morality and religion, or the ‘latest filth’ as she called it.

Bossuet again raised his eyes and tilted his head as if he was about to say: no, he was not worthy.

The Jesuit was dreading the humiliation he knew he would feel when, in a few moments, he would have to open the drawer in his desk, extract the money box, and count out the coins – he had yet to decide how much – and hand them over. The jackdaw began to move about in its box again.

CHAPTER V

THE GRANDE SYNAGOGUE

The Grande Synagogue was what those in the know called the dinners the Baron and Baroness d’Holbach gave every Sunday and Thursday in their sumptuous Paris apartments on the Rue Royale. Organising these *évenements* was one of Adélaïde Raynal’s duties.

“Women of fifty playing thirteen-year-old virgins!” Jean-Baptiste Longchamp was holding forth – it was one of his less agreeable traits – this time on the subject of the Comédie Française. “Herds of princess–shepherdesses and prince–shepherds prancing about in papier mâché meadows. Spectators on the stage. Half the time you can’t even tell who’s an actor and who’s not. Art, the theatre, should reflect the real world.”^{VIII}

“You master’s penchant for the illusion of the realistic has rubbed off on you,” the Abbé de Graffigny teased him, topping up his glass from one of the carafes of red wine. He was decked out in freshly ironed mantle and collar, freshly powdered tonsured wig, and had not spared the rouge. The overall effect was that of a slightly effeminate piety. “What is Diderot up to these days anyway?”

“Keeping his head down, I should think,” Bossuet suggested. He had been attending Grande Synagogue dinners on and off ever since he had presented the Baron with a copy of his d’Hemery file, but he had not met the Abbé before.

“Have you had occasion to experience the glories of our Versailles yet?” Madame de Walsh asked Stefan von Klopstock, in her aristocratic accent. She was the grande dame of the company; and it was a role she obviously enjoyed. She had recently published what she called a *slim volume on the lives of toads, lizards, newts – and frogs*. Her hair was done up in a silver-grey bouffant and her cheeks heavily rouged. Von Klopstock, decked out in his distinctive blue velvet jacket, was sitting beside her.

“One is allowed to view the King performing some of his public functions,” said Bossuet, “as long as one looks reasonably presentable, though they are a bit stricter nowadays.”

“Not strict enough,” added Madame de Walsh. “The last time I was there, there were quite a few unsavoury characters prowling about.”

“You can see the King being put to bed,” the Abbé added, “with some duke handing him his nightshirt and some marquis enjoying the honour of holding the royal candlestick. But there’s always a bugger of a queue for the lavatories.”

“It’s his official bed of course,” said Jean-Baptiste, relieved that the conversation had veered away from the subject of Diderot’s whereabouts. “Not the one he actually sleeps in.”

“One wonders who has the honour of holding the royal member these days,” the Abbé said, topping up his glass again. “The Murphyse seems to have been sent packing.” But then he returned to the subject of Diderot. “Jean-Baptiste is a close collaborator of Monsieur Diderot.” The comment was for the benefit of Madame de Walsh and von Klopstock.

“Please, Monsieur Abbé, you exaggerate,” Jean-Baptiste protested.

“*Shalt thou too deny me, Petrus?*” said the Abbé.

The ticking of the clock could be heard in the silence that ensued.

“The subscribers are concerned,” Jean-Baptiste was forced to admit.

“And your master?” said the Abbé. “Not like him to miss one of the Personal’s free spreads.”

“For our ears only,” said Adélaïde, interjecting, “the Baron has advised Monsieur Diderot to flee.” Suddenly aware she had become the focus of attention, she realised that she had been perhaps indiscreet. Her role as go-between between Diderot and Malesherbes – via the Baron and Jean-Baptiste as Diderot’s secretary – meant she was often more up to date on what was happening than Jean-Baptiste himself was. “But I’m sure that Jean-Baptiste is better informed,” she quickly added.

All heads turned again in unison in the direction of Jean-Baptiste.

“Monsieur Diderot’s father is on his deathbed,” he said. “He was staying at Grand-Val but has now gone to Langres.”

The footman’s unnecessarily loud announcement of the arrival of Mademoiselle Sophie-Françoise, Monsieur Gilles-Thérèse d’Argenson and the Margrave Siegfried von Möllendorf spared Jean-Baptiste from having to elaborate further.

The Abbé smiled at Sophie-Françoise. Her yellow bodice barely contained her breasts, and this evening she was enveloped in an invisible cloud of Norwegian musk. She looked younger than her brother. Just past the over-valued innocent flush of youth, the Abbé could not help thinking. It was hard to believe that they were twins, hatched from the same egg, as it were. The Margrave, his fair Teutonic features set off to particular advantage by his gold-

braided red cavalry jacket, looked particularly splendid.

“Gilles has a position in the civil service. At the Malaquais. All very hush-hush of course,” the Abbé said, tapping his nose with his beringed middle finger and winking at von Klopstock. “Works closely with Monsieur de Malesherbes.”

Gilles was happy not to correct the obvious exaggeration, noting with satisfaction that attendance at the dinner was indeed less than half of what it usually was. Normally getting a long conversation going was difficult – people just flitted from one theme to another; and if *les grands* themselves, Diderot and the Personal, were feeling pontifical, it was difficult to get a word in edgeways, still less to steer the conversation in any direction that did not interest them. It looked promising.

“Jean-Baptiste is Diderot’s secretary,” Sophie-Françoise said, addressing the Margrave, as she peeled off her yellow gloves and took a place opposite the Abbé, catching Gilles’s eye as she did so. “He’s the man to tell you the story of the dictionary of dictionaries.”

“The Margrave von Möllendorf is a great admirer of your master’s book of books,” Gilles added, addressing Jean-Baptiste. He had to admire his sister’s abilities at times. *He who hesitates is lost* was not a failing that applied to her. “I’m sure he would love to hear the story of its coming about.”

“Story, story!” The Abbé drummed the table with his glass.

Jean-Baptiste wavered for a second.

“It’s a long story,” he said.

“But a good one,” Sophie-Françoise encouraged him.

A footman in d’Holbach livery placed a large porcelain bowl smelling of peppery chicken soup at the end of the table.

“Story! Story!” The Abbé drummed the table with glass again.

“It all started with Le Breton the printer employing Diderot to translate Chamber’s *Cyclopaedia*,” Sophie-Françoise said, thinking that the Abbé for all his drunkenness could be useful at times, “a two-volume collection of, it must be said, rather arbitrarily chosen articles. Le Breton had had a fight – literally, it came to blows – with the original translator, some Englishman.”

“But the rather modest plan developed into a much grander enterprise,” Jean-Baptiste felt obliged to continue, “a plan to publish a compendium of all knowledge – what was to become the *Encyclopédie des sciences et des arts*.”

Gilles remained studiously expressionless. He hadn’t for a moment doubted Sophie-Françoise’s ability to wrap the likes of Jean-Baptiste Longchamp around her little finger. Though he was

not so sure, when it came down to it, that the Margrave was a man who could easily be persuaded to spend his unearned riches on books.

“But just as things were getting going, Diderot found himself locked up in Vincennes,” the Abbé added, “on account of his *Lettre sur les aveugles à l’usage de ceux qui voient* – his book for the blind ...”

“To get out he had to sign an undertaking never again to publish anything again without prior approval, Jean-Baptiste said. “On pain of being sent back there for the rest of his days.”

Gilles noted with relief how surprisingly easy this was turning out to be. Good old Sophie-Françoise certainly knew how to manipulate the stronger sex.

“Le Breton put together a consortium,” Jean-Baptiste continued. “The initial investment needed was eighty thousand livres. Now Diderot estimates that the whole thing will cost a quarter of a million to finish – if it ever is. There was a fortune to be made – or at least it seemed so at the time. Diderot was the driving force, as he still is.”

“Works like a horse and has the memory of an elephant,” Gilles added.

“And is motivated by what he calls *posterity*,” the Abbé added. “The atheist’s substitute for the afterlife.”

“The Indian believes in the transmigration of souls,” Bossuet said idly. The story of the origin of the *Encyclopédie* was not particularly new to him. “Even, I was told, that souls can be reborn in different times, in the future or in the past, as if time were a sort of river – that can be entered upstream or downstream, so to speak.”^{IX}

“Monsieur Bossuet has spent time in Pondicherry,” Adélaïde informed the company.

“*It is no more surprising to be born once than to be born twice*,” Gilles said, obviously quoting someone. “The Monkey.”

“I think it was the other way around,” Adélaïde corrected him.

“Go on,” said the Margrave, addressing Jean-Baptiste.

“But Jean Le Ronde d’Alembert,” Jean-Baptiste continued, “another man with a genius, was also crucial. An acclaimed mathematician, but, unlike Diderot, a member of the Académie, and more respectable somehow, despite his questionable antecedents, and with contacts.”

“There is a rumour that the Jesuits are spreading a rumour that d’Alembert is illegitimate,” Bossuet said.

“The bastards,” said the Abbé. “But I like it. D’Alembert the

Bastard. Bit of a mouthful but I like it. He's the only man with the distinction of not being paid by either side in the current conflict."

"The Bastard is also a member of the Académie des Sciences in Berlin," Gilles explained. "As is Diderot."

"I am not sure I quite agree with all this nicknaming," said Jean-Baptiste.

"The Bien Aimé calls his daughters Snot, Rag and Pig," said the Abbé.

"Subscribers were needed, a thousand for starters, a thousand of the rich and enlightened," Jean-Baptiste went on, avoiding the temptation to cross verbal swords with the Abbé. "And men in love with scribbling. The good Chevalier de Jaucourt ..."

"The only extant copy of his *Lexicon Medicum Universalis*, a medical encyclopaedia," Gilles interjected again, "had ended up at the bottom of the deep blue sea when the ship ferrying it to the United Provinces to be printed sank. So, finding himself at a loose end, he let Le Breton convince him to labour in the fields of knowledge in return for presents of books. But then he is a rich man."

"How rich?" asked Sophie-Françoise. "If I may be so vulgar?"

"They say he inherited sixty thousand livres," Jean-Baptiste informed her.

"What the Baron gets a year in rents, supposedly," Gilles said. "Though in fact, it's the mother-in-law, Madame d'Aine, who actually owns Grand-Val."

"Last time I was out there," said Sophie-Françoise, "she was as pissed as a coot and cajoling that pet priest they keep into giving her rides around the dining room, riding crop in hand."

"They say the Hermit has similar tastes," Gilles added.

The Margrave smiled, displaying a mouthful of surprisingly pristine teeth, and was about to ask who on earth this Hermit was, but Jean-Baptiste had begun to speak again.

"Goussier was engaged to prepare the plates. The Baron d'Holbach, Grimm, and Mademoiselle Adélaïde's uncle, the Abbé Raynal, were also involved. He runs the *Mercure de France*. And, as luck would have it, it was just about then that Malesherbes became the Director of the Book Trade."

"Malesherbes's support was crucial," Gilles said. "The whole thing was controversial from the word go. And at the time the authorities were going through one of their nervous patches: our mob was playing up."

"There was a rumour doing the rounds that Versailles was kidnapping Parisian children and that princes of the blood were

bathing in it, in some real peasant blood, literally,” the Abbé added. “The lower orders lack an appreciation of metaphor. Or should that be *simile*?”

Sophie-Françoise glanced at the Margrave. The Abbé was making her uneasy. She knew from previous experience that he was unpredictable.

“Diderot wrote the prospectus,” Jean-Baptiste continued a little more warily. “It promised controversy, but not enough to endanger negotiations with Malesherbes. He claimed – well, gave the impression – that the bulk of the content had already been written and was just waiting to go to the printers, and that the whole thing would be completed in four years. He outlined the principles of his organising system, how the various branches of knowledge would be ordered, listing the different types of knowledge and the activities they give rise to. How memory gives rise to history, reason to philosophy, the imagination to poetry and so on. Eventually, this became the tree-chart of the Illustrated System of Knowledge in the first volume.”^x

“Bérthier, the editor of the *Journal de Trévoux*, the Jesuit mouthpiece, immediately spotted the similarity to Francis Bacon’s Tree of Knowledge and called foul,” the Abbé added. “Except that in Diderot’s version, theology was classified as a branch of philosophy, one of whose offshoots is divination and black magic. The Jesuits were more than a bit miffed at not being asked to contribute, especially to the articles on theology.”

“But isn’t the whole thing organised alphabetically?” said the Margrave, his mouth full.

“Diderot admitted that this was a seeming inconsistency,” Gilles explained, “but he said that copious cross-references would integrate each article into the overall system.”

“By April ’51 they had a thousand subscribers signed up,” Jean-Baptiste continued. “A year later they had two thousand. The first volume was published in June ’52.”

“A must for the man, or indeed woman, of aristocratic taste and means,” Gilles added, “and modern ideas, a bible for a new sensibility, indeed for a new age.”

“But the devil ...” Jean-Baptiste began.

“Literally, according to some,” the Abbé interjected, filling his glass again.

“... was in the details.”

“Bayle’s *Dictionnaire* was frequently cited as a source,” the Abbé said, “or rather as an authority.”

“Bayle rejected both what he called the absolutism of faith and

hubris of reason,” Gilles explained. “He was of the opinion that a society composed of unbelievers would be far preferable to one composed of fanatics, even of fanatics of the true religion. And when the Bible itself was cited, one didn’t need a particularly sensitive nose to detect the irony between the lines.”

“For example, the article on ATHEISM —” Jean-Baptiste began.

“Purportedly *put together from the papers of a Monsieur Formey, secrétaire de l’Académie Royale de Prusse,*” the Abbé added.

“... condemned atheism as an *odious doctrine*, but it took pains to point out that atheists are often accused of saying that religion was invented —”

“Hint, hint, wink, wink,” interjected the Abbé.

“... by rulers in order to control their underlings. It didn’t take a lot of imagination to see that that line of discourse was deliberately designed to plant surreptitious seeds of doubt in readers’ minds.”

“But it was after the publication of the second volume that all hell really broke loose,” said Gilles.

“The Comte d’Argenson called it a *revolt against God*,” Jean-Baptiste continued. “The *privilège* was withdrawn. An *arrêt du Conseil* was slapped on first two volumes. A bit like bolting the stable door ... But it still had its supporters, the Pompadour for one.”

“Though she has since lost her enthusiasm,” Bossuet said.

“And Malesherbes was still on board,” Gilles added.

“A committee, chosen by Boyer, the Bishop of Mirepoix, was set up to oversee all subsequent volumes.” Jean-Baptiste went on. “In the end, a tacit permission to continue publication was granted. By the time the third volume was published, there were more than three thousand subscribers, many of them clamouring for copies of the first two volumes. So in ’54, the consortium decided to print a new edition of all three volumes. And that brought the number of subscribers up to over four thousand.”

“But hadn’t the first two volumes been forbidden,” the Margrave pointed out.

“Monsieur Malesherbes is a trapeze artist when it comes to legal acrobatics,” said Gilles. “But there was another unholy row when the fourth volume came out.”

“Diderot would feed the articles to the censorship committee in dribs and drabs,” Jean-Baptiste explained. “They never got an overview, I suppose. Each member of the committee would only get to read bits. But then, most of the authors – including Diderot and d’Alembert themselves – had been censors themselves at one stage or another, so they knew how the system worked.”

“Not a few of our enlightened ones pick up the odd purse of coins poring over the scribblings of others for examples of wrong thinking,” the Abbé added.^{XI}

“But anyway,” Jean-Baptiste continued, “the result was that the wise heads of the censorship committee ended up approving things one would never have imagined they would have. But Malesherbes managed to retain the tacit permission with yet more promises that religion and politics would be dealt with greater sensitivity in the future. And now too, there were more important subscribers on board, more eminent contributors, and it had gained in prestige both inside and outside France.”

“So what sparked off the current brouhaha?” the Margrave asked.

“D’Alembert,” said Adélaïde, “said the Genevans were Socinians in his article on GENEVA.”

“Socinians?” said the Margrave.

“*Those who reject all mysteries and imagine that it is the first principle of religion not to impose anything that would harm reason,*” Gilles explained. “It was meant to be a compliment. The Genevans were outraged. And the Church in France was none too pleased with the suggestion that they emulate the Genevans’ alleged good sense in matters *religio*. He also attacked the Genevans for prohibiting the theatre.”

“Hume says the Chinaman beats his idols when his prayers go unanswered,” the Abbé said, suddenly addressing Bossuet. “Do the subjects of the Great Mogul behave with equal good sense?”

“The Indian takes his elephant and monkey-headed gods as seriously as any Frenchman takes his religion,” Bossuet said.

“I’ve read they won’t eat beef,” the Abbé added.

“Herodotus was confused by the Egyptians’ attitude to pigs,” said Adélaïde. “He couldn’t make up his mind whether they didn’t eat them because they thought them unclean or thought them sacred to some of their gods.”^{XII}

“I ad...adore them,” said the Abbé, smacking his lips, “roasted and with app...pp...apples in their gobs. Pigs, I mean. As for Jews, their faith is even more fanatical than ours. And they don’t have some half-barbarous customs. Snip, snip.” He made a scissoring gesture with his middle and forefingers and then grimaced and intoned in a guttural voice: “I believe good to be evil and evil to be good!” But before anyone had time to pretend to be shocked, he smiled and began laughing at his own joke.

“*The religion of Christ might be right for the Spaniards, but the religion of the Aztecs is right for the people of Mexico,*” Gilles quoted, feigning fatalism. “Montezuma to Cortez.”

"I find it hard to see how the religion of the Aztecs could be right for anyone," said the Margrave.

"The Hermit ..." Jean-Baptiste began again. "A philosophe by the name of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who has taken to the woods of Montmorency and dressing like a workman," he informed the Margrave and von Klopstock. "And a native of Geneva —"

"... who believes that civilisation itself is the source of all our unhappiness and vices," Gilles added. "That man is naturally good but is corrupted by all this ..." He made a gesture encompassing the table and the company. "Civilisation. Us and our pleasures. The Hermit is hated by the Church because he believes Man to be essentially good. And by the philosophes because he believes that what is good cannot be improved."

"... penned quite an elegant defence of his native metropolis and its ban on spectacles."

"Tragedy, he said," Gilles added, "over-excites the emotions, comedy pokes fun at morality and actors are as infested with immorality as dogs are with fleas."

"A pe...pe...peculiar opinion for a man who has written an opera." The Abbé was beginning to stutter. It was an effect drink had on him. "But then, he is a pe...pe...peculiar fish. He laments the confusion sown by printed books and spends half his life scribbling. The whole pa...pa...palaver kept us frogs chattering for weeks." XIII

"Drunkness and prostitution go hand in hand with the theatre," said Jean-Baptiste. "Even d'Alembert more or less admitted that. The young need to be protected."

"The law should limit itself to enabling men to live as they damn well please," Gilles added. "The Church is there to *try* and make them good. Attempting to coerce men to be virtuous is as futile as trying to teach the monkeys at Versailles to stop stealing nuts from each other. And I don't just mean the ones in the royal menagerie."

"Perhaps the law should also endeavour to prevent the poor from starving in their hovels?" Jean-Baptiste added.

"But if by their example actors endanger the souls of others?" said Madame de Walsh. "Surely the law has a responsibility beyond the merely physical?"

"Liberty implies the freedom to act in ways contrary to what society holds to be good," said Gilles. "To be free to do solely that is approved is mere ... meaninglessness."

A platter of roasted thrushes and robins and a rabbit casserole appeared.

During a lull in the conversation, while the food was attacked,

Sophie-Françoise decided that the discussion of the *Encyclopédie* had run its course and there was little to be gained from trying to prolong it. The Margrave had been shown the goods, as it were.

The conversation turned to Voltaire and his latest *oeuvre*, *Candide*, as slabs of Camembert, decorated with fresh sprigs of parsley, arrived, followed by coffee and clementines.

The Abbé began to fill his pipe with what he called his *herbe à Nicot*.

“*Candide* is a satire on Optimism,” said Adélaïde, turning to the Margrave. “Leibniz —”

“... the Great God Ju...Ju...Justifier himself,” the Abbé added.

Mme de Walsh produced a pipe of her own.

“One of the main characters,” the Abbé continued, “a Doctor Pangloss, like Leibniz, believes that we live in the be...be...best of all possible worlds. The best He – capital H – could do given the nature of Be...Be...Being – with a ca...ca...capital B...”

“... given the circumstances, one supposes,” Gilles said, inhaling a generous pinch of snuff into each of his hairy nostrils, handkerchief at the ready for the inevitable sneeze. “Leibniz’s justification of God – his theodicy – he coined the word —”^{XIV}

“... th...th...theo-idiocy, theological idiocy!” the Abbé added, filling his glass and, this time, also topping up the glasses of the others in a gesture of alcoholic generosity. Bossuet pre-emptively placed his hand over his glass of water. “And as for all this talk of improvement! I cannot for the life of me im...im...imagine that life of Jacques the Ploughman has changed in any essentials since the time of Ne...Ne...Nero, aside from a drastic decline in the standard of pu...pu...public entertainment.”

Gilles sneezed into his handkerchief.

Adélaïde fetched a bottle of Hennessy-Charente from the liqueur cabinet.

“Variolation,” Jean-Baptiste suggested sarcastically, “maps that make Ptolemy’s attempts look like the scribblings of a child, canal lock gates, reading spectacles, chronometers, perspective, the discovery of phlogiston. Hardly examples of decline!”

“Variolation against the Italian po...po...pox wouldn’t be a bad idea,” the Abbé said.

“I think we’re supposed to call it the English pox these days,” said Gilles.

Sophie-François decided that she and her Teutonic Knight had had enough. The Abbé was getting distinctly into his cups, and Gilles was not far behind him. And if the Margrave’s appetite had not been whetted by now, then it would never be.

The Abbé took advantage of the prolonged goodbyes to serve himself a large Hennessy-Charente.

“The time of the common man will come,” Jean-Baptiste said when Sophie-François and the Margrave had finally left, trying not to address the Abbé directly. He detested the wilful blindness of the man, and of men like him. “Jacques the Ploughman is learning to read and reckon. Plato inscribed above the entrance to his Academy words to the effect that all who wished to enter had first to acquaint themselves with geometry. Is it unworthy to hope that one day all men shall have the opportunity to enter its hallowed portals?”

“You’re a waking dreamer,” said the Abbé.

“There are none so blind as those who do not want to see,” Jean-Baptist retorted, finally losing patience, wishing the man would simply shut up. “The day will come when the common man – a slave in all but name – will ...”

“A slave?” Madame de Walsh exclaimed. “What a dreadful thing to say! Frenchmen are not slaves.”

“Servants then, bonded servants,” Jean-Baptiste corrected himself sarcastically.

“The Creator enjoins us all to serve,” Madame de Walsh replied coolly.

“A strange sort of service that obliges the servant to pay his master,” Jean-Baptiste replied sharply. “The *taille* and seigniorial dues alone rob the peasant of half his crops. The Farmers-General are a plague – thirty thousand bully boys with the right to bear arms and enter private dwellings willy-nilly.”⁴

“But doesn’t the Hermit contend that Man needs to *return* to his original noble state,” said Adélaïde, changing the subject somewhat.

“When we were not ash...ash...ashamed to be what we are,” added the Abbé, somewhat cryptically.

“That what he calls the baubles of civilisation,” she continued,

⁴ Editor’s note: Under the feudal taxation system of the Old Regime, the *taille* was the land tax on the Third Estate (though some city dwellers were exempt). The *tailion* was levied to pay for royal army – 350,000 strong at the time. Then there was the *gabelle* on salt and endless *aides*, *douanes* and *octrois* on nearly everything else that was bought and sold. And there was the *dîme* for the Church. In theory, all three Estates were obliged to pay the *vingtieme*, one-twentieth of all revenues, but aristocrats used many ruses to avoid paying even that. Many honest French peasants might have owned their acres, but the King, the seigneur and the bishop owned the produce of it – or as good as.

only increase our estrangement from our original innocence ...”

“He fled Paris,” Gilles informed von Klopstock, “to find that rural idyll.”

“Leaving his bastards in the foundlings’ box at the Hôpital de Dieu to be raised at public expense” the Abbé added. “How many little ba...ba...bastards is it now? Four? Not exactly what P...P...Plato had in mind, eh!” He laughed so much at his own joke he nearly toppled over backwards on his chair.

“Monsieur Rousseau is a man who puts his money where his mouth is,” said Jean-Baptiste. “He refused a pension from the King. He earns his living copying music.”

“So badly that nobody would buy it if wasn’t written in the hand of the Jean-Jacques Rousseau who refused a pension from the King in the first place,” added Gilles.

“To Urban X,” bellowed the Abbé suddenly. He was on his feet, pipe and glass of Hennessy-Charente in hand, obviously drunk now, “to Urban X, I propose a toast to His Hole...Hole...Holiness Urban X. To His Hole.”

“Urban X?” Madame de Walsh whispered to Gilles. “But there’s never been an Urban X!”^{xv}

Adélaïde decided to intervene.

“Time for some music, Monsieur Abbé,” she said. “I believe Monsieur Jean-Baptiste has some new tunes.”

Jean-Baptiste gave her a friendly but disapproving look, but her announcement had the effect of getting the Abbé to sit down again.

The chairs were rearranged around the harpsichord.

While Jean-Baptiste played *La Frénétique*, Boismortier’s latest tune, his fingers moving deftly over the keyboard, the Abbé sat on the chaise-longue closest to him, full of frantic attention, his pipe in his mouth, swaying with the music and humming loudly and out of key. Gilles smiled at him and, managing to attract his attention for a moment, put his finger to his lips in a gesture for him to quieten down. The Abbé smiled back. The suggestion had more or less the desired effect.

“Our inimitable Abbé de Graffigny has a pronounced weakness for the fruit of the vine,” Gilles whispered to Bossuet, who was sitting beside him, adding, almost winking, “but a great believer in books for the common man. If you get my meaning.”

“De Graffigny,” repeated Bossuet. He must have missed the name earlier. “Is that so?” He was not quite sure what Gilles meant by a great believer in *books for the common man* – and he was sure he was not meant to ask. Perhaps a few discreet enquiries might turn up something of interest.

“An old family,” said Gilles. “But, I’m afraid, one whose future is behind it. Though his uncle is the Jesus Man *principales*.”

In the end, they had to more or less manhandle the Abbé down the stairway to the street. Gilles lit the way with a lantern, while Jean-Baptiste and von Klopstock half-carried, half-guided the drunk down the stairs. He seemed beyond comprehending what was said to him but was still unnervingly capable of bursts of lucidity.

“I...I th...th...think the Almighty was trying to...to tell us something,” he stuttered, “b...b...by putting th...th...the hole that shits un...un...baptised infants into the world an inch away from the hole that gives birth t...t...to unbaptised turds. *Inter faeces et urinam nas...nas...nascimur*. Is that in your book of bo...bo...books?”

“Christ,” said Jean-Baptiste to von Klopstock. “One day they’ll bore a hole through his tongue and chop his hands off.”

Von Klopstock looked at him blankly.

“The official punishment for blasphemy in France,” he explained. ^{XVI}

“I know who you are,” the Abbé began again, addressing Jean-Baptiste. “I know who you are.”

They managed to get him down another flight of stairs.

“You’re one of Diderot’s talking cunts,” the Abbé said, starring Jean-Baptiste in the face.

They opened the d’Holbach carriage door and began to manoeuvre him into it. The steps and door were only wide enough for one man, but eventually, they managed to get him on the seat.

“I believe good to be evil and evil to be good. Ha, ha,” he was guffawing repeatedly.

“Now, Abbé, the coachman will deliver you to your apartment,” said Gilles firmly, not at all sure that what he was saying was sinking in, before shutting the carriage door and signalling to the coachman to drive off.

But the Abbé stuck his head out the carriage window before it began to move and stared at Jean-Baptiste intently, “Where was your fucking Supreme Being when Damiens was on *his* cross, eh?” he screamed, his breath an invisible plume of red wine and Hennessey-Charante. “Where? You wanking dreamer.”

As the carriage took off, clattering over the wet cobbles and disappearing into the darkness of the Rue Royale, they could hear him shouting, his voice echoing between the houses.

“Death to the believers! Death to the believers! Death to the fucking lot of them!”

CHAPTER VI

MATERIALISM AND IRRELIGION

“There have been many changes.” Monsignor Verri’s Latin was correct but animated, in the Italian manner, and his accent was distinctly Roman. “Of course, that is only to be expected at the demise of one pontificate and the commencement of another.”

Loquacity had its uses, the Provincial-General mused, and much could be learnt by tolerating it; otherwise, he would have insisted that the Roman get to the *minor embarrassment* that was the official pretext for his visit.

“Benedict was an enigmatic man,” the Roman went on. “A saint of course, but enigmatic. An innovator too. One of yours, I believe.”

Give us a child 'til the age of seven ... Inane nonsense of course. The Society’s pupils were well beyond the age of seven when they came to them. And the implication was also utter rubbish. The rigour of a Jesuit education did not nurture slavish minds. Most of the philosophes had been through their schools, and they had hardly been trepanned; though at times he wished some of them had been. Diderot himself had attended Langres and Louis-le-Grand and he – the Abbé Diderot then – had even considered taking Holy Orders with the Society before ending up with the Jansenists at d’Harcourt. Bayle had also had a Jesuit education. He had converted to get it, as had the mad Genevan they were calling the Hermit. Both had, of course, relapsed after getting what they wanted. In fact, Benedict had regularly corresponded with some of these so-called spawn of Jesuit nurseries. The removal of Kopernikus from the Index was one of his last acts.

“Benedict’s decision on the Chinese Rites must have been difficult for the Society,” Monsignor Verri continued.

China had been the great Jesuit dream. The so-called Chinese Rites controversy had dragged on for seventy years. But Benedict had finally pronounced – and practices which had been legal in canon law for a century had become illegal overnight. China was a heathen civilisation but equal, in many ways, to Christendom – and superior in some. It had libraries, gunpowder and porcelain. It was

the source of tea, silk, lacquer, and even the umbrella, the abacus, the wheelbarrow and peacocks. Paper was a Chinese invention. Its arts and crafts put European artisans in the shade. It had even once produced an encyclopaedia, the eleven thousand-volume *Yung-Lo Ta-Tien*, early in the fifteenth century, organised according to a rhyming system integral to Chinese character writing. He wondered if Diderot knew about it. The Society reckoned that the so-called Middle Kingdom contained one-third of all the souls on earth. Sophisticated souls in comparison to the Americans of New France no doubt; but the Chinaman was so immersed in his traditions of subservience that he lacked any sense of the individual soul, and consequently of the need for individual salvation, and believed that the universe was devoid of anything unchanging and eternal. The Society still had a handful of missionaries there, their task now infinitely more difficult because of Benedict's decree.

"A contaminated faith is a false faith," the Jesuit said. "The Church is One, Holy, Apostolic and Universal. Or it is nothing. Entering into its bosom is a complete rebirth, a complete salvation. There is no half-redemption. His Holiness spoke. *Roma locuta, causa finita*. The matter is decided."

Monsignor Verri made a gesture that was both fatalistic, though it could have been regarding China or the decision itself, and almost dismissive, as if to say nothing was ever really finally decided. Romans seemed to have the knack of not taking anything too seriously. Perhaps it was because they lived amidst the ruins of greatness, surrounded by the evidence of the passing of all things, perpetually reminded that everything eventually became rubble, that even the statues of gods end up as headless torsos.

The Society had argued that the rites – ceremonies in which the yellow race venerated its sage Konfucius and honoured its ancestors – did not touch the faith and were inessential to it, and that the people had a great attachment to them. Ironically, the decision was made by a pope who himself had severe doubts as to the extent of papal authority, even questioning his own right to pronounce *ex cathedra* on matters of doctrine. A far-seeing man at times, blinkered at others.

"And the new incumbent?" the Jesuit asked, thinking of one of those small oranges that were all the rage at Versailles nowadays, a thing he could not help himself doing whenever Clement XIII came to mind.

"A man who values the role of the Society of Jesus," the Roman said. "Not one of your boys. But a friend."

The Society needed friends.

“His style is more rigorous,” the Roman continued. “Clement is a pontiff of the old school ... not that old of course ... I mean ...” Go back far enough – well, not that far, in fact, two or three centuries would suffice – and there were men who had occupied Peter’s throne whom it was better to pass over in silence. “Let us say, he seems to be a man who senses the need to impose, or perhaps reimpose, a rigour on a court that has grown habituated to ...” – he searched for a phrase – “... the more relaxed style of his predecessor.”

The Jesuit raised his eyebrows, a mannerism signifying that he was simply listening but sometimes mistaken for impatience. It took his listener off guard.

“He has ordered that statues in the papal palaces be covered up,” the Monsignor explained.

The eyebrows remained raised, but this time in puzzlement.

“Clothed?”

The Monsignor nodded.

“Christ *did* command us to clothe the naked,” said the Roman. “Though I don’t think that was quite what He had in mind.”

The Jesuit smiled. The Society prided itself on a restrained worldliness.

“Probably not,” said the Jesuit. The Sun King, as he had grown older and more devout, had ordered fig leaves put on the statues in the gardens at Versailles. Ideas of decency came and went like fashions in medicine. But it seemed like the act of a pope unsure of himself. Not very auspicious. He decided he would learn no more now. It was time to get his visitor to come to the point. “Which brings us to the *minor embarrassment* ...”

“It concerns the *Encyclopédie* of Messieurs Diderot and d’Alembert.”

“Right now we are in a sort of legal limbo,” the Jesuit said. “The Society’s view has been conveyed to the Conseil du Roi. The Jansenists cannot say that we having been lacking in fervour on this occasion. Versailles is anxious to act soon, rather have the Parlement take the initiative. Strictly speaking, for a royal decree to become law, the Paris Parlement must register it but I have no doubt that will be a mere formality in this case. The other Parlements, the États Provinciaux and the Pays d’État in Brittany will follow suit.”

“The Holy Office is impressed by the Society’s zeal. The *Encyclopédie* – in due course and in its entirety – will be placed on the Index Librorum Prohibitorum.” The Jesuit wondered why the man couldn’t simply call it the Index, like everyone else. “As will

the work of the atheist Helvétius.”

The Helvétius affair had been a circus. The censor who'd approved the work was a civil servant – or rather had been, he'd since been given his marching orders – a chief of clerks at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, someone called Tercier. He'd obviously merely skimmed through the manuscript. It had been given tacit permission in July, then rushed to the bookmakers, put on sale the same month, and amidst widespread furore had its licence revoked by the Parlement the following month. And now half a dozen pirated editions were probably being churned out under the imprints of various fictitious printers in Cosmopolis, that fictional city so-beloved of the so-called Republic of Letters. He had met the Swiss Marquis once, on some occasion at Versailles: a smiling man with a podgy face, tall, emanating sweetness and light. Difficult to believe he was a Farmer-General; collecting taxes was hardly for the faint-hearted.

“But with regard to the *Encyclopédie*,” the Roman continued, “a work regarded as a more serious menace, there has been, as you say in French, a *hitch*.”

“A *hitch*?”

“Regrettable of course, but the best-laid plans of men ...”

“I'm all ears,” the Jesuit said in French, the Latin expression eluding him. He had not an inkling of what this *hitch* might be. Everything had been arranged, or so he had thought.

“In order to place a book on the Index Librorum Prohibitorum,” the Monsignor went on in Latin, “the properly constituted authorities – in this case, the officers of the Holy Office – have to declare it heretical or, at the very least, a danger to faith or morals.”

The Jesuit uhhummed.

“And as you know, ever since *Sollitae Provida*,” – Benedict's bull which introduced stricter procedures for putting books on the Index – “the process has become more rigorous. And in order to decide that a work is heretical or a danger to faith and morals, it needs to be read ...”

“Yes,” said the Jesuit, concealing his impatience.

“And in order to read it, one needs a copy.”

The Jesuit felt his face go blank.

“There is a volume missing,” Monsignor Verri explained.

Typical bureaucratic papal incompetence, the Jesuit could not help thinking, allowing himself a fleeting moment of *Schadenfreude*.

“Which one?”

“The third.”

“And you wish that the Society provide you with a copy thereof?” It was hardly a question.

The Roman nodded.

“One could, of course, go through official channels, but it would look ...” he paused to find the right expression.

“Ridiculous,” the Jesuit suggested.

“... it would hardly show the Holy Office in the best light.”

The Jesuit resisted casting a surreptitious glance at the seven volumes in his cabinet. He had no intention of parting with his third volume to swell the bookshelves of the Vatican library. There was a time when they used to send out agents to actually steal books. He picked up the small brass bell on his desk and jangled it.

“Perhaps some refreshment is in order,” he said and rang for a servant. “I’ll see what I can do. I’m sure something can be arranged. There is a black market in illicit works, as you can imagine.”

“Excellent,” said the Roman, adding hastily, “not that these works can be bought and sold clandestinely of course. I mean that you will be able to procure one for ...” He was cut short by the appearance of a young novice.

“I suggest a drink of chocolate,” said the Jesuit “and some patisserie with a very fine jam we make here. From oranges. From clementines.”

They both smiled at each other; his visitor from relief, the Jesuit because he was thinking of His Holiness. But he also remembered that it was another Clement, the Fifth, who had failed dismally to protect that other martially-spirited order, also answerable exclusively to the pontiff himself, from mass incineration at the hands of a French king. And this Clement was the Thirteenth, not an auspicious number.

✱

Jean-Baptiste Longchamp and Adélaïde Raynal were just about able to make out the distant silhouette of the twin towers of Notre Dame, as if in a blurry watercolour, through the snow falling gently out of the grey nothingness of the sky and vanishing into the grey-brown expanse of the Seine.

“The book trade, like most trades, has its shadow side, its underworld,” Jean-Baptiste was explaining. They were both wrapped up against the biting cold, he in a heavy greatcoat, she in a bearskin cloak, and had stopped for a moment to look at a barge sailing slowly towards the arches of Pont Neuf. “At least half of the books in circulation are not written by their purported authors,

nor printed by their purported publishers.”

He had a habit of stating the obvious at times.

“Authors steal manuscripts from one another,” she let him go on, “offload the same manuscript on different printers. Editions that don’t sell are reissued with new title pages. Printers smuggle pages out of their workshops until eventually they have enough to put a book together. Print shops run off extra copies of books on the quiet. Formes of type made up in one shop are smuggled out for the night and used to print the same book somewhere else. Which is why half the stuff sold under the cloak has pages missing. And that’s just what’s printed in the country. Wagonloads of books are illegally imported every month.”

“The Lord’s work by day and the Devil’s by night,” she suggested. “So what is this thing you wanted to tell me about?”

“About three months after I started working for Diderot a strange thing happened.”

“A strange thing?” she repeated, adding without thinking: “Some sort of carnal escapade?”

He still wondered if he was doing the right thing, but who else could he confide in?

“I met a man called Jacques Charpentier,” he said.

A drunk in a filthy coat, an old army tricorne on his head, but impressively steady on his feet considering the state he was in, was urinating over the quayside, his steamy jet of piss splattering noisily onto the mud. They made their way around him.

“It happened one night,” he continued, “when I had to go over to Le Breton’s to deliver some proofs. To the Rue Saint Jacques. He hadn’t moved out to Massy yet. For some reason, the house door was ajar and there was no watchman about. So I let myself in and made for the workshop at the back. Outside the door I heard voices, loud voices. I recognised Le Breton’s. He was having an argument with another man. I could make out some of the words but not the sense of it, but it sounded as if the owner of the unknown voice – Jacques Charpentier – was accusing Le Breton of something, and Le Breton, equally enraged, was saying that the whole thing – whatever it was – was reckless, foolish and could not go on and such like.”

“And who, pray tell, is Jacques Charpentier?” she asked, intrigued.

“That you will learn shortly. Bear with me. Plots in real life, like those in books, are spoilt if they are too hurriedly revealed.”

A swarm of starlings had materialised over the river and was gliding effortlessly towards the five-storied houses on the Pont au

Change. There it merged with another, larger swarm, and became thousands, and swirled over the chimneys of the buildings on the bridge for a few moments; and then, as if animated by a single mind, suddenly flew upriver, disappearing into the falling snow.

“I was about to leave and return later when things had quietened down, but then I heard Diderot mentioned. So I decided to eavesdrop properly. But just as I was about to put my ear to the door, it suddenly burst open. Charpentier practically tripped over me. The printed papers in the portfolio he was carrying went scattering all over the floor. Instinctively – despite his protests – I helped him pick them up. It was dark in the corridor – my lantern had gone out – but there was enough light coming from the workshop to make out what the papers actually were.”

They were now able to make out the twin towers of Notre Dame more clearly. Visible from most points in the city, the great cathedral dwarfed everything around it. The giant statue of Saint Christopher, standing with his legs apart in front of the church’s great doors, was half-concealed in clouds of swirling snow.

“The patron saint of bookbinders,” she said, referring to the edifice. “And travellers.”

“Hagiology is not one of my strong points,” he said, shaking his head. He knew that a Saint John was the patron saint of printers, but wasn’t quite sure which one. The Protestant in him thought that one of the advantages of being born a Catholic would be that a religion so full of obvious fictions would be easy to abandon; but, curiously, that did not seem to be the case.

“And what were the papers?” she asked.

“Printed pages from the *Encyclopédie*. I recognised them immediately. Proofs, I presumed. Charpentier had no idea who I was, thanked me and went his way without introducing himself. Le Breton was in the back of the workshop, and I didn’t think he saw what had happened; and if he had, he didn’t let on he had.

“I thought it was odd of course. But I really had no reason to think that there was anything in it beyond Le Breton giving him a few proofs to look at. After all, who would not like to get a glimpse of the great work before it hit the streets, or rather the drawing rooms. Irregular of course, but hardly a crime, nothing terribly amiss, though Diderot would hardly have approved. It did cross my mind to mention it to him. But eventually, and conveniently, I suppose, I forgot about it.

“A fortnight later I met Jacques Charpentier again, on Rue des Moines, the street I usually took to my lodgings from Diderot’s place. It had the appearance of a chance encounter. But now I am

not so sure. I think Charpentier wanted to meet me, check me out. Perhaps he had asked Le Breton who I was and Le Breton had told him. Perhaps Le Breton had seen what had happened. And if he had, he would have been worried about my saying something to Diderot, so thought it might be a good idea if Charpentier had a word with me.”

They reached the Pont au Change. Houses, three and four storeys high, lined both sides of the bridge. The central thoroughfare was chock-a-block with carriages and carts. Stalls hawking winter vegetables, fish, meat, live chickens and loaves of bread lined the arcades on both sides. The shops were mainly money changers and gold- and silversmiths but there were also a smattering of others: a cutler, a sword seller, a few eating houses and patisseries, some dressmakers and a *parfumerie*.

“Charpentier apologised for not introducing himself properly on our first meeting,” he continued as they headed into the chaos. He remembered it as if it were only a day ago. *Jacques Charpentier*, Charpentier had said, *or JC if you're feeling lazy*, and winked. He'd had to force himself to laugh. It was not the kind of joke one made to a complete stranger and it was one of the things that led him to suspect that Charpentier had found out exactly who he was before approaching him. “He insisted that we *retire* – he spoke like that, in a deliberately self-conscious ironic sort of way – to some nearby eatery where he promised to *rectify* his *unforgivable omission* – not having introduced himself – *with a meal and a bottle or two*. Jacques Charpentier was the owner of the Imprimerie Charpentier. He was a man of considerable charm and physical bulk, a jolly fat man, the archetypal *bon vivant*.”

“Was?”

“Patience.”

They lingered at a wigmaker's for a moment. Half a dozen expressionless wooden heads, sporting the latest range of horsehairs, all of them *à la chinoise* – two curls above the ears and a pigtail – stared at them from behind the leaded window.

“The English call an important man a *big wig*,” she said.

“Ridiculous things really. I don't know why we wear them.”

“A man in a wig is telling the world he is a serious person, a respectable person, one who has emerged from the unwashed and unlettered masses of anonymous humanity. A head of grey hair, even if it's horsehair, symbolises age and wisdom.”

“He brought me to a restaurant,” he continued as they moved on. “And it turned out to be two bottles. I know it's a cliché, but he knew everyone. The waiters were all smiles. Some of the patrons

saluted him. It was the same in other places. Not all of them were so respectable. Sometimes he would go out of his way to bring me to some place in some back alley where he swore the soup or some other delicacy was superb despite what he would describe as the *humble surroundings*. He claimed he enjoyed the unpretentiousness of such places.”

“Where is all this leading?” she asked.

The pavement was crowded. In order to be able to continue their conversation, they were obliged to move out onto the traffic-jammed thoroughfare and wade through the horse manure and slush.

“Patience. One day he simply told me he had something to show me. He said it was something of some importance and of a confidential nature, but that he trusted me. Needless to say, I was intrigued. On the day, he turned up wearing a coachman’s cloak over his normal clothes, which, as was usually the case, were quite ostentatious. He was a snappy dresser. He insisted we take a hired carriage, though he was a man who, much against the dictates of fashion for one in his position, almost invariably walked everywhere. He used to say what was the point of spending good money on good leathers if you couldn’t stomp around in the mud a bit and occasionally get some dog shit on them. He had the carriage drop us a few streets from our final destination, which was on the river. It was all rather theatrical. He was like that. Being with him felt like being part of some occult crusade against what he called the *absurdity of the world*, a sort of doing battle against absurdity by mimicking it. *Absurd* was one of his favourite words.”

A weather-beaten character in the remnants of a blue army coat, the shreds of some insignia on the shoulders, was waving a printed folio in the air and shouting, “War memoirs! War memoirs! Fresh from the press! Two sous apiece! Support an old soldier!” He had a bundle of the pamphlets, stacked on a hessian rag. He did not seem to be selling many. Jean-Baptiste noticed he was not wearing the distinctive leather badge that the hundred or so colporteurs licensed by the Guild to hawk almanacs and official proclamations were supposed to wear.

“The quays were deserted, almost eerily so,” he continued. “It was a Holy Day. A *gardien* let us into a complex of warehouses. The place was like a rabbit warren. Eventually, we arrived at our destination, an attic room with two locks on the door. There were eight crates in the room; and in them there were forty sets of the first six volumes of the *Encyclopédie*. Near to eight thousand livres worth. I knew he had money but ... My first thought was that he

had simply been buying and collecting them over the years.”

The traffic began to move and they were forced into the gutter to let it pass. The occupant of one carriage, a coat of arms emblazoned its side, her coiffure a jet-black Pompadour bouffant, gave them a polite nod.

“But why was he showing you them?”

“The eternal urge to confess, I suppose. Secrets are hard to keep. I suppose he instinctively knew that I would not betray him. Perhaps because he thought that someday I might be of use to him.”

A group of children and adults had gathered around a shop window, the object of their curiosity a miniature house with miniature furniture and colourful figurines. They paused for a minute to look at it.

“Vaucanson’s automatons are being exhibited at the Palais Royal,” she said, as they walked on. “So where did Charpentier get them?”

But before he could answer her, his attention was momentarily distracted by a black man, darker than any Moor or Turk he had ever seen, in a fur-trimmed red coat, a dress sword at his side, and sporting a small white poodle on a leash; he was leaving a haberdasher’s, his valet laden with two neatly parcelled hat boxes, the smaller one precariously balanced on the larger. The figure stepped into what was obviously his private sedan-chair. The coat of arms on the varnished wooden door was a crown of thorns above a shield bearing a cross and a lion. The inscription underneath read: VICIT LEO TRIBU JUDY.

“The Lion of the Tribe of Judah,” she translated.

Jean-Baptiste was about to say he was sure he’d seen the device somewhere before when he felt a light tap on his left shoulder. It was von Klopstock.

“Finally managed to catch up with you,” said the German. “Saw you a few minutes back but it’s near impossible to get through this crowd.”

For a moment Jean-Baptiste found himself wondering how long the clubfooted German had been hobbling along behind them, and if he had overheard anything ...

Ж

“It is an opportunity for all three of us to make a not insignificant sum of money,” Gilles d’Argenson said.

Sophie-Françoise was sitting beside him, smoking a vanilla-scented Spanish cigarillo. Her apartment was an altogether more

spacious and more impressive affair than Gilles's; and it was on the first floor, Bageuret noted, with a balcony overlooking the Seine and the Pont Neuf. Both were dressed for some event they were obviously planning to attend later in the evening, she more noticeably so.

"An acquaintance of my good sister," Gilles continued, in the same mock-ceremonious tone, "a certain Margrave Johannes Siegfried von Möllendorf, an officer in the service of King Frederick of Brandenburg-Prussia, currently a guest of the Marquis Antoine-Marie-Alphonse de Choiseul, a cousin of the Duc de Choiseul, has expressed interest in purchasing some books for purpose of the improving the state of the arts and sciences on the other side of the Rhine, namely several sets of Messieurs Diderot's and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie des sciences et des arts*."

"The Margrave is a prisoner of war," Sophie-Françoise explained.

"Not a great deal of money," Gilles went on, "but a significant sum nonetheless. The Margrave requires ten sets. It seems there is a considerable thirst for enlightenment in the sombre forests of Germania. The last time we spoke you suggested that a set might fetch something between two hundred and three hundred livres. For ten sets that could work out at between two to three thousand livres."

To be shared out four ways, Bageuret thought, among themselves and Christine Charpentier. But not necessarily equally. Christine Charpentier had said he could take half of what they fetched. Gilles was a friend of course, but in matters of trade, even with one's friends, one needed to be ... well, mindful of one's own interest. He noticed that Gilles, for once, did not have a drink in his hand.

"You do realise," Bageuret suggested hesitantly, making it clear that he was addressing them both, "that an enterprise of this type has its risks." He did not add that those risks might also not be equally shared. "If it were to come to the notice of the authorities ..." He left the possible consequences of that to their imaginations. "If your margrave," he went on, stressing the plural nature of *your*, though he was sure that the German was Sophie-Françoise's possession rather than Gilles's, "was to be apprehended in the possession of such a quantity of ... let us say ... contraband ... and were questioned as to its origin ..."

"The Margrave von Möllendorf is an honourable man," she said. "He would never divulge a confidence, even under duress."

"And he's hardly going to be stretched on the rack," said Gilles, laughing at the preposterousness of the idea, but the laughter was

somewhat forced.

No indeed, thought Bageuret, the questioning of a margrave, even a Prussian one, would hardly be that rigorous.

“Besides, possession is still legal,” Gilles added. “It’s the printing of it that has been suspended.” He had been following developments in the *Gazette de France*, which was pretty much the government news-sheet – not as informative as the *Gazette d’Amsterdam* or the *Gazette de Leyde*, but more accurate when it came to legalities. “And the Parlement has forbidden further sales, though I’m not sure if that applies to already extant copies or only future ones.” But possession was still allowed, he was certain of that. “And since they are to be found in only the most respectable and noble households – those that can afford them – making the mere possession of the things unlawful would be tricky, to say the least.”

“Will there be a royal decree?” Bageuret asked. “And if so, with what degree of rigour would it be enforced?”

Gilles grimaced.

“Versailles does not want to be pre-empted by the Parlement,” he said. “It would be embarrassing if the lawyers and the Jansenists were seen to be more concerned with the moral welfare of the French people than was the court of his Most Christian Majesty. The King does not like the thing of course, but that’s probably because it is a book rather than anything he has read in it. But he is under pressure. Boyer – the Ass of Mirepoix, as the Monkey calls him – is reported to have thrown himself at the King’s feet and begged for its suppression. Said that it would be the death of religion. If only.”

Bageuret ignored the last remark.

“And the Pompadour is extremely unsympathetic to philosophes these days,” Gilles went on. “She’s not by any stretch of the imagination a *dévote*, but the enterprise has gone well beyond the ancient and hallowed practice of lampooning ecclesiastics. Well beyond. She detests the *encyclopédistes* because they are a threat to the order from which she sucks her power. And she hates the Jesuits because they would like to have the influence she has herself. Power, that’s what it’s all about.”

It was said, Bageuret found himself thinking, she had a set of the *Encyclopédie* in her rooms and on occasion been reported to have had one brought to the dinner table to settle a dispute. Once, on the composition of a powder, so the story went. Face powder according to some, gunpowder according to others. The fact that the *Encyclopédie* had not yet reached the letter P was not allowed to

spoil the story.

“But with what degree of rigour would a decree be enforced?” Bageuret asked again.

“The war and finding the money to pay for it,” said Gilles, “and keeping the Parlement on its leash are the priorities at the moment. But as ever, it’s important for our betters to give the appearance that they are doing something about something. There would be consequences ... A royal decree is a royal decree is a royal decree. Serious consequences if one was suspected of committing a calculated act of disrespect towards royal authority. But as ever, the *who* matters. A man of rank could perhaps expect rustication, a person of no consequence a public whipping, a foreigner deportation with dire warnings about never darkening our doors again. But if it was just a matter of trying to make a few sous on the side selling second-hand encyclopaedias, I doubt if it would come to more than a slap on the wrist and the usual unofficial demand for monies.”

Bageuret wished he could be sure about that.

“Of course,” Gilles added, “that presupposes being caught. But, all in all, I don’t think it will come to quarterings on the Place de Grève ...”

The crow Bageuret had come across in the yard that morning looked like it had been *quartered*. Someone or some creature – perhaps a cat? – had severed the wings and head from its body. Every printer in Paris kept cats – and pampered them, fed them better than their workers. Jacques Charpentier had loathed the creatures so there were none at Imprimerie Charpentier. But there was no shortage of strays about.

“... or,” Gilles continued, “that the Marquis de Lamoignon de Malesherbes will have a stack of pre-signed lettres de cachet on his desk waiting to be filled in with the names of anyone who might be suspected of reading it.” He allowed himself a smile at the image. The Director of the Book Trade detested the use of lettres de cachet.

“And the attitude of the Parlement?” Sophie-Françoise asked. Politics usually bored her.

“It takes the whole matter far more seriously than Versailles,” Gilles said. “The utterances of the Attorney General can leave one in no doubt about that. The committee report is thirty pages long. The wits are saying that detailed descriptions of deism, materialism and irreligion in it are so eloquent, it could have been written by Diderot himself. The Jansenists are sincere in their conviction that the thing is evil; and now too, the Jesuits are raising their shrill

voices. The Parlement's power is limited but their jurisdiction does extend to at least half the country. And I suppose," Gilles added, as usual finding the temptation to be flippant irresistible, "selling the things could also be constructed as carrying out a trade, so one could also be divested of one's noble status. Though it would depend on whether the merchandising was deemed bale and bond or retail, the latter being forbidden to us descendants of the Franks except, if my scant legal knowledge serves me correctly, at places of manufacture or at fairs." XVII

"A rather complicated situation," Bageuret commented, trying not to be sarcastic. And he could have said more but didn't.

"My brother likes complicating things," said Sophie-Françoise. "But, as I said, the Margrave is a man of honour and, in this case, that does complicate things. If he were, as you say, *apprehended* with the volumes in his possession, it would be extremely embarrassing. It would place his host in an impossible position."

Bageuret was unable to tell whether she found this sense of honour misplaced or simply toy-soldierish.

"The Margrave," Gilles explained, "will only agree to the transaction if it can be arranged that the books are delivered to an agent of his outside France. To a location in the Germanies yet to be specified."

"The Margrave is willing," said Sophie-Françoise, "to pay a portion of the price in advance, and the remainder on delivery."

Gilles got up and made a beeline for a decanter of brandy on a silver tray on one of the cabinets. Like most of the furniture, it was chinoiserie. Bageuret declined the mimed invitation to join him.

"Logistics," Gilles pronounced, more comfortable now with a glass in his hand, "logistics, that's the key to this," adding, "one may not be able to serve God and Mammon, but it seems one can serve Reason and Mammon."

Neither Sophie-Françoise nor Bageuret laughed. She was not in the mood for his wit and Bageuret found that kind of scoffing was one of Gilles's more disagreeable traits.

"It seems we are faced with two problems," Gilles continued, serious again. "Firstly, how does one get a few crates of contraband through the Farmers-General Wall and halfway across France? And secondly, who can we trust to do it? There must be quite a few customs posts between here and the frontier ... three, four?"

"That sounds about right," said Bageuret.

"And more crucially," Sophie-Françoise added, tipping the ash from her cigarillo into a rather delicate-looking blue porcelain bowl, "Will your employer agree to parting with the goods under

those terms?"

"And if so, at what price?" said Gilles.

"In normal times I would have thought that the best route would have been down the Seine," said Bageuret, "along the coast to the United Provinces, and then up the Rhine. But these are not normal times." He had no intention of discussing money until he had time to have a good think.

"What times are?" said Gilles.

"A barge perhaps, up the Seine to the Marne, might be a possibility," Bageuret suggested. "One usually tries to smuggle books into France, not out."

"Which," Sophie-Françoise added, "could be to our advantage."

Both men looked at her.

"There is always some advantage to doing the unexpected," she said. "Don't you find?"

Maybe, thought Bageuret, but *douaniers* were not outsmarted with salon aphorisms, no matter how witty.

"*Douaniers* are not well paid," he said. "Their masters do well, but the men who do the rummaging in wagons and barges are open to persuasion by the usual means."

In fact, officially, the *douaniers* had little interest in books per se, as they were tax-free; illegal books, strictly speaking, were a matter for the police and the Guild inspectors. But the reality was that the *douaniers* kept a keen eye out for them; the discovery of illegal merchandise, particularly if it was not too illegal, was a heaven-sent, excellent opportunity to collect bribes.

"A bribe a day keeps the authorities at bay," Sophie-Françoise suggested.

"I have developed a terrible itch lately." Gilles scratched his crotch. "Can't be fleas, can it? You can see them, can't you? Must be something else. Sorry, go on."

"*Douaniers* might, for the most part, be illiterate," Bageuret continued. "But I don't think they'd have that much trouble recognising Diderot's magnum opus. Of course, if we were unlucky, we might run into some who thought it a bit too big to turn a blind eye to it in exchange for a few coins, so one would need to be careful." He paused for a moment. "But I think it could be done."

"There, I told you so," Gilles said to Sophie-Françoise.

"My business has always been making books, not smuggling them," said Bageuret. "I've dealt with a few book smugglers in my time, but none that I'd trust. Half of them are out-and-out swindlers, and a fair few of them are informers to boot." The

Grammarian came to mind.

There was a short silence.

"I have an acquaintance," said Gilles, "an *abbé*, who's been rather active in the philosophy trade for years now. He's brought books in from the United Provinces, Neuchâtel, and even Avignon." Remembering, with some relief, that Sophie-Françoise and the Margrave had left before they had to carry de Graffigny down the stairs at d'Holbach's the other evening, he added, "He also has an uncanny knack of getting away with things."

Bageuret noted the look Sophie-Françoise gave her brother.

"True enough," she said, rather ambiguously.

"De Graffigny – that's his name – and I," Gilles continued defensively, "go back a while."

"Quite a while," Sophie-Françoise added. She clearly had her reservations about this *abbé*.

The descent into sibling rivalry was not reassuring.

Bageuret decided to intervene.

"Some poor apprentice has been sentenced to three years in the galleys for possessing a copy of the Helvétius book. Things can go wrong."

"Really," said Sophie-Françoise.

"Lackeys reading philosophy," said Gilles, scratching himself again. "A sign of our impending doom perhaps. But let's hope *douaniers* are honouring the tradition of illiteracy. Though who would have thought that the likes of Damiens would have had the remotest interest in politics?"

Sophie-Françoise, noticing Bageuret's sudden but ill-disguised discomfort, shot her brother another one of her looks.

"But to get back to the matter in hand," Gilles added quickly, realising his *faux pas*. "As yet there has not been a royal decree, which somewhat muddies the waters. And I'm sure there would be scope for some interesting legal points if there were any problems."

"Interesting legal points cost money," said Bageuret. Gilles might be extremely knowledgeable about certain things, but sometimes Bageuret did wonder what world he lived in.

"There is the matter of approaching your employer, Madame Charpentier," Sophie-Françoise continued.

"I think she will be amenable," said Bageuret. *I want to be rid of them*, she had said. *You can take half of what they fetch*. But parting with her inheritance before being paid in full might be another matter. "But there's the risk ..." he added, "I shall need some time to consider my own position."

"Of course," said Gilles, emptying his glass. "But remember:

legally the possession of the books is still not a problem, only their sale. And that shall be handled most discreetly. We can assure you of that.”

Bageuret thought of reminding them that sometimes the spirit of the law counted more than the letter of it, but refrained.

“There is an additional issue,” said Sophie-Françoise, “which my brother, being of a shy disposition when it comes to the nitty-gritty of commerce, has neglected to discuss.”

Both men looked at her.

“The matter of the money,” she said, “or more precisely, on how it is to be shared out.”

She paused for an instant. Bageuret smiled at her politely.

“There is the price the Margrave will pay for the books and the price Madame Charpentier will require,” she continued. “I suggest that the difference, less the inevitable expenses which will be incurred, be shared equally between the three of us. So it is in all our interests that that difference be as great as possible.”

Bageuret simply nodded. He would have to think carefully about the arithmetic of that.

“I will speak to my *abbé*,” Gilles said. “Informally,” he added before either Bageuret or Sophie-Françoise had the opportunity to express any reservations. “Sound him out, as it were. I will be most discreet.”

The business out of the way, Bageuret decided it was an opportune moment to broach another matter on his mind.

“Have you had the opportunity to speak to the Doctor Labussière?” he asked Gilles.

“Bageuret is planning to have his son variolated,” Gilles explained to Sophie-Françoise. “I’ve recommended Labussière.”

“Another one of your drinking cronies,” said Sophie-Françoise, but immediately regretted the flippancy. “But he is an excellent physician.”

“Labussière will be happy to see you at any time,” said Gilles. “I explained the situation. The fee will be a formality.”

He neglected to say how much of a formality.

“Gilles and I were both done as children,” Sophie-Françoise continued. “And as you can see ...” Neither of them was pockmarked.

“It’s a Mahometan invention, isn’t it,” Bageuret said.

“Turk,” said Sophie-Françoise. “Lady Montagu, the wife of the Roast Beef ambassador to the Porte, brought it back from Constantinople and to the attention of the Royal Society in London.”

“What exactly does it involve?” Bageuret asked.

“Purging and bleeding first,” Sophie-Françoise explained, “then, an incision is made in the arm. There are two methods. One is to collect smallpox pus from someone with a mild infection in a quill and introduce it into the wound. But the more common method nowadays is to use powdered smallpox crusts. The incision is then bound up. A slight fever usually follows. The wound itself takes a few weeks to heal.”

“They say His Majesty has refused to have it done?” Bageuret ventured.

“Most ruling families have adopted the practice,” she said. “The death rate for those who undergo the operation is less than one in a hundred. In a bad year, one in four who get the smallpox die of it. And a great many more are left blind or turned into idiots. There is of course a risk, but outbreaks of the smallpox are as certain as the seasons, if not quite so predictable. And it is only one throw of the dice, while the risks of contracting the smallpox, like the poor, are always with us.”



Bossuet had been watching the Abbé's apartment for over two hours. It was on the fourth floor of a house on the Place de Loudun – one floor short of being a garret. The man obviously did not make so much from his dabbling in *philosophical books* that he could afford something lower down, and Place de Loudun was hardly a fashionable address either. It was cold and snowing, the snowflakes barely visible in the faint illumination cast from the windows of the houses; there were no street lanterns in this *quartier*.

Bossuet had not found it difficult to put two and two together after the Grande Synagogue. Wheedling out information had become second nature to him. Not that it was that difficult. People loved nothing better than to talk about each other. As he had guessed, the Abbé Honoré de Graffigny, nephew of Father François-Antoine de Graffigny, Provincial-General of the Society of Jesus in France, dabbled in illicit books. Finding out where he lived had been easy enough.

Spying on the Abbé like this was a long shot. He might not emerge; and if he did, the chances that he would go anywhere of interest were slim. In fact, Bossuet really had no idea what he hoped to achieve. Perhaps some more information that might compromise the Jesuit might come to light. The priest had handed

over ten livres at the end of their conversation; he had acted as he had hoped. Bossuet the blackmailer had become Bossuet the informant. He wondered if the confessional had given the Jesuit a taste for delving into the secrets of others too.

A nip of brandy would have gone down well. He imagined its fieriness, how it would have slipped down his throat and warmed him. But those days were behind him. He had not let a drop of the stuff pass his lips for three years now. Not since that last binge, waking up in his own shit in his Saint Petersburg lodgings after days spent in a vodka haze. It was nothing short of a miracle that he had not frozen to death on that occasion and on countless others, but somehow, no matter how drunk he had been, his good leg and his gammy one had always carried him home to the safety of his bed.

He rubbed his gloved hands together, tugged at Corneille's lead, and decided to make another tour of the square. He had adopted the mongrel several months back. Molière had given him the taste for animal companionship. In Saint Petersburg it had been two cats, Racine and Fontaine. The Jesuit too, it appeared, had a fellow feeling for the beasts, a weakness for strays. Maybe they had more in common than he thought. If the light in the apartment was still on, he decided, when the church bells rang – it was coming up to nine o'clock – he would call it a night.

He began to walk. Every now and again Corneille stopped to smell something. Perhaps the urge to sniff out things was universal. But should some suspicious watchman question him, walking a dog was a good pretext for wandering about. If he was stopped, his looks would not stand him in good stead. The deformed aroused suspicion. But there were also times when his deformities were an advantage; few imagined that there was anything much more to him.

As he made his way around the square, he thought about the other sniffing out he was engaged in. Desforges had been a friend. They'd been young men together, both of them in Paris for the first time, enjoying the city *in all its filth and glory* as Desforges had described it once as they stood in the middle the Pont Neuf one sultry summer's evening, contemplating the lazy coming and going on the river. Desforges, the would-be poet; and he, the would-be adventurer with his heart set on the Seven Seas and the Indies. He had lost count of the number of times he had gazed down the oily Seine and imagined himself being borne away by its muddy waters. For a few months he and Desforges had been inseparable. They had laughed at the world together, got drunk together, went to brothels

together. Desforges had a permanent and infectious suspicion of everything and everybody. *Feel guilty, pray hard, die slowly and go to heaven ... or hell!* had been one of his stock phrases. Bossuet could almost hear his wheezy voice. *Dress up, powder your cheeks, put your horsehair on, lick arse and climb the slippery pole!* had been another.

Eventually, a position as a clerk with the Compagnie des Indes in Pondicherry had come up. Bossuet had applied and, armed with references, most of them out-and-out forgeries, he had actually been offered the job. He had signed the five-year contract there and then in the Compagnie office.

“You’re off your head,” Desforges had said, pipe in his mouth as always. “You’ll be lucky if you last six months, if you don’t shit yourself to death in the bilges of some rat-infested hulk before you get there. Of course you got the bloody job! Who else would want it? Signing a contract with that crowd is as good as signing your own death warrant. And you’ll not make a penny out of it. You have to have money to make money at that game, at any game.”

That evening they started in the Procope and ended up in the Cave. There, in the darkness and the smoke, among the prostitutes and the drunks, they had talked until dawn. Bossuet had tried to explain. He wanted to see the world. Out there, he’d half-told him – as much by gestures as with words – in some distant land, under an exotic sun, a destiny was waiting, a final physical state of being almost, some destination in time and space, imagined vaguely as some exotic town on the banks of a languorous river or a tropical island in a timeless sea ...

“You are mad,” Desforges had said several times.

He still remembered that evening clearly: the candles in bottles on rough wooden tables, the straw-strewn floor, the character they used to call the Grammarian drinking at the counter as usual.

A few weeks later Desforges, too, had given into the necessity of *earning his crumbs*, as he called it, and got himself a position with some lawyers with offices in an alley off the Châtelet, and *taken up the ’umble clerk’s quill*. A month later, Bossuet was on the barge to Le Havre. From there he had taken the ship. He didn’t make his fortune. As Desforges had predicted, he had come back from Pondicherry with nearly as little money as he had set off with – but he had made contacts, and stepping into two sets of dead men’s shoes, *climbed the slippery pole*, eventually finding himself in the ranks of the Compagnie’s intelligencers – as they liked to call themselves. He found he had an unexpected ear for the local language, but less than any suspected, so he took care to avoid the

two Jesuits at the settlement who really did know it and had even mastered its cryptic script far better than he had. But there were some things one did not ask a priest to translate, particularly not a Jesuit.

He had not died; not from fever, the drink, nor the explosion. He had been doing an inventory in the munitions shed. He winced at the thought of it: the solidity of the world ripped to shreds in less time than it took to blink. Death had almost taken him in its claws.

It was hard to imagine that sweat-soaked tropical world now. But some things stuck in his mind. Like the time he had come across some Indian monks in an overgrown cemetery meditating on the corpse of one of their brethren as it rotted in the heat and humidity. He could almost remember the smell even. They believed that the road to salvation lay not only in the overcoming of desire but also in the overcoming of disgust.

He had written to Desforges twice but there had never been any reply. On his return – he had not signed up for another five years – he was not able to find out much beyond rumours that Desforges had been in some trouble with the law. Then – thanks to contacts made in the *Compagnie* – the position with the Marquis de l'Hôpital with the Embassy to Saint Petersburg came up. Being not particularly solvent at the time, it was an offer he could hardly have declined.

Another five years had gone by – disappearing into whatever it was time disappeared into – before he was in Paris again. An old acquaintance, met by chance, had told him that he had heard that Desforges had been *taken away*. The simplicity and vagueness of the expression made it all the more ominous. He could tell him nothing more. But by then, installed in the *cabinet noir*, Bossuet was able to use his contacts and ask around; and somebody had suggested he have a look in the d'Hemery files.

Suddenly the lamp in the Abbé's apartment went out. Bossuet gave Corneille a tug, pointed the dog in the direction he wished to go and made his way across the square to the shelter of some trees.

A minute or so later the house door opened and a figure emerged. But from the way her cloak enclosed her wide skirts, Bossuet knew immediately it was not the Abbé. For an instant he half-expected him still to emerge but the cloaked figure turned around and spent half a minute fiddling with the lock on the house door, obviously having some difficulty getting it to lock properly. It looked like the Abbé had gone to bed.

The cloaked figure began to walk along the pavement. Her gait was awkward, slightly rigid in an odd sort of way, even allowing

for the fact that she was swaying from side to side and having some difficulty walking in a straight line – as if a wind was catching her voluminous clothing and buffeting her from side to side. But the snowy night air was still. He decided she must be drunk. The windows of the Abbé's apartment remained dark.

Bossuet considered following but decided against it. The last glimpse he had of her was of her turning down one of the small alleys leading off the square and heading in the general direction of the Champs Elysées and the Jardin des Tuileries.

CHAPTER VII

THE PRINCIPLES OF A NEW SCIENCE

A Grande Session was in progress when Gilles d'Argenson arrived at the Parlement. From his position in the public gallery, he was able to get a pretty good view. One of the judges, one he didn't recognise, was cataloguing Helvétius' transgressions in minutiae. He did however recognise Omer Joly de Fleury, also on the rostrum, looking like a cat about to pounce. Iron Head Machault was there too, silent as a rock. Even flat-faced Le Paige had put in an appearance. Ever since he'd described Versailles policy towards the Parlement as *creeping despotism* in his *Lettres sur les lits de justice*, he'd been doing all his writing from the safety of the Temple – de Conti had made him Temple bailiff. The Temple, once the seat of the Knights Templar, was a walled and officially sovereign enclave within the walled city of Paris itself, outside the jurisdiction of the Paris police. In fact, Gilles wouldn't have been surprised if they were currently printing the *Nouvelles Ecclésiastiques* within its precincts. Le Paige's book was as dry as dust but detailed – he'd cited judgements and precedents centuries old, and must have scoured the Royal Library without letting anyone know what he was up to – and the argument that the *lit de justice* ceremony originating in the practice of the Merovingian kings visiting the Frankish assemblies to seek their advice, and not – as Versailles argued – the other way around, more than plausible.

Gilles scanned the crowd on the floor of the chamber in search of de la Haye, or Brass Head as everyone called him. Even the ministry secretary had called him that when he'd given him the batch of sealed papers. Gilles had never spoken to him but the man had been pointed out to him on more than one occasion.

De Fleury rose to speak. There was a noticeable hush as he did so. He opened with a simple statement:

Je suis bon encyclopédiste,

Je connais le mal et le bien.

Je suis Diderot à la piste;

Je connais tout, je ne crois rien. *

* I am a good *encyclopédiste*,

A chorus of self-satisfied laughter filled the chamber; and Gilles was reminded how much he loathed all this assemblage of nitpicking lawyers and legal hangers-on. The ditty had been making the rounds lately. De Fleury indulged the multitude for a moment but then raised his hand for silence, got it, and continued in a more measured tone of voice:

“Faith is useless. The existence of God doubtful. The universe formed itself of its own accord. Religion and fanaticism are synonymous. The Scriptures are fiction. The Messiah, at best, is a simple legislator.”

The man was clever, Gilles gave him that. Get them to laugh and they are already halfway to believing what you say before you even say it. Then follow it up by saying the unsayable. Very clever. And all of it in an excruciatingly reasonable tone of voice. It was often assumed that men who rose to high position were rude fellows as well as scheming; but one needed charm too, lashings of it in fact.

“These are the maxims argued by Helvétius in his book *De l'esprit*. But, I ask you: From whence originates the spirit in whose bosom these spiritually poisonous thoughts were nurtured? The answer is obvious. It is a book which once stated as its lofty aim *that our descendants, being better instructed than we, may become more virtuous and more happy*, a book which should have been the book of all knowledge but which has become the book of all error. Helvétius' *De l'esprit* is nothing less than an abridgement of Diderot's encyclopaedic dictionary.”

The acoustics of the chamber must have been designed with the express purpose of making every inanity uttered in it sound as if it had divine sanction. Even the coughs and throat-clearings sounded solemn. But then, it was a cathedral of sorts. And the precedents, the wigs and bright red robes – probably already a century out of fashion in 1659, never mind 1759 – were designed to convey the impression of a social order that was immovable, eternal and divinely ordained. Charlatans, the lot of them, Gilles could not help thinking. But centuries of wielding power had given the de Fleurys and the Iron Heads of the world formidable instincts.

“Monsieur d'Argenson,” he heard a voice behind him.

He turned around.

It was de la Haye, Brass Head.

“I hope you are enjoying Omer Joly de Fleury in full flourish,”

I know both good and evil.
I follow hot on Diderot's trail;
I know everything and believe in nothing.

Brass Head said, with more than a touch of irony. He smelled of eau de cologne. "Bracing to hear the enemies of God denounced with such passion, is it not?"

Gilles wasn't sure if he was unnerved more by the man's studied ambivalence or the fact that de la Haye had actually known who he was.

"All the venom rife in Diderot's dictionary is to be found in the cross-references," he could hear de Fleury saying, his voice echoing up from the floor of the chamber behind him.

"The problem with our friend Diderot is his method," Brass Head went on, his voice a half-whisper in the church-like hush of the chamber. "He would have us believe that his magnum opus is nothing more than a mere assemblage of facts and instructions. Under his capable pen, everything becomes relative: kingdoms and republics, the mores of civilisation and the customs of savages, the immorality of the Christian and the morality of the Mahometan." He smiled at his little joke. "Diderot blurs all distinctions: of estate, of authority and of religion, even of sex. The wood merges seamlessly with the trees. And the end result is ..." – he paused for a second – "... a meaningless world."

Perhaps, thought Gilles, the world was neither meaningful nor meaningless, simply mysterious. The most mysterious of all possible worlds ... or should that be the least mysterious?

"The cannibal rite of Eucharist and the holy sacrament of the Mexican," Gilles suggested. The man was not at all what he had expected.

"And in such a world," Brass Head smiled again and continued, "the claims of magistrates and churchmen to knowledge and wisdom are no better than any well-argued alternative. Mere whims."

"And whims can be well argued," Gilles said, not at all sure what this man was trying to say to him, or get him to say.

"And at times better argued than more worthy and more reasonable propositions," Brass Head went on. "The tenets of the Catholic religion are worthy and, if viewed in the correct light, reasonable; yet most of humanity rejects them. Largely because have been seduced by the rhetoric of superstitious tricksters who prostrate themselves before idols – who sound reasonable in the ears of the ignorant. Power is in large part the ability to sound reasonable. Diderot has that ability, the ability to sound reasonable. But he has no right to power."

"Alphabetic classification was inevitable," Gilles said, unable to think of anything original or witty. "And it is both a dictionary and

an encyclopaedia ...”

“Some might say it was merely convenient.”

“Convenience is ...”

“Many sins are committed in the name of convenience,” Brass Head interrupted him again. “The classifier of knowledge decides what is important *and*, perhaps more importantly, what is unimportant, what is legitimate and what is illegitimate. World-views uphold social orders. And he who reclassifies knowledge creates a new view of the world. Diderot is rocking the applecart. And we can’t have that, can we?”

Brass Head extended a lavishly be ringed hand.

For a moment Gilles thought it was for him to shake it.

“My papers,” Brass Head said. It was almost an order.

Gilles realised his mistake and handed him the batch of papers he had been sent to deliver to the man. Before he could say anything else, Brass Head was heading towards the stairs that lead to the floor of the chamber.

On his way out, Gilles noticed von Klopstock sitting in the back row of the public gallery, a well-used notebook and pencil in hand. The young man seemed to have a knack of appearing in the most unexpected places. Nothing else to do, Gilles supposed, for a moment nostalgic for the idleness of his own youth, for its dreams.



Du Guesclin could see by the look on Jean-Baptiste’s face that he did not approve of brothels. But he’d guessed as much. Which was precisely the reason why he had asked him to meet him in the smoking room of Madame Gourdan’s so-called Château on the Rue de Deux Portes, among the half-dressed *mademoiselles*. There was something too much of the moralist about the young man for his liking.⁵

“Why did you want to see me,” Jean-Baptiste asked. “Is there a problem?” He’d never actually been in a brothel before.

⁵ Editor’s note: Readers of a more sensitive disposition may wish to pass over this section of the narrative. It is an example of the decadence and depravity, both intellectual and moral, that life under the Old Regime all too frequently gave rise to. However, our commitment to remain true to the original text obliges us to reprint it unexpurgated, despite the fact that the Author’s intention was obviously to titillate his readership rather than add anything of substance to the meandering plot of his narrative. Pornography has no place in the literature of a Republic of Virtue.

“More of an opportunity,” du Guesclin said. “I love the smell of this place. Cheap perfume, hot tea, the oriental-scented tobacco smoke and a hint ... just a hint, mind you ... of the juices of Venus. And such an apt address!”

It took a moment for Jean-Baptiste to realise what he meant.

“Do you want a puff?” Du Guesclin offered him the snake-like stem of the Turkish waterpipe.

Jean-Baptiste shook his head. The growth on du Guesclin’s nose seemed slightly bigger than it had been the last time he’s seen him, the miniature veins that criss-crossed the marbly deformity more pronounced.

“There’s a floor show in a minute,” du Guesclin continued, indicating a small stage at the other end of the room. The backdrop was a surprisingly well-executed painting of a young woman, her purple dress raised, plump pink buttocks exposed; one of her hands was reaching back between her legs and grasping the erect penis of a fully dressed but wigless rake in order to guide it into her gaping hairless sex. Copies of Boucher’s famous odalisques – both the blond and the brunette – were hanging on each side of it. The blond was reputed to be the O’Murphy woman, the so-called Morphyse, at the age of fourteen; the brunette was said to be Boucher’s wife. When the latter had first been exhibited at the Salon, Diderot had accused Boucher of doing little better than prostituting his own wife, even if it was in the service of art.

“An opportunity, I don’t understand,” Jean-Baptiste said.

“I would have had a word with Dildoreedo,” du Guesclin said, “but he’s hors de combat for the foreseeable future and I have never seen eye to eye with Le Breton – he’s not an easy man to deal with. And I really did not want to trouble the Personal, who, in any case, has very little comprehension of commercial matters.”

Dildoreedo! Jean-Baptiste shook his head inwardly. Why Diderot had anything to do with the likes of du Guesclin was beyond him.

“Commercial matters?”

“Yes. Your master’s books. They are very much in demand.”

But before du Guesclin could continue, two women had mounted the stage, one of them carrying a chair.

“Candles,” somebody shouted.

The candles on the tables were blown out and the stage, suddenly illuminated only by the crescent moon-shaped chandelier hanging above it, was transformed into an island of light amidst a sea of orange glows from the waterpipe charcoal burners.

One of the *actresses* was dressed in a man’s black suit; the other,

standing at least a foot higher, rounder and plumper, wore a low-cut yellow dress. The one dressed as a man spoke first.

"I am Dildo-Diderot-Dildoreedo," she half-chanted, "I am Reason and I *do* the fucking around here."

"I am de Fleury," the other one said, "and I don't want to be defleured!"

Then she turned her back to the audience, unhitched the fasteners on the back of her dress, wriggling her large bottom as she slipped out of it. When she turned around again she was naked except for an ecclesiastical-purple paper fig leaf over her privates.

The woman in black followed suit, took off her coat, undid the ribbon holding up her *culottes* and let them drop to the floor. She had SCIENCES written on one buttock and ARTS on the other. Then she turned around. She was wearing a black strap-on dildo a foot-and-a-half long.

"Reason," she said, pointing at it.

Then she started chasing *de Fleury* in circles around the stage, to the sound of a tambourine played by turbaned Moor clad in yellow satin Turkish pantaloons and naked to the waist, standing off to the side. Every few seconds they stopped, *Diderot* to gyrate her hips and wave her preposterous dildo around, *de Fleury* to wriggle her behind at the cheering crowd.

"Well," du Guesclin whispered, "who takes your fancy? I rather fancy *Dildoreedo* myself."

Before Jean-Baptiste had time to compose a diplomatic answer, *de Fleury* had grabbed *Diderot's* dildo and was trying to wrench it out of its harness.

"There'll be an auction later," du Guesclin added.

Jean-Baptiste said nothing.

Suddenly *de Fleury* had *Diderot's* dildo in her hand and the roles were reversed; *de Fleury* was now doing the chasing and it was *Diderot's* turn to stop and start and wriggle her behind. Then *de Fleury* hit *Diderot* on the head with the dildo and *Diderot* fainted and fell face-first into *de Fleury's* waiting arms. *De Fleury* backed onto the chair and sat down with the prone *Diderot* over her knees.

"Spank! Spank! Spank!" someone shouted and the crowd started a slow hand clap.

On cue, *de Fleury* began to spank *Diderot* with the dildo, swishing it around in the air between each stroke. For a second, Jean-Baptiste wondered what it was actually made of. Then she put it in *Diderot's* mouth, who began to suck and lick it with exaggerated abandon. Jean-Baptiste felt the beginnings of a warm twinge in his trousers but managed to will the unwelcome

sensation away.

“Reason sucks! Reason sucks!” *de Fleury* began to shout.

The crowd took up the refrain. Du Guesclin, waving the stem of his waterpipe around, tried – not that he was expecting him to – to get Jean-Baptiste to join in.

“Reason sucks! Reason sucks! Reason sucks!”

De Fleury extracted the dildo slowly from *Diderot's* mouth – it came out with a pop – and by means of a sort of syringe mechanism squirted a white liquid – it must have been cream – onto *Diderot's* face.

“Cream pie! Cream pie!” the crowd began to chant, banging the tables with their mugs and glasses. “Cream pie! Cream pie!”

De Fleury squirted more cream over *Diderot's* face, the crowd applauding rapturously as *Diderot* licked it up.

“One of Madame Gourdan’s more recent inventions,” du Guesclin informed Jean-Baptiste. “Rather ingenious, is it not?”

With a flourish *de Fleury* held the dildo above *Diderot's* exposed behind, and waited ...

“Fuck Reason!” a voice shouted and another refrain went up.

“Fuck Reason! Fuck Reason! Fuck Reason!”

Diderot pretended to attempt to escape *de Fleury* mimicking fucking her from behind with the dildo.

“Fuck Reason! Fuck Reason! Fuck Reason!”

Jean-Baptiste was almost on the verge of getting up and going – or wished he was. And then, mercifully, it was over, and the two actresses – if one could call them that – were bowing to the audience – with their backs to the audience, in a bottom-wriggling finale. Du Guesclin was laughing his head off.

“You were saying the *Encyclopédie* is much in demand right now,” Jean-Baptiste said.

“It’s all this talk of bannings and interdicts ...” – which was making it even more likely that within weeks he would be without any source of income, Jean-Baptiste could not help thinking – “... the lure of the illicit and all that.”

“So ...”

One of the so-called *mademoiselles*, her bodice so low as to make her practically bare-breasted, appeared at their table and relit the candle. Jean-Baptiste ignored her. But du Guesclin made a point of catching her eye and smiling at her.

“If there are any unclaimed seven-volume sets,” du Guesclin continued when she was out of earshot, “I might have some punters. But I’d want a cut, a reasonable one. In fact, to tell the truth, they’re queuing up.”

“Queuing up?”

“Yes. Just think about it.”

Jean-Baptiste thought it better to nod agreement rather than commit himself to the exactness of words.

“You don’t approve,” du Guesclin said. “Don’t deny it. It’s written all over you.”

“Places like this are cesspits of disease.”

“Nothing that a good dose of mercury won’t cure!” du Guesclin laughed. “A night in the arms of Venus leads to a lifetime on Mercury, eh?” He laughed again. “There are precautions one can take. There’s more than one way to skin a cat in heat. One of our delectable whores,” he took a suck from the pipe and indicated a buxom half-naked *mademoiselle* at the far end of the room engaged in conversation with a man old enough to be her grandfather, “tells me last week she *entertained* a young man here whose penchant was to be tied to a birthing stool – or whatever they call it – and have her dress as a dairy maid – naturally, with her tits hanging out – and *milk* him ... It’s something that has obsessed him for years, apparently. One of our Teutonic brothers, she said. Touchingly innocent really, in comparison to the pleasures to be had at Madame Gourdan’s newest establishment. The collection of restraining devices and horsehair whips at the Salon de Vulcan is ... well, I’ll spare you the details. There’s a peephole you know. Some maintain that the surreptitious observation of the surreptitious sins of our fellow men is good for the soul, emancipatory ...”

Jean-Baptiste could barely contain his disgust.

“This place is an affront to womanhood,” he said.

“An affront?” du Guesclin repeated, pretending to feign naivety.

“Would you allow your sister to work here?”

Du Guesclin thought for a moment.

“There are different categories of women,” he said. “One does not fuck one’s sister, but one does fuck one’s wife. Does that mean one holds one wife in less regard than one’s sister?”

There was probably no use arguing with the man but Jean-Baptiste decided to say his piece all the same.

“A reasonable civilisation would not allow womanhood to be degraded like this,” he said. “A just society would banish places like this from the face of the globe.”

Du Guesclin laughed.

“I really find hard it to believe you are really the cynic you make yourself out to be,” said Jean-Baptiste.

“A latter-day Diogenes?” du Guesclin replied. “If only. That

noble Greek – or should that be *ignoble*? – believed in living quite literally like a dog, that is naturally. Which is why his followers let their beards grow. The word *cynic* comes from *kunikos*, dog. The story about him I like best is the one about Alexander the Great. Diogenes used to live in a barrel, some sort of wine vat. Anyway, when the Great Alexander – a man who had his own dreams of civilisation, Greek civilisation, a reasonable civilisation by the standards of the time, perhaps of any time – turned up, the Great Alexander asked him if there was anything he, the conqueror of all the known world, could do for the penniless philosopher. And do you know what Diogenes said?”

“No.”

“*Move your shadow!*”

For a moment, Jean-Baptiste did not understand.

“Great Alexander, you see,” du Guesclin laughed, “was standing in the sun.” He laughed again. “Diogenes used to relieve himself, sexually, wank himself off in public, in the agora, you know. Used to lament the fact that one could not satisfy the pangs of hunger in a like manner ... by rubbing one’s belly ...” Du Guesclin laughed again. “The next time you see a print of Raphael’s *School of Athens* look at the old man sitting on the steps at Plato and Aristotle’s feet – that’s good old Diogenes, right in the centre of the mural. A lot more to Raphael than Madonnas and Christ-cherubs. The only absolutely unmistakably identifiable poet, or rather poetess, in his *Mount Parnassus* is Sappho; she’s shown holding a scroll with her name on it. Always thought it rather fitting that the old master should find his eternal resting place in a pagan temple.”^{XVIII}

For some reason, Jean-Baptiste felt impelled to argue with him.

“Progress —” he began but du Guesclin cut him short.

“There is a book by a Neapolitan, a Giambattista Vico, called *Principi di una Scienza Nuova*. The principles of a new science.”

Jean-Baptiste vaguely remembered seeing a copy of it somewhere.

“An obscure work, published about thirty years ago,” du Guesclin continued. “A work of civil theology, as it was called then. It’s about progress – and decline. I gave a copy of it to your master.”

Despite himself, Jean-Baptiste found his curiosity awakened.

“Vico believed one can discern patterns in the histories of civilisations. Organic patterns, patterns originating in the particular attributes which each civilisation possesses, patterns of progress and decline. Like you, I dare say, he too was a great believer in the power of ideas. God made Nature, he said. Nature made Man. But

ideas, Vico proposed, are different. Men produce ideas. And ideas make societies. Ideas, he said, being a creation of the human mind, can be far better understood than Nature, while Nature, like sex and our sisters, we can only dimly comprehend.”

For a moment he thought du Guesclin was going to wink but, instead, he just stared at him for a second without blinking. There was something profoundly repulsive about the man; and it was as if the boil or whatever it was on his nose was a physical manifestation of it.

“So?”

“Vico saw history as a sort of orderly progression of ideas, of modes of perceiving the world, each new set of perceptions superseding those that had preceded it, changing our ways of feeling, how we express ourselves and ultimately how we act.”

Du Guesclin was distracted for a moment. *Diderot*, her *culottes* on again, was disappearing arm in arm with a young man in a blue uniform with scarlet facings through a door marked PRIVATE to the side of the stage. So much for her being auctioned off, Jean-Baptiste thought: the man was full of shit.

“First there is chaos,” du Guesclin continued. “Adam and Pandora are cast out of the Garden and into the wilderness to fend for themselves among the weeds and the beasts. Out of that struggle comes the Age of the Gods, theocracy, superstition. Men cower in fear and are ruled by priest-kings and pharaohs – hence, pyramids and the infant sacrifices of the Carthaginians. Their idea of art is monuments to the gods and bloody religious rites.”^{XIX}

“And what follows that?”

“The Age of Heroes. Aristocracy. Men put their thrust in strong men and submit to the rule of the Achilles of the world; and that age, according to Vico, also produces its distinctive art: poetry, the Iliad, the Odyssey. *L’art a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît point.*”^{XX}

While du Guesclin was laughing at his not particularly original misquoting of Pascal, Jean-Baptiste wondered if he was being faced with a superior intellect or mere intellectual verbosity. The man was clever, he would give him that, and was utterly eel-like in his slipperiness.

“This is followed by the Age of Peoples, democracy, the rule of those who have accumulated wealth and joined together to make laws according to what they see as the dictates of reason. Prose is its preferred mode of expression.”

“Sounds more like the Age of Merchants,” Jean-Baptiste said.

“Or of the bourgeoisie. Our ultimate fate perhaps. To become

bourgeois. Part of the divine plan.”

“I look forward to the Age of the Common Man.”

Du Guesclin laughed again.

“You take a dim view of mankind,” Jean-Baptiste accused him.

“You take me far too seriously.”

“Go on,” Jean-Baptiste said impatiently. He despised himself for wanting to listen to the man, and for the moment of arousal he had experienced as the dildo had swished through the air over that whore *Diderot's* shapely arse.

“Signor Vico believed we could understand how thoughts were shaped, and how those thoughts in turn shaped institutions and how institutions in their turn shaped thoughts. History is not, he said – as the Epicureans believed – a haphazard affair. But, as Vico puts it, *because Man pursues intelligent purposes*, nor is history merely a sequence of mechanical causes and effects, as the Stoics argued.”^{XXI}

“So there is progress.”

“And decay,” du Guesclin added, pointing at his nose. “Which is as natural as growth. But, yes, there is progress. Guided, Vico proposed – diplomatically – by the invisible hand of divine providence. Progress as a spiral of historical cycles, a gyre-like process, with each new beginning somewhat more fertile than the previous.”

“But I thought you did not believe in the ability of Man to improve himself,” Jean-Baptiste said, not at all sure what du Guesclin was getting at.

“Not as a result of moronic moralistic preaching,” he said, adding before Jean-Baptiste had time to object, “so if you want to serve progress learn Italian.”

“Sometimes morals *are* simple.”

“That anyway is the gist of Signor Vico’s little book,” du Guesclin said, ignoring his comment, “I’ve only read it twice. It lacks a brothel scene though. And I do think all good books should have a brothel scene. But I do sometimes ask myself, what kind of age encyclopaedises? And why is it that all ages produce pornography? I don’t suppose you’re going to stay for the auction.”

The question brought Jean-Baptiste to the brink of rage but he held himself in check. They were *queuing up*, the man had said. Up until now, his ideas of making money from Charpentier’s cache had been vague ... but ... he suddenly had a vision of selling all twenty sets. Would that be possible? But how? He might have keys to the Quai des Potiers but the books were not his; not all of them in any case; but he reminded himself again, he’d taken risks, he

was owed. Twenty sets of the *Encyclopédie* would not be easy to get rid of. Though he had no doubt that, even if *queuing up* was a bit of an exaggeration, du Guesclin could drum up customers. The man had contacts and could sell bread to a baker.

“No,” said Jean-Baptiste. “That pleasure I shall spare myself.”

“There is more often tenderness in the back rooms here than found in many a marriage bed,” du Guesclin said quietly, as Jean-Baptiste got up to go. “As much human kindness, human frailty and human avarice as found in any cloister. Everyone here at least knows they are a sinner. The greatest evils of this world are committed by those who are convinced they are without sin. The most dangerous temptations come clothed in virtue, dressed up as utterly selfless, in the purest raiment.”



Vaucanson’s uniformed drummer boy turned its boy-sized wooden head from side to side, its hidden mechanism whirring, fluttered its horsehair eyelashes and stared at the Jesuit. Then the automaton whipped the drumsticks in its gloved hands and deftly rendered a roll on its tin army-drum.

“His other creations are on display at Versailles,” Madame Isabelle de Vereaux said. She was a big woman, and when François-Antoine de Graffigny thought of her, he invariably thought of Mijnheer Rubens’s flesh-filled canvases in the Palais de Luxembourg; but in her presence the sheer feminine bulk of her made it impossible to keep that image in his mind. Rubens’s two-dimensional nymphs were passive creatures; Isabelle de Vereaux’s perfumed presence was on the verge of the overwhelming. Her femininity was of a more primaeval, a far more pagan kind. “There’s a flute player that can play a dozen different tunes and a duck that can actually eat grain, digest it *and* excrete it.”

Mannequins of any kind made him uncomfortable. Man had been made in God’s image. Mannequins and automatons were too close to being a travesty of that, an invitation to forget our essential divine nature. Some of the heretics forbade all human images and the Eastern schismatics had gone through periods of iconoclasm. The Mahometans were very strict about it.

“Voltaire calls him *the bold Vaucanson, rival to Prometheus*,” she continued. “They say he wants to build an artificial man next.”

“The workers at the Lyon silk factories were not impressed by his Promethean pretensions. When he was down there on his last tour of inspection there was quite a riot. They were terrified he was

going to replace them with his automatons.”

He was not wearing his cassock. The brown curly wig – she wondered how many wigs he actually possessed – was overdoing it slightly. The colour did not really suit him. But secular clothing gave him an adventurous, slightly illicit air, and showed off his rather muscular legs.

“According to Descartes,” she said, “a man-machine, perfected and refined a hundred thousand-fold – a sort of chemical machine – would be as a man in all its essentials.”

One would not have thought she was well read, but she was. Sometimes he thought she had a man’s mind – if such a thing were possible.

“The notion that the world is no more than a more sophisticated version of this tin-pot drummer boy,” he retorted, trying not to sound too pious, “is a fallacy peculiar to our times. We were not created in the image of a clock – not even a chemical one.”

“Perhaps one day, armies will consist of Vaucanson automatons,” she suggested. “And instead of corpses and arms and legs, battlefields will be strewn with springs and cogs. Progress in the mechanical arts does have its positive aspects.”

“And its negative ... Perhaps one day mechanics like Vaucanson will invent weapons capable of annihilating entire cities.”^{XXII}

“But would they ever be used? Montesquieu thinks not. Their use would ensure the mutual destruction of both sides.”

“Man’s cunning should not be given free rein,” he said. “The Japanese – to give credit to the heathen when credit is due – banned all guns two centuries ago. The land was riven by warring clans and in the process of destroying itself. They used to make the best firearms in the world, and they still make the best steel.”

The Japanese had banned firearms in 1543. Funnily enough, the same year Kopernikus published *De Revolutionibus*, and Andreas Vesalius his *De Humani Corporis Fabrica*.

“I’ve heard they only allow one Christian ship a year to land there,” she said “A Dutch one. And the clog-trotters are obliged to trample on a crucifix before they are allowed to land?”

“Invention for invention’s sake is a form of vanity,” he said, ignoring the provocation.

“Would you put an end to all new invention?”

“Louis-le-Grand has one of the best libraries in Europe – twenty thousand volumes. Who discovered quinine? There’s a reason it’s called the Jesuit bark! Our observatory in Peking is one of the best ever built. Descartes learnt about Galilean astronomy in a Jesuit school. Even Vaucanson was one of our boys. Kopernikus would

still be on the Index if it were not for Boscovich.”

“Never heard of him,” she said.

“Roger Joseph Boscovich, SJ, a son of Dubrovnik. One of the best minds of our age. Sunspots. The aurora borealis. The transit of Mercury. The ruins of Roman villas. The use of sundials among the ancients. There is little he hasn’t written on. He was here last year and gave a lecture on his theory of matter and atoms. The atheists do not have a monopoly on speculation. And we Catholics are not the unreasoning fanatics Monsieur de Voltaire would have us be. Christians might still be burning witches if Friedrich Spee von Langenfeld – another member of my fanatical order – had not opened men’s eyes, over a hundred years ago, to the absurdity of witch trials. *I can have you tortured and you can have me tortured – and in the end we will all be witches.* Hardly the words of a fanatic. There is more than one way of doing natural philosophy. The improvement of the material conditions of our lives is a laudable enterprise, but it should not distract us from our proper purpose.”

“About which there seems to be a lot of controversy these days,” she suggested.

“Speculation and invention should be accompanied by a sense of piety, of *pietà*.”

“Piety?” she said and smiled indulgently at him.

“The universe,” he said, realising she was flirting with him, “should be contemplated respectfully, with a measure of awe and humility. The role of natural and experimental philosophy is to bring us to a greater knowledge of God through knowledge of the wonders of His creation. Our bodies become dust. Our eternal souls are what are important.”

“My dear François-Antoine, I sometimes wonder if you are as unforgiving regarding the sins of the flesh as you are regarding those of the spirit.” She was the only person to ever use his baptismal name. He could not say he was at ease with it. In any case, they seldom met in society. “But I suppose to find that out, I should have to make you my confessor.”

For an instant he had the ridiculous notion that she could read his thoughts. A priest’s bed was a lonely place. And there were times when he did wonder what it would actually be like to be her confessor, listening in the limbo-like darkness of the confessional as she whispered intimacies to him through the grill, her perfume mingling with the scent of candle wax and incense. Lust. He wondered if it ever led to love, the essence of the divine itself. As he also sometimes wondered, in his more speculative moments, if

the reason God made men and women mortal was because only through loving other mortal beings could Man appreciate the profundity of love – and through that earthly loving might gain a glimpse of the depth of God's love for Man ... But what then of the love a priest felt for God? There were so many questions.

He gestured towards some unoccupied tables in the sun at the edge of the colonnade.

“Shall we be seated?”

The Athénée – it had been her suggestion that they meet there – was one of the more exclusive Palais Royal establishments, and popular with doctors from the Sorbonne.

“So what information have you been able to gather pertaining to our man?” he asked.

“Well, for a start, Bossuet *is* his real name.”

A red-faced watchman, wearing a mangy horsehair too small for his bullish head and sporting a truncheon in a worn leather holster, was keeping the beggar children from sticking their begging palms through the wrought-iron railings that separated the clientele from the street. The half-starved urchins, one of whom had deserted his sack of horse manure to join in, were treating the whole thing as a game. *Suffer the little children* ... Half of them would be eking out a living as little sodomites and whores before they reached the age of twelve, if they weren't already.

They ordered milky coffees.

“Where shall I begin?” she asked. “History? Family? Connections? Reputation or lack of? Financial situation?”

“You *have* been busy,” he said, taking out his snuffbox. “The matter of his current employment would be as good a place as any.”

He took a pinch of snuff, savoured the effect and sneezed loudly into his handkerchief, a purple one as usual.

“You will rot your nose,” she said.

“The flesh is weak,” he said, tucking the handkerchief into his sleeve.

The waiter arrived with two bowls of foam-capped milky coffee.

“Better venial sins than mortal ones,” she suggested.

“It could be argued,” he admitted.

“And little sins remind us of our essential imperfectability?”

“The God of Rome forgives. He is not the harsh predestinating master of Geneva. We are not expected to be perfect. To even think that we could be is a kind of blasphemy. We were created imperfect. Man is fallen. And capable of monstrous acts. But God did not create monsters. Nor saints. But enough of coffee-house theology.”

“Our man, as you describe him, is some sort of clerk at the *cabinet noir*. He works in their offices on the Rue de Nicot. Finding out what he does exactly was beyond even my capabilities, I’m afraid. But my confidant described him as getting around.”

“Getting around?” he asked.

“The Compagnie des Indes – from which he has some sort of pension. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Philosophe circles even.”

“Anything more definitive?” he asked.

The Athénée was invariably packed in the afternoons with the usual assortment of lawmen, the idlest of the aristocracy and well-heeled whores, most of them actresses, a profession barely distinguishable from the former, both being based on make-believe and pretence. Through the din of conversation around them, he could overhear a conversation in Latin. He could not make out what was being said but one of the speakers had a Slavic accent – like Boscovich’s in fact.

“He has some decoration or other,” Isabelle de Vereaux continued, “something military, some sort of cross. Something to do with his injuries, which are war wounds. Apparently he cut a fine figure once.”

Bossuet a handsome man? Was that how the rogue saw himself? As a handsome man, with the character and demeanour of a handsome man? Yet, to the world he was a deformed man and the demeanour of the world to him was its demeanour to a deformed man. Was his greasy unkempt mop of hair an unconscious affront, a sort of revenge, a protest against the fate which had robbed him of his looks and grace? Perhaps.

“He was a clerk with the Compagnie in Pondicherry,” she continued. “Then he spent a few years with the Embassy to Saint Petersburg in some minor and, by all accounts, confidential capacity. Monsieur Bossuet is well travelled. A lot of time spent on ships, in carriages – sleighs even, I should imagine, when he was in the Russias.”

He had seen engravings of the sleighs the Russians used: vast contrivances the size of gypsy caravans, drawn by teams of half a dozen, even a dozen, horses.

“He’s known to be acquainted with the d’Holbach coterie and the *encyclopédiste* crowd,” she added. “And has been known to attend the so-called Grande Synagogue on occasion.”

The Jesuit was visibly surprised.

“Where he no doubt slips some of the Baron’s silver cutlery into his pocket when nobody’s looking. A libertine?”

Madame de Vereaux let him come to his next thought unaided.

“Or someone who wishes to give the impression that he is,” he added.

“Perhaps. But I think it would be a mistake to presume that he was acting on behalf of the *cabinet noir*. I cannot imagine a clerk being entrusted with approaching someone in your position.”

At least it was clear now that the man was a professional spy, no occasional dabbler.

“He did not come across as a common blackmailer,” he said.

He had told her only that Bossuet had got his hands on some potentially compromising correspondence. He had not gone into any detail.

“He could be working for somebody else,” she said.

That did not sound good, not at all. He was more or less helpless against the man until he knew exactly who he was working for, if anyone.

“The tentacles of the Pompadour party and the Jansenists reach into all sorts of nooks and crannies,” she added.

But other possibilities flitted through his mind. Could he be in the pay of some *encyclopédiste* even? No, the idea was patently absurd? Or was it? Or was he, like Damiens, a fantasist who imagined he was acting out the wishes of one of his superiors?

“I need to know who he is really working for and what he really wants.”

“Perhaps he – or whomever he may be really working for – simply wants to remind you that your position and that of the Society is not invulnerable? Playing the common blackmailer would fit into that scenario.”

He didn’t believe it. So much effort simply to tell him what he already knew. No, the man must have some particular aim, something specific. But it was possible of course. Bossuet had exactly those qualities required for that sort of thing, and a gift for sheer effrontery. But there was something else about the man too, a hint of the vendetta? He could shake off the feeling that the man was more than a common money-grubber.

“Of course,” she said, “it’s possible he might have private motives.”

“Such as?”

She shrugged.

“And his family?” he asked.

“He does not seem to be descended from that bishop you mentioned,” she said.

“That’s not quite what I suggested.”

“Well, if he is related to those eminent Bossuets, nobody knows anything about it.”

Jacques Bénigne Bossuet, Bishop of Condom and Meaux, and author of the *Discours sur l'histoire universelle*, had been instrumental in bringing about the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes. Perhaps not, in hindsight, the wisest of royal decrees. It had not reconverted the Huguenots, merely drove masses of them into emigration and the arms of the Protestant powers. Even Innocent XI had reservations about it.

“Jacques Bénigne Bossuet, the Bishop of Condom and Meaux,” he said, adding without thinking, “a man whose biblical dating left a bit to be desired.” The good bishop’s dating of the Flood had been shown to be out by several hundred years by Martino Martini, a fellow Jesuit, who had compared it with the very accurate chronologies kept by the Chinese on the reigns of their Emperors. “Though his views on the precedence of ecumenical councils over popes still excite some controversy.”

He took a sip of his coffee.

“A rather Jansenist idea?”

“Our adversaries can appear quite reasonable at times.”

“I have always found Jansenist attitudes to the education of we members of the weaker sex rather enlightened,” she said. “The Russias and Austria-Hungry are ruled by women; and, if not better for it, they can hardly be described as the worse for it.”

“If heresy did not have its attractions, it would not be a problem.”

“No, indeed,” she said rather flippantly.

“The right to act according to one’s conscience is not absolute. One needs to distinguish the informed conscience from the mistaken, from the erring conscience, and from the febrile conscience of the fanatic. Every age has its particular heresies. Utopian visions are the heresies of the modern age. The Kingdom of God is not something to be instituted on earth by men. Luther may not have promised heaven on earth when he unleashed his so-called Reformation but his teachings encouraged others to do so. Lured with visions of a land flowing with milk and honey, the poor peasants rose up. Predictably, they committed the most merciless atrocities and were just as mercilessly suppressed.”

“There is a whisper,” Madame de Vereaux said, returning to the original topic of their conversation, “that the forbearers of our Bossuet did not have an entirely respectable provenance in matters *religio*. But there was no mention of any Jansenist connection. Though, needless to say, he may hold Jansenist views in secret. That would hardly be unusual. He attends Mass regularly of course.

But don't we all."

"Reconverted Huguenots?" he suggested.

She nodded.

"Possibly."

But there was nothing particularly odd about that either; a substantial portion of the bourgeoisie had Protestant antecedents. Even the Royal Family had. The Church's most loyal children had always been the humble, not the great and those with pretensions to greatness.

"Anything else?" he asked.

He found himself staring at her breasts. An image from *Thérèse philosophe* came into his mind: that of Father Dirrag's telling Eradice to raise her shift and her soul to God as he prepared the birches to chastise her for her sins ... or, more likely, to chastise her for the desire to sin she induced in him. It was the filthiest book he had ever had to read. And the best written of its type. He could well believe that Diderot was responsible for it.

"He seems to come originally from some place in the Orléanais," she said.

She wondered how he would react if she were ever to suggest that his attentions might not be unwelcome, but she had long ago decided that it would make her life far more complicated than she wished it to be.

"You are probably overestimating him and whoever he may be working for," she continued. "Everyone has something to hide, Françoise-Antoine. Your peccadilloes will only be used against you if they want to get you. And when they want to get you, they will always find some, whether you have committed them or not."

Like all men and women who lived only for this world, she mystified him somewhat. The Society's Mistress, as she provocatively described herself, like many mistresses, had been granted a modest annuity for services rendered in the past; no doubt augmenting others she had amassed. Looked at cynically, one might say that her continued cooperation ensured that the bankers in Avignon paid that annuity punctually.

"But I have not quite exhausted all possible avenues of enquiry," she reassured him.

"There is also something else. A particular book I would like a copy of, something ..."

"... particularly perverse?" she smiled

"In a way, yes, Volume III of Diderot's ..."

It took him a moment or two to realise she was not smiling at him. He turned around. A young man in a blue velvet jacket was

waving – very casually, almost discreetly, but light-heartedly – in their direction. The sudden pang of jealousy he felt surprised him. The handsome-looking youth was making his way to the privies. He was limping slightly. There was something wrong with one of his legs and he was wearing one of those heavy clubfoot-boots.

CHAPTER VIII

A POLITICAL ACT COMMITTED
BY A NONENTITY

As Adélaïde waited for Jean-Baptiste in Diderot's library – punctuality was not one of his virtues, but the fire, behind its wire guard, was alight, so she knew he would be back soon – she found herself leafing through a folder of proofs for the *Encyclopédie's* illustrated plates which had been left lying on Diderot's desk. Goussier's work, she presumed.

The illustration depicting a CAMERA OBSCURA featured two nude figures, one male and one female, being observed through the device; both were well formed and curiously lifelike, with only the barest hint of the Greek or Roman statuesque about them. The one entitled SURGICAL INSTRUMENTS showed an ominous array of saws, forceps and other implements, each one drawn with a chilling precision; she dared not imagine their actual use. Others illustrated the manual trades. THE BUTCHER was portrayed by a drawing – surprisingly crude – of a bull tied by the neck to a ring on a flagstone floor and about to be slaughtered by having its head smashed in with a sledgehammer. But the illustrations of SAW MILLS and MACHINES POWERED BY MEN, ANIMALS, WATER & WIND were drawn with extraordinary exactitude, the various parts of each apparatus painstakingly labelled. She wondered if they would include a plate illustrating one of Newcomen's coal-powered fire pumps, a so-called atmospheric engine; she'd seen one once, from a distance, or rather the smoke from one, a massive plume as black as the purest ebony drifting into a clear blue sky over a lush English valley. There were also tables of chemical symbols; some of which she was familiar with from her work with the Baron:

 Water

 Gold

And that most mysterious substance – if it was a substance:



Phlogiston

She'd seen a cannon being made once when she'd accompanied the Baron on one of his investigative expeditions to an armoury. A team of horses was being used to rotate a drilling mechanism to bore a hole in a cylinder of iron. The metal had got hot enough to turn water into steam. The greater the amount of rubbing applied, the greater the release of heat, the Baron had explained, a flirtatious grin on his face. But the flow of heat continued as long as the rubbing continued, he'd said, similar to the way Nollet's electric fluid was released when an electric was rubbed; it seemed to be endless. But if heat was subtle material fluid, as Boyle had held, and most believed, surely it must be possible to extract it entirely ... like phlogiston, which could be extracted entirely from any substance containing it. But were heat and fire the same thing? Galileo had thought that heat was a sort of illusion of the senses, and attributed it simply to the motion of atoms. Halley had believed that the aurora borealis, the so-called northern lights, are caused by magnetic effluvia, another fluid not unrelated to Nollet's electric fluid. One knew so little. She wondered if someday there might be a theory of everything, if such a thing were possible. The symbol for air was included but not the one for fixed air.^{XXIII}

The illustration for the plate entitled ALL THE INGENIOUS METHODS MAN HAS DEvised FOR TRAPPING WILD ANIMALS showed a variety of traps. One particularly gruesome one, with a wolf caught in it, consisted of a spike-studded iron collar that snapped into place around an animal's neck.

"*Homo homini lupus,*" she muttered to herself. Man, it seems, was not only a wolf to other men, but to wolves as well.

"Goussier never stops moaning about how tight-lipped your average craftsman is," Jean-Baptiste's voice boomed out from behind her. She had not heard him come in. She wished he wouldn't sneak up on her like that. "They think he's going to steal their secrets."

"How many plates have been prepared?"

"Over two thousand, maybe more."

"Goussier *is* prolific," she said.

"Yes and no."

She looked at him.

"Colbert commissioned the Académie des Sciences to do a series

of plates on the arts and sciences in 1675," he explained. "Réaumur did a few hundred but they were never published. They have been wasting away in the Académie's files ever since. A fair number of these here are touched-up versions of Réaumur's original drawings. And all those hundreds of visits to workshops that Diderot is credited with. Largely fictitious, I'm afraid."

"How did Diderot get hold of them?" she asked.

"Through d'Alembert, I presume."

"And when the Académie finds out?"

"There will be another unholy row, I should imagine. Do you have any news?"

"The Baron has arranged to meet Malesherbes, but otherwise, no. I was just curious to hear the rest of your story."

"Is it that interesting?"

"You had got as far as Jacques Charpentier bringing you to a warehouse on the Quai des Potiers and showing you his book collection."

"Well, take a seat!" he said, obviously pleased.

"I'll try Diderot's for size," she said, settling behind the larger of the two desks.

He sat on the table, as far away from her as was politely possible, or so it seemed. He hadn't greeted her with his customary kisses on the cheeks either. Somehow she didn't think it was an oversight, though she was sure he would have said it was, and perhaps believed it was. It was almost as if he wanted to be able to look at her in a particular way; to both admire and scrutinise her. It was slightly discomfiting but then he did have an erratic side to his personality.

"A lot of Guild printers are pretty reticent about selling illegal books, but Jacques Charpentier was not," he began. "Catholic books by day, he used to say, Jansenists ones of an evening, and ..."

"... something for Eros by the light of the moon?"

He thought of the crescent moon-shaped chandelier at the Rue de Deux Portes. He dreaded to think what she would make of him visiting such a place.

"Something like that," he said. "Jacques Charpentier liked to take risks." He was exaggerating a bit, Charpentier had been too commercially-minded to really put himself in serious danger. "He and Le Breton knew each other through the Guild, and somehow – don't ask me how! – he convinced Le Breton that there was a chance to make some money behind the backs of the consortium. Le Breton was not rich then, but he wanted to be. I don't know the

ins and outs of it but they decided to secretly print copies of the *Encyclopédie* and sell them on the quiet. At first, they'd only intended to print copies of the first three volumes of the 1754 three-volume reprint ...”

“Forty copies of each volume;” she said, not quite believing him, not that she had any reason not to. “There are nine hundred pages in a volume. How in the name of God did they manage to do that secretly?”

“It was easier than it sounds,” he explained. “It was really more or less a matter of running extra pages through the presses. On three presses – when everything has been set up – two hours extra work, at the most. Though of course there was also the covers and the binding. It’s not uncommon for printers to run off extra copies of books – for the King, as they say in the trade – and sell them on the quiet. But ... well, it wasn’t just any old book. They had to cover their tracks. Le Breton insisted. He would change things slightly, introduce the odd error. If you compare these unofficial copies – what I like to think as of the ‘Charpentier *Encyclopédie*’ – with the official *Encyclopédie*, you will notice discrepancies in the type, a word dropped here, a sentence there, the odd transposed paragraph. Similar but different paper was sometimes also used. Even the covers and the bindings are slightly different. To the trained eye, there would be discrepancies which, if it ever came to it, would make it difficult to prove that the books had been printed on the Le Breton press. They could be explained away as pirated copies ...”

“You said they’d only intended to print copies of the first three volumes ...”

“The thing was not all of the *real* three volumes sold immediately, so they decided to hold off putting the extra copies of the 1754 volumes they had printed on the market – and in the meantime print extra copies of the fourth volume, with the intention of selling all four volumes when all the *real* copies had been sold. The process of producing a volume from scratch – as opposed to reprinting one – is slightly more convoluted. There is a lot a lot of toing and froing, what with all the proofs and corrections and so on. But at the end of the day, it’s still a matter of printing extra pages. However, Charpentier did not find the buyers he had promised. Perhaps he did not try.”

“Go on,” she said.

“They went on to print extra copies of the fifth volume. By then their little scheme was working like clockwork. Sometimes a forme – that’s the tray that holds the blocks of type – would be inadvertently dismantled after the official printing. But that was not

a problem. All they needed to do was reset the type and have those pages printed at Imprimerie Charpentier. Le Breton was still in the Rue Saint Jacques at the time, which made the coming and going all a lot easier.”

“I see,” she said, still rather incredulous.

“But two years later, after the first flash of roguish enthusiasm,” he continued, “things looked different. Or at least they did to Le Breton. He has nervous episodes, and by then he was getting very nervous – and rich. The attraction of printing surreptitious copies was waning. Left to his own devices he would probably have pulled out of the whole business, but he could not be sure how Jacques Charpentier would react if he did. Jacques cultivated the impression of being unpredictable. But Le Breton manage to convince Charpentier to hold off selling any of the – by now – five-volume sets. They would be able to sell them later, he told him, when they would be worth more. Also, the longer they procrastinated the more value was being added. The *Encyclopédie* was becoming famous all over Europe. Each time they waited and added another volume, the more valuable each set of volumes became. And the more valuable they became, at least in Le Breton’s eyes, the less predictable would be the actions of Jacques Charpentier if he did decide to pull out. But then the unexpected happened ...”

“The unexpected ...”

“The madman struck. Robert Françoise Damiens stepped out of obscurity and secured himself a paragraph or two in the pages of history, or at least a mention in the footnotes in the footnotes thereof – despite all that was subsequently done to reduce his body into its constituent molecules.”

“A latter-day Herostratus,” she suggested.

He did not get the reference.

“Herostratus set the Temple of Artemis at Ephesus on fire. One of the wonders of the ancient world. To achieve immortality in the memories of men. They say Alexander the Great was born the same night. But refresh my memory.” She had been on her tour of *le perfide Albion* at the time of the assassination attempt.

“The authorised version of events – probably as close to the truth as any – is that the King was getting into his carriage at Versailles, in the Great Court, to go to Trianon, when Damiens simply walked up to him and stabbed him. There was no crowd about, only a few courtiers and servants. Surgeons and a priest were called for. The King was bled. Père Desmarets, his official confessor, was not available, so some almoner had to step in. Then they found another

priest and he confessed again, until eventually Père Desmarets was found and he made a third confession – which apparently lasted for over an hour.

“The wound wasn’t deep but they thought the knife might have been poisoned. The news reached Paris quickly. The theatres closed. Masses were said. The churches were packed. The sacraments controversy was at its height at the time. The Archbishop was denying Jansenist curés on their deathbeds the last sacraments. Not a very popular stance. You know how touchy the mob can be about these things. Versailles supported the Archbishop, the Parlement supported the Jansenists. Versailles had suspended the Parlement. But on the night of the assassination attempt, most of the magistrates assembled at the Palais Royal off their own bat and wrote to the Dauphin offering to resume normal duties.

“At Versailles the vultures hovered over what was assumed would be the royal deathbed. Iron Head Machault told the Pompadour to leave. He was the Keeper of the Seals and Controller-General at the time. Etiquette requires that the *maitresse-en-titre* not be present at the palace during the death of the King. Not that she had shared the royal bed for years. D’Argenson – he was War Minister at the time – also crossed swords with her. They say Iron Head personally supervised the burning of the soles of Damiens’s feet during the interrogation.”

“He’s not called Iron Head for nothing.”

“When it looked like the King would survive, the theatres opened again. But there was no end of gossip. And a flood of pamphlets, both Jesuit and Jansenist inspired. And, after a few weeks, the Pompadour took her revenge, cold. She had Iron Head exiled from Versailles to Paris. And d’Argenson was rusticated, sent packing to his estates in Poitou, on the grounds that as he was responsible for security in Paris, he should have seen it coming. The d’Argenson twins are not related to him, are they?”

“Only vaguely, I should imagine.”

“Versailles did not want the Parlement involved but no other court has the authority to investigate or try an attack on the royal person, so some of the magistrates – of Versailles’s choosing, of course – had to be recalled. Damiens was kept in the Conciergerie with two physicians in attendance, chained hand and foot to a bed to stop him killing himself. His food was even brought from the royal kitchen in Versailles in case anyone tried to poison him. He’d had a Jansenist prayer book on his person, so the investigations concentrated initially on a possible conspiracy from that direction.

Much was made of the fact that the day after the attempt was the Epiphany, La Fête des Rois. The tentacles of the investigation spread out and began to touch all sorts of people. Even members of respectable families were questioned. To be suspected of being involved in such a thing – or having uttered anything which could have been construed as sympathy for Damiens and his supposed accomplices was a terrifying prospect. Even de Conti came under suspicion for a time. And he was one of the judges. He was accused of deliberately prolonging and confusing matters by making too many speeches.

“But the magistrates were eventually obliged to reconcile themselves to the fact that Damiens had acted alone. It was decided there was no conspiracy and that Damiens, an ex-soldier, a servant, a peasant really, had acted on his own, and not out of some personal grievance, but because he actually believed that the King was being misled by the Jesuits into suppressing Jansenist-inclined clergy. They concluded that he had been inspired to commit his madness by a conversation he had overheard in his master’s house. But it was decided that the conversation itself was not treasonous, merely disrespectful. There were some feeble attempts to blame the Jesuits by comparing Damiens to Ravaillac but it was obvious that Damiens was motivated by his Jansenist sympathies. Which, I have no doubt, had the Jesuits secretly rubbing their paws with glee ...”

“Ravaillac?” She knew the name but couldn’t place it.

“The murderer of Henri IV,” he said. “The Jansenists have always claimed that Ravaillac was an instrument of the Jesuits. But – in the case of Damiens – there was no conspiracy. It was, rather – how shall I put it? – a political act committed by a nonentity. A conspiracy might have been more reassuring. But none could be proved despite the fact that Damiens was a nonentity who managed to get around. It turned out that he’d been in contact with quite a few noble households during his mottled career. A few weeks here as a lackey, a few weeks somewhere else as a footman. That sort of thing. All very embarrassing for those involved. Ironically, for once, it was slightly advantageous to have a reputation for irreligion.

“There were a few executions. No more than half a dozen, if that. A few unfortunates were strung up – nobodies caught up in the chaos – for having had the bad luck to have been overheard uttering some idiocy which in hindsight appeared suspect, the kind of banter that would have normally meant nothing more than a few days in the pillory, if that. One unfortunate ended up doing the hangman’s jig because some witnesses swore he’d called the King

a *bugger* and said that it was a pity that Damiens had made a bollocks of it all. Of course, he also confessed to it.”

She was somewhat taken aback by his language – though, in this case, she supposed, it was reported speech. The lower classes spoke like pigs; and so did the nobility at times, though they pretended they didn't. But men like Jean-Baptiste actually rarely did.

“While nobody could say that the *Encyclopédie* had anything to do with the assassination attempt,” he continued, “it was argued that it, and writings like it, and the general spirit of disrespect for society and religion they engendered, tilled the soil out of which acts such as Damiens's sprung. Damiens's trial lasted nearly three months, if you count the preliminary examinations, the questioning and the rest. His guilt was a foregone conclusion. He insisted that he had only intended to *touch* the King – an extreme form of *lèse-majesté* no doubt – not to wound him. He could have been dismissed as a madman and put under lock and key in some remote monastery and forgotten. But royal omnipotence and the loyalty of the Parlement needed to be demonstrated. So, after the possibility of a conspiracy was dealt with and dismissed, the next item on the judges' agenda was the nature of the punishment to be meted out on his person.”

“Are such matters not prescribed?”

“Apparently not. It seems there is no prescribed penalty for parricide, or rather regicide. Both words were used interchangeably at the time. Strictly speaking, parricide and regicide are two distinct crimes, but in this case, because Damiens had attempted to murder his own king, it was deemed to be parricide as well as regicide. Presumably, if he had murdered someone else's king, it would only have been merely regicide. It was, of course, *attempted* parricide, but that minor detail seems to have been forgotten in the rush to justice.”

He got up and started rummaging among a seemingly haphazard collection of cardboard folders on one of the bookshelves.

“The pamphleteers had a field day,” he continued. “Both official and unofficial. Though one can never quite be sure which so-called unofficial pamphlets have been penned by the same hand as penned the official ones. Most of them regurgitated the reports and weighty opinions found in the *Gazette* – but ... how shall I put it? ... in a style more accessible to the unlettered. And things can be said under the cover of anonymity that might ruffle the wrong feathers if said quasi-officially. They say that Voltaire used to write that sort of propaganda at one time. I don't disbelieve it. Though I doubt that it is a particularly lucrative activity. More a matter of thirty

pieces of copper rather than of silver.”

He handed her a crudely printed pamphlet.

“This is a fairly typical example. There is no telling who it is written by.” He indicated a passage three-quarters the way down the page.

She began to read it, aloud.

“The judges have decreed that Damiens is sentenced to repent for his crime in front of the main doors of Notre Dame de Paris. He will be taken there in a cart naked, where, with a burning wax torch in his hand, he will be granted the grace of making an amende honorable. From there he shall be brought to the Place de Grève where, on a scaffold that will be erected there, he shall have flesh torn from his breast, arms, thighs and calves with red-hot pincers. His right hand, in which he shall be forced to hold the knife with which he committed the parricide, shall be burned with sulphur. Molten lead, boiling oil, burning resin, wax and sulphur melted together shall be poured into all his wounds. He will then be quartered, his limbs torn from his living body by four horses and his body consumed by fire, reduced to ashes and the ashes thrown to the wind. Thus will be the instructions given to the executioner when the judges throw the gauntlet at his feet.”

“The wording is pretty much a verbatim repeat of the official sentence,” he explained. “Except for the gauntlet bit. That’s a reference to the custom of throwing a gauntlet at the executioner’s feet, the King’s champion, he who administers the King’s justice.”

“One hundred years ago in England, the regicide Cromwell murdered his king,” she read on, all the time aware of that strangely remote gaze of his. She found herself giving his black-culotted crotch a quick glance. How she could actually even think of sex as she read the litany of terror ... but she’d heard it said by those who attended executions that the jeerings of the crowds were known for their lecherousness. Perhaps it was the mind’s propensity to conjure up opposites ... death, sex ... pain, pleasure ... *“But when the Monarchy was rightly restored in that country, the regicide’s body was dug up, and dragged through the streets of London and destroyed, and the abominable head of that evil-doer displayed for twenty years on a gate. Even the Protestant English loath the regicide.”*

“The English don’t bother with horses,” he said. “They simply hang a man until he is half-dead, then cut off his private parts, slice his abdomen open, pull his intestines out with some sort of winding device, and then chop his arms and legs off – they leave the cutting off of the head ’til last. When the Duke of Monmouth landed there

in 1685, they dispatched near to three hundred of the common people who had rallied to his cause thus. Needless to say, Monmouth himself was dispatched to his eternal reward in a more brief and tasteful manner.”

She swallowed briefly before continuing. She had seen an autumn pig slaughter once. Death-squeals and blood. Life sliced open and its bloody innards revealed.

“Damiens’s body shall be committed to the flames and burned to ash so that not a single part of his substance shall remain in the world,” she read on. *“This is not, as some say, in order that he will not be able to rise again on the Day of Judgement, but rather to symbolise the indescribable suffering the sinner will face in eternity; for no man will escape facing that Final Judge whose repertoire of punishment is nothing in comparison to the King’s executioner, yet whose mercy is infinite. Perhaps the suffering of the patient Damiens on the scaffold will be taken into account on that day of Final Judgement. Rather dubious theology ... But the patient? What an odd choice of word.”* ^{XXIV}

“One who suffers ... or is about to suffer,” he said. “From the Latin *patiens*, I presume. It’s a rather archaic expression, but the lawyers still use it. The judges did consider refinements to Damiens’s final agony, but it appears their imaginations failed them.”

She handed him back the pamphlet.

“It all came to a head on the day of Damiens’s execution,” he said as he put it back in the cardboard folder he had taken it from. “Jacques Charpentier actually turned up here on the morning of the execution. He’d been drinking. Enough that you’d notice. Diderot was not here, which was just as well. Charpentier’s timing was always good. Though if Diderot had been here I’m sure he would have got on just fine with him, despite Diderot’s dislike of excessive drinking in others – when he is not imbibing himself. But I did not relish the thought of them meeting each other. A lot of people were drunk that day. It was festive, in the macabre way of these events. Most right-thinking people were horrified at the barbarity of it; and not only those of a philosophical disposition, but many of the pious too: Jansenists, Jesuits and Protestants.” He had moved from the edge of the table was sitting on the windowsill. Every now and again he looked down into the street. Watching out for Brass Head’s watchers, she presumed, though she had not noticed anything amiss on her way in. “Diderot had decided to spend the day at a friends’ in the countryside. He said he did not want to be anywhere near what he called a reversion to the dark

ages. There were many who were uneasy about it all but considered it *necessary*. Charpentier told me he was planning to go to the Place de Grève. And he wanted me to go with him.”

“And did you?”

“Yes,” he admitted. “I was not inclined to. But somehow he convinced me. He said not going would have been shutting my eyes to the reality of it. I told him my imagination was good enough, that all I had to do was to imagine the leg being pulled off a live chicken, and that the thought of that alone was enough to make me sick. But he insisted. He said it would be a test of the faith in mankind I professed. And that if that faith survived the experience unscathed, it would be proved, made stronger for it. He claimed that he did not actually want to see it himself, that he wanted merely to see those who did want to see it. That’s what he wanted me to believe, and perhaps to believe himself. But curiosity is a terrible temptation, perhaps the most terrible.”

“To see evil being done and remain innocent – is that possible?” she was about to say but didn’t.

“We followed the crowd to Notre Dame, where Damiens was to make his *amende honorable*. There was an enormous throng. People had come from the provinces, some even from abroad. But I did manage to catch a glimpse of Damiens. They had built a stage for him to kneel on in front of the main doors. Just big enough for him and the priest. He was wearing a shift. Some sense of decency must have intervened. Nothing remarkable about him at all. He was not a young man. Forty-something maybe. Thin grey hair. He looked slightly embarrassed at being the centre of so much attention.”

She tried to imagine it, but also tried not to.

“Eventually we got to the Place de Grève. Sanson and his assistants were waiting on the scaffold. There were sixteen of them; all of them in their ceremonial robes, barbered, powdered and rouged.”

“Dressed to kill,” she suggested, but immediately regretted the comment.

“Sanson was in charge of course, but his lackey Soubise was to do the actual work, to do the honours, as it were. It was an hour or so before things got started. Soubise, like most everybody, was drunk – Jacques had brought a bottle of brandy with him – and had forgotten to buy the wax and the lead but eventually some was procured. All the rooms with balconies or windows with a view of the square had been rented out – at a hundred livres a go – and they were packed.”

She'd heard stories of what went on, supposedly, on the balconies overlooking the Place de Grève during executions, of dresses being lifted ... she wondered if they were true ... or merely stories ...

“They had erected a scaffold for the preliminaries; but by the time we managed to wedge our way forward to the edge of the square, they were not using it anymore. You can hardly get four carthorses on a scaffold – and in the end they were using six of them. It was impossible to see over the heads of the crowd. And there was so much drinking and shouting going on – the language was filthy – it was impossible to hear anything except, every now and again, the neighing of the horses and some confraternity saying the rosary, reciting Hail Marys over and over again, like some parody of a chorus in a Greek tragedy; and, intermittently, Damiens's eerily disembodied screams. About an hour into it, people started to boo and hiss. News filtered back to us that they were jeering Sanson and Soubise for botching the job. It was then that they had to bring the two extra horses on. And an hour or so later, there was a rumour that a message had been sent to the King – highly unlikely – requesting that Sanson be allowed to use a cleaver to cut Damiens's legs off, which Soubise eventually did. The crowd clapped as the limbs came off. The whole bloody butchery lasted three hours.”⁶

He remembered that at one point the crowd had suddenly become quiet. Even the choir of Hail Marys had stopped. The silence lasted for less than a minute until eventually broken by the sound of a woman giggling uncontrollably on one of the balconies.

“We knew it was all over when we saw the plume of smoke rising from the pyre on which they were burning Damiens's body. A little later the crowd began to disperse and we made our way closer to where it had been done.”

He was about to describe the sawdust-strewn cobbles – like in a butcher's shop – and a particular pool of vomit. And the smell: a damp mixture of ashes, burned meat and cheap wine. But thought better of it.

“De Graffigny was there.”

“The Abbé?”

“Who else? I've never seen a man so drunk and still standing. But he was still lucid, shouting his head off.”

“What was he saying?”

“Something about God having tied another knot that He can't undo. It's an old schoolboy joke. If God can do everything, can He

⁶ Editor's note: Not a thousand deaths on the guillotine would make up for the torture that was inflicted on the martyr Damiens.

tie a knot he couldn't open? I was drunk too at that stage. So was Jacques. I doubt if anyone was sober by then."

"I see. And your faith was not diminished by the experience?"

"Best of all possible worlds and all that I suppose," he shrugged. "My faith is a matter of the will not the intellect ... Anyway, as Damiens's body was being consigned to the flames, the argument I had witnessed between Le Breton and Jacques Charpentier reached its climax. Le Breton, in one of his periodic nervous fits, went to the warehouse on the Quai des Potiers, retrieved his twenty sets, brought them back to the Rue Saint Jacques and consigned them to his own private bonfire in the yard. According to Jacques, that is; but it must be admitted he did have a taste for melodramatic narratives. In any case, Le Breton destroyed his share of the books. Perhaps it did not happen exactly like that, but it was certainly around then. It's plausible. It would have made a kind of sense. The city was in a strange mood that day."

"But Le Breton was in no danger from the authorities, was he?" she said. "The *Encyclopédie* was legal then? It was being published legally? With a tacit permission?"

"Yes. Le Breton's only real risk was that the consortium would find out. But it's true; Le Breton had little to fear from the authorities. However, as I said, he was – is – a nervous man at times, and perhaps he was infected by the general feeling of nervousness in the air. Rossbach happened about then too and with *L'Académie royale de Prusse* and *La Société royale de Londres* blazoned across the title page ... But there was something else that gives a hint as to Le Breton's state of mind at the time, in fact, most of the time, something I stumbled across quite by chance."

She gave him a quizzical look.

"About the middle of last year, I was reading through the sixth volume. I don't do that very often but occasionally I find myself twiddling my thumbs here. Anyway, I came across something which did not feel quite right, a discrepancy. At first I thought it might be a mistake so I checked it against the original article. The original manuscripts and some of the proofs are kept here – or rather were. The original text was different."

"Which article was it?"

"FANATICISM. Then, I checked it against the proofs, which Diderot usually goes through with a fine-tooth comb. I thought it might have been changed at that stage. But it had not been. As it happened, the corrected proof of the article was here too, so I compared the proofed version of the entire article with the final printed text to see if there were any more discrepancies. I found

several. It did cross my mind that it might have been of one of Diderot's ploys to outwit the board of censors. Where possible, he only gives them one manuscript copy of an article to examine, which they return with suggestions. It's all very polite and civilised. Or at least it has been up recently. Though I have known Diderot to simply ignore their instructions. And if they don't have a copy of the original article – which Diderot can conveniently misplace – it's rather difficult for them to deny that they did not approve it. But it was definably not that. And in every case the printed articles were ... how shall I say it ... toned down. Later I came across the same sort of thing in other articles in the seventh volume. There could be more, but it would take a life's work to ferret them out. There is only one person who could change the text like that: Le Breton."

"What did Diderot say?"

"He does not know."

"You didn't tell him?"

"No," he admitted. "And he does not read the volumes after they have been printed. Not that there would be any point. Any errors discovered would be beyond correction. No, once a volume is out, Diderot is consumed by the preparation of the next one. Most authors are so tired of their own words at that stage that they do not read what has been printed."

"Or so overjoyed to have their words in print that they promptly dispense with their critical faculties," she suggested.

"A moral failure on my part, I suppose. I knew he would have been furious. I saw him angry once. Not a pretty sight. I cannot bear outbursts of anger, no matter whom they are directed against. And a row between him and Le Breton, with possibly my name being mentioned, was not something I wanted to contemplate. So I said nothing. By then, too, I had myself become involved in Charpentier's scheme, seriously involved. But that part of my tale will have to wait. I have to meet du Guesclin."

"Where?"

For a moment he wondered if she somehow knew about his meeting up with du Guesclin at Madame Gourdan's and was about to blush but then realised it was an innocent question.

"The Quai du Nord," he said, glad that he had not been forced to lie. "He has a warehouse there."

CHAPTER IX

HONOUR AMONG BOOK SMUGGLERS

The Charpentier house in the Faubourg Victor was one of a row of two-storey houses built in the '40s. The field opposite was still marshland.

Bageuret was asked to wait in the drawing room. Somehow he had imagined more inherited wealth. The furnishings were not as lavish as he had expected: two fauteuils and a sofa, all three in different styles but upholstered in the same blue fabric, an escritoire and an old harpsichord with a folio of Boismortier tunes on its lectern – the only man ever to make a living from selling printed music, it was said. The portrait of the King in ceremonial dress, above the fireplace, didn't look as if it had cost a fortune either. Jacques Charpentier had known how to make money – Bageuret's first job had been to arrange the binding of three thousand breviaries that had just been printed; and there'd been near enough to a dozen jobs like that in the short time he'd known him, and they were still coming in – but the man knew how to spend money too, though he had obviously not spent it on furniture. Once, Bageuret himself had nursed dreams of a house, a cottage somewhere outside the Farmers-General Wall, even a modest annuity. But it had never happened. The iron reign of money had seen to that.

Jacques Charpentier used to say that the key to rising in the world was spending money, not hoarding it. Throwing it away was more like it, Bageuret had thought at the time. A man rose by amassing money, not by dispensing it willy-nilly, though the appearance of largesse did not go amiss. Once, one evening, he and Charpentier had been emptying a bottle of wine at the workshop, Charpentier the bulk of it. At first, they had merely talked shop in the candlelight, but then Jacques had come out with his *plan* – a convoluted scheme to eke his way into the ranks of the nobility. Whether he had been in earnest or the wine talking, it was impossible to know, perhaps both. He had outlined it in some detail: documents purporting he was a foundling adopted from a provincial *hôpital de Dieu* by a childless bourgeois couple and testifying that there had been a letter left in the cradle in which he

had been abandoned, identifying him as the offspring of some obscure provincial nobleman fallen on desperate times, a young mother dead in childbirth; and then, years later, his *true* father – since made good – subsequently finding him again after a long and heart-rending search, recognising him as his true heir and receiving him back to his repentant bosom. Charpentier had suggested that it would not prove too difficult to find an impoverished country *comte* to do the honours. Outrageously improbable. But then, there was no dearth of soi-disant gentlemen in Paris with dubious pedigrees. He had even sketched out a concocted coat of arms. The printer's bollocks on the shop sign were to become two overlapping gold discs on a black diagonal strip on a field of white; the gold discs, representing the money he'd made – and spent, he'd joked – and the black diagonal strip the river of black ink from which he'd panned his gold. But, Bageuret supposed, it was not that unusual. Many an aspiring family had fondly made-up coats of arms closeted away for years in anticipation of the dreamed-of day when they would be dusted off and proudly displayed. The more ancient they appeared the better. They said d'Alembert had been similarly inventive. Charpentier's philosophy of life was that of the gambler's: the right cards in the right hands could change everything, transform a printer into a *comte*; or the wrong ones transform a marquis into a pauper. But that was not the real world, the world of the iron reign. Bageuret had never understood why he had not simply purchased an office, even one that would confer nobility on his descendants – not that, in the end, Charpentier had been blessed with any – if not on himself. God knows, there were enough for sale. Versailles's appetite for money was insatiable. He could easily have carried on his trade by proxy, half the nobility did, one way or another; which he had no doubt intended to do anyway. Maybe it was the scheming aspect of his *plan* that he was really enamoured with, with the idea of pulling a fast one on the good and the great.

Bageuret wondered if he himself was a not a dreamer too, or an idiot, for getting involved in this affair; for thinking that he, unlike the overwhelming majority of men, was actually going to leave something in the world behind him. He had three hundred and ten livres stowed away – safely deposited at the goldsmith's. That was what he'd managed to save, or scrape together rather, over the years. A paltry legacy. He was forty-three years of age. And death came suddenly, *like a thief in the night*, as the priests said. It was not enough to get the boy a place in one of the Jesuit schools. In principle they were free but a Latin tutor to prepare the boy would

have to be paid for; and the lad would need clothes, books, and a donation would not go amiss. And, if the school was outside Paris – the provincial schools were easier to get into – there would be board and lodging to pay. A scholarship was hardly an option. The boy was bright but not that bright. Everyone complained about the Fathers, but anybody who was anybody had been educated by them, and packed off their sons to them to be educated by them in turn. The Fathers would give the boy a chance. There would be other boys there from good families, contacts would be made. Of course, what he would get from the sale of the Diderot books would not be enough either, but it would go a long way. And money could make money. The army needed victuals, uniforms, boot leather, tobacco, brandy ... there were countless opportunities. The war was a goldmine for anyone with a bit of capital.

The door opened and Christine Charpentier was suddenly in the room. She had a letter in her hand and was wearing her spectacles. Her fingers were ink-stained.

She motioned him to the fauteuil furthest from her.

“Debts,” she said, referring to the letter.

Bageuret was taken aback by the unexpected familiarity.

“This one,” she said, “is from some Chevalier de Rohan, of whom, needless to say, I have never heard.”

He was even more taken aback when she actually handed him the letter. The paper was watermarked and it bore an embossed coat of arms.

“Oh, it’s polite of course,” she said. “A *polite* reminder that Monsieur de Rohan holds a promissory note signed by my *dear* late husband for the sum of three hundred and twenty-four livres, which falls due on the fourth of April. I’ve spoken to Dreyfus about it. He says it could be challenged in court but advises against it. The de Rohans have a bit of a reputation, it appears.”

“They are a powerful clan,” he said. Voltaire had a run-in with them; in fact, he’d been beaten up by one of their number. He’d hidden himself in London for a while to escape their clutches, before the war.

He cast his eyes over the text, trying not to seem overly curious. The handwriting looked professional, most probably that of a lawyer’s clerk, though it was signed by the Chevalier himself. The tone was considered but uncompromising. It did not mention the property or service in return for which it had been originally been made out. The amount was for exactly fourteen livres more than Bageuret’s own life savings.

“My late husband was partial to gaming,” she informed him.

She removed her spectacles. Her eyes, usually obscured by the thick round lenses, suddenly looked naked, almost indecent.

“What else did Monsieur Dreyfus advise?” he asked, hoping to sound somewhat competent in such matters, or at least concerned.

“*Diligence and thrift. Pay only when necessary and then as little as decently possible*, to use his exact words,” she said, mimicking the lawyer. “*It’s what everyone does*, he assures me.”

Jacques Charpentier used to ape his real and imagined adversaries in the same way.

“I have found a buyer,” he announced.

“A buyer,” she asked, momentarily puzzled at what he was referring to.

“For the Diderot books,” he explained. “A German nobleman has expressed interest in purchasing ten sets.”

“Ten?”

“An acquaintance of mine in the civil service is intimate with a German margrave – marquis, I believe, is the French equivalent.”

He gave her an abridged version of his conversation with Gilles and Sophie-Françoise. He made a point of omitting any reference to the dubious *abbé*, restricting himself to saying that it should not prove too difficult to find someone who was experienced and dependable enough to attend to that aspect of things.

“Of course,” he concluded, “striking a bargain and completing a transaction are two very different things. But I believe the offer is serious. This margrave offers to pay half of the price on dispatch of the goods from Paris, and the rest on confirmation by his agent of their safe delivery to a place of his choosing on the other side of the Rhine – assuming, of course, that a price can be agreed. The exact location has not been specified.” He waited a moment to see how she would react to this before speaking again, but she gave no indication as to what she was thinking. “Under the circumstances, it is the type of arrangement one would expect.” That was not strictly true but it was a white lie.

“Your customer *is* aware that the way things are going, no more volumes may be printed, that his set could remain incomplete?”

“He believes that rest of the volumes could very well be printed in Amsterdam ...” *Has been led to believe* would have been more accurate.

“I see,” she said. “And what price was proposed?”

This was the tricky bit. She had said he could have half of whatever he could sell the books for. He could simply have left it at that. But was he also not due one-third of the one-third of the difference between that and the price the German would hopefully

pay? Less the expenses of the shipping and whatever Gille's *abbé* would require for his services. After all, if he and Christine Charpentier were selling to this margrave directly, they would be selling at a higher price than the price they would get from Gilles and Sophie-Françoise. So, really, he was entitled to both cuts: a half of the price to be paid to Christine Charpentier, and the third of the profits on the sale to this margrave. He liked to think of himself a fair man, honourable in commerce. But religion was religion and business was business, and no sensible merchant passed over the possibility of buying cheap and selling dear. Besides, as a man without position or connections, he was taking the greater risk.

"None as yet. But I would suggest one hundred and forty livres per set," he said, meaning what he would pay her, not what the d'Argenson's margrave would pay.

That was nearly a third less than the subscription price.

"Which would come to fourteen hundred livres for ten sets," he added.

Of which he would pocket seven hundred livres. And if the German bought at one and a half times the subscription price – which was not beyond the bounds of possibility – he could add another four to five hundred livres to that. Eleven hundred livres in total, maybe more.

"One cannot expect the full subscription price," he explained, trying not to sound too earnest.

"I had expected something somewhat higher."

He had been hoping she was not going to say that, but he had anticipated it.

"The political wind is not blowing in our direction, I'm afraid," he said.

"Are we printing or selling any illegal books now? Anything we need to worry about?"

The question took him by surprise.

"Printing none," he said. "As for selling ... let us say unlicensed rather than illegal, yes. Some farcical novels, nothing remotely political – this is not the time for that – sundry items which haven't gone to the censor simply because they're not worth it. The expense would simply make them unprofitable. Nothing that will be noticed. Part of a new edition of a book is always exchanged with other Guild members for an assortment of books – that way every shop has a good range of stock. Sometimes books of questionable provenance are included in these swaps. Your husband had his contacts, so there are other sources as well – and

there is still some old stock. But we do have our arrangements with the powers that be. That will cover anything ... that might be considered risqué ...”

“Filth from under the cloak,” she said, and laughed, almost flirtatiously.

His unease was obvious.

“Men always expect women to be shocked,” she said. “But I can assure you, I am not, not easily. We are not innocents.”

He should have been relieved by the statement but was not sure that he was.

“Have we ever printed prohibited books?” she asked. “As opposed to merely not-permitted.”

“I believe your late husband did on occasion. Only those who enjoy the favour of the Prince de Conti would risk that right now.”

“The King’s cousin? I am at a loss.”

“And Prior of the Order of Saint John of Jerusalem,” he explained. “The Temple is under his jurisdiction, not under Sartine’s, and lately the Prince has been putting some rooms there at the disposal of some printers and writers. Naturally only to those that serve his cause.”

“Naturally. I suppose you will want the keys then.”

“The keys?”

“To the storeroom.”

“It would be useful ...”

“To get into the warehouse building you simply have to show them to the *gardien*.”

She opened one of the compartments in the *escritoire* and took out the ring with the two keys on it.

“Be careful with them,” she said. These are the only copies.”

✱

Isabelle de Vereaux was pissing – noisily – into her chamber pot behind her Chinese-dragon dressing screen.⁷ About some things, Stefan von Klopstock had discovered, it seemed she could be shy, or perhaps she was just teasing him. He could never tell. Her rooms on the Rue Chauvet were small but richly furnished, and warm – warm enough to make nakedness pleasurable even in the depths of

⁷ Editor’s note: Readers of a more sensitive disposition may wish to omit this section of the narrative from their reading. It adds little to the tale, being but another example of the Author’s attempting to titillate his readership.

winter. The logs in the grate were glowing behind the wire guard in front of the fireplace. How she had originally engaged him in conversation that day at the Palais Royal he could not quite remember. And neither could he quite remember how she had suggested he come back to her rooms that first time. The tinkling sound of her piss against the porcelain chamber pot was arousing him again. In truth she unnerved him; it was the sheer bulk of her, the overwhelming, almost maternal femininity that she exuded; yet all she had to do was wriggle her little finger and his cock stood to attention like a well-trained grenadier. It was an invitation into an utterly carnal paradise, where nothing counted except the pleasure of physical sensation and the lure of the perverse, and whose secrecy was part of its seductive power. His escapade at the brothel came back to him. It had been mad really – and had cost him a small fortune into the bargain. How this side of him, this ever-returning and messy lecherousness, could coexist with his image of himself – with what he believed was his true self – as an honourable idealist, a man of reason, moderate in his appetites, he despaired at understanding. It was as if there was a worm in his soul, a demon that normally inhabited the shadow-world of dreams and nightmares, but which every now and again needed to come forth and be sated.

There was a letter on her *escritoire*, addressed to someone by their Christian name, and beside it a book, something about the comet. He picked the letter up and gave it a quick glance through. There were references to the Society of Jesus, and to a *Monsieur B.* who'd been *attending the d'Holbach synagogue*. He cast a glance over the last paragraph: *the third volume of the book of books ... rumour has it that some full sets are being discreetly put on the market by persons as yet unknown ...* He wondered if ... She said she kept a notebook in which she wrote *things which might be useful someday*, that *information was power*. She'd even shown it to him, though, needless to say, not allowed him to look inside it. They were *souls cut from the same cloth*, she'd said when he'd tried. He wondered if she was right. He didn't particularly like his urge to rummage through other people's papers in the vague hope of stumbling across ... he wasn't sure what. Her Scarlet Book, she called it; it had a scarlet morocco cover. The tinkling stopped and Isabelle de Vereaux reappeared from behind her dragon screen as naked as the day she'd been born, her large breasts and belly glistening in the candlelight. He felt himself immediately in her power again, his desire made even more irresistible by their rendezvous having the air of being one-off

events.

“Play with me,” she said, putting his hand on her sex. “And tell me things.”

“What things?”

“Interesting things, odd things, secret things.”

They say there's a peephole at the Deux Portes, Gilles d'Argenson had said to him the other evening at the Régence, when for a moment the ladies were out of earshot. The talk had been of an essay in the Mercure by some abbé on the subject of curiosity, on when it was a virtue and when it was a vice, and on the relative proclivity of the sexes to it. Used, Gilles had added, no doubt more by the descendants of Adam than by those of Pandora.

ж

Suddenly, Bossuet was holding it in his hand. He had found what he had been looking for: the file on *the lawyer's clerk, Jean-Baptiste Desforges, a nondescript young man from Limoges, guilty of the most serious sedition.* There wasn't enough light in the cellar to read it properly by, so he quickly concealed it under his coat and headed back up to the copying room. Being the hour for lunch, it was unlikely that anybody would be about.

There wasn't, so he settled himself on the windowsill – it was a grey day – and started to go through it. On his subject's literary abilities Joseph d'Hemery had, for once, remained mum. Desforges's crime was described as *the publication of scandalous verses on the subject of the deportation of the British Pretender, Charles Edward Stuart, subsequent to the signing of the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle, which had mocked the King and been prejudicial to the good order of society.* It quoted the lettre de cachet ordering that *person to whom this order pertains, Jean-Baptiste Desforges, be imprisoned in the Arsenal of the Bastille until further notice.* There was a note written in the margin, chillingly casual, in a different hand, a hand that was obviously not accustomed to being economical with writing paper: *It is necessary to make examples of these infamous people.* It had been initialled with a large stylised P. The Pompadour came to mind, but surely she could have had no possible interest in someone as low down on the feeding chain as Desforges. The dossier ended with the simple statement: *15 September 1749, subject transferred to the Abbey of Mont-Saint-Michel, into the custody of the Congregation of Saint Maur.* He had seen engravings of the fortress-like abbey, accessible only by when

the tide was out via a causeway. It had looked like a little boy's dream castle.



The Jesuit knew immediately from the handwriting on the packet that it was from Isabelle de Vereaux. As he sliced open the brown envelope with the blunt brass blade of his letter opener, he felt an uncomfortably rush of erotic anticipation. Inside, there was an unbound book, its pages uncut – *L'Appartition de la Comète: preuve contre les Jésuits*. There was also a letter. Her handwriting, like her, was large, round and confident, and unmistakably feminine.

Mon cher François-Antoine,

The enclosed little gem can be had around town for a franc and a half. A jolly book pedlar on the Île-de-Cité informed me that the anonymous author of the little tome claims that the Englishman's comet is a sign sent to us by the Almighty Himself to signify that the days of the Society of Jesus are numbered. I thought you might want to have it burned or something.

Apropos Monsieur B – information has come my way that he is an Israelite, not a reconverted Huguenot. Or rather, the family converted sometime back – so he is unlikely to be related to that illustrious Bishop of Condom whose name he sports. Which might lead one to suppose it's probably only your pieces of silver he's after. But then, Jew or Gentile, doesn't money lie behind nine-tenths of our actions? But his race-brothers or co-religionists (I am never quite whether they are a race or a religion, perhaps they are both) do have a reputation for cunning – or is that merely a silly prejudice of mine? – so I am sure that you will concur that it would be wise that I continue in my attempts to ascertain whether or not he is also receiving silver from anyone else ... A little bird has also told me he's been attending the d'Holbach synagogue more frequently of late.

As regards the third volume of the book of books – a difficult assignment, though rumour has it that some full sets are being discreetly put on the market by persons as yet unknown.

Your devoted informant, V

She was fond of the conspiratorial touch.

So Bossuet was of Hebrew extraction. That would make sense. And *Bossuet* was an adopted name. A Huguenot would not have to change his name, but a converted Jew might well have done so. It

could be a covert insult of course, but then some of the great names have become so common these days. It was a common prejudice that the Hebrew nation was inordinately attached to money, but not being allowed to hold wealth in the form of land, what other alternative was available to them? But sometimes deeper truths lay buried in common, even silly prejudices. The Society did not accept applicants of Hebrew lineage. And with good reason: the stain of deicide was not so easily removed. Perhaps, what he took as Bossuet's personal antagonism towards him, beyond the man's petty avarice, was some manifestation of the perverse pride of his race.

In Rome they were confined to a gated ghetto which, oddly enough, had been created relatively recently, he had been surprised to learn, in the 1550s only, on the orders of Paul IV; he had imagined it dating from well before the Quattrocento, from the twelfth century or earlier, like the ghettos of the Imperial cities. The locking of its gates at night stemmed, he supposed, from the time when Jewish usury had really been a curse, and the fear of what they might get up to under the cover of darkness was very real. True, it was not very large, in fact little more than a few alleyways wedged between the *Theatrum Marcelli* and the Tiber. But it was for their own good to a large extent; within its confines they were safe from the mob, and it enabled them to observe their various rites undisturbed – of which there were many: five feuding sects were packed into the one synagogue officially allowed them. Every Mardi Gras they were obliged by law to parade down the *Via del Corso* in a body – the women in their yellow headscarves and the men in their yellow hats – to the jeers of the Romans. And any Roman Jew in the presence of the pontiff was required to kiss the spot on which the papal slipper trod, literally the kiss the ground the pope walked on ... He sometimes wondered if such harshness was not counterproductive, an overreaction to the havoc caused by the mad German monk. Until Luther had come on the scene, Rome had been becoming increasingly more open to the world. It was hard to imagine the likes of Raffaello de Urbino being given free rein to paint frescos in papal antechambers nowadays; but such had been the nature of what the Italians called the *Rinascimento*. He had little doubt that if Galileo had taught his theories before the appearance of the mad monk, his propositions would have been examined with a more reasoned calmness; after all, he had said little more than what Kopernikus had said, and Kopernikus had not been considered a threat. But of course, there were limits to openness; the half-baked ideas of one or two Quattrocento popes –

rumoured, it had to be admitted – of incorporating elements of Hermeticism and even ancient Egyptian superstition into the Church's teachings had been pure lunacy but, fortunately, had been limited to the erection of excavated obelisks in front of a few of the churches in Rome.

In France, strictly speaking, like the Huguenots, the Jews did not legally exist; but they did of course, quietly inhabiting the seedier corners of society, lurking in its back alleys, as it were, nomadic in spirit if not in fact, their loyalty to Christian princes earnestly proclaimed but secretly begrudging. Their rejection of the true faith and their alien ways forever held them outside the community of the faithful. An ancient race that had grown proud because it had once been chosen – and one lacking the childlike innocence of the pagan – and that pride, and their guile, was passed from parents to offspring, like a harelip or a clubfoot. It had become their nature never to become part of the whole. *Perfidi Judaei*. A stubborn race, but sly enough in their way – and not only with money. But like all things that the Almighty allowed to exist, one had to accept that there was some purpose to them, that they had their place. Perhaps, the Great Bernard was right: they had been scattered over the earth to remind Christians everywhere of the Lord's suffering. He had dipped into their Kabbalah once, a model of the material and immaterial universe, with its spheres or *sephiroth*, representing different dimensions of being, of what they considered the ten attributes of God, the layers of some meta-cosmic onion, not that far removed from the way men had seen the material world before Descartes and Newton had supposedly opened their eyes. Man, who had within him the glimmer of a divine spark, inhabited Malkuth, the lowest of the *sephiroth*, the realm of base matter, of decay and suffering, a realm that did not emanate directly from the divine itself but somehow from the spiritual universe that the divine had created ... It was, in a way, an esoteric version of Plato's universe of perfect forms and shadows.

But such musings were a distraction. Jew or Christian, whatever this Bossuet was, he needed to find out whom the man was really working for, if he was working for anyone. And what he really wanted. The quicker the Society's Mistress found out, the better. ^{XXV}

“A late night?” Gilles asked.

The Abbé looked distinctly hungover.

“I dined – if that’s the word,” the Abbé explained, “with Labussière in his garret. We had a few drinks later at the Régence. I’ve ordered a hair of the dog from below.”

They were in one of the top rooms of Moulin Noir, the windmill – a Don Quixote machine, the Abbé called it – where the Abbé kept his merchandise, the chests of pornography and dubious religious tracts, mainly Jansenist, they were sitting on. There was an inn on the ground floor, frequented by the better-off sort of artisans.

“I can’t quite imagine either of you playing chess,” Gilles said, flicking through one of the copies of *Candide*. The Régence was another well-known chess players’ haunt.

“We didn’t. He left about midnight. I stayed on and got involved. Ended up somewhere else.” His memories of the evening – or rather the early hours of the morning – were patchy.

Gilles nodded. The Abbé’s nocturnal wanderings were not a matter he enquired into too deeply.

“There are some books that need to be transported,” Gilles said. “Valuable books.”

“Destination?”

The Abbé began to break up a plug of tobacco. His hands were shaking.

“Germania.”

“Where there dwelleth wild tribes and fierce beasts. And the nature of the merchandise?”

“Ten sets of Diderot’s *Encyclopédie*. Seventy volumes.”

They heard footsteps on the stairs leading up from below.

“That’ll be the hair of the dog,” the Abbé said.

He made a point of taking the tray from the boy at the door.

There was a jug of brandy, two mugs, a lighted candle and some tapers on it.

“They know I keep books here,” he explained as he poured them both a finger of brandy. “But one doesn’t want the hired help sniffing around if one can help it.”

“The Parlement has not banned its transportation,” Gilles said. “Not specifically.”

The Abbé emptied his mug in a single slug. It was not Hennessy-Charente, but it did the job.

“A legal point I would not relish arguing in front of a bench of red robes.”

“Hence the need for discretion,” said Gilles, taking a more restrained sip from his.

“Generally, I prefer the slim, the filthy and the profitable. Pocket-sized, plain font, cheap paper – but not so cheap that it will fall apart after a single read. Something that the man or woman about town can discreetly carry to salon or coffee house.”

He lit his pipe with one of the tapers. The smoke smelled vaguely of almonds.

“They’re big books,” the Abbé continued. “A single volume probably weighs about six pounds. Seventy times six is four hundred and twenty pounds. You’d need four or five mules to carry the lot. Or eight or nine human mules – porters. At fifty pounds a man.”

The porters were at the bottom of the chain of being in the smuggling business. Their so-called captains paid them a miserable couple of livres, fortified them with piss-cheap gut-rot and sent them to brave the mountain trails – usually at night. The gangs travelled on their own. The captains, who met them at their destinations, did well though. They usually charged by weight. The going rate on the Swiss-French border was thirteen livres for the quintal, for a hundred and twelve pounds. The porters knew that there were different types of books – pirated books and forbidden books – and they didn’t like carrying the later; though, not being able to read, they could rarely tell the difference. The risks were not negligible; if caught, they could end up in the galleys.

“I’ve done the northern trails,” the Abbé went on, “from Liège and Amsterdam, and the south-eastern trails from Neuchâtel and Geneva. The Juras are rough country, shoot-outs between the gangs and *douaniers* are common enough. But I haven’t been down there since the outbreak of hostilities. Lovely phrase that, so polite. And I’ve had stuff brought from Nancy by barge. I’ve never smuggled out though. Normally the safest route to the Rhine would be by sea. But Brest and Le Havre are under blockade and the Roast Beefs have squadrons cruising off all the northern coasts and the Austrian Netherlands.”

“A barge up the Marne has been suggested,” Gilles said.

“Not a bad idea. A barge is far less easily searched than a chest on a mule’s back, or on a man’s. On the other hand, customs posts on the rivers and canals are not that easily avoided. But it’d still involve some cross-country travel. I know the way to Nancy well enough, but beyond that I’d need a map. Asking directions at every crossroads would not be the wisest idea.”

The alcohol had now more or less restored his thinking to something approximating its usual equilibrium, or rather disequilibrium. He envied Gilles his ability to drink like a horse

and somehow not slip over the edge.

"I can probably get hold of a decent map," Gilles said. "And there'll be filthy lucre for bribes."

"Filthy lucre. Where would we be without it?"

"I sometimes wonder."

"Paradise perhaps. How much?"

"A hundred écus should not be a problem," said Gilles.

"Three hundred livres," the Abbé repeated, looking distractedly out the window. Through the wooden frames of the naked windmill-sails, he could see a young girl leading a kid-goat. Its hooves were slipping on the wet cobblestones every time the urchin tugged the twine around its neck. The creature's horns had hardly sprouted. "Innocence and ignorance being led to the slaughter. *The best of all possible worlds*. Leibniz be damned!"

Or the most mysterious of all possible worlds, Gilles was about to say as he went to the window and looked down at the scene that had inspired the Abbé's philosophical musing; but the Abbé spoke first.

"Four hundred and it's a deal," he said.

"Done."

"The two stables of this trade are moral instruction and debauchery, religious texts and pornography," the Abbé went on. "But every now and again I get my hands on some gems." He indicated one of the chests. "Have a look."

Gilles opened it and found a layer of *The Pearls of Debauchery* staring him in the face.

"That's only the top layer," the Abbé said before he had time to react.

Gilles looked underneath. The rest of the chest was packed with copies of Helvétius' *De l'esprit*, unbound bootleg copies, maybe a hundred of them. Gilles picked one of them up.

"Omer Joly's favourite atheistic and amoral little tome," Gilles said and began to flick through it. The title page said it had been *printed at the expense of the Vatican*. "For all their flummery and obsession with precedent, about who follows whom in their processions, and who doffs bonnets to whom, not all our betters are totally unperceptive men. But it's Diderot he sees as the real threat. You are taking quite risk with these!"

The Abbé shrugged his shoulders and took a sip from his mug.

"Diderot is hardly the first to point out the shortcomings of priests and princes," he said. "Reformers come and go. And he can be a prim bastard at times. Primness is the habitual sin of the reformer, who invariably finds himself in a decadent age."

“Ah, decadence.”

“But decadence is too chaotic for the reformer, who invariably wants things to be tidy.” The Abbé took a suck from his pipe and let out a puff of smoke. “And wholesome.”

“But Diderot is far more than a mere reformer,” Gilles said. “He’s reinventing the grounds of ethics. That’s what horrifies the likes of de Fleury and Iron Head. What he’s saying, when it boils down to it, is that the basis of ethics need not be derived from the eternal, from a divinely ordained order, but that it can be derived from the material world. From base matter. *Nihil in intellectu quod non prius in sensu*.⁸ And he even argues that if ethics are grounded in the intellect – which is derived from the senses and the material world – would not the ethics of a blind man be different to those of a sighted man.^{XXVI} Which is to say that ethics are relative, not absolute. The rub in that – some say, and with some justification – is that if he can disparage the customary grounds for virtue, with centuries of tradition behind them – and with such ease – cannot another do the same with the virtues he lauds? The logic of his stance more or less implies that it is almost one’s *moral* duty to do so. And so on, ad infinitum.” Which, Gilles remembered, was in a roundabout way more or less what that fanatic Brass Head de la Haye had argued, in that chillingly ambivalent tone of his.

“Saturn devours his own bastards.”

“Yes, the *Encyclopédie* is a Pandora’s box.” Gilles laughed. The irony of using the same metaphor that the Provincial-General had used – another de Graffigny – was not lost on him. He wondered if he had ever actually had an original idea. If anyone ever did? Though it obviously did occasionally happen. “And there is such a treasure trove to be found within its pages. Not even those who see it as their sacred duty to plant their august arses on the lid of the thing in the vain hope of keeping it securely shut cannot resist taking a peek inside it every now and again.”

“But it’s still a rich man’s divertissement.”

“There’s a Bible in half the households of the United Provinces. It’s not that hard to imagine ten thousand copies being printed, twenty thousand, more even, and at a lower price. Some of the more useful or controversial articles are already being churned out like hot cakes, here and abroad.”

“*But so few can read,*” said the Abbé, quoting Voltaire – more or less.^{XXVII}

⁸ *There is nothing in the intellect that is not previously in the senses*, attributed to both Locke and Condillac.

“But I rather think that the Parlement and Versailles are of the opinion that the few who can read are the few that matter, and that those who write what they read have particular responsibilities.”

“There are some who write for those who cannot read,” said the Abbé. “And the *odious doctrine* itself?”

“That there is no greater crime than religion!” said Gilles. “No greater cruelty than to give a man hope of life to come so that he fritters away this miserable one! But then, the thought of how men would behave if they were to believe that they were merely the products of some cosmic game of dice, originating in some consommé-textured universal ocean with too much salt in it, and destined to nothing more than to return to it, is not reassuring. In comparison to the everlasting flames of hell, Diderot’s posterity is a pale incentive to toe the line.”

“So the thinking atheist’s social duty is to be seen attending Mass on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation?” the Abbé countered. Their conversations often developed into this tide-like and meandering ebb and flow of ideas. “As the Monkey encourages the peasants on the French side of his Ferney estate to be good Catholics? While those on the Genevan side he encourages to be good heretics ...”

“There is no God and the Monkey is His John the Baptist.”⁹

⁹ Editor’s note: I feel it necessary to point out to the reader, lest he gain an erroneous impression, that there is absolutely no evidence to suggest that the great Voltaire was an atheist. He was a deist. As can be seen clearly from his words: *If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him.* These famous words appeared in his *Letter to the Author of The Treatise of the Three Imposters* – Toland’s atheist tract. Though his enemies often slandered Voltaire with the accusation of atheism, as they did many who opposed the tyranny of the feudal and priest-ridden order of the Old Regime. As Citizen Robespierre has on more than one occasion pointed out, atheism has no place in the new historical era which has been ushered in by our Triumphant Revolution. It is an aristocratic vice, born out of lassitude, idleness and decadence. “The idea of a Supreme Being,” he points out, “who watches over oppressed innocence and punishes triumphant crime is essentially an idea of the people.” And nothing is closer to atheism, he adds, than the religion of the priests, who first had men worshipping “a ball of fire, then a cow, then a tree, then a man, then a king.” He has often reminded the Convention for the need of what could be called a civic religion in order to inspire citizens to live virtuous lives. Indeed, he says, echoing Voltaire: “even if the existence of God and the immortality of the soul are nothing but dreams, they are still the most beautiful dreams of the human spirit.”

Perhaps a further word of caution is called for here: The Author has also,

“And your own opinion as regards the odious doctrine?” the Abbé asked.

“There are many shades of atheism. I try to keep an open mind. Atheism, and all it implies – life being meaningless, no afterlife and all that – may be the most reasonable point of view. Yet when I look at the world, the miracle of it – this perhaps most mysterious of all possible worlds, if not the best – I cannot help thinking that the odious doctrine is not sufficient.”

“I don’t. Keep an open mind, that is. But shouldn’t that be the *least* mysterious?”

Gilles shrugged.

“But: *for since we are finite*,” he quoted, “*it would be absurd for us to try and determine anything concerning the infinite*. Descartes. That could, of course, be taken as a suggestion not to think at all. Philosophical questions are not necessarily posed to be answered but ceasing to pose them would be ... a sort of death of the spirit, I suppose. And then, on the other hand, there is Pascal’s wager.”^{XXVIII}

“Which does rather assume that God needs or somehow desires or even needs to be believed in,” the Abbé said. “Even old Isaiah admitted that in the sight of the Lord the inhabitants of the earth *are as grasshoppers*.” He remembered the God’s eye view he’d had from the top of Notre Dame. In fact, he often remembered it. “*We live in mystery and horror*, Pascal said, which is true enough. A great mind. His *nuit de folie* notwithstanding.”^{XXIX}

Gilles was silent for a moment before speaking again.

“An-aesthetics and aesthetics are my creed. An-aesthetics to relieve the pains of our bodies, and aesthetics to relieve the pain in our souls, and perhaps ...”

“Aesthetics?” the Abbé asked. He never heard the word before.

“From the Greek *aisthētikos*,” Gilles explained. “A feeling, a concern for beauty, the perception of. A German called Baumgarten has written a book about it called *Aesthetica*.”

“And an-aesthetics? *An*. Not. Without. Greek for, I believe.”

on other occasions, allowed factual errors to creep into his narrative. For example, one can only speak of a Farmers-General Wall proper since 1784, when the building of a wall whose sole purpose was to facilitate the collection of unjust taxes by the corrupt Old Regime was commenced under the auspices of the infamous architect, Claude Nicolas Ledoux. Readers outside Paris will be pleased to learn that most of Ledoux’s 62 toll gates have since been destroyed by the people of Paris in an act of revolutionary fervour. The Farmers-General were abolished on the 21st of March 1791 by the Old Regime calendar.

“Those things which enable us not to feel, not to perceive. I made the word up. Poussin and Paracelsus.”

“Poussin. Creator of beauty. And Paracelsus ...”

“Creator of laudanum. Opium and alcohol. And the *cure* for syphilis!”^{XXX}

“And aesthetics?” the Abbé asked.

“Beauty is its own justification. For ’tis a joy to behold.”

“And the origin of this sense of beauty?”

“Alas, I fear that God gave Man a sense of beauty in order that he might lust and to go forth and multiply. But like everything that the divine hand touches, it went awry. Some men find beauty in landscapes ...”

“... and others in comely youths ...”

“... and others in sights far less comely,” Gilles added.

“And if there is no God?”

“Beauty is mechanism – a proposition too dreadful to contemplate.”

Church bells began to peal in the distance.

“There’s a trader I know,” said the Abbé, returning to the subject of the business at hand. “He has business with barge masters who do regular runs on the Marne. Helped me arrange to bring in a load of Montesquieu’s *De l’esprit des lois* once, just after it came out. He’ll know if there are any barge masters about who might be willing to take a passenger and some mysterious cargo in that general direction for an appropriate fee.”

“How long will it take to speak to this trader?”

“A couple of days. He never leaves the city.”

Gilles pocketed one of the copies of *De l’esprit des lois* and placed a ten-sou piece on one of the chests.

“Have another drink on me from the change.”

“Avoid the Place de Grève,” the Abbé said, as Gilles got up to leave. “There’s a large crowd today.”

“In search of uncomely sights?”

The Abbé nodded.

“A modicum more reason in the affairs of men would not go amiss,” Gilles said before leaving. “Some might welcome an avalanche to sweep the table clean, and starting all over again. However, I do not have such a great faith in humanity. But we do need more lamps to light the way. The world can be a dark and confusing place.”

After Gilles had left, the Abbé picked up the coin. It was an early Sun King piece. One did not see many of them nowadays. He sometimes suspected that the money was only how he justified

these smuggling escapades to himself; and that in his heart there was a deeper, darker motive. Perhaps a desire for some cathartic personal apocalypse. *The Book of Revelation* had always been his favourite Scripture. He fingered the Sun King ten-sou piece. Filthy lucre. Was it the greatest stumbling block to paradise on earth? Certainly, there could be no paradise with it. But there was more evil in the world than that of Man's making. Portuguese buggers had not caused the Lisbon earthquake. Bugger the God Justifier! Bugger Leibniz! A better world was imaginable. If God had created the world, he had long abandoned it – *Deus absconditus* was more like it! – leaving, as a final act of cruelty, a memory, a trace of Himself behind in it. But bugger that! Merry pessimism, he supposed, that was the only thing for it. Yes, he decided, let that be *my* creed: merry pessimism.

Ж

The gutters had overflowed and transformed the streets into shallow streams of endless water. But rain and darkness were ideal conditions for following a man. On a cold dry night every footfall would have echoed between the buildings. And, Bossuet thought, as he stalked the Abbé, who was heading in the general direction of the river, it appeared as if the object of his curiosity might be leading him somewhere interesting this time.

He had left Corneille behind. The dog was terrified of thunder and lightning. Bossuet had gone to the Place de Loudun again, not really expecting anything much. It was the third evening he had done so. He had been there for about ten minutes when the heavens had opened – it had been threatening rain all day – and was forced to take shelter in a doorway. On the last occasion the Abbé had emerged but he had simply walked a few streets to a nearby basement drinking hole and disappeared into its depths. He had not been wearing his clerical garb, understandably enough in the circumstances – not that he wore it all the time anyway. Bossuet could have followed him in but the Abbé would recognise him from the Grande Synagogue; and besides, as a man who eschewed intoxicating drinks and even tobacco – a vice he had never been able to see the attraction of – he would have stood out, as the saying went, like a bishop in a knocking shop.

He had actually been on the verge of calling it a night when the Abbé had appeared. Initially, Bossuet had assumed that he was probably again making his way to his local drinking hole. Bad

weather, he knew from experience, had never dissuaded a man with the taste for alcohol from braving the elements in search of it. But the Abbé had started walking in the opposite direction, towards the river. Braving this kind of rain for a drink was understandable, but otherwise, it showed some determination. So Bossuet had decided to follow him.

A flash of lightning illuminated the street in a blast of blue electric light and rendered the cascades of raindrops momentarily visible. At the end of the street, Bossuet caught a glimpse of the greatcoated figure ahead of him, momentarily silhouetted against the quayside and the masts and riggings of the ships before the darkness suddenly descended again. The crash of thunder that followed a few moments later sounded as if it would split the sky.

It took a moment or two for his eyes to become adjusted to the darkness again. It was not pitch-black – it never really was in the city – and this evening a near-full moon was intermittently appearing from behind the clouds.

The Abbé turned left on reaching the quayside, forcing Bossuet to hurry again so as not to lose him. He got to the corner and, feeling slightly ridiculous, poked his head around it. The weak moonlight was barely enough to see by. The greatcoated figure was walking along the warehouse side of the quay. Bossuet followed, hugging the warehouse walls and hopping in and out of the large Roman-arched entrances. The Abbé stopped. Bossuet took refuge in one of the entrances. A muffled thud and then two louder ones in quick succession echoed across the open space of the quayside. The Abbé was knocking at one of the large warehouse doors. The knocking stopped and the Abbé disappeared into the building. Which was just as well, Bossuet thought, his hip was beginning to play up.

There was another flash of lightning. For an instant, the oily expanse of the Seine and the granite two-towered mass of Notre Dame on Île-de-Cité were eerily visible. Bossuet left the shelter of the entrance and proceeded down the quay. He needed to verify which entrance the Abbé had disappeared into. As he made his way towards it, he hugged the buildings even though there was nobody around now. The rain was still lashing down, but not quite in the furious swathes as earlier. He could barely make out the number plate above the door: 13. He looked across to the quayside and searched for a landmark. There was a horse trough opposite, overflowing in the rain, and beside that, at the entrance to the jetty, a small wooden hut, like a watchman's or a dispatch clerk's, big enough to hold two people at the most. He memorised the scene –

in case he needed to find the place again – before making his way back to the shelter of the entrance he had been in earlier to wait.



Bageuret had already opened up one of the crates and was looking through one of the volumes when Gilles came up with the Abbé. Gilles introduced them and they shook hands perfunctorily.

“There are five sets in each,” Gilles explained, referring to the crates.

“May I?” said the Abbé, gesturing for permission to extract one of the volumes.

“Be my guest,” Bageuret said, lifting one out and handing it to him.

The Abbé balanced it in one hand, weighing it.

“As I guessed,” he said. “Five to six pounds. About fifty pounds a set, packed and boxed. I’ve spoken to my trader acquaintance. He says he can arrange passage on a barge. All the way to Saint Dizier.”

“Excellent,” Gilles said, opening his rain-sodden greatcoat and extracting a cylindrical leather case, “and I’ve managed to get hold of a map.”

The Abbé noticed he was wearing a sword, a dress sword but heavy enough, though unlikely to have an edge. Gilles rarely wore one; he had the right of course, though wearing one was not that fashionable these days. But if accosted by a watchman it would immediately signify his rank, which could be useful.

Gilles unrolled the map on the lid of one of the crates and Bageuret positioned the lamp so they could see it properly.

“From Saint Dizier you’ll need to make your way across Lorraine to get to Alsace,” Gilles said, tracing out the route. “The road is clearly marked from Nancy to Lunéville – one of the Sun King’s forts – and to Strasbourg.”

“Lorraine?” Bageuret asked. “It that in France?”

“Yes, but ...” Gilles said. “When Stanislas Leszczynski relinquished the Polish Crown in ’33 – de facto, not de jure, mind you – he was made Duke of Lorraine in compensation. It reverts to Versailles on his death. And by all accounts, good old Stanislas likes to keep a semblance of sovereignty.”

“Lorraine’s a bit of a free-for-all as far as books are concerned,” the Abbé said. “Stanislas allows a free market. There’s a thriving trade at Nancy. All sorts of books are sold openly on the streets and in the markets. The fairs in the spa towns are always buzzing.”

“And for what it’s worth,” Gilles added, “Alsace is not under the jurisdiction of the Paris Parlement either, not directly anyway. So, even if they there were to be a decree from the Parlement while you’re on the road, as it were ...”

“Gothic political structures have their advantages,” said the Abbé. “All those legal nooks and crannies ...”¹⁰

Only a man who belonged to a class who could afford lawyers would make a comment like that, Bageuret thought. But, he supposed, if you were going to break the law, better to do with those could afford lawyers than those who couldn’t.

“From Strasbourg you’ll need to take a boat down the Rhine,” Gilles continued. “Your final destination is here, Worms, an imperial city, in the Bishopric of Worms, in the Palatinate. This map is the best I can do. The German states are forever changing their borders. One is never quite sure who owns what or who owns who. Maps with up-date political boundaries are not that easy to get hold of. It’s a distance from all the territories belonging to either Hanover or Brandenburg-Prussia but the Hapsburg possessions in the Netherlands are not that far away. Not that that means much, there are armies wandering all over the place at the moment.”

Gilles rolled up the map, put it back in its case and handed it to the Abbé.

“A representative of a Professor Klaus von Möllendorf, from the Martin Luther University in Saxony, will be there to take delivery of the books,” Gilles continued, extracting his pewter flask from an inside pocket. “Medicinal,” he explained, taking a gulp. “Toothache. A swig anyone?”

Bageuret shook his head.

“Later,” said the Abbé, likewise declining.

“The professor is an uncle of the Margrave,” Gilles went on. “His representative will have a letter of introduction and will be staying at an inn called the Schlemihl just outside Worms. At least that is how I think you pronounce it. It’s spelt S-C-H-L-E-M-I-H-L. That’s a Jew word for something or other. It seems the Margrave was quartered there once. In any case, the arrangements have been made. That’s where the books need to be delivered to. The Margrave will make the final payment to us here in Paris when he receives confirmation that the books have been handed over. This will be in the form of a letter of receipt confirming what has been

¹⁰ Editor’s note: This is a typical argument of those who would not see a rational and comprehensive system of law imposed – as is now being done by the tireless legislators of the Republic of Virtue and Progress.

delivered et cetera et cetera which this professor's representative will send directly to the Margrave."

"The books will need to be repacked," the Abbé said. "Ideally in eight separate boxes, oblong shaped. They need to be easy to handle. Crates this size are fine on a barge but I'll have to get them onto a carriage or mules at some stage."

"I'll have some pinewood boxes made," said Bageuret.

"The barge is sailing on the Monday before Ash Wednesday, the twenty-sixth," the Abbé said. "It will dock directly opposite here."

"The day before Mardi Gras," said Gilles.

"When men – and women – go about in masks and are who they truly are," said the Abbé.

"And give uninhibited vent to their baser natures?" Bageuret retorted. The comment had just come out. He had nearly said *and behave like pigs*.

"I see it rather as a donning of masks of own choosing rather than those that society and so-called morality oblige us to wear," the Abbé countered. "Carnival is always a good time for this sort of thing. In the evenings nobody is sober enough to notice what you are up to, and in the mornings they are too hungover to care."

"And the *douaniers*?" Bageuret asked. His reservations about the Abbé were not abating. The man was arrogant and he didn't like the way he carried himself; there was something vaguely feminine about it. In principle, this was no business for a man of the cloth, not that your average *abbé* could really be considered being of the cloth these days. However, he seemed competent enough, and sober. No scheme of men was ever perfect; perhaps the Abbé was simply the inevitable joker in the pack.

"Getting them out of the city on a barge will be a lot easier than having to go through the Farmers-General Wall," the Abbé said. "At the gates they can easily stop and search. On the river, it's not so straightforward. Now and again the *douaniers* will check a vessel on the quayside before it sails, and sometimes they'll board a barge on the river, but the boxes will be well concealed. It's not so easy to unload a barge, open everything and load it all back again."

The room suddenly illuminated.

"I once saw a bolt of lightning hit a church," said Gilles, as they waited for the crack of thunder to follow. "Smashed the steeple to smithereens.

"The curé must have been bugging the altar boys," the Abbé added.

"There's no need to be blasphemous," said Bageuret. "Without

the Church there wouldn't be a school or a charity in the kingdom."

He crossed himself and winced when the cannonade-like roar of thunder finally sounded.

"It's miles away," Gilles reassured him. "If one of us had a watch, we could calculate how far exactly. Sound travels at one thousand feet a second. Newton worked it out exactly. One thousand feet a second – in air. It travels faster in other substances. Something to do with their compressibility."

"And lightning?" asked Bageuret. "How fast does that travel?"

"As fast as light, I should imagine," said Gilles. "A hundred thousand miles a second give or take."

"Roemer," the Abbé informed Bageuret, "the Dane who designed the fountains at Versailles for the Sun King, worked it out from observing eclipses of the moons of Jupiter or something like that."

"The wonders of science ..." was all Bageuret could think of saying, with barely veiled sarcasm.

"The paperwork will cost twenty livres?" said the Abbé, getting back to the subject at hand. "Another thirty livres for carriage and another twenty for the barge master. Seventy livres in all."

"Is that all?" said Gilles.

"A sou is a lot if you don't have one," Bageuret felt obliged to point out.

"Seventy livres will not be a problem," said Gilles.

"How much do I get in advance?" asked the Abbé.

"A hundred," said Gilles.

"What about expenses en route?" the Abbé asked. "There are seventy-seven seigneurial tolls on the Loire – from its source to its mouth. The Seine-Marne is unlikely to be different. I might have to pass through twenty. There will probably be *douaniers* at some of them. A few palms may be needed to be greased."

"Take it out of your advance," said Gilles. "We'll reimburse you when you get back. We won't expect receipts."

The three men smiled.

"One other thing," Gilles continued. "The Margrave wants to see his babies being loaded onto the barge. He will be in a carriage further up the quayside. He has a taste for the melodramatic."

"He doesn't want to see them beforehand?" asked the Abbé.

"It hasn't been mentioned," said Gilles.

"Odd," said the Abbé.

"Perhaps he doesn't see the point," suggested Gilles. "If we were going to cheat him, we could do it any time."

"Oh well, honour among book smugglers and all that, I suppose," said the Abbé."

“Perhaps,” said Gilles.

“Or your other half is a very convincing woman,” said the Abbé.
“The foibles of our betters.”

“Foibles and baubles,” Gilles said, half-repeating the Abbé for no comprehensible reason. “If there is nothing else, we should go. It’s getting late.”

“And I have some other business to attend to,” said Bageuret, replacing the lid on the crate. When he had left the Rue Paradis, Christophe, whom he’d left in the care of the girl, was still in the throes of a fever. Labussière had said it was only to be expected, but it was preying on his mind.

“And I need a drink,” said the Abbé.

Gilles proffered his flask.



Outside, huddled under an arched warehouse entrance, Bossuet was getting colder and wetter by the minute. He had been waiting for what seemed like an hour. And his bladder was bursting. He relieved himself against the wall, shook himself and buttoned his front fall, and wondered how much longer the Abbé was likely to be. Then, suddenly, he realised he was standing in the wrong place. If the Abbé came out now – and he might even have company – and decided to double back the way he came, he would walk right into him. That would be a disaster.

Christ, he said to himself, almost panicking.

But where to? If he went further up the quayside and the Abbé went that way, he would also be in the way. He needed to be on the opposite side, by the water. How could he have been so stupid? It was not as if it was the first time he had done this sort of thing. On the opposite side, there was nothing except the small wooden hut. It was completely exposed and he would get even wetter. But it would have to do. He would have to stand behind it. He gave one quick look up and down the quay and scurried across.

He had been in this new observation position for maybe a minute when he heard voices and saw a chink of light and the warehouse door opening. Three greatcoated figures emerged. One was the Abbé. Bossuet recognised him immediately. The other two were shorter and one of them was rounder than the other. There was another flash of lightning. For an instant, he was certain they must have caught sight of him, but they had not. But he had recognised one of them, the rounder of the two other men. It was d’Argenson,

Gilles d'Argenson, from the Grande Synagogue. He was sure it was. But he had not been able to get enough of a look at the short thin one to be able to recognise him – if he would have recognised him, that was.

The trio began to walk, passing the arched entrance Bossuet had been taking shelter in minutes earlier. He waited until they had turned the corner. As he followed them, hopping in and out of doorways, waiting until they were just nearly out of sight, and then scurrying to catch up with them, he was again thankful for the rain and the clouds. It was a godsend. He would never have been able to do this on a clear night. Pretty soon, he was sure, they were going to go their separate ways, and he would have to decide who to follow; but that was easy enough. Gilles d'Argenson he knew. The mysterious character was the short thin one. He needed to find out who he was and where he lived.

They left the docks and they were in residential streets again. The rain was easing, not much, but a little. And he sensed that the lightning had passed now.

On the corner of the Rue des Gitanes, the three figures stopped for a moment. Then Gilles d'Argenson and the Abbé continued going straight ahead. The short thin man took a side street on his own. Bossuet waited for d'Argenson and the Abbé to be far enough away from him so that if they did turn around they would not be able to recognise him before he scurried down the side street after the short thin man. Following him was easier. The short thin man probably didn't know him, and he wasn't walking very fast. In fact, mercifully, he seemed to be slowing down; Bossuet's hip was beginning to play up again. There were also people about now; and in the darkness, everyone looked reasonably similar, so he would not stand out should the man look back.

As he stalked his quarry, Bossuet tried to remember what he knew about Gilles d'Argenson. He had seen him before at other Grande Synagogue dinners, but the only time he had really engaged him in conversation was on the last occasion. He had some sort of position in the civil service, at the Malaquais, all very hush-hush, somebody had said. It could even have been the Abbé. Then again, it was the sort of thing the man probably would say, regardless of whether it was true or not. D'Argenson had not denied it. That could have been boasting by default of course. It would not have been the first time a minor office holder or clerk pretended to be a somebody. Of course, with a name like d'Argenson, he was probably not just a quill-pusher, but you never knew. These days a lot of the old families didn't have two sous to rub together, with

not a few of their younger sons eking out a living in the lower echelons of officialdom. He also vaguely remembered a mention of some Malesherbes connection.

They reached a commercial *quartier*. Shuttered shops were becoming more frequent and there were street lanterns: oil lamps suspended on lines every twenty yards or so between the houses, though only a few of them were still alight. And there were watchmen about; some huddled together in pairs in doorways, the light of a lamp or the glow from the bowl of a clay pipe visible. Men recruited from the country mainly; hardy men, but above all, as far as their employers were concerned, men without contacts with Parisian housebreaker gangs and other rackets.

The rain had nearly ceased when his greatcoated quarry went down the Rue Paradis, a narrow street with half a dozen bookshops. Bageuret stopped outside one of the doors, fumbled for a key, found it and disappeared into the darkness of the shop doorway. He must live above the shop, Bossuet concluded, perhaps even owned it. He crossed the street and walked up to opposite the shop. A chink of light was visible through the wooden shutters. The streetlamp above him was alight so it was just possible to make out the lettering above the shop doorway: IMPRIMERIE CHARPENTIER and the two overlapping black discs on the white sign. It was all fitting together. It was all about books. The Abbé smuggled them. And Gilles d'Argenson, with his connections to the Director of the Book Trade ... It had to be that!

As Bossuet wandered back to his lodgings – the rain had more or less stopped completely now – he began to go through the possibilities and what he needed to do next. A visit to the bookshop would certainly be in order. He needed to get a feel for the place and have a look at this Monsieur Charpentier face-to-face. Although he had not got a good view of him, he was sure he would recognise him again. Then there was the warehouse. He was sure he could bribe his way in. *Gardiens* were nothing if amenable to coins in the hand, as long as it was obvious that he was not going to walk off with any of the merchandise. Or a piece of legal-looking paper could do the job, something looking like a search warrant or police order of some kind, with a small bribe to keep quiet about the visit, and the consequences of not doing so hinted at. He hadn't come across a *gardien* who could read yet. Either way, a closer examination of the books this Monsieur Charpentier was hiding away in 13, Quai des Potiers – and he was becoming surer by the minute it was books – should not cost more than a couple of livres. Finding out more about Gilles d'Argenson's hush-hush position

was another matter. But he could ask around.

So far it all made sense. This Charpentier was printing something illegal – it could be anything, pamphlets, books, pornography, Jansenist religious tracts, even something political – and he was using the Abbé to smuggle it to somewhere, to somewhere in the provinces most probably. But how did Gilles d'Argenson and his hush-hush job and his supposed connection to Malesherbes fit in? If it did. All in all, a productive evening, he thought. He would find out more, but it would have to wait until he got back from Saint-Michel.

CHAPTER X

FOUCAULT'S PEDERAST PATROL

“When Charpentier told me about Le Breton’s bonfire I assumed, I think,” Jean-Baptiste said, “that that was going to be the end of it, but ...” He was riding in the d’Holbach carriage with Adélaïde Raynal. She was paying an overdue social call on her uncle and had invited him along. The world outside, as it passed by, looked more distant, looked upon rather than at ... one was not quite in it in the same way one was when on foot. Sitting comfortably in the carriage’s upholstered luxury as they moved with aristocratic confidence through the streets, he wondered if this was the way the great and the good saw the world. “But Jacques had other ideas.”

She noted how he switched from *Jacques* to *Charpentier* and then back again as if he was never quite sure where he had really stood with the man. It seemed, she thought, that Jacques Charpentier had been in many respects much that Jean-Baptiste was not: a man who took risks, a gambler who thrived on the uncertainty between winning and losing, a man who accepted the world as it was – revelled in it even – who did not entertain hopes or dreams that it could be improved. If anything, Jacques Charpentier seemed to have been someone who believed that the world was best treated as an object of amusement, like Sophie-Françoise perhaps. She wondered if the ability to be amused by life was an innate disposition or something one needed to deliberately cultivate.

“He said he wanted to continue,” Jean-Baptiste continued. “At least for another volume. But to do that, he said he would need help. My help.”

“What kind of help?”

They passed under the western buttresses of the Temple. The skeletal sails of the three windmills on the hill overlooking the walled enclave were motionless in the cold morning sunshine.

“Jacques had come up with a strategy to get rid of the twenty sets Le Breton had left him with. He wanted to take out twenty subscriptions using fictitious names and simply add legally purchased volumes to the existing ones – make the whole thing legal, as it were. Once he had the legal subscriptions, he would be

able to eventually sell the sets – and the subscriptions – quite openly. The reasoning was sound, in its way. Officially, all subscriptions go to Le Breton – he is the publisher – but Diderot was also arranging some of them. Approaching Diderot directly and asking for twenty subscriptions was hardly an option. And twenty new names on the subscription list – all at once – would have sort of stood out. However, if the twenty new subscriptions emerged over a period of a few months, and there was no direct contact between him and Diderot, it would be a different matter. But for that, he needed a go-between.”

“Yours truly?” It was more a statement than a question.

“Well, you must admit I was well placed.”

They heard the coachman shout at somebody to get out of the way as they drove into a crowded street and were forced to slow down. Outside the carriage window was a sea of hats and wigs: the smelly mass of humanity, as viewed from an elevated position, he thought sardonically.

“Of course, he offered to pay me.”

“Much?”

“In kind. Two of the sets would be mine to sell.”

“And you agreed?”

“Yes. It was not as if I were not already involved.”

The carriage gathered speed. They had escaped the chaotic throng of a few minutes earlier and were now driving down a broad arboreal avenue. The friezed façades of the houses on either side, shining in the winter sun, exuded a restrained and solid affluence. And there were fewer people about: mainly servants and tradespeople with the air of being on lawful business. The absence of idlers and hangers-about was noticeable; their unwashed presence, lest it sully the air of easeful prosperity, was obviously discouraged here.

“And if you had refused?”

“No, it was not like that,” he said – rather defensively, she thought. “I was not afraid that Jacques would do a Le Breton and throw a tantrum or something. It would have been easy to refuse without causing offence. I could simply have said that Diderot would not listen to me, or that he liked to deal with prospective subscribers personally. But your intimation is correct. It was compromising my loyalty to Diderot. It certainly fell short of treating one’s fellow as an end rather than a means. I suppose, I thought – as the English say – you may as well be hung for a sheep as for a lamb. And Jacques could be ...” – he searched for a word – “... persuasive.”

Somehow she could imagine it. Diderot was a worker, a plodder with a vision – though he was hardly humourless. But the world of proofs, corrections and cataloguing lacked the whiff of adventure, the wheeling and dealing, and fascinating unpredictably that Jacques Charpentier must have personified. But on the other hand, working on the *Encyclopédie* could hardly be described as dull.

“Did Jacques Charpentier have a wife?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said. “But I only met her once. Briefly.”

“A mistress?”

He had never been able to make out what Charpentier’s attitude to women had been. At first he had thought him almost shy, even prudish. But once, Charpentier had steered him into a bookshop on the Rue de Saint Laurent to collect three books he had ordered, all of them expensive – and illicit. One was a 1735 reprint of Agostino Carracci’s 1603 *Les Amours des Dieux* – a collection of Aretino’s sonnets, translated from the Italian, and accompanied by sixteen detailed engravings of Greek divinities copulating in a variety of positions, the females as muscular as the males, their breasts and buttocks as firm as workmen’s biceps, guiding shamelessly engorged divine and semi-divine cocks into their gaping hairless cunts. Charpentier had described them as *frozen moments of the eternal struggle for pleasure* and recited a line from one of the sonnets: *In your pussy and your behind, my cock will make me happy, and you blissful*. Jean-Baptiste had later learnt that the images were based on a fresco in some palace in Rome. Another book was of a more recent vintage, the 1741 first edition of *L’Histoire de Dom Bougre, portier des Chartreux*. The drawings of frenzied monks coupling with each other and with amply-buttocked servant women from behind were amazingly crude. “Like dogs in the street,” Charpentier had said and laughed. He remembered one image in particular: a lanky monk, presumably the infamous Brother Bugger himself, onanating over the white belly of a debauched female figure. The third was a lavishly illustrated copy of *Thérèse philosophe*. It was the only time Charpentier had shown him that side of himself.

“I don’t think so,” he said. “No, I don’t think he had a mistress.”

“Did his wife know about any of this?”

“Jacques said she didn’t.”

She wondered if the Charpentiers had any children, but before she could ask, Jean-Baptiste had begun to speak again.

“All we needed to do was to come up with twenty plausible names. Jacques came up with the cash and it was entered against the fictitious subscribers. I merely let Diderot know – quite

casually – that some extra subscriptions had come in. When the books were printed I simply picked them up from Le Breton along with the others that we pick up for other clients and delivered them to Quai des Potiers. We started in April '57 and continued until last year. Jacques simply wanted to keep on amassing the volumes, his reasoning being that as time went on they would become more valuable. A nest egg for our dotages, he called it. The last subscriptions were paid at the beginning of '58. Now, of course, the list is closed. Officially, at any rate."

The carriage suddenly came to a halt.

"The Baron has started on a new *oeuvre*," she said, as they waited. "Working title: *Le Christianisme dévoilé*."

"Christianity unveiled."

"However, unlike Salomé, I fear the revelation will not have the effect of making it more desirable."

They heard a roar, or a series of cheers, in the distance up ahead, accompanied by what sounded like hunting horns and the ringing of bells.

"I wonder what that's all about," Jean-Baptiste said. "I think I'll pop out and have a look."

The street was packed, carriages and wagons jammed nose to tail.

"The King is passing," the coachman told him without being asked, just as he caught a glimpse of a blue and gold ceremonial carriage crossing the intersecting thoroughfare about fifty yards up ahead. "He's on his way to the Parlement."

"His Majesty is passing," he informed Adélaïde scathingly. She had remained in the carriage.

A mounted platoon of white-uniformed Swiss Guards rode past.

"What is it with men?" he said as he got back into the carriage. "Why on earth do they feel this need to set up idols and prostrate themselves at their feet?"

"It's a kind of love," she said, "an expression of our need to admire and be admired."

"And then," he continued, as they began to move again, "on the twenty-third of October last year, fate intervened. At the corner of the Rue de la Redoute and Rue des Marchands. And Jacques Charpentier – whose timing was normally so good – met his untimely end, crushed to death under barrels of pickled herring and stacks of chamber pots from the back of an overloaded wagon. It was taking the corner, probably too fast – you know what Parisian waggons are like – and the axle snapped."

He remembered visiting the site a few days later. Shards of red earthenware had still littered the cobble-stoned street.

“Killed instantly,” he added.

She tried to stifle the urge to giggle but failed.

“Aeschylus was hit on the head by a tortoise dropped by an eagle who mistook his bald patch for a stone,” she said in an attempt to somehow justify her unexpected reaction. “Though in a more prosaic version, it’s a crow and a stone.”

He found himself giggling with her.

“Sorry,” she said. “I couldn’t help myself.”

“It was a terrible shock,” he said, finding his composure again. “Suddenly he was no longer there. I cannot say in all honesty that we were friends. There was something mercenary in Jacques that made that difficult, or at least I thought there was. I don’t think it was deliberate or even that he was aware of it. However, I felt his absence none the less.”

They were silent for a moment.

A carriage, drawn by a pair of matching chestnut mares, passed them on Jean-Baptiste’s side, a pair of brawny lackeys in red and silver livery hanging precariously onto the rear. Jean-Baptiste’s eyes met those of the couple riding in it, a middle-aged man and a younger woman, Spanish- or Italian-looking. The man, who was wearing a particularly large wig, bowed and waved politely. Jean-Baptiste reciprocated. He did not recognise the coat of arms on the carriage door but it looked familiar.

“The irony of it,” he went on, “is that Jacques had a terrible fear of growing old, of decrepitude. He often used to joke about someday *opening his veins* – as he called it.”

“Lucretius said the best way to think of death was in the way we think about our pre-natal non-existence. None of us regrets not being alive before we are born; thus, and similarly, neither should we regret not being alive after we are dead.”^{XXXI}

She had once put the barrel of one of d’Holbach’s duelling pistols in her mouth – just to see what it would feel like, both physically and metaphysically. She remembered the metallic-sulphur taste, its cold materiality against the bridge of her mouth, its penis-like girth. Suicide was a mortal sin, a crime, punishable by death, absurdly enough. A man had been hanged at Tyburn for attempted suicide when she had been in London.

“*I am and death is not. Death is and I am not,*” she added. She wasn’t sure where the quote came from but it sounded like Epicurius. “The Stoics considered suicide honourable.”

“I thought they praised endurance above all other virtues.”

“Perhaps some things aren’t worth enduring.”

“Jacques was thirty-eight,” he said. “He’d once quoted

Montaigne to me. *I look around me and I see that I have lived longer than most men ever had. I have no right to complain.* Or something like that. Montaigne was thirty-something when he wrote that.”

“But life must go on,” she said tentatively.

“Yes,” he said. Perhaps now was the time to tell her he’d been approached by possible customers for sets of *Encyclopédie* and that du Guesclin had also expressed serious interest, but they had arrived at their destination.

✱

Bageuret was lying on the couch in the front room of his lodgings above Imprimerie Charpentier. He had covered himself with a blanket – the fire was alight but there was still a chill in the air – when the door opened and a little boy’s head appeared.

“What are you doing, Papa?” Christophe asked.

The child’s fever had passed and he was up and about again.

Bageuret smiled, shifted himself into a more comfortable position and lifted the eight-year-old onto his lap. Sunday was the only day he ever got to spend any time with the boy.

“I was remembering when I was a little boy like you,” he lied.

He ran his fingers through the boy’s brown curls. His hair was like Thérèse’s, soft to the touch, feminine. The boy would never cease to remind him of her. The memory that came to him was of her stepping out of the tin bath in the kitchen of their old place on the Rue des Dragons, her wet goose-pimpled buttocks glistening in the candlelight, her belly full and round. It had been a Good Friday, after three o’clock, the time when Christ was in his tomb again and sins of the flesh unthinkable. Was lust for the dead as sinful as lust for the living, he wondered; he winced for shame at the idea of having to ask absolution for such a thing, even in the anonymity of the confessional. Then, mere months later: the boy’s gory birth, the ferric odour and tinkling sound of her blood dripping into the white glazed dish when Porée had bled her, and Death. It sometimes seemed that he loved her more now than at any time when she was alive.

“Did *your* papa take you to the Place de Grève, Papa?” the boy asked.

“What games did you play today?” he asked, instead of attempting to respond to the awkward question, surprised by his son’s perception that he too had had a father. At that age he himself, as far as he could remember, had only been dimly aware that his

own father had had a father, or his mother a mother, or that time really passed.

“I played Louis and Arnot played Damiens, and then I played a horse.”

The boy's face was pretty and guileless. Bageuret wondered if he himself had looked angelic at that age. A place in one of the Jesuit schools would enable the boy to get an apprenticeship, or a pupillage or whatever it was called, with a chamber of lawyers. Degrees in law, he had heard, could be had on the most cursory of examinations at Rheims – with, it went without saying, the right introductions and the money. Lawyers could do well. Minor court offices, those that conferred noble status after twenty years – if not on the holder, then at least on his sons – were not beyond the means of the half-successful advocate, especially in the provinces. Years hence, long after he was in his grave, Bageuret imagined a portrait of himself and Thérèse hanging on a wall above the fireplace of a decent house, his son pointing it out to *his* son with pride. He still had that drawing, from when she was carrying their first child, done by that fellow who worked the arcades of the Palais Royal. Thérèse could be painted from that. Their ages would be out of course; but he quite liked the idea of himself, the older and successful master printer, standing beside a seated young and pretty wife. It would be the first portrait painted of anyone in his family or in hers. As for the rest: God knew who was saved or He would hardly be God. How the bishops could maintain otherwise was beyond him. He had his faults – all men did. But God was good, and with a bit of luck they would all be united in heaven, along with the other two little ones. When it came down to a man's ultimate fate, when all was said and done, all one could do was pray and hope.

“Then *you* didn't end up in little itty-bitty pieces,” he laughed and tickled the boy, who then lost himself in laughter too and slipped from his father's lap. Children had such notions, he thought, as the boy disappeared through the half-open door. It was all a game to them.

Bageuret had in fact been thinking about Jacques Charpentier's *Encyclopédies* before the boy had come in. Surely Charpentier could have thought of a more lucrative way of putting his to money to use. Perhaps it had just been another game, like the cards, the nights on the town, the posing, the needless flirting with dubious authors, the shady deals, the gambling dens and private clubs in the back streets around the Palais Royal – which were probably no more than expensive knocking shops. Of course, Bageuret had known none of this in the beginning, not that it would have deterred

him from taking the job. A salary nearly half as much again as he had been earning at the Imprimerie Dominic and the possibility of commissions had not encouraged him to worry about Jacques Charpentier's peccadilloes.

He remembered the funeral, the finale: a Requiem Mass at the Church of the Mathurians sung by the curé and three priests, accompanied by an organist and a choir of altar boys, their prepubescent voices rising heavenwards to the painted images of the saints, angels and cherubs on the domed ceiling, Charpentier's corpse laid out at the feet of the silver statue of John the Evangelist, the Guild's patron saint. The church had been packed with Guild members, arrayed in their golden-liliated velvet. Sixty candle-bearing orphans from the Hôpital Général, dressed in their blue and grey uniforms, had marched in the procession. It had been a sunny autumn day, red-golden leaves tumbling from the trees as if Nature herself was in mourning, as the varnished oak coffin, one and a half times the size of a normal one, was lowered into the October ground.

His reverie was interrupted by a knock at the door and voices, that of the servant girl's and a man's, and the sudden and unexpected appearance of Gilles d'Argenson in the doorway.

"We have a *problema*," Gilles said when the girl had left, sitting down at the wooden table without waiting to be invited. "Do you have any drink?"

Bageuret poured him some red wine from a half-empty bottle on the mantelpiece. Gilles looked as if he was in one of his panics. He had them every few months or so. They were usually about nothing. Though this time, there was the matter of the *Encyclopédies* ...

"A problem?" Bageuret repeated.

Gilles handed him a note. It was written, or rather scrawled, on brown paper with a quill that could have done with a sharpening. Bageuret got up and went over to the window to have enough light to read by.

My dear friend,

Dreadful mess. I have been arrested. It happened last night. I beg you to come, or send someone. All too difficult to explain. I promised you would pay the bearer of this note two livres in order to ensure its delivery. Forgive the presumption. I beg you not to delay.

*Honoré de Godrons
Bicêtre, Saturday*

Bicêtre was where the worst of Paris's riff-raff ended up, along with the city's lunatics and syphilitic whores. He had seen the fortress a few times. The towering stone edifice looked every bit as ominous as its reputation.

"Who is Honoré de Godrons?" Bageuret asked cautiously.

"The Abbé Honoré de Graffigny."

Bageuret turned slightly pale.

"You cannot be serious!"

"Honoré de Godrons is a name he uses occasionally, his *nom de guerre*."

"In his war against society and *so-called* morality, I presume. One of his masks."

"We were in the same class at the Collège des Godrons at Dijon," Gilles said rather lamely. "With the good Fathers of the Society."

This was trouble. Bageuret made a determined effort to remain calm.

"It's probably a mix-up of some kind," Gilles said awkwardly, glad that Bageuret had no more than a passing acquaintance with Honoré de Graffigny. Otherwise, the likelihood of him lending that proposition any credence would have been extremely improbable.

"Is there any possibility – even the remotest – that this has anything to do with our ... enterprise?" Bageuret asked.

"No. No, absolutely not."

"Are you certain?"

"Absolutely," Gilles said. "It is something else." He was emphatic. "It's probably about some unpaid debt or some drunken brawl." Or, he was thinking, some drunken blasphemy or ... He checked his imagination. "There are countless petty grounds for which a man might find himself incarcerated for a few days and nights. Happens all the time."

True enough, thought Bageuret, but the impression Gilles was giving him was that of a man trying very hard not to give the impression that he was clutching at straws.

"If it was anything else," Gilles went on, "anything to do with our ... enterprise, he would have given a hint of some kind. And I am certain that he is not being held under a *lettre de cachet*. If he was, there would be no need for him to conceal his identity. It would be known."

Unless the *lettre de cachet* had named him under his pseudonym ... but Bageuret decided not to voice that thought. Nor did he ask Gilles why he had even mentioned a *lettre de cachet*. They were not usually issued by Versailles or the Parlement without grounds

– as the result of trivial mix-ups. He had sensed that the Abbé was trouble. And judging from the type of remarks he had made at the Quai des Potiers, he was exactly the kind of slippery individual that lettres des cachet were designed to deal with. But was that good or was it bad? Lettres des cachet were often enough applied for and granted to persons of considerable rank for some personal reason; such persons could be pleaded with, reassured that an insulting word or act was the consequence of too much drink, a momentary episode of madness, a misunderstanding, apologies made, repentance demonstrated, magnanimity shown. However, if it wasn't a lettre de cachet, that was all beside the point right. 'De Graffigny' sounded like the name of a family with some resources; it implied a certain access to the goods of this world, to money – which meant that any bribe demanded was be unlikely to be negligible, and a good reason for the Abbé to pretend to be someone else.

"It may be simply a matter of shame," Bageuret could not resist saying with muted sarcasm, "his concealing his true name. He is, after all, an *abbé*."

"Of sorts," muttered Gilles, missing the jibe. "He is not a man who takes the wearing of the cloth so seriously." He paused for a moment. "He is the nephew of François-Antoine de Graffigny, the Jesuit General."

Bageuret had thought the name had sounded familiar. François-Antoine de Graffigny's rank and position were common knowledge. And it was hardly a common name; he should have made the connection earlier.

They were both silent for a moment.

"Are you sure it has nothing to do with ...?" Bageuret began to ask again.

"I'm certain he would have given a hint if it was. I am sure of that. Besides, we have done nothing contrary to the law."

Yet, Bageuret felt like adding. He considered the situation for a moment.

"The first thing you need to do is to find out why he has been incarcerated," he said. "You need to visit him."

Gilles mulled that over for a few seconds.

"The intendant knows me. We met once or twice at the ministry. I'm sure he would remember me. I can hardly turn up casually enquiring after an obscure prisoner. That is simply out of the question. Whereas ..."

"It would need to be a person of rank," Bageuret said quickly. "Of some standing." He was not going to give Gilles the chance to

suggest he run this little errand for him. "Your sister perhaps. A woman visiting a prisoner. Nothing would be thought of it. Happens all the time."

Gilles had not considered that possibility.

"Very astute of you," he said. "I had not thought of that."

It made sense. She wouldn't even have to give her real name. Bearing, the right accent and a carriage worked wonders. Sophie-Françoise could charm her way into a cardinal's bedroom.

When he was showing Gilles out, Bageuret decided to tell him the title he had chosen for his manuscript.

"I thought *The Beast in Man* might be appropriate," he said.

"*The Beast in Man?*" Gilles had glimpsed through Sophie-Françoise's latest *oeuvre* but had not read it. But then he remembered there was one character who had gone into a long meditation on his true nature being bestial because he was unable to perform the sexual act except from behind, *like the beasts of the field*. "Oh, yes. Splendid. Has a nice philosophical ring to it."



Jean-Baptiste exhaled a sigh of relief as first one lock opened and then the other, both of them effortlessly. The keys still worked.

He pushed the door open gently and let himself in, taking care to pull it shut it after him.

The crates were still there, exactly as they had been when he had last seen them, about two months before the accident, around the end of August – he remembered it had been an atrociously hot day – when he and Jacques Charpentier had packed away the twenty copies of Volume VII he had procured. Nothing had been touched.

Slowly and carefully, he used the crowbar – it was still in the corner where they had left it – to prise open the lid of one of the crates. When he got it off, he slipped it carefully to the floor and leaned it against the side of the crate. The books were still there, as pristine as the day they had come off Le Breton's press.

You know, he remembered Jacques saying, *I envy Diderot*.

The statement had surprised him. He had not imagined Jacques Charpentier ever envying anyone.

A new world is being fashioned out of the ashes of what our fashionable philosophes deride as superstition and fanaticism, and perhaps it is indeed that, Charpentier had said. *Not necessarily a better world, mind you, but a different one. Diderot and men like him are its architects. The lines of their lives are drawn with ink, while the lines of the lives of the likes of us, JB ...* – he remembered

how Jacques had introduced himself as JC that day on the Rue des Moines and, following the logic of that, used to address him as JB at times – ... *are drawn with chalk – coloured chalk, one hopes, but chalk all the same. Dust. Chalk dust. A puff and we may as well have never been. Original thoughts: it is so difficult to have them and as difficult again to express them clearly. But Diderot can do both. The minds of the likes of us are such a jumble most of the time.*

Jean-Baptist extracted one of the volumes, opened it and pondered on the title page. Was it really, as he was increasingly beginning to think, perhaps had been thinking for a while now, just knowledge for the elite? Was Jean-Jacques Rousseau right? Sometimes, to listen to the so-called philosophes, you'd think they thought they were God's gift to mankind; or rather, as they were more likely to put it, the Supreme Being's gift to humanity. And there was really something smug about the way most of them went on. Or was he just imagining it? Just like the way they said Rousseau was supposed to be only imagining that Diderot and the other *encyclopédistes* were out to ruin his reputation.

"My husband lived for the moment," Christine Charpentier had said when he'd exchanged a few words of condolences with her at the funeral. "That was his nature. Some said he was a dilettante, one who toys with ideas rather than engaging with them seriously. But I like to think that dilettantism also has connotations of taking an innocent delight in things. And – in some respects – it is difficult to be entirely serious about what one delights in." She had been distressed, obviously, and was concealing her grief behind apparent detachment. "Death is *absurd*," she'd added, as she let go his hand, using one of Jacques's favourite words. If she had known about the nature of his dealings with Jacques, surely, he had thought at the time, she would have given some indication, but she hadn't.

The exchange had reminded him of something Adélaïde Raynal had once said: something about each love being particular, unique unto itself. Perhaps it was, he had thought then. But Adélaïde did have a tendency to complicate things. He remembered that as he'd left the cemetery he'd had a fleeting image of the widow and Jacques Charpentier coupling: her small girlish body straddling her bull-like husband.

Mademoiselle Sophie-Françoise d'Argenson, alias Madame d'Aurevilly – *Madame* was more authoritative than *Mademoiselle*, she'd decided – descended the long narrow passages of the netherworld of Bicêtre. The smell of burning whale oil from the gaoler's lamp did little to mask the fungoid stink of mould and palpable despair that emanated from the prison's impenetrable stone walls.

The gaoler unlocked the heavy wooden cell door. It creaked on its unoiled hinges as he heaved it open.

She barely recognised the man in the freezing cell. There was a few days' stubble on his face and on his skull – they must have taken his wig. He had wrapped himself in a brown woollen blanket against the cold. Underneath that, he was wearing a soiled hemp shirt too big for him and tattered trousers that were barely decent – definitely not his own. He was also barefoot. She could not help noticing that his feet were not those of a man accustomed to going without shoes. The cell's only furnishings – if they could be called that – were a straw-covered pallet and a filthy earthenware chamber pot on the straw-strewn floor. The stink was even worse than it had been in the passageway. The window, high up and well out of reach, was little more than a slit in the wall and barely allowed enough light in to see by. She had known that places like this existed but had avoided imagining them in any detail.

“Gilles sent me,” she said.

The Abbé nodded and sat down on the straw-covered pallet. It was crude, but it was still a bed of sorts. And he had not been put in a communal cell either, she noted.

“Good,” he said, looking up at her. “Good. I knew I could depend on him.”

“We need to know what this is all about,” she said.

His hands were twitching.

“We need to know what this is all about,” she said again, deliberately avoiding the first person singular. She was dreading what his answer might be. She very much doubted that, as Gilles had suggested, the whole thing was probably about some unpaid petty debt. The prison clerk had merely smirked and muttered something about him being one of Monsieur Foucault's prisoners. She had no idea what he had meant – and sensed he would have told her no more if she had enquired further.

A shout, impossible to even vaguely locate, reverberated from somewhere within the labyrinthine depths of the fortress. Her sense of being someone for whom the Bicêtres of the world were hells into which only lesser beings tumbled into – as someone protected

from such unthinkable nightmares by her birth and what she considered her innate common sense – was momentarily shaken.

“What happened?” she asked again.

She sat down beside him and took his hands in hers.

“Calm, Monsieur Abbé, try to be calm,” she said. “We need to know what happened.”

He nodded.

She said nothing, afraid of the effect a misplaced word or gesture might have on him.

“I was arrested by Foucault’s pederast patrol,” he said, suddenly lucid, avoiding looking at her. “In the Jardin des Tuileries.”

She remained silent and retained her grip on his hands.

“I was drunk, *mademoiselle*. Very drunk. My memory of it is incomplete.”

The Jardin des Tuileries was a well-known haunt of the more promiscuous of the so-called Knights of the Cuff. The entrance faced the end of the Champs Elysées. She had passed it often enough at night in a carriage but never seen more than the odd shadow among the trees and bushes. But what drew him there, she wondered. There were enough discreet gentlemen’s clubs all around the Palais Royal where even ladies of a like disposition were welcome; and one of Madame Gourdan’s specialities was the arrangement of what were euphemistically called Sapphic introductions. Paris catered for all tastes; it was only a question of price, and contacts.

“Tell me what you remember,” she said gently, straining inwardly to keep him calm, thinking there was little limit to what men would not do when they were insensible with drink. A sodomite could end up on the scaffold – in Sanson’s unthinkably capable hands – in theory at any rate.

“I was with another man ... when they saw us and shouted out.”

“Were you apprehended in the act?” she asked, somewhat surprised by her forthrightness. But it was necessary. Inwardly, she cursed Gilles for his ineptitude, for involving this man in their affairs. But what was done was done.

The Abbé shook his head and smiled weakly.

“No. It was dark. There was a little moonlight. I remember hearing shouts and seeing torches and a group of men running towards us. I stumbled and was caught.”

“And the other ... gentleman?”

“He got away.”

Maybe it was not as bad as he imagined, she thought. Perhaps it could be described as bawdiness, drunkenness. If both were fully

dressed, there was perhaps no evidence of a serious crime. A lawyer could make it look that way. Not that anyone in their right mind would want it to go that far.

“You are sure you were not engaged in ... an act?” she asked again. “That you were both fully dressed?” A range of possible *acts* was presenting themselves to her imagination.

“I am sure,” he said, “I am sure,” as if repeating it would make it more true. They had not touched; he was sure of that, as sure as he could possibly be. They had not got that far. He felt a wave of despair approaching again, felt it poised to engulf him. He clasped her hands more firmly to hold it precariously at bay.

The Abbé looked at her directly, almost impudently. Her eyes were getting used to the semi-darkness of the cell and she could see how pale he was. She could smell the staleness of his breath.

“The reason I stumbled, *mademoiselle*,” – he paused for a moment – “was because I was wearing a dress. A dress, *mademoiselle*, I was dressed ... as a lady.”

She had a sudden vision of him in a hooped, outrageously green dress, a fan with a green floral design on it in his hand, flirting, his face powdered and rouged, wearing a Pompadour-bouffant wig. The image was utterly ridiculous, but at the same time, she imagined that the sight of him dressed like that would also have made him appear touchingly vulnerable. But the vision vanished and she was assailed by a flurry of darker thoughts. She forced herself to focus on the essential. What manner of crime was involved here? Was it that of pretending to be a woman or the actual wearing of feminine clothing? And what about male actors who played female roles? And was there actually a whiff of pride, some pathetic insolence behind his confession? Or was she just imagining it? She resisted the urge to free her hands from his horny grip.

“I am not a lawyer, *monsieur*,” she said, “but it seems to me that you were apprehended in suspicious circumstances, very suspicious, but perhaps not in the committal of a crime, or at least not of a very serious crime. I see no evidence of one. Your behaviour was scandalous. But that is almost *de rigueur* in these wicked times.” Her attempt at humour fell flat. “You probably imagine your situation to be much graver than it is in reality.” It was what she wanted to believe, what she wanted to make herself believe, what she wanted him to believe, at least for the time being. “The law is not clear on such matters,” She knew she was speculating wildly. “Actors dress up. It is probably nothing beyond the wit of a clever advocate. And a hopefully not too

exorbitant bribe.”

“And that is what he wants,” he exclaimed suddenly, letting go of her hands and jumping up. He began to pace the cell. “Yes. That’s what it’s all about. Money.”

“Who?” she asked, relieved at being physically disengaged from him.

“Foucault, the pederast catcher, the man who put me here,” he said, continuing to pace up and down the confined space of the cell. “Have you ever wondered why so few end up before the magistrates? And why those that do are all paupers? Do you think it is an uncommon vice? Orléans and his cronies paraded their inclinations around in broad daylight and they never had any trouble with the law, did they?”

He was referring to the Sun King’s brother – Philippe, not the current Duc d’Orléans – who, it was said, had been quite a man’s man in his time. But she knew that cases did come before the magistrates, and not all of the accused were paupers.

“Foucault’s just letting me sweat it out in this hole to push the price up.” His voice dropped. “But the rub is I have no money. There are five livres in my room. Five livres will not buy me out of here. They know I’m a gentleman, but not who. If he did, he’d want more. Of course, they suspect I am not who I say I am. But that’s common enough in these cases.” His changing from *he* to *they* and back again pointed at more complexities, or confusions, or both. “Tell Gilles I can pay it back.” He paused again. “Tell him that I can pay it back.”

“How much do you think this Monsieur Foucault wants?” she asked first.

“A hundred livres at least, maybe two?” He was still pacing.

It was serious sum, but not an impossible one. Though not one she had any intention of paying. Let Gilles stew in his own juice for once.

“They know I am a gentleman,” he said again.

“And if this Foucault were to know who you really are?”

He stopped in mid-stride and gave the appearance of thinking about the question before replying.

“Ten times as much. My uncle is François-Antoine de Graffigny, the Jesus Man.”

“So I have been informed,” she said. Ten times one hundred livres – let alone ten times two hundred – would too much even for Gilles to get his paws on, no matter what tricks he might manage to pull out of his hat.

“My esteemed uncle is not so close to the Almighty that a scandal

would not damage him. Yes, Uncle François would be placed in an extremely uncomfortable position if his godson and nephew were to be exposed as an arse fuckee.” He let the description of himself fall from his lips with a mixture of self-satisfaction and self-loathing. Yet there was almost something in his tone of a man defending his honour. “There is no shortage of people who would pay generously to have a means to bugger him and the Society of Jesus Men. Pun intended.”

That she did not doubt.

“This must not come to the notice of a magistrate,” he went on. “I must not be questioned officially. Foucault must have his money before it comes to that. He has my clothes. They must be retrieved. Madame Roquier’s dressmakers do not come cheap.”

She did not immediately realise that he was referring to the dress and only understood the attempted joke when it was already too late to laugh at it. The clothes would be evidence, thus the concern; which also explained why he was dressed in rags.

“There is a lawyer, a Monsieur Orieux. His chambers are in the Passage d’Évêque. An appropriate address, don’t you think? It’s just off the Châtelet. He knows how these things work.”

“We will talk to him,” she said.

“There is something else,” he said. “They searched my apartment.”

“But ...” – they didn’t know who he was.

“I rent it in my *nom de guerre*.”

“And?”

“They found some books. Some copies of Voltaire’s recent outburst, *Candide*. And a dozen or so copies of *Thérèse philosophe*, the Helvétius book and some other volumes.”

“Such as?”

“*The Pearls of Debauchery* ... a rather ...”

“I have heard of it.”

“It would be hard to argue that they were only for personal use,” he said.

Ж

From the Brittany coast, the Abbey of Mont-Saint-Michel looked like something from an ancient legend. The engravings he had seen of it had not prepared Bossuet for the reality of the Gothic edifice, which was more a fortress than an abbey. The black muzzles of the cannon – a troop of Guards was permanently stationed there – were visible even from the mainland. The incongruity of it – monks and soldiers, men of such disparate callings, sharing the same

labyrinthine complex of towers and battlements – was not reassuring.

The Abbot de Broglie, a bearded, balding man in his sixties, looked as if he had not touched a razor for a decade. Unusual in a monk, Bossuet thought; though in Pondicherry there had been holy men – and they did possess a sort of holiness, he supposed, in an oriental pagan fashion – who had never put a blade to their beards; and he vaguely remembered something about the ancient Israelites believing that to cut one's God-given hair was a blasphemous act.

The Abbot's bureau was spartan: a plain wooden crucifix on the whitewashed wall behind his simple desk; two straight-backed chairs; and an *escritoire* with some papers on it under a window overlooking the courtyard–garden below.

“Monsieur Desforjes was remitted into the abbey's custody a few years before I was elected abbot.” De Broglie spoke with a thick Languedocien accent. The Congregation of Saint Maur had a reputation for discipline and scholarship, but Bossuet detected neither in the old monk. “I was not involved in the particulars. However, I have since, naturally, perused the papers authorising and pertaining to. The *lettre de cachet* specified – because of his state of mind and the danger, both physical and spiritual, he posed to himself and others – that the conditions of his imprisonment be particularly restrictive. Being a house of religion, we do not of course have the type of facilities normally used in such a case – prison cells and dungeons and the like. Not in this part of the abbey anyway, and Monsieur Deforges was delivered into our custody, not into that of our military companions. But there was a ... I suppose you could call it a cage of sorts ... very roomy ... which had been used in the past for the restraint of those dangerously lunatic souls whom it befalls us on occasion to care for. He was lodged there. It is situated in a hall which receives more than sufficient light and air, and a fire is always kept burning in the winter months. These days it is the fashion to regard ecclesiastical custody with a special horror, but the Church's prisons have always been more rigorously regulated than those of the temporal authorities. There are documented cases of men committing blasphemy expressly in order to be transferred to them. The mission of the Holy Inquisition has always been primarily to save souls, not to punish.”

Bossuet noticed there was no stool at the *escritoire*. The Abbot obviously attended to his correspondence standing up. Maybe he had a stiff back; or piles, like Martin Luther. He wondered if the monk was also in the habit of throwing inkpots at the devil.

“The lettre de cachet also stipulated that the sole reading material he be allowed be devotional in character and that he not be allowed any writing materials,” the Abbot continued. “Nothing unusual about that of course. He was lodged in the cage for about three years; after which permission for his release into the abbey grounds was obtained by my predecessor, his mind having been stilled by then but, unhappily, by no means healed. Monsieur Desforges has only a shadowy memory of the crimes which led to his incarceration or of his previous life.”

Bossuet had only vaguely imagined the possibility that Desforges was actually still at the abbey. He tried to conjure up the features of Desforges’s face but found he was unable to.

“So, even if I judged it prudent to allow you to meet him,” the Abbot went on, “I doubt that he would recognise you from Adam. And if even if speaking with you aroused some dream-like fragments of memory in the recesses of his poor damaged mind, I fear it could only disturb the little peace he has found in his life among us. He occupies his days with simple devotions and working in the buttry. I do not wish to sound sanctimonious but I sincerely believe he has accepted the lot that God – in his, admittedly inscrutable, mercy – has apportioned to him.”

Bossuet was speechless. He did not know whether it was a reaction to Desforges’s actually being there – at that very moment somewhere in the Gothic labyrinth of the abbey’s buildings – or at the Abbot’s unblinking naivety, or dreadful innocence, or whether it was all a pious act.

“The life of mortals is one of suffering, but if we open ourselves to Him, God grants the grace to bear it,” the ecclesiastic added, seemingly utterly unaware of Bossuet’s incredulity. “Divine grace, beseeched with a pure heart, with a heart purged of pride, is always granted. Our earthly lot is not what we wish it to be. It is what it is. Monsieur Desforges’s relative ...” – there was more than a hint in the Abbot’s tone that he was accepting the existence of this relative, on whose behalf Bossuet had said he was making enquiries, only out of politeness – “... can be assured that Monsieur Desforges’s days of particular suffering are in the past. To release him into the world – even if the authorisation for it could be obtained – would be an act of cruelty and place a burden on his family which I am sure they would find difficult to bear.”

Bossuet felt a shutter coming down on part of his world, on a whole stretch of the past, rendering it forever a place never again to be revisited. Yet, at the same time, he found himself being overwhelmed by a sense that perhaps, in a perverse and inadvertent

way, the Abbot had a point, that some things – like rotting teeth and ruptures – simply had to be accepted.

The Abbot seemed to sense his despair.

“Men of God have not always acted with the compassion that the Catholic religion enjoins them to act with, or so it can appear at times. We can never really know the minds of others, what forces and necessities move them to act in the way they act. Only the Almighty can see into the inner workings of men’s souls. We are fallible creatures and easily misguided, as poor Monsieur Desforges once undoubtedly was. I cannot undo the past. Under the circumstances, all I can do is to try and act with the compassion I am enjoined to exercise. The world may no longer need protection from Monsieur Desforges, but I’m afraid that Monsieur Desforges now needs protection from the world.”

As Bossuet was about to take his leave – the Abbot had accompanied him to the to the abbey front door – the old priest hesitated for a moment as if he had something more to say but could not find the words. But then he spoke.

“He has talked of a child, not a boy or a girl, just a child ... Do you ...?”

Bossuet shook his head without thinking.

“No, he said, “there is no child.”

“Poor man,” the priest said. “There but for the grace of God go I.”

On the way down the steps to the causeway, Bossuet could not help thinking that it was ironic that the Grammarian had surfaced again. He was sure that Desforges had had some dealings with him. As for the child the Abbot had talked of: it was probably all nonsense. Though the Grammarian might know something. The last time Bossuet had been in Paris, before Saint Petersburg, he’d heard that the Grammarian had been forced to make himself scarce; there’d been some gossip about him being involved in smuggling tobacco over the Pyrenees. Foreign tobacco was illegal in Spain; they even had special customs agents who went around sniffing people’s snuffboxes on the lookout for it. Now word had it he was scraping a living in the lower echelons of Sartine’s many-tentacled police apparatus. But the Grammarian could wait. Bossuet’s priority now, when he got back to Paris, was to find out more about this Charpentier fellow. He had already fatalistically accepted what the Abbot had told him – perhaps too quickly and fatalistically, even callously. But what else was there to do, he told himself as he looked over the vastness of the sea below him, stretched out under an equally vast and oblivious sky.

CHAPTER XI

THE BOOK OF GOMORRAH

“The Italian vice, though Greek too,” said Orieux, and paused as if he was tasting a mouthful of unfamiliar wine on which he had been asked to give an opinion. “The *peccatum Sodomiticum*. The sin of Sodom. *L’amour nommé socratique*. *Le péché philosophique*. The Jesuit vice.”

The lawyer was blind. He wore round spectacles with green-black lenses. Yet his desk, the main item of furniture in the dingy office, was strewn with a dozen written and printed documents. He was about fifty, unashamedly fat and smelled faintly of perspiration, wig powder and lavender; and had the air of a man for whom the high fees some his profession pocketed had always remained elusive. Gilles wondered if his infirmity was from birth or had been acquired. Unable to make eye contact, Gilles felt he ought to say something.

“But it is an area of the law in which you have experience?” he said.

“Legal experience,” the lawyer smiled. “Emphasis on the adjective. One could say I have made it a specialty. Nowadays, in the world of modern jurisprudence, the term *sodomy* is deemed a bit too ecclesiastical; though, strictly speaking, it is still the legal term. The ecclesiastical view was – and still is of course – is that it is a challenge to God, a heresy, a violation of Man’s divinely ordained nature, and the law is there to punish this blasphemy, commit the sodomite to the flames, to deflect God’s judgement, so to speak; and society is thus purified, made spiritually healthier. The preferred police term – and among lawyers generally – nowadays is *pederasty*, a more scientific word, with connotations of a crime against society rather than the divine order, an unnatural and unhygienic practice which undermines those relationships which are essential to civilised life. And in truth, who knows what diseases it spreads? The Almighty, in these more enlightened days, is increasingly considered capable of dealing with offences against His laws without recourse to human jurisprudence. But some even go further: a few law enforcers even believe it that it should be considered as no more than a mere public nuisance – as long as it’s

carried on behind closed doors, doesn't disturb the livestock, as it were – but that is a distinctly libertine view.”

Gilles made a half-hearted laughing sound. He could not help thinking that *Justitia* herself was always depicted blindfolded.

“Nowadays too,” the lawyer continued, “it is a crime which is almost exclusively dealt with *ex curia*, a manner of *lex non scripta* arrangement with the penalties for transgressions being decided upon by the good gentlemen of the Paris police. Officially, of course – *i-dot-e-dot*, on some moth-eaten parchment on some dusty shelf deep in the bowels of the Châtelet – it is still a capital crime, and has been since the thirteenth century. A law passed in those more wholesome days, at Orléans, prescribed the amputation of the testicles or clitoris – in a case of *amor lesbicus* – for the first offence, the penis or breasts for the second, and the stake – burning at – for a third. And before that there was *Deuteronomy*. *If a man lieth with et cetera et cetera* ... Of course, that holy book did not specify which city gate or the size of the stones ... so even in the interpretation of divine injunctions there can be pickings for us lawyers.”

Gilles grunted for the sake of politeness.

“The exact wording of the Orléans decree – if my memory serves me correctly, which it usually does – is that a man *who has been proved to be a sodomite must lose his testicles, and if he does it a second time, he must lose his member, and if he does it a third time, he must be burned* – and a woman *shall lose her member each time and on the third must be burned*. The prescribed mutilations have long since fallen into disuse. Of course, they probably proved fatal in themselves and there is a certain illogicality in a bugger without his tackle – no matter how determined – committing the crime again, except, I suppose, in the passive mode. These early laws can be frustratingly vague. Over the centuries there has been considerable discussion as to what actually constituted the crime. Is full *coitus per rectum* required, or mere intention? And what of other acts? The human imagination is not uninventive when it comes to urges of the flesh. Do the perpetrators need to be apprehended in *flagrante delicto*? Number of witnesses required? *Et cetera, et cetera, et cetera*.”

Gilles found himself grunting again.

“Misconceptions abound,” Orieux continued. “Montaigne relates how two Portuguese somehow managed to persuade a priest – though God knows how – to perform some matrimony-like ceremony in San Giovanni a Porta Latina in Rome once. They'd apparently convinced themselves that because fornication was

legitimate in marriage, sodomy would likewise be legitimate if authorised by a church ceremony.”

Gilles resisted the temptation to ask if the groom and groom had lived happily ever after.

“Committed to the flames of course, both of them,” Orieux continued as if he had read his thoughts. “But what may seem insubstantial details to the layman is the stuff of life for us gentlemen of the law. The first legal definitions, albeit in canonical law – an area in which I have dabbled – come from the *Book of Gomorrah*, an eleventh-century tome dedicated to His Holiness Leo IX. In those days, indeed until recently, the practice was seen as one which tempted all more or less equally, and to which any man might – under circumstances – succumb to. However, in this century learned opinion on the matter is that it is an inclination, an aberration from the norm, possessed almost exclusively by a limited category of men – the Knights of the Cuff or the *night birds* as they are called; there are many euphemisms. But all that does not really concern us here. The sodomy laws have always been complex. Some progress has been made in clarifying matters, but not much. The prudery of legislators – to say nothing of their rather impoverished imaginations – does not help. So the law is not straightforward. If it were, there would be little need for my honourable calling. *N'est-ce pas?*”

Gilles wished the man would get to the case in point.

“It’s quite surprising what’s still on the statute books. In the 1620s the Parlement – getting a bit carried away with itself – passed a decree which made the denial of certain of Aristotle’s doctrines punishable by death. It has not been revoked – merely forgotten about. But, I take it, your friend is not being accused of denying Aristotle as well? Rhetorical question.”^{XXXII}

Gilles found himself remembering that Diderot had said in his *Lettre sur les aveugles*: about how a blind man would be totally unmoved by the sights of religious and regal pomp, and would hardly feel shame at his own nakedness or that of others; and that for a blind man to believe in the existence of anything he had to touch it. There’d been a blind and obviously fictional optician in the book, an Englishman, a Nicholas somebody ... Sanders perhaps. *If you want me to believe in God, you must make me touch Him*, Diderot had had him say.

“But enough of ancient history. Sodomy is still, as I said, officially a capital offence. But because it is often an additional charge in capital cases – tagged on, one could say, as a sort of judicial spice – and I suppose because of it not being exactly

uncommon, even among those of more exalted station, there is considerable confusion in the public mind regarding the legal situation. The last time anyone was put to death for it – solely on charges of sodomy – was about a decade ago. Two labourers, a Bruno Lenoir and a Jean Diot, were ordered to perform an *amende honorable* at the door of Notre Dame and then burned on the Place de Grève. Even at the time it was rather unusual for the law to be applied in all its rigour. It was the first execution exclusively for sodomy for at least a quarter of a century. They might have been strangled first – the magistrates can be merciful – but my memory fails me on that point.”

Gilles was hearing little to induce him to revise his opinion that, more often than not, the machinery of the law was little more than a game of chance – with loaded dice – and that it had always been so, and would always be so.

“So, you see, the full rigour of the law is not applied very often. If it were, I image the quantity of cases to be dealt with would be quite burdensome, and it would all be rather impractical. The services of magistrates and legal clerks do not come cheap. But Monsieur Foucault’s patrol is quite active in trapping the so-called night birds. It is a particularly lucrative branch of law enforcement. Their *modus operandi* makes frequent use of spies and even agents provocateurs. The usual procedure is to arrest the culprits, detain them until such time as they make a confession and name their accomplices. Foucault’s clerks keep copious and rather detailed records – a sign of the times. But it is more a matter of control rather than outright oppression. There are about four hundred arrests a year. And control is seen to be necessary. After all, one cannot have labourers and servants using their betters in such a fashion, and believe me, *monsieur*, they are those in high rank who wish to be so used. It is, after all, also known as the aristocratic vice, and not for no reason. A vice with pedigree, one could say. Or masters taking advantage of their servants, or grown men of boys. The law is there to protect all men, high and low. The temporal ruler also has a duty of spiritual care towards the faithful. Unhealthy practices can be contagious. Not all will succumb, but some will. And the weak need to be protected, against themselves if need be. Such is the theory anyway.”

“Indeed,” said Gilles, rather ambiguously.

“But, on the other hand, the agents of the law realise that the consequences of prosecuting the crime too severely and too widely could prove somewhat embarrassing – and undermine confidence in the natural and healthy order of society, which ironically the law

is there to protect – for Versailles too has its nightingales.” Orieux smiled again. “Official policy, to the extent that one can be said to exist, is one of *grande clémence*. If brought to court and convicted, the condemned is either burned in effigy rather than *in persona* – *pour encourager les autres*, as Monsieur Voltaire would say – or was he quoting some Englishman? – or, depending on the circumstances, sentenced to a few years in the galleys, or deported to the Antibes – an option which the Roast Beef navy has not made very practicable of late. But most of the time, if dealt with solely by the police, penalties tend to range from a few days to a few months in Bicêtre. In the end, it’s not so much what you’ve done but rather who you are and who you’ve done – or been done by.”

“And in this particular case?” Gilles asked patiently.

“Is de Graffigny a robe or a sword family?”

“Robe. There are no military connections at all.”

Orieux digested the information without comment.

“The police probably suspect that de Godrons is not his real name,” he continued, “but they are used to that. Aliases are not uncommon in these cases. Of course, the books found in the Abbé’s lodgings are an added and potentially serious complication.”

Luckily, Gilles thought, they had not found the books at the Moulin Noir. That would have been a catastrophe.

“The Abbé sails close to the wind,” the lawyer added. “If he had fallen into the hands of a man less worldly than Monsieur Foucault – a more, let us say, fanatically religious man – he might find himself facing a charge of distributing blasphemous printed matter right now. And that is not an offence which is dealt with *ex curia*.”

Gilles vaguely remembered reading a few years back about a blasphemy case that had taken place in ’45 or thereabouts – in Lyons. There had been executions. The account had been graphic regarding their gruesomeness. The condemned had included a priest; for saying a blasphemous Mass, whatever that was. The actual charge, he remembered noting at the time, had been blasphemy and sorcery, or was it sacrilege and sorcery? But witchcraft had ceased to be a crime decades ago ... For a moment he considered asking Orieux when witchcraft had been taken off the statute books but then remembered it had been in the 1680s, under the Sun King, but it had been replaced with something about pretending to be a witch and something about sacrilegious magic ...

“Discreet representations to Monsieur Foucault,” Orieux went on, “with appropriate emphasis on the detainee’s sincere repentance and willingness to make amends, say in the form of a

donation to a charitable or religious institution of Monsieur Foucault's choosing, is the invariable course of action, and usually quite effective. The transfer of the donation to its final recipient to be left in Monsieur Foucault's capable hands, and its order of magnitude should reflect the rank – in this case, the perceived rank – of the penitent. For our services as intermediaries, there will a modest commission – in addition to our customary honorarium for legal services.”

Being able to observe Orieux while at the same time being unobserved by him felt slightly indecent.

“Our chambers have a working relationship with Monsieur Foucault,” he continued, his tone suddenly more business-like. “If you can return here tomorrow towards five o'clock – time is of some importance in these matters, as I'm sure you understand – I will be able to tell you how much it is going to cost to remedy your friend's unfortunate predicament.”

“Excellent,” said Gilles. It was all he could think of saying.

“I may be pedantic, *monsieur*,” said Orieux. He could sense that Gilles was lacking total confidence in his abilities. “But it helps me memorise things. In this hoary byway of our legal system, it's rather difficult to get testimonials as to the efficacy of my past performance, but I'm sure you'll find that I am efficacious. I do have a reputation. *Quod non est in actis, non est in mundo*.”

Gilles looked at him, obviously not understanding. The blind man sensed his incomprehension.

“What is not in the files does not exist. No paperwork in these cases, I'm afraid. But then that is just what we want. I shall also see to it that the lady's garments, or rather the gentleman's lady's garments, are retrieved. Green is their favourite colour, you know, the favourite colour of sodomites of both sexes. Why, I have no idea. Shades of the greenwood, of devilry, of being outside the law perhaps. But who knows from what recesses of the human psyche these traditions originate!”

Ж

“In his *Plurality of Worlds*,” Jean-Baptiste said, “Fontenelle describes it as the Bedlam of the Universe, its inhabitants driven mad by the heat,”

Adélaïde Raynal was looking at Mercury through Diderot's telescope in the darkening sky above the city's roofscape. She was barely able to make out the faint luminous disc.

“There is a recent edition here somewhere,” he added. “That stink is pretty bad.”

There was rivulet of raw sewage was running down the street and they could even smell it at this height. She'd had to step over to get to the front door.

"Do you really believe that it's possible that the other worlds are inhabited?" she asked, her eye still fixed to the eyepiece.

"I hope not. One mad world is enough."

She wondered if his seemingly jovial mood was in fact nervousness; and, if it were, was there a particular reason for it.

"But *in an infinite universe there are infinite possibilities*," he added. "Giordano Bruno. The only man to have the honour of being formally excommunicated by the Lutherans, the Calvinists and the Roman Church. Newton believed that that sun was inhabited, and apparently so does Voltaire."

"And in an infinite universe everything that can happen eventually happens."

"You know Kopernikus never actually saw Mercury," he said.

"That space somehow goes on forever and ever in all directions I can somehow imagine," she said, removing her eye from the eyepiece.

"A glimpse of the Milky Way through a telescope is surely enough to convince anyone of that," he said. "Though Bruno didn't have the benefit of a telescope. He believed that every star is a sun in its own right."

"At the edge of the universe, somebody throws a stone," she said, obviously quoting something she had read. "Whether it rebounds or continues, something is there. *De Rerum Natura*. On the nature of things. Lucretius. But that time is infinite? That it has no end, that it goes on forever, that too I can imagine somehow. But that it has no beginning? That I find harder to imagine."

"I'm not quite sure that an infinity can have a beginning?" He replaced the protective leather cap on the telescope lens. "But perhaps there are different kinds of infinities. Bruno also believed that the universe was ... how shall I put it? ... *ensouled*, that every atom of it was ensouled by the Deity to keep it in motion, to keep it progressing towards whatever it might be progressing towards. Not like a clock at all. Diderot believes something similar." ^{XXXIII}

She closed the window.

He fetched two glasses and cleared a corner of the book-strewn table. She'd purloined bottle of red wine from the Baron's Rue Royale cellar.

"I'm sure you didn't invite me here to discuss the inhabitants of the universe," she said, as she sat down.

"Opportunities arise," he said when they were seated. The

twilight was gradually cloaking the library in semi-darkness. "If you wanted a set of the *Encyclopédies*, where would you go?"

"To Diderot?" she suggested. "To Le Breton?"

"Le Breton – in what I imagine is his current state of mind, and in the current atmosphere – would run a mile if approached by a stranger. D'Alembert is out of the picture, and Diderot is currently indisposed. That leaves the Baron, but the avenue to the front door of Grand-Val is a rather forbidding prospect."

"You have been approached?"

He took a sip of his wine and waited a moment for her to begin to consider what possibilities this might present before replying.

"Half a dozen queries in all, most of which I would consider serious."

"And your response?"

"I indicated that private arrangements might be possible."

She said nothing. He wondered what she was thinking.

"And oddly enough, one was from by a gentleman from a fiery country the inhabitants of which Monsieur Fontenelle believed were unable to recollect the past. A Chevalier d'Abyssinie, an Abyssinian. You might remember him. VICIT LEO TRIBU JUDY."

"The black man on the Pont au Change?"

"There is a copy of the coat of arms on one of Goussier's plates. The Chevalier d'Abyssinie appears to be busy collecting books in order to be able to return to his homeland armed with the knowledge of the modern world."

He paused for a moment.

"The Silkworm ..."

After their last he meeting had found himself making up possible nicknames for du Guesclin, the Shit Merchant was probably the most appropriate ... though that kind of foul-mouthed silliness was exactly what men like du Guesclin liked to provoke. It was easy to belittle, to scoff. The man's clever tongue and cunning went hand in hand with his lack of vision. In the end, he had decided on the Silkworm.

"Du Guesclin?"

"Who else?"

"Apt."

"Says he'll take as many as I can supply ... or words to that effect."

"But ..." she began. He knew about Charpentier's *Encyclopédies* but that was not quite the same thing as possessing them.

"I have the keys to the storeroom where they are."

He extracted a pair of keys from his inside coat pocket.

“QdP means Quai des Potiers,” he explained as he handed them to her. “13 is the number of the warehouse. The keys are to the storeroom. To get into the building you just have to show them to the *gardien*.”

She examined them for a moment before handing them back.

“Charpentier gave them to me. Remember, I used to make deliveries to the Quai des Potiers – of the volumes of the *Encyclopédie* from the subscription list we concocted. I needed keys to get into the storeroom.”

It took her a moment to digest this.

“Did you give any indications to these interested parties how much the acquisition of a set of volumes might cost?”

“Not exactly. But I suggested it was unlikely to be less than the original subscription price.”

“Which is about thirty livres per volume,” said Adélaïde, picking up the abacus from the Diderot’s desk and deftly manipulating the black and white beads, making a calculation. “Two hundred and ten livres per set. That’s a total of four thousand two hundred livres!”

“They might even expect to pay more.”

“Seriously?”

“Perhaps even as much as a quarter more, even a third.”

She thought again for a moment.

“There is nothing in writing about the arrangement between you and Jacques Charpentier, is there?” she said eventually. “About what you were promised?”

He was going to point out – diplomatically – that under the circumstances it was hardly likely that there would have been, but he just simply shook his head.

✱

“You fucking dolt,” Bageuret screamed.

The knocked-over wooden bucket was on the floor, empty, its contents, several pints of piss, splattered over the stacks of the unbound copies of the freshly printed batch of *The Pearls of Debauchery*.

“Get out, you fucken’ drunken cunt, you’ll pay for this. Get the fuck out of here.”

“’Twas an accident, sir,” Patrick tried to explain. The man stank of cheap wine and garlic.

“Get out,” Bageuret shouted again, “and you too,” he added, addressing Maurice, the drunken bear’s apprentice, “before I fire

the both of you. Stupid cunts! Get out!"

Weeks of work for nothing, Bageuret thought, as they quickly disappeared out the door to the yard. Three hundred bloody copies. He would have sold them for two livres a piece. Six hundred bloody livres!

They'd been so drunk they hadn't even noticed they'd knocked the bucket over. And what fool had put it on the shelf? As if he didn't have enough to worry about. He still had to collect the boxes the Abbé wanted, get them to Quai des Potiers and pack them.

The bell on the shop door rang. Bloody perfect timing, he thought, as he went to see to it.

The man waiting at the counter had a mane of greasy grey hair, a disfigured face, a walking stick and a mongrel on a lead.

"Monsieur Charpentier," he said.

It took Bageuret a moment for him to realise he was assuming he was the owner.

"Bageuret," he said, "Sebastien Bageuret. Monsieur Charpentier is no longer with us. The Imprimerie belongs to his widow. How may I be of service?"

"I was wondering if you happen to have any books on the Spanish conquest of Mexico," Bossuet said.



"I am sure the good priest will appreciate the advantage of seeing to it that this affair is quietly swept under the carpet," Sophie-Françoise said. "The Jesus Men can do without any more scandals. And besides, where else could you get that sort of money?"

"I could try to borrow it," Gilles said. The suggestion was obviously half-hearted.

"And put yourself further in debt. Let the family pay. It's what families are for."

They were on the balcony of her apartment, waiting for the Carnival parade to reach the Pont Neuf. They could hear drumming in the distance but could not see anything yet.

"You know the Chinese use printed paper money?" he said.

"I like the idea," she said. "Money is, after all, a sort of magic. Only works if you believe in it; but then everyone does. There are no atheists when it comes to Mammon."

"John Law liked the idea of printing it too. One month everyone was a millionaire, the next minute they didn't have a pot to do a number two in. There were quite a few disbelievers then." ^{XXXIV}

"True enough."

"I was a messenger boy who had got a loan of a ministry carriage for the day," Gilles went on, continuing the account of his visit to the Jesuit. "And he knew it. But he did have the grace to offer me a chair."

"And what was the message you had to deliver?"

"To collect. The considered opinion – in writing – of the Society of Jesus Men regarding what should be done about Diderot's magnum opus. But I sort of let him believe that I would be putting the hallowed document into Malesherbes's hands personally."

"Well, if they think one is important, I suppose one is."

"God knows why, but I actually went there expecting to be confronted with some sort of ecclesiastical idiot," he continued. "I actually quoted Pascal at him."

The vanguard of the parade was coming into view.

"And what gem of Jansenist wisdom did you impart?"

"That *the value of there being a divine order is so incalculably high ...*" The parade began to cross the bridge. "*... and that he who bets on it, who gives up illusionary pleasures and prepares the ground for grace, the gift of faith and the possibility of eternal life. But since grace is like the rain; and the fickle rain maker causes grace to rain down only when it suits him. And rain dances do not work. So what need of Church, bishop or priest? Or Jesuit?"*

"I take it he was not amused."

"No, he was not amused, and I didn't get the impression he was a wagering man. And now I have to approach him as a supplicant, on my metaphorical knees."

A fat man in a monk's cowl, leading a donkey decked out in bishop's vestments and with a bishop's mitre on its head, was leading the procession. Behind him came the brewery apprentices, rolling two dozen wooden barrels in front of them and using them as drums. The crowd was easily a few thousand strong.

"And if the good ecclesiastic sees me as his nephew's companion in debauchery, a fellow Knight of the Cuff?" Gilles said – the question was rhetorical – and laughed at the thought, but then said more morosely, "Or little more than a blackmailer?"

"Give me the money to get my fellow sodomite out of the *merde* or we'll hand you over to the Jansenists to be buggered yourself!" she suggested, attempting to mimic the sound of his voice.

"Precisely," Gilles said. "This Foucault – and Orieux is probably in cahoots with him – has all the cards and no doubt knows it. He might be convinced to make do with less, but time is not on our side."

The Ship of Fools appeared, its passengers wearing papier mâché

animal heads: foxes, rats and weasels.

“A ship on the land,” she said. “The world turned upside down. And it would be so unseemly to haggle.”

“I imagine this Foucault is one of those policemen who thinks he is doing a public service by accepting bribes, the unofficial pecuniary benefits of his sinecure enabling him to enforce the law in a more humane way than would otherwise be the case. His official pay is probably less than mine, and in my position one is assumed to have an independent income in the first place – and be primarily motivated by *noblesse oblige*.”

“The Foucaults of this world are the price of public order.” She had to half-shout to be heard above the racket the brewery apprentices were making with their barrel-drums as they passed beneath them. “They do the dirty work. And we allow them their scavenging as long as they stick to the tradesman’s entrance.”



Comme d’habitude, Isabelle de Vereaux allowed Stefan von Klopstock to escort her back to her apartment on the Rue Chauvet. They were both masked. Carnival was in full flow now. Hers was that of a cat, sky blue with mother-of-pearl around the edges. His was brown and, she had to admit, rather sadly unimaginative – young men seemed to be less flamboyant than in the days of her youth. As on the last occasion, she paid the coachman.

He was a boy really, she thought, as he undid the laces of her dress – his fingers marginally more adept than they had been the first time. The thing about boys, she mused, besides their tight Greek bottoms, their unquenchable lust and their propensity to lose control – and fresh young cocks – was that they were so deliciously manipulatable. But while their loins might be afire for a lover past her prime, who with the help of goodwill and candlelight might resemble one of Mijneer Rubens’s nymphs, they had an aversion to being seen in public with a woman who could have been their mother. But secret pleasures had their charms and discretion was a powerful aphrodisiac.

He eased the dress from her shoulders. Its hoops collapsed on each other as it dropped to the floor. She remained standing in it while he undid her linen – with admirable control for once; he was learning – and she felt the heat of the fire on her round arms, large back, expansive buttocks and pillaresque legs, and his young hands sliding down her sides and coming to rest on her thighs.

She felt the papier mâché nose of his mask, and then his pursed

lips, first on one buttock and then on the other. She turned around and faced him, belly level with his face, and pulled him up towards her and kissed him full on the mouth, simultaneously reaching down and feeling the outline of his engorged cock in his tight *culottes*. His left foot was little more than a stump really, almost arboreal, chthonic; but she had always found the slightly flawed more intriguing. Pretty men were a pleasure to look at it, like paintings of Greek gods, but they did not arouse her curiosity; she supposed she suspected that when the brittle shell of their good looks was prised apart nothing would be found within, nothing revealed, because too much of their souls had gone into the making of their outward forms. But he was so young, she thought wistfully, so young – he would tire of this soon.

Ж

At the Jesuit palace Gilles found himself in the same beeswax-smelling antechamber he had waited in two months earlier, with the same the blue and plaster statue of Our Lady staring down at him from its alcove. He wondered, not for the first time, if piety and bad taste were not inextricably intertwined. Though the flowers – snowdrops – in the vase at the Virgin's sandalled plaster feet were real. The order of the grounds, visible through the plate-glass panes, he could not help thinking, when compared to the chaos of any wilderness, was proof that in some things at least the human imagination might be superior to the divine. A robin was picking at some leavings on the bird table. The bird was said to have acquired its red breast from the blood of the Saviour when one of its kind had attempted to pluck out the nails from the His hands and feet. Fables for children and peasants. He'd had to hire a carriage. Affairs of this nature were not resolved on the cheap. He was expecting one of the virginal seminarians to come and fetch him, but when the door opened it was the Jesus Man himself who appeared.

"Monsieur d'Argenson. *Quelle surprise!*"

Gilles noticed that he did not say it was a pleasant one.

"I had not been expecting anyone from the ministry," the Jesuit added by way of explanation, with more than a touch of sarcasm.

Gilles bowed politely in response to the ecclesiastic's outstretched hand and kissed his ring.

"I am not here in any official capacity," Gilles explained. There was little to be gained by pretences.

The Jesuit gave him a genuinely puzzled look.

"I think we had better speak in my bureau."

Gilles muttered a politeness and followed him down the corridor.

The Jesuit invited him to take a seat before sitting down himself. A light brown morocco-bound book lay open on the leather-inlaid desk. Gilles twisted his head in an attempt to get a better look at the illustrations – architectural drawings and what looked like the ground plans of ancient buildings.

"*Voyage d'Égypte et de Nubie*," the Jesuit explained. "Not easy to get hold of. Monsieur Norden got as far as in the second cataract." He shut the book and moved it aside. "So in what capacity are you here?"

His tone was genuinely polite.

"The matter is delicate," said Gilles, attempting confidence. "I come in the capacity of the friend of a relative of yours."

The Jesuit was listening intently.

"Monsieur le Abbé Honoré de Graffigny," Gilles added.

The Jesuit remained expressionless. He extracted a snuffbox from his cassock and placed it on the desk. A different one to the last time, Gilles noted.

"The Abbé is, I believe, a nephew of yours," Gilles said.

"A distant relative, more by marriage than by blood. He is the son of the second wife of my half-brother." It was obviously not a relationship that he esteemed. "I am also his godfather."

"I am here at his request," Gilles said, hoping to establish himself as merely the messenger with bad news, not cause of it, but the Jesuit was giving no indication that he appreciated the distinction.

"There has been an incident," Gilles continued. "A rather unfortunate incident ... and your nephew, in his hour of need, has asked me to approach you." His emphasis was on *his*. "He is being held prisoner at Bicêtre. He has not been charged or brought before a judge, but he is suspected of having committed ..." Gilles took a breath. "... indecent acts." It had come out easier than he had expected.

"The evidence against him, while for the most part circumstantial," Gilles went on, "is none the less quite serious. In fact, I have sought legal advice on the matter on your nephew's behalf. If the affair were to come before magistrates, a conviction could easily follow. *If* it were to come before the courts, that is. It need not come to that." His voice trailed off; he had hoped the Jesuit would be inclined to say something at this stage but the man remained stonily silent.

"I mean," Gilles was obliged to continue, with some apprehension and clumsiness, "it need not come before the judges,

arrangements can be made. An apology to the police. And, I have been led to believe, as is customary in these matters ..." – he hesitated before coming to the crux of the matter – "... a moderate donation to a worthy cause ... in recompense for actions which I'm sure in any case were more the unfortunate result of youthful folly rather than any heinous intent, regrettable but ..."

"My nephew, as you call him, is of age, and hardly a youth by any standard of measurement that I can think of."

The Jesuit picked up his snuffbox and flicked it open, but had second thoughts and snapped it shut again.

Gilles, distracted by the gesture, nearly said: *Your nephew is of course naturally also concerned that his situation might cause embarrassment for Your Excellency*, but he checked himself.

"I am not finding this easy," he said instead. "I shall come to the point. I have engaged a lawyer on his behalf. There have been negotiations. Four hundred livres are needed. The Abbé has managed to keep his name secret. He is not unaware that *if* his real identity became known, Your Excellency could be compromised."

The Jesuit said nothing.

"When his apartment was searched," Gilles continued, deciding to it would do no harm to paint the situation a bit blacker than perhaps it was ... not that it wasn't black enough, "a quantity – a significant quantity – of the latest book attributed to Monsieur de Voltaire was seized. There were also some other books – also in quantity – none of them, I'm afraid, edifying. It would not be too difficult to make a case that he was intending to distribute them, or even of having being involved in their importation. All this has somewhat put a higher price on settling the affair than would usually be the case. Upped the ante, as they say." His attempt at humour was unsuccessful. "The Abbé himself does not have an income or property which would enable him to raise that amount and, unhappily ... neither do I."

"But the Jesuit coffers are full," the Jesuit said scathingly, but immediately seemed to regret the comment. "My apologies. That remark was uncharitable. You have been honest with me and I thank you for that."

Gilles made an appreciative head bow.

"This alleged indecent act?" the Jesuit continued. "Perhaps you could enlighten me somewhat as to the particulars. The manner of charge one could expect?"

Gilles found himself hesitating.

"No need to be embarrassed, Monsieur d'Argenson. You forget I am a priest. I can assure you that the Church's collective

knowledge of the depths to which men sink is second to none. I am unlikely to be surprised.”

Perhaps the Church’s power to delve into men’s hearts, to get them to willingly reveal their innermost secrets – assembling an invisible encyclopaedia of their souls – was the true source of its power, Gilles thought before replying. And when it came to sins against Nature ... well, the Jesus Men did have more than a bit of a reputation, as the Monkey had not been shy to point out in his latest *oeuvre*.

“Conspiracy with a person unknown to commit sodomy,” he said.

The Jesuit took a deep breath but remained silent.

“The consequences for the Abbé if four hundred livres are not found do not bear thinking about. My feeling is, particularly at this time, considering the political atmosphere, is that he could be made an example of. The lawyer mentioned the possibility of a burning in effigy, the galleys ...” Gilles let it at that; he was sure the Jesuit more than capable of imagining what the courts were capable of.

The Jesuit began to fidget with his snuffbox again.

Gilles wondered, to his surprise, which consequences were weighing on the Jesuit’s mind the more heavily, those to himself or those to the Abbé? He had not considered that the Jesuit might be concerned as much, or perhaps even more, with the fate of another than with possible damage to himself and the Society. He filled in more of the details: the time, the place, the women’s clothes even.

“The Abbé is a dangerous man,” the Jesuit said when Gilles had obviously finished, “both to himself and to anyone who has anything to do with him.”

Gilles let the implied criticism pass.

“There have been other incidents,” the Jesuit said, “but this, I’m afraid, exceeds anything I could have imagined. One wonders if the scoundrel is in full control of his reasoning faculties?”

Gilles could see that he was weighing up options as he spoke.

“We were schoolboys together,” said Gilles, as if that was somehow a mitigating factor. “At de Godrons.”

“In any case, mad or bad,” said the Jesuit, his tone now suddenly more brisk, as if he had reached a conclusion, “this time, the bastard could well and truly land me in the shit.” The profanity was lancing. “And himself, and you too, to a certain degree.”

“I am in little danger,” Gilles said rather lamely, thinking: so much for the Jesuit’s concern for the fate of another ...

“Four hundred livres is a considerable sum. You no doubt assume that I have effortless access to money. The de Graffigny patrimony

exists on paper, or rather it does not exist at all. So, legally speaking, it could be argued that we no longer even belong to the nobility. There hasn't been a sou for twenty years now. Gambled, whored and pissed away, like no small number of French fortunes."

Gilles found himself taken aback by the unexpected vulgarities.

"Spades should be called spades when they are spades," the Jesuit said. "The Abbé was a charity pupil at des Godrons. His mother's doing; she was a persuasive woman. As you know, his income is a pittance – a benefice from a half-starved parish in Roussillon he has never seen – and some forgotten inheritable pension granted to his grandfather by the Sun King for the imaginary performance of an office that was probably already defunct at the time. Both are paid erratically. I myself may give the appearance of being prosperous, but all this ..." – he made a gesture encompassing their sumptuousness surroundings – "... I only have the usufruct of. It belongs to the Society. My personal income, I can assure you, is nominal." But the protestations were obviously a prelude to how he would circumvent all that.

"If this was entirely a personal matter," he continued, "there would be little I could do, despite my familial obligation, tenuous and unmerited though it may be. Your *friend* is the only other member of our branch of the de Graffigny clan. And perhaps the last. I will not have offspring, and it seems unlikely that legitimate issue will spring forth from my nephew's loins. Which is probably a small mercy." He was giving himself more time to think. "But this is not entirely a personal matter. As you have so pointedly pointed out, a scandal would not only damage me but would also have serious consequences for the Society. And I have a duty to protect the Society from scandal."

He'd had another report from Lisbon. The Portuguese court was preparing a decree to expel the Society from Portugal itself and the rest of the other Portuguese lands, including Macao and Goa. Malagrida's preaching that the earthquake had been a divine punishment for depriving the Jesuits of the Maranhão, the Brazilian state which had been practically run by the Society and where they had tried to protect the aborigines from the predations of their so-called Christian fellow countrymen, had not helped.

"The Emperor Justinian included sodomy in his *Corpus Juris Civilis* because he believed it caused earthquakes," the Jesuit said. "Evil should be suppressed, but for the correct reasons."

Gilles wondered what that was all about. He knew that Roman law was the basis of the legal system. How exactly it related to customary law, which had its origins in the customs of the Franks,

he had never been quite able to make out. No doubt, Orieux, if given the opportunity, would gladly enlighten him.

“But that is another day’s work ...” the Jesuit continued. “There are many in the Parlement who would seize on any pretext to draw us into disrepute. By damaging us, they bring the Church into disrepute, and thereby endanger souls. The Jansenists themselves seem immune to scandal. One would have thought that the fact that that pitiable wretch Damiens was seduced to act as he did by their doctrines – something the Parlement’s own judges could not cover up – would have damaged their cause, but they seem to have survived that storm quite intact.”

Pitiable. An ambiguous adjective to use, thought Gilles, but then even most of those that had supported what had been done to Damiens saw it more as a necessity rather than as a laudable example of French justice. The man was being particularly frank with him. Perhaps he actually was under the impression that Gilles was more important than he actually was.

“Who knows about this?”

“I have been discreet,” Gilles said. “Only the lawyer, a Monsieur Orieux, a gentleman with some experience of this genre of case, and a confidant of mine who visited the Abbé in Bicêtre on my behalf are aware of the details. It would have been inadvisable for someone in my position to have gone to the prison myself.”

“*I was in prison and ye visited me not,*” the Jesuit quoted absent-mindedly. And the devil quotes Scripture for his own purposes, Gilles felt like saying. But the Jesuit was obviously thinking. “And,” he continued, “it is hardly in the interests of Monsieur Foucault and his associates to kill a goose that is about to lay a golden egg by blathering about it to all and sundry. The police can be extremely discreet if they are of a mind to be.”

“I should think we have little to fear from that quarter,” Gilles said. “In that regard at least.” He hoped the use of *we* had not come across as too familiar.

The Jesuit flicked his snuffbox open and offered Gilles a pinch. Gilles declined, wondering if the priest merely had the usufruct of that expensive personal accoutrement too. The Jesuit inhaled a dab of the rich tobacco dust from the back of his hand, paused for it to take effect, and sneezed into his purple handkerchief.

“What is my nephew’s current address?” he asked, placing a sheet of blank paper in front of him and extracting a quill from a brass quill stand.

Gilles gave it without thinking.

The Jesuit dipped the quill in the matching brass ink pot and

wrote the address down.

“When this matter is resolved, I want our friend the Abbé to leave Paris,” he said, as he pressed a sheet of blotting paper onto the wet ink. “No, to leave the country. And to give an undertaking to never, under any circumstances, show his face within the city or the kingdom again as long as I have the privilege of walking this earth. I want him gone within a fortnight of his release. That is more than enough time for him to sort out his affairs. He is to make over the receipt of his income over to me and it will be paid to him as long as he absents himself. I’m sure that in his present circumstances you will not find it too difficult to convince him of the wisdom of agreeing to this.”

Gilles could hardly disagree.

“And in the meantime,” the Jesuit continued, “I am going to petition the relevant authorities to grant me a *lettre de cachet*, the enforcement of which will be left entirely at my discretion. I am sure you are aware of how these things are done. It will be served if the Abbé has not left Paris within the fortnight I have specified. I can ensure that he is kept under lock and key in a very remote and suitably spartan monastery for a very long time. I know of one in the Pyrenees which would serve quite nicely.”

“And the funds?” Gilles reminded him gently.

“They will be delivered to you tomorrow.”

Gilles nodded.

“There is another matter,” said the Jesuit.

Gilles nodded again.

“An unusual service you could render me. In reciprocity, so to speak.”

“Anything within my gift,” said Gilles graciously.

He had the feeling that it would be, but only just, and not without some awkwardness.

The Jesuit began to explain.

“It concerns the procurement of a book. In the normal course of events I would not trouble you, but in this case I am a little at my wit’s end. As you can well imagine, we have our own sources – one of my duties is to keep myself informed on dangerous ideas and opinions – a guardianship we have in common I suppose.” He could not resist a little smile. “But in this case it has not been possible to get hold of the volume in question. To be precise, Volume III.”

For a moment Gilles did not understand.

“Volume III of the work we discussed at our last meeting. A mite tricky to get hold of under current circumstances. Particularly a

single volume. I thought someone in your position – with connections at the Office of the Director of the Book Trade – might be able to help.”

He gave Gilles quick smile.

“A single volume?” Gilles said, and added, without thinking, “It might be easier to locate a set.”

“If needs be. At a reasonable price of course. A just price. The matter is of some importance. Perhaps you might be able to make some discreet enquiries ...”

“I will see what I can do,” Gilles said. “It may be possible. I am acquainted with the Baron d’Holbach. He is a member of the consortium.” Not that he had any intention of approaching the Baron.

“Good. I’m sure I can depend on you to do your utmost. As I said, it is of some importance.” Then, almost as an afterthought, he added, “Some Hebrew theologians teach, erroneously naturally, that Adam, being made in the image of God and thus being neither male nor female, or both, was a hermaphrodite, and that only after the Fall did mankind become engendered.” He then paused for a moment and asked: “Do you think he got dressed up before he got drunk or afterwards?”

Gilles shrugged his shoulders but said nothing.

Of course, the real question, the Jesuit was thinking, was what on earth was a man like Gilles d’Argenson doing being mixed up with somebody like his nephew who, when it came down to it, was no more than a debauched book smuggler with a name? And so involved with him that he felt obliged to go round begging for bribe money to get him out of that madhouse in Bicêtre. That they were acquainted with each other, he could understand; they probably moved in the same circles and in many ways Paris was a small world – but that they should be so closely involved with one another ...

CHAPTER XII

MAN DECIDES WHAT IS RIGHT

Gilles was examining a framed engraving of a château, obviously waiting for him, when Bageuret was shown into the sumptuous hallway of Hôtel de Walsh de Serrant.

“Our host’s pied-à-terre outside Nantes,” Gilles informed him, nodding in the direction of the picture. The edifice, with its two distinctive domed towers on each wing, could have been mistaken for a royal palace. “Slaving and shipbuilding.”^{XXXV}

There was more than a whiff of alcohol on his breath.

“Descended from the High Kings of Ireland of course,” he added. “Who no doubt could trace their pedigree back to the Trojans.” Descent from the High Kings of Ireland was an old joke about the Franco-Hibernian aristocracy. “Though how many of us Frenchmen can actually trace our ancestry back to those who fought at the side of Charlemagne with any accuracy must be equally questionable.”

“Some of us most certainly can’t,” Bageuret pointed out.

“Our hostess, Madame de Walsh, by the way, is the church mouse of the family,” Gilles informed him.

“What am I doing here?”

“Did you bring the books?”

“They’re in a box in the porch. I had to hire a carriage.”

“The Margrave has changed his mind about seeing the merchandise.”

Bageuret nodded. He was not surprised.

“I paid the lawyer,” Gilles said. “You should be able to collect the Abbé tomorrow evening. I’ll send word.”

Gilles had insisted that *he* could not be seen hanging around outside a prison; and, *a lady*, meaning his sister, could hardly be expected to do so either. Bageuret had not objected this time. The departure of the barge was only days away, and he had judged it safe enough; and he wanted to get this whole affair over with as soon as humanly possible.

A footman in de Serrant livery appeared and said Madame de Walsh had instructed him to inform them that the Margrave von Möllendorf would be returning shortly but that in the meantime

they were invited to join her in the drawing room. Gilles asked him to take the box in the porch up to the Margrave's apartments.

"Shall we ...?" Gilles said, opening the brass-handled double door, ceremoniously stepping aside to allow Bageuret to enter before him.

A group of half a dozen people, all dressed to the nines, were sitting around a low table overflowing with a luxurious display of every sort of conceivable patisserie, listening to a woman in her sixties reading from a finely bound book amidst the odour of sugar and jam. Glass-fronted bookcases and family portraits lined the walls and there was a glass mirror hanging on the wall, the largest mirror Bageuret had ever seen. The thing was flawless. The scene it reflected could have been taken for reality itself. He was glad that he'd taken the precaution of wearing his new tailor-made black suit. The chair Bageuret was given felt so fragile he was half afraid it would collapse under him.

"Couldn't we explain in this way how the multiplication of the most dissimilar species might have resulted from two single individuals?" Madame de Walsh was quoting, her aristocratic voice echoing about the high rococo-ceilinged room.

But Gilles was not listening to a word she was saying. He was desperately trying not to look at ginger-wigged Brass Head de la Haye, the last person he had expected to see there, not that there was any reason why de la Haye should not be acquainted with the de Walsh de Serrants. Brass Head was sitting beside a small woman endowed with full and creamy breasts – which Gilles could not help ogling when she stretched forward to pick up a piece of chocolate-covered patisserie – and between which a small silver crucifix on a silver chain dangled tantalisingly.

"... their origin would be owing only to a few accidental productions in the embryo," Madame de Walsh read on, *"in which the elementary particles would not have retained the arrangement which they had in the father and mother animals ..."*

And, beside she of the full and creamy breasts, another surprise: Jean-Baptiste Longchamp – with Adélaïde Raynal. The von Klopstock fellow had also managed to get himself an invitation to the gathering.

"... each degree of error would have created a new species and by dint of repeated divergences there would have come about the infinite diversity of species which we see today, which will perhaps increase with time, but to which the passing of the centuries perhaps brings only imperceptible additions."

Madame de Walsh shut the book with an authoritative thud.

“From the *Système de la nature* by a Doctor Baumann,” she informed them, “a nom de plume used by Monsieur Pierre Louis Moreau de Maupertuis.”

There was an embarrassing silence.

Gilles took the opportunity to introduce Bageuret. She of the full and creamy breasts was introduced as a Mademoiselle du Columbier.

Bageuret found himself being served a cup of tea. Both the cup and the china saucer bore a delicately painted miniature of the de Walsh de Serrant coat of arms.

“English-style,” somebody informed him, “with milk.”

“Not very patriotic, I’m afraid,” Brass Head joked.

“*Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*,” Gilles muttered.

“What?” Brass Head asked, not quite sure he had heard right.

“*It is sweet and honourable to die for one’s country*,” Gilles translated, as if it was the Latin that Brass Head had not understood, adding with barely veiled condescension, “Cicero, I believe.”

“Very amusing,” Brass Head said sarcastically.

“Then these fossils,” Von Klopstock said, “might be the petrified husks and skeletons of animals and plants which ... But I don’t quite understand ... Aren’t they merely the remains of animals that drowned in the Flood?”

“Most naturalists now believe that there were several floods,” Madame de Walsh said.

“And Scripture does not say that there were no others,” Gilles added.

“Perhaps,” suggested Brass Head, “because there were no others.”

Gilles gave him a forced smile.

“In fact, with a close study of the Scriptures the Noachian Deluge can be very precisely dated,” Brass Head went on. “The year 2348 *ante Christum natum*. Bishop Bossuet calculated it down to the very month. A November, I believe.”

Gilles was about to ask him if that was a November by the Julian or the Gregorian calendar but Madame de Walsh had begun to speak again.

“It has also been suggested that fossils may be failed instances of spontaneous generation, subsequently embalmed and petrified by the preservative properties of mud.”^{XXXVI}

“The Bible teaches us that our first parents were fashioned from clay,” Bageuret found himself saying. “Which is a type of mud. So I suppose it is logical to assume that the plants and animals were

fashioned from the same substance. But failed instances? Were not all plants and animals created on the same day? On the sixth?"

"Plants were created on the third," Brass Head corrected him. "Sea creatures and birds on the fifth. Man – and the animals – were created on the sixth day."

Von Klopstock wondered if the bookmaker had read his manuscript yet. If he had, he wasn't giving any indication that he had. He didn't seem an erudite man – but maybe that was not a bad thing; he might be easier to impress. His work was not a flippant novel.

Madame de Walsh coughed and launched a ball of phlegm into the spittoon beside her, a tray of sand inset into an elegant miniature table about a foot high.

"These days, Monsieur Bageuret," she said, "most scientific theories of the origin of species tend towards the transformism idea, the view that the Supreme Being did not create the world and the species that make up the great chain of being in one instance, but gradually, one biblical day at a time, as it were. Many hold that species change their forms as conditions and climates change, even giving rise to new species. As eggs transform themselves into birds. And caterpillars turn into butterflies. Others argue that the creation is still unfolding."

"Augustine suggested that the Creator may have deposited the seeds of creatures in the earth," Brass Head added, "to flower into new species in the fullness of time. In fact, he counselled that hasty and ignorant interpretations of the six biblical days of the Book of Genesis can damage the cause of Our Faith."

"Diderot believes that matter has an inbuilt sensitivity," Jean-Baptiste said, "which predisposes it to bringing forth new life."

He'd seen a draft of the *Encyclopédie* plate on the life cycle of the frog – from a jellied egg to a tadpole to a frog and then to a fish in autumn which would lay the eggs in spring that would start the whole process again. He'd only glanced at it but was sure it was something like that. It made sense. One never did see frogs in winter. He was about to mention it but realised that it was an instance of life bringing forth new life, not dead matter doing so.

"So there is something polymath Diderot believes in," Brass Head said.

Bageuret was tempted to point out that *polymath* Diderot, for all his boat-rocking and irreligion, at least worked for a living, but of course did not.

"And what exactly is the great chain of being?" Mademoiselle du Columbier asked.

Gilles wondered if she was on the market, and if Sophie-Françoise would consider her a suitable candidate for the sensible marriage she was never ceasing to recommend he contract. Erotic possibilities flitted through his mind.

“Nature’s hierarchy,” Brass Head explained, his tone, Gilles noted, distinctly proprietorial. “Imagine a chain or ladder beginning with the most simple of unliving things and going right up to the most complex. From the most base, which is inanimate matter, to the highest, which of course is Man.”^{XXXVII}

“Us,” Gilles couldn’t help adding, contemplating the silver crucifix hanging obliviously between Mademoiselle du Columbier’s full and creamy breasts, and thinking: *Oh, to be upon that cross!*

Bageuret could not help wondering what the earlier de Walsh in the full-length portrait in its gold leaf frame reflected in the glass mirror would have made of the conversation. He’d been a great bull of a man by the look of him; his Sun King wig was a mass of curls and ringlets; and the *culottes* of the cavalry dress uniform he was wearing were so tight as to display the outline of his tackle and his muscular thighs a trifle too immodestly for modern sensibilities.

“Diderot believes that Nature has within it a tendency to improve itself,” Jean-Baptiste added. “And that this tendency is a sort of a subtle natural law.”

Bageuret washed another mouthful of cake down with a sip of tea, something he rarely drank. A pound of it would have cost him several days’ wages.

“Leibniz suggested that the very idea of a species is merely something we have invented in order to enable us to classify plants and animals,” Madame de Walsh said.

“Not an opinion shared by the Comte de Buffon,” Brass Head said.

“They say de Buffon’s given the creatures he studies the run of his Burgundian château,” Gilles said, his mouth full. He was having some difficulty avoiding covering himself with the crumbs from a particularly flaky piece of cream-laden patisserie. “Badgers warm themselves by his fire, and his servants spend half their lives cleaning up hedgehog shit.”

This time he did succeed in making nearly everyone laugh. Bageuret nearly spilled his tea. But Madame de Walsh did not seem impressed.

“Do you consider yourself a Neptunist or a Vulcanist?” Adélaïde asked Madame de Walsh, deciding to intervene.

“Neptune and Vulcan?” Mademoiselle du Columbier said, feigning bewilderment.

Gilles was tempted to make a half-cryptic allusion to Madame de Gourdan’s new establishment but thought better of it.

“Neptunism and Vulcanism are theories of natural theology, my dear,” Brass Head explained. “Neptunists maintain that in the beginning the earth was submerged beneath a universal ocean and that over time, vast stretches of time, this ocean diminished and the continents emerged. Vulcanists believe that the earth emerged from fire and molten rock.”

Why, Bageuret found himself wondering, did these people find it so difficult to simply accept that creation is a mystery and simply leave at that. He had little doubt the long-dead Franco-Irishman in the portrait staring down at them would have agreed. There was something unedifying and, he could not help feeling, self-destructive about this obsessive nitpicking, this chipping away at things.

“But, Madame de Walsh, surely species exist?” he said. “Common sense tells us that. Cats are unmistakably a different species to dogs. Surely?”

“Excellent point, Monsieur Bageuret,” Madame de Walsh said.

“Unmistakably,” Mademoiselle du Columbier giggled.

“But how does *one* define a dog?” asked Madame de Walsh, the question obviously rhetorical.

“A dog has four legs, it ...” Bageuret began to say but found he had spoken before he had thought it through.

“And foxes and wolves?” she said. “Are they dogs? Or are they what the Comte de Buffon calls a variety or breed of the species dog?”

Bageuret expressed his ignorance via a polite grimace.

He found himself resenting this aristocratic woman. He could just imagine her libertine attitudes, her probable self-righteous – and currently fashionable – disapproval of the trade that had filled her family’s coffers to overflowing and enabled her to play the *femme savante*. No good Christian could take pleasure in enslaving another, but purchasing creatures who were already in that condition was another matter. There was nothing unchristian or dishonourable about trade, as long as it was within the law. Her type never considered for a moment that to be a slave belonging to a Christian just might be a trifle preferable than to be a slave belonging to some heathen brute. And that maybe Nature’s hierarchy did not confine itself to polyps and monkeys.

“De Buffon points out that the outward form of an animal does

not define its species," she explained. "The mule resembles the horse more than the water spaniel resembles the greyhound; but a mule is not a horse, while spaniels and greyhounds are dogs. And there are dogs that bear a far closer resemblance to foxes and wolves than they do to many other varieties of dogs." XXXVIII

"And what is the good Comte's opinion on the origin of species?" Adélaïde asked.

"He admits that one could be easily led to the conclusion that all animal species have a common ancestor," Madame de Walsh said, "because the inner design of all animals is so similar. Anyone comparing the skeletons of a man and a horse cannot be but struck more by similarities they share rather than the differences. The horse's foot is composed of the same basic bones as a man's. The skeletons of a monkey can be easily mistaken for that of a child. But he rejects that idea ..."

Without interrupting her monologue, she went over to one of the bookcases and extracted a volume of Buffon's *Natural History of the Earth, of Man and the Quadrupeds*. Eight volumes had been printed so far, twenty were planned.

"... on the grounds that if such a thing had occurred, it could only have occurred by gradations, extremely slowly and there would have to be a great number of intermediate animals. And if a member of a new species did occur spontaneously through degeneration from another, the chances of the simultaneous occurrence of two individuals capable of breeding with each other would be impossibly high."

"Which, as one would expect, is completely in agreement with Scripture," Brass Head added. "But there is little new in this. Galen pointed out that the monkey is more similar to Man in its physiology than any other animal. The Comte de Buffon is not deceived by surface appearances. The essence of natural philosophy is *not* to be deceived by surface appearances. Kopernikus wasn't. Nor Newton."

Madame de Walsh found the passage she was looking for.

"*If the horse and the ass belong to the same family ... he writes, and comes to the conclusion that – and I quote – with equal propriety may it be concluded, that the monkey belongs to the family of Man; that the monkey is a man degenerated ...*"

"Or Man a degenerated monkey," Gilles could not resist interjecting.

"... *that Man and the monkey have sprung from a common stock ... but ... we are assured, by the authority of revelation that all animals have participated equally of the favours of creation; that*

the first two of each species were formed by the hands of the Almighty.”

“I sincerely dread to think of the consequences of men being led to believe they sprang from the same stock as monkeys,” said Brass Head. “They’re bad enough as it is. Despite the Church trying to drum into their heads that they are made in the image of the Almighty Himself.”

“Where does Professor von Linnaeus position Man in his system?” Jean-Baptiste asked. He remembered seeing a letter from Linnaeus in Diderot’s correspondence. It had been about men and monkeys. Or was it apes? Not that he knew what the actual difference was. He made a mental note to see if he could find it again.

“Family: hominidae. Genus: homo. Species: sapiens,” Madame de Walsh told him, pronouncing each syllable with pedagogic exaggeration. “Man is the only species in the genus homo. Other members of the hominidae family are apes and monkeys. Man is unique in being the only species in a particular genus, but there are five varieties: the European, the Asiatic, the American, the African and the Wild Man.”

Gilles was about to make another sarcastic comment but the double doors to the drawing room opened and the footman announced the arrival of the Margrave von Möllendorf.

“Our hostess has been entertaining us with theories on the origin of species,” Gilles explained to the newcomer.

“Idle speculations to help pass a lazy afternoon in pleasant company,” Brass Head added.

“Many of which will appear in my new book,” Madame de Walsh added.

Interesting, though Bageuret – that she was writing a book, not the ideas of Professor von whatever-his-name-was. It could be controversial of course, but controversy could sell well.

Madame de Walsh made use of the spittoon again.

“I am going to have to temporarily relieve you of the company of Messieurs d’Argenson and Charpentier,” the Margrave said. “We have some dreadfully boring worldly dealings to discuss.”

“Bageuret,” Bageuret corrected him, “of the Imprimerie Charpentier.”

The Margrave smiled at him but did not apologise.

Bageuret took an immediate dislike to the man.

Sophie-Françoise, wigless and wearing a floral silk dressing gown, was waiting for them in the Margrave’s apartments on the top floor. Bageuret was taken aback by the sight of her cropped

black hair.

"I have taken the liberty of unpacking your tomes, Monsieur Bageuret," she said.

The books were in two stacks on a varnished oak side table.

The Margrave extracted his pince-nez from his waistcoat, opened one of the volumes and began turning the near-folio-sized pages.

"*CHARITY*," he began to read, "*a theological virtue ...*"

Gilles headed towards a decanter of brandy on a cabinet by the window and poured himself a glass.

"Ah, Hennessey-Charante. *Greater love hath no man*," he pronounced as he sniffed it, then polished off the contents in a single swig and promptly filled the glass again.

Bageuret noticed a pocket-sized book bound in pink morocco on a side table. He had to squint to make out the title. It was a copy of *The Pearls of Debauchery*. He felt some pride in the fact that someone had gone to the trouble of having it properly bound. But leaving it lying around in broad daylight, did these people have no sense of shame?

"*CLITORIS*," the Margrave read on, "*... anatomical term ... an organ situated at the anterior of the vulva one of the principal reproductive organs ... See also NYMPHS ... ordinarily proportioned according to the size of the animal ...*" He was silhouetted against the leaded window behind him through which Bageuret could see the blurred shape of a thin crescent moon in the darkening sky above the equally blurred battlements of the Bastille. "*... women who have particularly long and large ones ... extremely sensitive, the principal seat of pleasure in the female ... women who practice self-abuse ... indeed ... See HERMAPHRODITE and CIRCUMCISION ... Must keep you up nights, eh, Monsieur Bageuret?*"

Bageuret shrugged his shoulders. He had no idea what aristocrat was trying to say.

"Bedtime reading," the Margrave added.

Like a schoolboy with a dictionary, Bageuret could not help thinking, the first thing he looks up is the dirty words. But Bageuret had not expected such explicitness. He had only glanced through the volumes, more interested in the workmanship than the content. The truth was he wasn't what could be described as a great reader.

"You don't mind, do you?" Gilles said, addressing his sister, filling his pewter flask.

"I do sometimes wonder about this encyclopaedising," Sophie-Françoise said, opening another one of the volumes. "Perfect knowledge, the ability to predict the position of every billiard ball

in the universe, would be awesomely boring. And what's the use of knowing something is a sin if one is powerless to resist the temptation?"

"Perhaps it's the knowing it's a sin that makes it irresistible," Gilles suggested.

"Excellent, Monsieur Bageuret," the Margrave pronounced, shutting the volume he had been reading from. "I'll settle up with Monsieur d'Argenson here in a few days. Before you sail, as they say. Don't worry, I'm not one of your betters who think tradesmen's bills are best permanently lodged in the bottom of one's in tray." He turned to Gilles. "That other man in black, below in the drawing room ... Diderot's factotum ... Baptiste something or other ... he doesn't know anything about this?"

"Ignorant as a newborn babe," Gilles assured him. "His head is too full of schemes to improve mankind for him to notice anything much that's happening right under his nose."

"No, he has nothing to do with it," Sophie-Françoise added.

"Good," the Margrave said.

"Try and at least act half-sober when you and Monsieur Bageuret say your goodbyes below," Sophie-Françoise said as they left.

On their way down the stairs, Bageuret told Gilles about the incident with the newly printed copies of the second edition of *The Pearls of Debauchery*.

"I'll take every last sou it cost out of their pay," he said. "That'll make the buggers think twice."

"You're not afraid they'll squeal, do the dirt on you?"

Bageuret shook his head.

"Not a chance. They'd find themselves blacklisted from here to Marseilles if they tried any crap like that."

Brass Head, in the process of devouring a flaky cream-topped *gâteau Basque*, eyed them with obvious curiosity as they re-entered the drawing room.

"Halley also believed the Flood was caused by a comet," Jean-Baptiste was saying, "though he thought it was due to a sort of global sloshing about of the oceans caused by one as it passed near the Earth." XXXIX

"Well, I hope it keeps its distance this time," said Mademoiselle du Columbier.

"I don't think he was referring to the current one," said Brass Head. "And Scripture makes no mention of any such celestial apparition."

Brass Head, Gilles noted, was in his element playing the role of Mademoiselle du Columbier's *spiritual adviser*. She was

obviously one of those women who took an unhealthy interest in the consolation of religion and its various providers. His vague phantasies of her suitability as a marriage partner had disappeared; but he couldn't help wondering if Brass Head ever got the chance to play Father Dirrag and Eradice with her.

"I think the Almighty has a preference for expressing his divine wrath in the form of earthquakes nowadays," Gilles said.

Bageuret had seen Gilles drunk like this before; and he knew from experience he could be both lucid and outrageous. The brandy he'd had upstairs – how many glasses had it been? two? three? – had obviously gone to his head.

Madame de Walsh decided to try and bring the conversation under some measure of control again.

"Newton calculated that an iron ball the size of the Earth would cool in fifty thousand years," she said. "But the Comte de Buffon actually did an experiment. He heated up several balls of iron to get figures for cooling rates for different sizes. The figure he came up with for a ball the size of the Earth was seventy-five thousand years."

"Overheated balls can get a man into trouble on occasion," said Gilles. "Didn't the Comte have a bit of bother with the learned doctors of the Sorbonne a few years back?"

"I don't think it was his balls that the good doctors were concerned with," countered Brass Head.

"Some swear the world started with a fire," said Gilles, unable to restrain himself, "others that it started with water. And others again that it materialised out of thin air."

"Indeed, Monsieur d'Argenson," said Brass Head. "Creation is a mystery we can never hope to understand. Natural theology can only open our eyes to the wonder of it."

"In the beginning there was nothing," said Gilles. He clicked his fingers. "And then there was something."

Brass Head appeared taken aback for a moment but rallied quickly.

"The emergence of being from non-being is the core of the divine mystery, Monsieur d'Argenson. Your joke suggests such a thing happening is ridiculous, but it did happen. God does not proceed – as Monsieur Baumann or Maupertuis, or whatever else he wishes to call himself – by degrees of error. Or, as Monsieur Diderot would have us believe, that new species emerge by means of monstrosities and freaks."^{XL}

Von Klopstock looked on the verge of saying something – perhaps in defence of Diderot – but then obviously thought better

of it. Bageuret still had not read the manuscript the young Westphalian had given him; he doubted it would be worth printing but one never knew.

“Faced with the grandeur of Nature,” the ginger-wigged aristocrat continued, seemingly unaware just how intoxicated Gilles actually was, “who can really believe that life and the universe it inhabits are not the result of an infinitely higher intelligence. And what better evidence of it is there than the fact that animals are so well adapted to the environments in which they live. Such perfection could not be produced by mere chance, or by some arbitrary, mindless and soulless mechanism. The universe is ruled by laws, divine laws. Deny God’s laws and you deny God. Deny God and everything is permitted.” Brass Head was visibly angry now. “The man who does not believe in God can permit himself everything.”

“God or no God, Man decides what is right,” Gilles countered. “The truly moral man obeys God because he judges God to be right, not because of the threat of hellfire.”

“Attila the Hun decides what is right,” Brass Head scoffed. “Religion is the foundation of civilisation, not your so-called scientific theories – however bloody clever. There is not a thought or an idea or a system of thought which – using your so-called reason – if brought to its ultimate conclusion does not lead to absurdity or worse. And make no mistake about it, there are men who will see to it that nothing that damages religion will be tolerated, men who take their responsibilities seriously. Don’t underestimate us!”

Bageuret decided to intervene.

“Do you have any particular printing house in mind for your book?” he asked Madame de Walsh. “There could well be a public appetite for lighter, less erudite and cheaper fare than Buffon’s encyclopaedic tomes.”

Gilles took out his flask and topped up his tea with some brandy.

“No, Monsieur Bageuret, not as yet,” Madame de Walsh said, pointedly ignoring Gilles’s drunkenness.

“Medicinal,” Gilles explained rather lamely. “Toothache.”

“If I may be so bold,” Bageuret said, handing Madame de Walsh one of his visiting cards. “Printed by our very own craftsmen.”

As she examined the card, he picked up the teapot and began to pour himself some more tea. But as his cup slowly filled with the sparkling brown liquid it suddenly shattered, releasing a cascade of scalding tea into his lap.

Madame de Walsh called for a napkin.

“One should always pour the milk into the cup first, Monsieur Bageuret,” she said.

“The china is rather sensitive to the heat,” Brass Head explained. “Pouring the milk first means it doesn’t get quite so hot. You have not burned yourself, I hope.”

“No, no,” said Bageuret. “I am quite unhurt.”

“Tea can stain dreadfully,” said Mademoiselle du Columbier, handing him the napkin.

“Oh, not on black,” said Bageuret, wiping himself with the napkin. “It shall not show at all.”^{XLI}

Ж

“Just take them,” Adélaïde suggested.

The smouldering pine logs in the fireplace were giving off a heady resinous scent. Diderot’s library, at times, could be surprising homely. The d’Holbachs’s apartment on the Rue Royale had a transitory, even anonymous, air about it; and Grand-Val, massive and servant-infested, even more so. She had never been to Jean-Baptiste’s lodgings but she imagined them to be spartan, dingy even, books piled on the floor gathering dust, and a rough wooden table that served both as a desk and a cramped table for hurried meals. She was sure he didn’t entertain much, if at all. He’d got used to the inky penury that most of the city’s clerks lived in. Charpentier’s *Encyclopédies* could change that. But he needed to grab the chance. She wondered if he would.

“Nobody else knows about them,” she added. “They were never supposed to exist in the first place. The man who owned them – these books which were never supposed to exist – no longer exists. So, for all intents and purposes, they do not exist. What never existed will not be missed.”

For a moment Jean-Baptiste thought she was joking but then realised she was not.

“Ideas need money,” she said quietly.

“Take all of them?” he asked.

“Yes,” she nodded. “Just take them, just take them all, and sell them.”

“But where could I hide them?”

“We’ll think of something,” she said.

Maybe, he found himself thinking, maybe ... Perhaps he should arrange another meeting with the Silkworm.



“Nice pair of mammaries,” said the Grammarian. He was referring to Emilie Blanche. “I like them on the large size – to tell the truth – love to bury me muzzle in them. Enjoy the sight of them bouncing and flopping about while being given a good ride. Like a woman on top. Not ashamed to say it. There is a lot of heepocrisy in the world. It would be a far better place if we were more honest about our deevinely ordained urges. And as for guilt: nothing like it for keeping men in line. Tell a guilty man in search of forgiveness to lick your arse and nine times out of ten he’ll do it. And he’ll thank you for it.”

The Grammarian’s manner and attitude had not changed at all. He was as foul-mouthed as he’d ever been, though, like Bossuet himself, he had aged. He was fatter than he used to be and the stubble on his unshaven drinker’s face was grey. But his amber eyes, as bright as ever in his ageing face, conveyed the same shiftiness. And, Bossuet could have sworn, the grotty horsehair he was wearing was the same one he’d worn more than ten years earlier.

“I need another drink,” he said and signalled to the boy.

They were in the Cave. Bossuet had suggested it – *for old times’ sake*. It was early evening and the place was empty except for the two of them. It had not changed much. There was a faded print of the Lisbon earthquake on the wall, a crude woodcut of the doomed city viewed from the sea: rubble, houses and churches in flames, ships being tossed about like toy boats in the heaving waters of the harbour.

“The Almeeghty incinerated Sodom and Gomorrah for their sins,” the Grammarian said, noticing Bossuet staring at the image, “and once drowned the whole of humanity like unwanted kittens. But Lisbon ... maybe He doesn’t want to be believed in anymore. Perhaps He’s grown tired of doling out retribution – given up hope? – and these days just wrecks havoc for the hell of it. Or maybe it’s just that disaster strikes regardless, so eat, drink, fuck, shite and be merry. The church bells in Paris rang from the vibrations, you know.”

He had a point, about the retribution bit anyway, Bossuet thought. For it was extremely unlikely that the peoples of Paris or Naples were less given to the pleasures of the flesh than those of Lisbon.

“But I observe that you have seen the light,” the Grammarian continued, nodding at Bossuet’s non-alcoholic bowl of chocolate. “A road to Damascus experience? Or a *nuit de feu*?” The

Grammarians were not as uneducated as the impression he quite deliberately strove to give. Bossuet had always thought that behind the bluster and the deliberate mispronunciations, there was a man of intelligence, and oddly enough, even some sensitivity.

“Something like that,” Bossuet said, as the boy put another glass of cheap red wine in front of the Grammarian.

“The desirable Emilie Blanche worked in the print trade,” the Grammarian went on. “It’s forbidden of course for the wilier sex to sully themselves with printer’s ink, but since she wasn’t printing prayer books ... It was one of those basement fly-by-night shops. Booklets. Quick wank jobbies. Hardly a word spelt right. I’m sure you know the kind of thing I mean. She had learnt her alphabets in some convent or other and was nimble enough with her feingers – in more ways than one, if you gets me meaning. Got into the pheelosophy trade eventually, did a fair bit of peddling – and a bit of smuggling. On more than one occasion she walked through a Farmers-General gate with a wicked female smile on her face and a dozen Jansenist tracts keeping her fanny warm. Used to peddle pheelosophical works under her cloak around the Palais Royal too.

“Anyway, a few weeks after your friend Desforges – a funny fish, never warmed to him, always thought that there was something unstable about him, a little too idealistic for my low tastes – was given free board by the perfumed arseholes of Versailles, Emilie found out she had a bun in the oven. Thing about arseholes: no matter how much rose and lavender water you sprinkle on them, what comes out in the end is always shite. Nature of the beastie. But then shite’s part of life, and life’s not fair, especially not to women. Of course, the whole thing was a farce. Desforges read out that poem of his in some slop house, got drunk, and somebody nicked it from his coat pocket. A complement really, I suppose. It’s not that often poems are purloined. Anyway, whoever nicked it read it out or had it copied or something. That is what landed your mate in the shite. The irony of it is that at the time he had written some exquisite filth about the Bien Aimé’s little brothel at Parc-aux-Cerfs – he was copying it out himself and hawking it around the cafés – which, one would have thought, was far more likely to have been the thing that would have landed him in the shite house. But that’s the wee of the wicked world.”

Bossuet was not sure that Louis’s Parc-aux-Cerfs harem – or the King’s Birdcage as it was also called – existed at the time. But he let it pass.

“But, that’s ancieent history,” the Grammarian continued. “Old Emilie is a clever old bird. She managed to get herself a position à

la campagne, with some aristo family, well away from this rat-infested metropolis. One day the rats will take over – not the ones that live in our magnificent sewers – and the anti-Christ will appear among us in all his glory. Can't wait for it, to tell you the truth!"

Even in the old days, it had been impossible to tell when the Grammarian was joking or being serious, or both, or neither.

"I don't suppose you have any idea where *à la campagne*?"

"Planning a visit?"

The Grammarian was nothing if not quick.

Bossuet was non-committal.

"It's in the realms of the possible," he admitted.

"I didn't know you knew her."

"I didn't. Not really."

The Grammarian gave Bossuet one of his looks.

Bossuet attempted to look innocent.

"She's in a place called Alligny-en-Morvan. One of those thousand godforsaken places in France where one would be forgiven for thinking that the principal cause of death was sheer boredom. I come from thereabouts originally. Couldn't get out of it fast enough. But destiny brought me back there about two years ago. I visited her."

"Destiny?"

"An inheritance. An ancient relative went to his eternal reward, a man who didn't have the sense to spend everything he had before he became too decrepit to enjoy it. Not that there was much to spend."

"How is business these days?" Bossuet asked before thinking.

The Grammarian had had quite a reputation. In the old days there was a rumour that he had a contact in the pulping room in the Bastille who supplied him with confiscated books by the barrowload.

"Can't complain," he said. "The public's taste for pornography dressed up as risqué morality is constant. Even the philosophes are at it nowadays. Though with that crowd it's more of a case of risqué morality dressed up as pornography. Or is it the other way around? No matter. Like the gravedigger, the hawker of smut is never out of work."

He obviously didn't want to advertise the fact that he was working for Sartine's lot now, though God knows why, he could hardly hope to keep it a secret. But then, maybe he still dabbled in the philosophy trade on the side.

Bossuet decided that he had asked enough questions.

"Take the Chalon-sur-Saône post-chaise to Saulieu," the

Grammarians said, without needing to be asked. “Alligny-en-Morvan’s about half a day’s walk from there. From there you go over the bridge – the local open sewer is called the Ternin – and take the road to Autun. Her rustic idyll – a comfortable enough cottage – is about a quarter of a mile from the bridge. It’s set back from the road, on the right-hand side. Not that easy to miss. You’ll find it.”

CHAPTER XIII

A SOAP ENEMA TWICE A WEEK

You'll be expected, the note in du Guesclin's barely legible scrawl had said, instructing Jean-Baptiste to meet him down a nameless back alley at the rear entrance to a house on the Rue Saint Saviour.

A *maid* in a black feline half-mask, reeking of perfume, the bodice of her black livery barely containing her breasts, opened the door and asked him to take a seat in the candlelit kitchen. A few minutes later the Silkworm, wearing a simple black half-mask but instantly recognisable – though his mask actually hid the boil-thing on his nose – waddled down the stairs, candlestick in hand.

“Welcome to the Salon de Vulcan.” Du Guesclin's breath smelled of wine and garlic. “Well, to the antechambers thereof. Shall we ascend into the lower depths?” He handed Jean-Baptiste a black half-mask. “House rules,” he explained.

The *maid's* grey eyes, her pupils dilated in the semi-darkness, gave Jean-Baptiste a furtive glance as he put the mask on and made to follow du Guesclin up the stairs. He did not like the man but, as Adélaïde had pointed out, ideas needed money; and du Guesclin could be the source of it.

The chandelier-lit carpeted hallway they entered at the top of the stairs was another world. A half-masked footman, rouged, with a beauty spot on the corner of his reddened lips, asked for Jean-Baptiste's coat in an accent one would have expected his master to possess. Under the bright light both his livery and mask revealed itself as dark purple, not black; the braid on the sleeves and hems of his jacket was a garish yellow. From somewhere in the house Jean-Baptiste's could hear music. It sounded like Boismortier.

“Thank you, Etienne,” du Guesclin said with exaggerated politeness as the footman took Jean-Baptiste's shabby greatcoat.

Etienne made an exaggerated bow, and as he hung it among the well-tailored coats and fashionable tricorns on the cloak rack, Jean-Baptiste caught a glimpse of a half-masked figure in the glass mirror above the umbrella stand, and for an instant did not recognise himself.

The salon was a spacious double room, profusely lit by chandeliers. There were about a dozen tables, their masked

occupants, both male and female, dressed – like the implausible servants – as if in costume. Two musicians, also masked and in the house livery, were playing a violin and a harpsichord on a low podium. All the curtains, made of a heavy material the same dark purple colour as the livery, were drawn. The effect overall effect was ambiguously both funereal and carnivalesque. There was no sign of the so-called collection of restraining devices and horsehair whips du Guesclin had been going on about when they'd met in the Rue de Deux Portes.

“Welcome to the first circle,” du Guesclin said as they took a seat.

There was a *nouvelles à la main* and a vase containing make-believe green and purple paper flowers on the table.

“The Roast Beefs are bombarding Le Havre,” du Guesclin said, indicating the hand-written news-sheet. “They're supposed to have destroyed all the so-called secret barges. Double entry bookkeeping was the Venetian's secret weapon; the Roast Beef's is paying his debts on time.”

Another *maid*, as well-spoken as Etienne, brought them a carafe of red wine.

Du Guesclin poured them both a glass.

“The English king is not allowed to default. Their Parlement is stuffed with the men who lent him the money in the first place and they see to it that he bloody well pays it back. The country's a third the size of France, with a third of the population, but they can raise money at the snap of their fingers and at half the rate of interest we can. Maybe it's their religion. We *católicos*, in our hearts of hearts, see money as sort of necessary evil, a sinful thing. But you Calvinists know how to manage Mammon. You even think that having a full purse is a sign of grace, some sort of indication that Christus Pantocrator somehow approves of you.”

“As far as I'm concerned it's the source of nine-tenths mankind's misery,” Jean-Baptiste retorted.

Two half-masked figures, a tall spindly man dressed like a curé – though again, Jean-Baptiste could not quite bring himself to believe he actually was one – and a woman dressed like a convent girl emerged from a door at the opposite end of the room and took a seat at an empty table. For a moment he wondered if she might actually not be a prostitute.

“Property is the cause of greed and avarice,” Jean-Baptiste continued. “Whole peoples are subjected in its name, and corrupted. Read the Abbé Morelly!”

“The fellow who wrote the article on NOAH'S ARK? The one

d'Alembert eulogised in the Preliminary Discourse to humour the champagne theologians in Versailles? Not that one can blame him, the arse of Mother Church required vigorously licking at the time. Royal Professor of Theology or something, isn't he?"

"You're thinking of the Abbé Mallet. And it's *was*. He died a few years back. I'm talking about the Abbé Morelly. The author of *Le Code de la Nature*."

"Some would say that arses should only be licked for pleasure."

It was a female voice.

They both looked up.

The owner of the voice was a half-masked middle-aged woman with hazel brown eyes; but her black curly hair – entirely natural – and her rosy cheeks, and the feline mask, made her look younger than she actually was. She was dressed like a shepherdess from the Comédie.

"Madame G, Monsieur L," du Guesclin said, introducing them.

Pseudonyms were obviously also de rigueur. Jean-Baptiste wondered who she really was.

"Monsieur L believes that the institution of property is the source of all our woes," du Guesclin said.

"How charming," Madame G said, lighting a long thin cigarillo, "a man who believes in things."

"The origin of property," said Jean-Baptiste, feeling suddenly flattered, despite his better judgement, "property in land, the source of all wealth ... was violence and the threat of it. Monsieur Rousseau says it's the greatest hoax ever."

"Odd for a man who loves to sing the praises of Nature," said Madame G. The smoke from her cigarillo smelled of something more exotic than tobacco. Jean-Baptiste wondered if it was some sort of opium. "I should have thought there was nothing more natural than property. The dog and his bone and all that. And as for wealth, surely it's not only green fields that produce riches. What about workshops and ... houses of pleasure?"

"What the Hermit actually says," du Guesclin elaborated, "is that no man should be allowed to own so much that he can compel another to labour for him."^{XLI}

One of the *maids* was rolling an unusual contraption into the centre of the room: a varnished box about two feet high and four feet long mounted on a wheeled table. A lens of some sort, like the lens of a telescope, protruded about six inches from the front of it, and it had a curious miniature chimney-like structure sticking out of the top. It reminded Jean-Baptiste of a camera obscura. He had never actually seen one but Goussier had done a plate of one.

“But the *institution* of property is the foundation stone of liberty,” du Guesclin said, suddenly quite earnest, as if for once he actually believed in what he was saying. “Banish Man’s sense of property, of things and of himself, and he becomes the plaything of tyrants and the mob.”

“Property is theft, property is freedom,” Madame G laughed.

Etienne, the *footman*, had also appeared. He was carrying what looked like a broom handle. Jean-Baptiste didn’t recognise it for what it was – a candle extinguisher, of the type used in churches and great houses – until he noticed the thimble-sized conical cap on the tip of it.

“The Guardians of Plato’s Republic had no property,” Jean-Baptiste went on, determined to make his point. “The Waldesians maintained that Christ and His disciples owned no property – neither personally nor communally – not even his own clothes.”

“The who?” Madame G asked.

“The so-called Poor Men of Lyon,” Jean-Baptiste explained, “a heretical sect founded by Pierre Waldo of Lyons in the 1170s.”^{XLIII}

“You *are* a knowledgeable young man,” Madame G said.

Her round, brown eyes, peeking at him from behind her feline half-mask, seemed to be flirting with him. He felt a twinge in his *culottes*.

“An occupational hazard,” du Guesclin explained. “Monsieur L is an *encyclopédiste*.”

“In the encyclopaedia business one is obliged to think ahead,” Jean-Baptiste found himself saying. “We have already collected materials for the articles beginning with W.”

Du Guesclin exchanged an almost imperceptible glance with Madame G and smiled. Slippery *and* smug, Jean-Baptiste said to himself. Did the man really believe his corrupter act – pathetic but oddly self-consciously ridiculous – was not transparent? And as for Madame G: he wondered if G stood for Gourdan, and if this woman the notorious procuress herself, whose husband was supposed to be a mere six months in his grave.

“The Adamites went the whole hog as regards material possessions,” du Guesclin said. “They divested themselves of everything, even gave up wearing clothes – to emulate life in the Garden of Eden – and abjured matrimony. There are rumours that scatterings of them still exist in Bohemia and some remote and godforsaken Alpine dells.”^{XLIV}

They were now sitting in semi-darkness. The Etienne character had already extinguished half the chandeliers.

“One hopes they cut better figures than the average French

curé,” said Madame G.

Du Guesclin laughed and filled his glass again.

“A religion of reason is what we need,” Jean-Baptiste said, hiding his annoyance at the flippancy with which his ideas were being treated. “Beliefs based on science, on natural philosophy. The feudal order is dying. We need virtues grounded in reason. Rational virtues.”

“As opposed to rational vices?” Madame G suggested.

“Virtues which encourage moderation and promote health, peace of mind and living to a ripe old age,” Jean-Baptiste retorted. “Those are the true measures of human happiness.” But curiosity got the better of him. “What is that?” he asked, indicating the contraption being set up in front of the musician’s podium.

“It’s called a *lanterna magica*,” Madame G informed him. “We had it shipped from the United Provinces. The Dutch are absolutely wild for the devices.”

He’d heard about magic lanterns but had never even seen a drawing of one.

The music had stopped now and the two musicians had vacated the podium; and Etienne was rolling down a large sheet of whitewashed canvas sheet in front of the purple podium-curtains.

“Invented, some say, by Anthanasius Kircher,” du Guesclin added. “For his fellow Jesuits to add even more phantasmagoriae and illusions to their rhetorical repertoires. Others believe it’s a Chinaman invention.”^{XLV}

The *maid* was inserting a glass plate resembling a miniature stained-glass window into some sort of slot behind the lens of the *lanterna magica* apparatus. Etienne extinguished the last of the candles and the room was plunged into darkness.

The room suddenly became as silent as a church. An image, the black outline of a keyhole against a yellowish illuminated background, appeared on the whitewashed canvas sheet; and underneath, the words:

DREAMING BEAUTY AND THE BEAST
A history in pictures of light ...

The second image was of a castle, not very finely drawn, seen through a chaotic lattice of briars; with a rose in the top right-hand corner, shedding drops of liquid, which could either have been blood or tears. And the caption read:

BEAUTY, the possessor
of the prettiest clitoris in the kingdom,
a virgin, at most 15 years, forever sleeps ...

The next image was of a young girl – Beauty obviously – asleep on a stone slab, like the sculptured effigy of a long-dead crusader lying on the stone lid of his sarcophagus, and the words:

*... but the evil BEAST is possessed by dreams
of rousing her from her innocence ...*

A face appeared on the whitewashed sheet, the face of the Beast, a bearded creature, a satyr-like Old Testament prophet. Unseen in the darkness, the violinist began to play a slow mournful tune. The words under the face of the Beast read:

*I have come to sate
my lust for Dreaming Beauty's sleeping Jewel ...*

Of course, it was obvious how it was all done, Jean-Baptiste was thinking, the projected images had simply been painted or drawn or engraved onto the plates of coloured glass. But the illusions were impressive, frighteningly so.

The next image was even more crudely drawn, perhaps deliberately so; it took him a few seconds to recognise what it was. The Beast, naked, stood in the doorway of the chamber in which Beauty lay stone-like on her sarcophagus-bed, his monstrous erect penis the size of one of his obscenely muscular arms. The tune being played on the violin suddenly changed from mournful to lively, and became louder – but not so loud that he could not hear the clink-clunk of the painted panes of glass being inserted and withdrawn from the magic lantern.

The projected images began to come more quickly now and showed the Beast coupling with the passive and obviously still-sleeping Beauty in a variety of positions: the Beast on top of her, the Beast pirouetting her atop his monstrous member ...

... Beauty is evilly deflowered ...

Jean-Baptiste felt Madame G's warm palm rest on his thigh for a moment.

"Desire is such an irrational thing, don't you think?" she whispered.

"Yes," he said. It was all he could think of saying to find his voice.

He'd once seen prints of pictures that a Dutchman by the name of Bosch had painted three hundred years ago: one was called *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, another *Hell*. He was reminded of them now, the way they confused innocence and depravity, the faery and the diabolical.

The next image showed a crude drawing of the bearded mad-

eyed satyr-like creature parting what were obviously Beauty's buttocks ...

... and then more evilly used ... as a boy ...

An unwanted thought forced itself into his mind at the sight of the obscene image: of Adélaïde, of her sitting across from him at Diderot's desk that day in the library, of her sometimes boyish looks ... but he managed to half-banish it. The next image showed Beauty awakening ...

*What monsters have I conjured up in my dreams?
– Beauty asks.*

Suddenly he had a vision of a world awash with dreams, of them appearing on walls and ceilings as the illuminated projections of countless magic lanterns; of countless flickering half-formed thoughts and inchoate desires released from the depths of men's imaginations, flooding the world with phantasms that had no right to see the light of day, the products of dreams that should not even be remembered ... distorted images of imaginings of paradise ... He thought of the restraining devices and horsehair whips du Guesclin had taken such perverse pleasure in alluding to ... More words appeared:

*Did Beauty dream of the Beast?
Or did the Beast dream of Beauty?
What do you dream?*

"The dreams that reason dreams when reason sleeps," du Guesclin muttered, almost to himself.

The last three images were of the face of the Beast, transforming into that of a boy-child, laughing, and then of Beauty ... in the process of metamorphosing into a Beast-like creature herself ... followed by the image of an eye with a keyhole in the place of the pupil.

Finis.

The applause was unexpectedly polite, and strangely formal.

Etienne began to relight the chandeliers.

"Fevered illusions," Jean-Baptiste said. He was determined to get the first word in. "Smoke and mirrors."

"Perhaps your notions of human happiness are an illusion too," du Guesclin suggested. "*We are but clay in the rough hands of circumstance, tabulae rasae, a mess of muscles and fibres, capable of spasms of pain and pleasure, without souls, natureless except for the basest instincts.* Locke. Perhaps all there is are momentary

electrifications of the senses?"

"And joy?" Jean-Baptiste said, fully aware that the man was trying to provoke him. "Innocent joy. I suppose that's an illusion too. Man has base instincts but he also has the germs of virtue in his being. We can cultivate either. What we have just seen ..." – he gestured towards the whitewashed sheet – "... is pandering to the basest instincts, the product jaded minds corrupted by the vices of a jaded half-civilisation."

"Perhaps the science of the future will be able to measure pleasure," Madame G added. "And pain."

"Accurate methods for measuring such things are not unimaginable," Jean-Baptiste replied. "Descartes believed that mathematical methods could be applied to all the sciences eventually."

"A mathematics of morality," du Guesclin laughed.

"Better than a mathematics of immorality," Jean-Baptiste retorted. "Deciding which of two evils is the lesser is a not an uncommon ethical dilemma ..."

"Mathematical formulae to measure the ethical degree of pain to be meted out to the criminal?" suggested du Guesclin.

"Excuse me," Madame G suddenly said and got up. "Mademoiselle Sappho seems to require my assistance."

Du Guesclin watched her cross the room knowingly. Jean-Baptiste half-expected him to say something but the merchant remained untypically silent. Jean-Baptiste decided to broach the subject of the *Encyclopédies*.

"You said you might have some buyers," he said. It came out with more abruptness than he had intended. "The last time we met ..."

"Indeed, I did," said du Guesclin. "I'd expect two hundred livres for each customer I send you."

"Two hundred livres?"

"I'm not going to haggle. Just add it to whatever price you were going to sell them for. I'm not going to send you paupers. They'll be able to afford it."

No wonder the man was rich, Jean-Baptiste thought. For an instant he almost found himself admiring him.

"These books are like jewels. The punter wants the price to be high. Otherwise, he'll feel he's not getting the real thing. And if there is one thing in my centuries of mercantile experience I've learnt, it's never to undersell your wares. You can always reduce the price of something. Punters love to think they are getting a bargain. Increasing the price of something is always a trifle more

awkward.”

“I don’t quite have them in my possession. There are some logistical issues to resolve.”

At the other end of the room Madame G was wagging her finger, in mock-reprimand, at a fat middle-aged man dressed in a Louis-le-Grand schoolboy uniform a few sizes too small for him. Jean-Baptiste wondered if there was not any whim or phantasy that these people would not indulge in, no matter how ridiculous.

“You are being careful, I hope,” du Guesclin said.

“Yes.”

“Well, do be.” For a moment Jean-Baptiste was wondering if the man was expressing a genuine concern for his welfare, but then he added, “I wouldn’t want to see a chance to make some shekels go down the drain because of some stupidity.”

Madame G suddenly appeared at their table again, back from her mysterious errand.

“Boys will be naughty, and some of them particularly depraved,” she said by way of a non-explanation, “and girls will ... well, will be girls.”

“Depraved?” said du Guesclin, seemingly genuinely surprised for once.

“Possessing inclinations divergent to one’s own. Are you two gentlemen still philosophising?”

“Do I ever do anything else?” du Guesclin laughed. “In fact, I was just about to tell our Monsieur L that even the best of human ideas decay and ultimately become oppressive. And that his no doubt laudably intentioned religion of reason will go the same way.”

Jean-Baptiste stifled a sigh of contempt.

“Ideas are like living things,” du Guesclin went on, slipping into his philosophical *modus operandi*. “No idea is the final word, and all ideas belong to their time and the classes of men who think them. And, like the men who think them, they are born innocent, bloom – some at least – turn sour in middle age, become superstitious in their dotages and eventually putrefy and shed their clogs. Of course, they occasionally renew themselves. But even Francis of Assisi’s spiritual heirs ended up selling indulgences like hot chestnuts. The Reformers were like a breath of fresh air when their turn came – for a time – one can sometimes catch a glimpse of it in the plain symmetry of their churches. The Jews, the people whom God chose to bring morality into the world, ended up screaming for His crucifixion. Mahometanism liberated the Moorish mind from the legions of jinn that infested it, gave its

followers a single God and a simple set of rules to live by; but now the Ottoman is afraid to print books.”

“Man is capable of pursuing intelligent purposes,” said Jean-Baptiste, trying to get the conversation back on a sensible track again. He realised only after he’d said it he’d used a phrase du Guesclin had used in the other brothel.

“Indeed, he is,” du Guesclin said, “and ideas create societies, but ideas are ruled by their own laws – like the price of corn or the price of anything else you care to think of.” Or, Jean-Baptiste was about to suggest, the price of night soil, but thought better of it. “Empires rise and fall. The sizes of wigs fluctuate. Things get worse, things improve, other things get worse.”

“And where are we now?” Madame G asked. “On the way up or on the way down?”

“Oh, *après nous le déluge?*” du Guesclin said and smiled. “But hopefully not before *our* time is up, said the cynic.”

“Sometimes,” Jean-Baptiste suggested, “things have to get worse before they can get better.”

“Well, Monsieur L, *if* that is the case,” du Guesclin said, “and you want to assist the invisible hand of providence as it unfolds the divine plan – or install your new religion of reason – that would suggest that one’s duty lies in doing one’s damndest to make things worse. Which, I dare say, could be quite amusing – if one were imaginative about it.”

Jean-Baptiste decided he had enough; and decided now was as good a time as any to get to the real reason he was there.

“I have twenty sets,” he said to Guesclin, “but I have some customers of my own. I could let you have maybe fifteen.”

There was no hiding the surprise in on du Guesclin’s masked eyes. He was silent for a moment.

“I want to see them,” he said.

“That can be arranged.”

Ж

Gilles was restless. It was nearly midnight. He and Sophie-Françoise were waiting for Bageuret to return with the Abbé. He had delivered the money to Orioux that morning. The blind man had fingered it carefully, counted it and subtracted his honorarium, which he had simply put into his pocket. “Your friend will be at liberty before the evening is out,” he’d said. “The pederast catcher is a man of his word.” As a token of goodwill as it were, on receipt of his thirty pieces of silver, Foucault had the dress the Abbé had

been wearing delivered to Orieux's office during the afternoon. Orieux had had it sent in a brown paper parcel to Gilles's apartment; Sophie-Françoise had laughed when he'd told that it was green.

"And this one, my dear brother," she said, turning the palm-sized Tarot card face up on the table, "signifies influences which may manifest themselves in the near future."

The skeletal figure of LA MORT, black-robed and scythe-wielding, stared up at Gilles. He did not exactly grimace, but he was not reassured. Consulting the cards had been his idea.

"It symbolises change," she explained. "Propitious or ... antipropitious – if there be such a word."

"The Jesus Man said some of the Jews believe that before the Fall we were all hermaphrodites. At the time I thought it was a roundabout way of suggesting that the Abbé ..."

Another barrage of *feu d'artifice* exploded somewhere over the Ile de la Cité and a flash of white light illuminated the apartment for an instant.

"Hermaphroditus. The Child of Hermes and Aphrodite."

"Diderot once gave me a peek at some of the drawings for the engravings," Gilles went on. "A few depicted hermaphrodites. Their nether regions were very precisely drawn – looked like the work of an anatomist. You don't think there is a possibility ...?"

"When the moon was full in the glades of ancient Greece, his or *her* worshippers met and exchange clothes. The women carried whips. Nobody doubts the sex of La Pucelle d'Orléans. Women dress as men in order to move more freely in the world."

"Hardly the same thing," he said.

"The Empress Elizabeth holds regular balls – she calls them her *metamorphoses* – at which the ladies are obliged to dress as men and the men as ladies. Rumour has it that every man at the Russian court is required to have an entire lady's wardrobe. The fashion is even catching on here, though not at court ... There's discreet shop that specialises for the clientele of both sexes on one of the streets off the Palais Royal."

His elder sister – elder because, they'd been told as children, she was the second-born; it had something to do with Esau the first-born having sold his birthright to his twin brother Jacob for a mess of pottage – invariably seemed to live in a more sophisticated world than he did.

"Everything interesting seems to happen somewhere in one of the streets off the Palais Royal," he said.

She, for her part, could not help thinking that her brother, for all

his virtues, was a man who lived too much in his head, aware that he had a body only when it attacked him in the form of a toothache – or an itch.

“Our good French peasant,” she continued, “not a species known for effeminate or any other charms for that matter, is even inclined to don a dress when he feels the urge to brutally avenge some real or imagined wrong. Though unlike real women, they keep some sort of under-trousers on beneath. And there are even rumours about our own dear Bien Aimé ... Here, cut these.”^{XLVI}

She handed him the pack of Tarot cards.

“Mal Aimé these days,” he corrected her. “I think the sun of our monarch’s popularity has passed its zenith.”

“Mal or Bien, when he was a young man, a boy really, he had tendencies. They say. But his *boyfriends* were sent away. Lewd pictures of shepherds and shepherdesses – especially shepherdesses – were left lying around. The Comtesse de Toulouse got Madame de Vrillière to *cure* him. Henri III is supposed to have dressed in women’s clothes in public. He used to go around accompanied by a number of youthful male attendants clad in all the colours of the rainbow, his so-called *cuties*.”

“Well, I doubt if the Abbé is curable,” he said, giving her back the cards.

“I hope your confidence in his dubious abilities is not misplaced. He appeared to me to be a man distinctly at the end of his tether. I know buggery was a virtue in Sparta. And Athens too, come to mention it, but ... Didn’t Nero indulge in sodomitical matrimony? And Caligula marry his horse? Or did he simply bugger it?”

“He made it a senator.”

“And if the Abbé buggers things up?”

“He won’t.”

“But if he does?” she said.

“We’ll have been paid half of the money,” he said.

“My Teutonic Knight would not be happy with that attitude!”

“He is taking a risk. We are taking a risk.”

The next card she turned up was LE DIABLE, cloven-hoofed, with the head and horns of a goat. The hand-coloured printed images looked even more medieval in the candlelight.

“No need to make a face,” she said. “Just think of him as the impishness of things. The forces of earth. Pan. The lust that comes with spring. The Lord of the Sabbat.”

“I didn’t think there were any witches left. I thought we’d burned them all.”

He made a sudden grimace.

“Are you suffering?” she asked.

“Twinges. Hell is a toothache. I need to make an offering to whatever deity is responsible for rotting teeth.”

“Saint Appolline, I believe.”^{XLVII}

“What do the cards advise?”

“I doubt they tell us more about what will happen in the future than we can guess ourselves. The way I think about it is that perhaps they are somehow in sympathy with everything that is happening at the moment they are laid out, that all things – cards and events – somehow unfold together. To predict that someone is going to have a long life or a short one is beyond them, I’m afraid.”

“The Monkey’s particular secret is a soap enema twice a week,” he said, “and endless cups of coffee. Fifty a day. He’s sixty-five and still going strong.”^{XLVIII}

“One man’s poison is another’s elixir.”

The next card she turned up card was LA JUSTICE, complete with blindfold and balance – signifying Orieux? But perhaps it just coincidence.

“They say he’s taken to wearing diamond buckles in his shoes,” he said. “It’s all the fashion at court nowadays. Not that his leprechaun face is welcome there.”

Gilles was silent for a moment.

“And if the future is predestined?” he added. “If every important decision was made on a Monday morning on a November day in 4004 *ante Christum natum*? Or even, if one is to believe the likes of Maillet, ten million millennia ago.” But his open-ended tone told her he had no particular wish to follow up the myriad implications of that possibility.

Dabbling in the occult – if it could be called that – had failed to alleviate his restlessness and he was becoming bored with it. As she gathered up the cards and replaced the vase of artificial flowers in the centre of the table, he looked at the clock. Bageuret should be leaving Bicêtre by now.

Ж

The door in the prison gate opened and a figure, his coat flapping in the wind, emerged and made his way over the cobblestones towards the waiting carriage. An unpaid debt to someone high up at Versailles, Gilles had said – or rather hinted, he had not been that forthcoming. Bageuret had his doubts. As the Abbé stepped into the light cast by the carriage’s lantern, Bageuret had the momentary impression it was Gilles. Then he realised the coat and

the wig the Abbé was wearing were actually Gilles's – he was sure of it. Wondering what that was all about, but with no intention of asking, he opened the door of the hired carriage. As the Abbé mounted the carriage step, the moon momentarily appeared from behind the clouds and Bageuret caught a glimpse of the menacing outline of the Bicêtre fortress tower.

“A misunderstanding, a terrible misunderstanding,” the Abbé said as he sat down.

“It happens,” Bageuret said and knocked at the front panel of the compartment to indicate to the coachman to move. He had a sudden sense of foreboding.

“At least I had a room of my own,” the Abbé added. “In the asylum, the cretins and the lunatics sleep eight to a bed, or rather to a pallet. Wanking themselves into an early grave, no doubt.”

“No doubt,” Bageuret said, slightly embarrassed. The medical men were saying that habitual onanism, besides being sinful, also led to debilitation and was even a major cause of lunacy. But he was not sure what counted as habitual.

The Abbé remained silent until the fortress was safely behind them.

“Where are we going?” he asked eventually.

“To Mademoiselle d'Argenson's apartment for now. Gilles will put you up at his place until it is time for you to leave. He will take you directly to Quai des Potiers early on Monday morning.”

It began to rain again as they approached Paris. They could see the white starbursts of a *feu d'artifice* display lighting up the sky over the city and hear the detonations.

“The Carnival lasts from Saint Stephen's Day to Mardi Gras in Venice,” the Abbé said.

Bageuret could not see his face in the darkness.

“I don't know about Venice,” Bageuret said, “but I know about Paris. The whole thing is just an excuse for drunkenness, fornication, and crime.” The day before the Slaughter of the Ox had taken place. He had seen it once – there had not been a sober Christian in sight. The thing was heathen to the core.

“But there's a few sous to be made, eh!” suggested the Abbé. “Venice gets thirty thousand visitors a year.”

He seemed to be overly jolly for a man who had just spent four days in a dungeon.

It was still raining when they reached the Farmers-General gate and were waved through. The streets were empty except for a few masked and costumed revellers. The damp gloom and smell of saltpetre from the *feu d'artifice* mingling with the familiar sweet–

rotten smell of the city only aggravated Bageuret's sense of unease.

"I've always found the fragrance of freshly ignited gunpowder oddly invigorating," the Abbé said, taking a deep sniff of the air.

The thought came to Bageuret that he could simply signal to the coachman, stop the carriage, get out and walk away from this whole affair. And he could have, he supposed. But he also had an overwhelming feeling that what was happening had developed its own momentum and was moving inexorably towards its resolution, whatever that would be, as inevitably as the carriage was being drawn towards its destination by the cantering horses.

The *gardien* at Sophie-Françoise's house was expecting them. Bageuret escorted the Abbé up the stairs to the door of the apartment. Sophie-Françoise invited him to stay for a drink but he declined on the pretext that the carriage was waiting below in the street. In fact, he had asked the coachman to wait to avoid having to stay. He'd had enough of the Abbé and, in any case, he did not relish a walk back to Imprimerie Charpentier in the darkness, with revellers prowling the streets, and only his growing foreboding for company. Although Sophie-Françoise did not say anything directly, he thought he detected some unease, but she seemed determined to go ahead. Women did seem to have a second sense about these things, he thought and took some consolation in that.



Mon cher François-Antoine,

Our limping Janus-faced cabinet noir man is most probably working on his own. In fact, I am sure of it, in as much as one can be sure of anything in this city of spies and conspiracies. It's money he's after most likely as not. It's as simple as that. There is no puppet master to worry about. Which makes him a puppet without a master, I suppose, if that makes sense. Which I'm sure it doesn't, but I like the concept.

As regards the third volume of the book of bad things to know – I have learnt that a crony of Denis the Devil might be offloading some old stock – a sort of clear-out sale before the bailiffs arrive, I should imagine. But the goods will not be cheap. I am making further enquiries.

Your devoted informant, V

François-Antoine de Graffigny, SJ, shook his head. He was used to Isabelle de Vereaux's sarcasm. He wondered if she really imagined it actually impressed him. But it did seem Bossuet's

motive was simply money. She had been correct in her initial appraisal. And perhaps too, as she had more than once pointed out, he did at times have a tendency to read too much into things.

It seemed he had two options. If Bossuet considered himself a blackmailer he would attempt to milk him as long as he could ... an untenable situation ... and he would simply have to find a way to destroy the man. But, and mercifully so, he was sure the cripple considered himself more of an informant – though the way the man had tried to inveigle himself into his good books left much to be desired. The man could be useful, but first he would need to show him who his master was, show the puppet that he had a master, whether he liked it or not.



Jean-Baptiste could not help relishing having du Guesclin follow him up the wooden stairs to the attic storeroom on Quai des Potiers, having the man dance to his tune for a change, as it were. The older man was slightly short of breath by the time they reached the door.

“Too many Turkish pipes last night,” he explained.

Jean-Baptiste could have commented but thought better of it. The man would probably have come up with some know-all answer in any case.

“They’re in pristine condition,” he said, as he opened the two locks, “never even been as much as flicked through.”

Jean-Baptiste opened the door and let du Guesclin enter first.

“I see you’ve been busy,” du Guesclin said.

Jean-Baptiste thought it was just an idle comment until he had followed him in and saw what he was referring to.

“Jesus,” he whispered to himself and felt himself go more than slightly faint.

“What’s up?” du Guesclin asked

Two of the wooden crates had been opened – and emptied.

“What is it?” du Guesclin asked again. It was obvious now that something was wrong.

“Somebody had been here.”

Several oblong white pinewood boxes were stacked up against the wall. Whoever had been there had also started using the place as a storeroom. This was a disaster.

“I don’t understand,” du Guesclin said.

“Somebody else has been here. I have the only set of keys.”

“You mean you thought you had.”

Jean-Baptiste sat down on one of the pinewood boxes.

“They’ve taken half the books.”

Du Guesclin sat down beside him, on another one of the pinewood boxes

“It was a mad idea. I should never have ...” He nearly added *let her talk me into it* but he had become aware of du Guesclin again. The man was obviously going to ask him for an explanation.

“Have what?”

“They’ve taken half the books,” Jean-Baptiste repeated. He had no intention of telling du Guesclin any more than was absolutely necessary. “I should never have let the keys out of my sight. That’s what I mean. Somebody must have made a copy of them.”

Du Guesclin did not look convinced.

Jean-Baptiste felt another wave of panic.

“Calm down!” du Guesclin said. “A key is bugger all use if you don’t know what lock it opens. If someone did copy your keys, it was someone who knew what they were for. But I don’t think *they*, whoever *they* are, have taken the books.”

“What?”

“I think we’re sitting on them,” du Guesclin explained, tapping on the white pinewood boxes they were sitting on by way of indication. “There’s crowbar over there under the window.”

Jean-Baptiste immediately seized it and began to wrench open the lid of one of the boxes.

“Carefully does it,” du Guesclin said. “Don’t cause any damage.”

Jean-Baptiste eased the lids off slowly. All sorts of wild possibilities were going through his mind, none of which made any sense.

The missing *Encyclopédies* were in the boxes.

Jean-Baptiste didn’t know whether this was an improvement on the situation or a worsening of it.

“This changes everything,” he said without thinking. “I don’t know, maybe ... maybe we should just call this whole thing off. It was a lunatic idea from the start.”

But du Guesclin cut him short.

“This is your chance, lad, don’t let it slip through your fingers. Don’t go lily-livered!”

Again Jean-Baptiste wondered if du Guesclin was actually expressing a genuine concern for his welfare. But it was hardly likely.

“Chances like this are once in a lifetime,” du Guesclin went on. “It’s a lot of money, lad. Enough to make a difference.”

Jean-Baptiste looked at him.

“This could be the difference,” du Guesclin explained, “between

you being a man who makes a difference and being a man who ... simply doesn't."

That was bloody rich, Jean-Baptiste could not help thinking, coming from the likes of du Guesclin, a man who'd lived his life doing nothing but amassing money by any means possible and indulging every depraved whim in his head.

But he had a point. Or did he?

"The ways to make money can be counted on the fingers of one hand," du Guesclin continued, raising his right hand and opening his finger one at a time. "One. Marry it. Two. Inherit it. Three. Steal it. But crime is risky. Four. Commerce, which is neither theft nor crime but shares certain qualities with both."

"And the fifth?"

Jean-Baptiste was about to suggest it might be the honest exercise of an honest trade but knew du Guesclin too well to fall into that trap; the man would have simply scoffed at him.

"Something extremely rare," du Guesclin said. "Finding buried treasure! And digging it up. And that, my lad, is what these books are. Buried treasure. To you anyway."

"To me!"

"You're young. Probably a lot further from the grave than I am. There *are* things you want to do, aren't there?"

"Yes, I have ideas."

"Let's just call them desires. Grab your chance while you still have time. Things fall apart. That's the only law of the universe I know. Quicker than you think, and then snap, the springs in the clockwork burst: a rupture, a fever, or ..." – du Guesclin tapped his nose – "... a cancer. This is your chance." He paused for a moment and then he asked him: "Are you going to tell me how this treasure throve happened to fall into your hands?"

Jean-Baptiste thought for a moment before deciding to tell the truth, the briefest possible version of it.

"I had a partner. We collected them over the last few years ... it was a sort of retirement nest egg, for him anyway. But he was killed ..."

"Killed?"

"An accident."

"Name?"

"Jacques Charpentier of the Imprimerie Charpentier."

"On the Rue Paradis?"

It was more a statement than a question.

Jean-Baptiste nodded.

"I've had dealings with him, and his wife," du Guesclin

explained. "Couldn't make it to the funeral. Tragic really. But you've got to look on the bright side."

"The bright side?"

"When someone you know, or sort of know, sheds their clogs ... well, it sort of gives you an extra lease of life ... the chances that you're going to follow in their clog-steps very soon is sort of reduced."

"What?"

"It's like if you're planning an ocean voyage and you hear of a shipwreck ... well, there's only so many shipwrecks happen in a month ... the shipwreck you hear about reduces the chances of the same fate befalling your ship. While if you haven't heard of a shipwreck for some time before that, it means that one is due ... and it could be your ship. The laws of chance. Pascal and all that. Funny thing: the scientific way of looking at the world. Not so sure I like it, to tell you the truth."

Jean-Baptiste refrained from arguing with him.

And surprisingly du Guesclin didn't ask any more questions.

"I was sure nobody else knew," Jean-Baptiste said, "He must have told somebody else."

"Well, let's not worry about that now. Give me the keys."

Jean-Baptiste was taken aback.

"What?"

"Whoever has the other set of keys is obviously planning to move the books they've packed in these boxes. We need to pre-empt them. I have an idea."

CHAPTER XIV

A SERMON IN A BROTHEL

The Jesuit extended his hand with a studied casualness and Bossuet went through the motions of a genuflection and kissed his ring.

“The *nouvelles à la main* are full of rumours,” Bossuet said as he stood up.

He had requested their meeting. The Jesuit had instructed him to meet him at the Queen’s Pond in the Jardin des Plantes. Situated near the river, it had been founded by the Sun King as a royal garden to grow medicinal herbs; it had since become a public park, complete with a maze and a labyrinth. Occasionally, exotic beasts from the menagerie at Versailles were displayed in cages.

“Tittle-tattle,” said the Jesuit, as he threw a handful of crusts from a brown paper bag into the water. Several mallards immediately made a beeline for the food. But Bossuet had a point, there had been more talk than usual about the Society in the last week or so, inspired by events in Portugal. “Our *nouvellistes* love nothing more than the mutterings of those who see conspiracies everywhere.”

The priest was in lay dress. One law for some, another for the common herd, Bossuet could not help thinking. It was not unheard of for a lesser cleric to have a *lettre de cachet* slapped on him courtesy of his bishop for not wearing a cassock. In a port in Ceylon, Bossuet had once come across a Jesuit dressed in the orange robes of an Indian priest. A man should be honest about what he was – but then, who was he to judge. But the Indians were not in the habit of burning heretics, so there was no excuse – though they did burn some of their widows. The same could not be said for the Portuguese Inquisition in Moçambique and Goa though, or for the Spanish Inquisition in Spain’s colonies.

“Mutterers need bones to gnaw upon,” Bossuet said. He could not help thinking the Jesuit did come across as a pompous old ass at times.

The Jesuit did not say anything, letting Bossuet come to the point he was obviously trying to come to unassisted.

“And a potential bone might be the activities of a certain Monsieur le Abbé de Graffigny. A relative of Your Excellency,

I believe.”

He could see that he had caught the Jesuit's attention.

“The birds have a hard time of it in winter.” The priest threw another two crusts into the water, this time further out so the ducks had to again scurry across the oil-smooth surface of the pond to reach them. “What about him?”

Bossuet worded his reply carefully.

“He is involved in activities – illicit activities – which, if they came to the attention of certain persons and the public, particularly at this time, might be ...”

The Jesuit gave him a look that contained more or less equal measures of anxiety and malice.

Bossuet sensed he had gained the upper hand.

“Guilt by association is a most unjust concept,” he continued, “but the world is not always just.” The Society's prohibition on those of Hebrew descent entering its ranks being an example in point, he thought silently.

“The Good Lord decides what is just,” the Jesuit said.

The impatience in the priest's voice was patent.

“The conspiracy your nephew is part of is not an imagined one.”

The Jesuit remained stone-faced.

“He is involved in a plot to sell twenty sets of Diderot's *Encyclopédie*. Your nephew mixes with the d'Holbach crowd. He has contacts. He and his co-conspirators have acquired complete sets of all the volumes published to date and, I have good reason to believe, are in the process of selling them.”

The Jesuit gave him a sceptical frown.

“Complete sets of the *Encyclopédie*?”

“Of all those printed to date. Perhaps Monsieur Diderot has been saving up for a rainy day?” Not that he'd found any evidence that there was any connection with Diderot, but there was no harm in hinting at that possibility.

“A rainy day?” asked the Jesuit. But then he realised that Bossuet was suggesting that Diderot had been hoarding copies with the intention of selling them at some future date and that now was obviously a good time to get rid of them. That was if there was any truth in what Bossuet was telling him.

“If such a plot – and your nephew's role in it – were to become known ...”

There was no need for Bossuet to finish the sentence.

“Have you seen these *Encyclopédies*?”

“Yes.”

“And Gilles d'Argenson ...?” the Jesuit said.

It was a shot in the dark.

"I am not quite sure what his role is ..." Bossuet began before he realised that he had not mentioned d'Argenson. He was thrown into sudden confusion. Had the priest known about this all along and had simply been humouring him? Or had simply been fishing? Bossuet suddenly realised that if he had been, he had just swallowed a hooked bait?

The Jesuit folded up the paper bag and put it in his pocket.

"Let's walk," he said. "I have enough of the *cacouacs*."

They came to a junction in the path. There were two signposts, one pointing in the direction of the maze and the other to the labyrinth.

"Do you know the difference between a maze and a labyrinth?" the Jesuit asked.

Bossuet shook his head.

"A labyrinth has one path leading to its centre, while a maze has several paths leading to its."

"The Abbé has quite a reputation among the *cacouacs* of the human variety," Bossuet said, in an attempt to regain some ground. "In some circles, he is known openly as a supplier of *philosophical books*. When I learnt of his relationship with Your Excellency, I felt somewhat duty-bound to take it upon myself to make some discreet enquiries."

The Jesuit stopped in front of a cage – not a particularly roomy one – with a monkey in it. The smell reminded Bossuet of being below deck at sea. The Jesuit looked vaguely ... for a moment Bossuet could not put his finger on it ... embarrassed? Men, he had noticed in Pondicherry, were often oddly embarrassed in the presence of monkeys. The temple ruins outside Pondicherry had been infested with screaming tribes of the creatures, stoning each other in fights over the banana trees. They'd even had their kings and matriarchs. Maybe it was the same among all creatures, this urge to climb atop the dung heap and declare oneself *coq au village*. The Indians had a pecking order that was as intricate as anything in France.

"Monkeys are strong beasts, far stronger than they appear," Bossuet said. "If they grab hold of your finger it's the devil's own work to try and get them to let go of it."

The monkey picked its nose, examined the berry of yellow-green snot for a moment, and then ate it. The animal was at least twice the size of Molière, the size of a child but with the wizened face of an old man or woman; and, he had to admit, it did bear an uncanny resemblance to the crude prints of Voltaire sold at the stalls around

the Palais Royal.

“One should never underestimate any creature,” the Jesuit said. “Go on!”

“Your nephew’s services are much in demand. The appetite for the intellectually illicit is *the* vice nowadays.”

As Bossuet went on in this vein, saying nothing very specific, the Jesuit could not get d’Argenson’s words and ingratiating tone out of his mind: *It might be easier to locate a set!* The blatantly feigned concern of a man whom he had taken at face value, even if he did have airs too big for his breeches. Was it even true that that little drunken cur of a nephew of his had been locked up in Bicêtre at all? Had d’Argenson lied about that too? No, he told himself, avoid jumping to hasty conclusions. On balance, that was probably true. The whole sorry tale was too outlandish to have been invented. But they had taken him for a ride – there was no doubt about that – they had treated him like a fool and taken his money. His nephew was a disgrace, a man steeped in the dirt of sin, a man who put his thing up other men’s backsides and had the same thing done to himself: a sodomite. It was more than a sin of the flesh. The body was the Temple of the Holy Ghost, to defile it was a sin against Nature herself, against the divinely ordained order of the natural world, the worst of sins, a crime against the divine will.

“Where is he now?” the Jesuit asked, suddenly bristling with rage.

Bossuet was taken aback.

“I don’t know,” he said.

The Jesuit stared at him.

“I have not seen the Abbé at all recently. Naturally when I learnt ... I made a point of keeping abreast of his comings and goings but ...”

“I want details, not prattle,” the Jesuit said.

Bossuet tried to say something but found himself stuttering.

The priest decided that it was time to impose his will on the ill-kempt clerk. He had toyed with Bossuet and allowed himself to be toyed by him long enough.

“Let me make myself clear,” he said. “I want the names of every person involved in this, the exact location of these *Encyclopédies*, everything you know, every last detail. Do you understand me?”

Bossuet was about to remonstrate but the Jesuit decided to make himself even clearer.

“In the wider scheme of things, *monsieur*,” he said, “you are a nobody, a glorified clerk, of no importance to anyone.”

The shock was visible on Bossuet’s face as he suddenly realised

what was happening. No, he had always been vulnerable. The power had always been in the hands of the Jesuit, who – for his own reasons – had simply chosen not to exercise it. The boot was on the other foot now, and Bossuet knew it.

“You are flirting with forces to whom your personal fate is entirely inconsequential. I know who you work for. I know exactly who you are. Men like you lie forgotten in prisons all over this country. How long do you think you would last chained to an oar in a galley? Just image the squalor. If you even got that far. It is a long limp to Marseilles, a very long limp, and even longer with a chain around your neck. A whisper from me in the appropriate ear and your days of spying and blackmailing and pawing the coins of your victims would be over forever. *Ad perpetuitatem*. Do you understand me?”

Bossuet could not even bring himself to mutter an affirmative.

“Do you understand me?”

“Yes,” Bossuet managed to say finally, completely subdued by the Jesuit’s display of wilfulness. He should have known that behind the carefully cultivated mild and pompous exterior had lurked a fierce determination. He had allowed himself to be fooled by his own illusionary and pathetic sense of importance. A man did not become the Provincial-General of the Society of Jesus by piety and meekness. He had foolishly underestimated the man. But, he reminded himself, the reed that bends in the wind survives the gale. With as much grace as he could muster, Bossuet bowed submissively.

“Now, let’s start from the beginning again, shall we?” the Jesuit said.

Bossuet began to talk. And he found himself telling the truth, more or less, and providing a lot more detail than he thought he would. As he listened to what Bossuet told him, the Jesuit’s anger grew. D’Argenson and his nephew had deceived him, taken his, or rather the Society’s money. But he checked his rage at the insult to himself. There was more involved here. Far more. And now, in his rage, he was seeing it more clearly. Diderot’s Tree of Knowledge bore fruits as poisonous as the tree Eve had plucked the apple from. *Thou shalt have no other gods before me*. Neither Baal, nor Mammon, nor flesh, nor earthly beauty nor earthly knowledge. The lust for knowledge – and for the power it brought with it – was like a contagion, its invisible and odourless vapours spreading like a malaria. The discovery that the universe was mostly ethereal space was no reason to banish God and His mysteries from the world. The Virgin was not some latter-day Aphrodite nor Jesus some

latter-day Apollo. The void of empty space did not make the cosmos devoid of meaning. Quite the opposite, the sheer unimaginable magnitude of an infinite universe – be it Galileo’s, Descartes’s or Newton’s – only served to illuminate the utter immensity of God, as Nicholas of Cusa had pointed out over three hundred years ago. But even he himself, a man steeped in the *Spiritual Exercises*, had felt the allures of those fruits. He had allowed himself to be enamoured by witty phrases, cleverness and tantalising revelations, even at times by the idea that human destiny was in human hands, in the hands of poor fallen humanity. The sheer arrogance of it! And the notion that these *encyclopédistes* were the men of the future, that Man was the alpha and the omega, could be improved, and eventually even perfected – and earthly happiness the purpose of life. Improvement was not inevitable. *Est ubi gloria nunc Babyloniae?*¹¹ Greece and Rome lay in ruins, most of the works of the ancients lost forever. And gone too were the doctrines of the Cathars, the Albigenses, the Bogomils, the Arians, the Pelagians, the Manicheans, the Anabaptists and other spiritual quagmires too numerous to count – like dust upon the wind. Only the Church endures, His Church. Only she was the bedrock of justice and salvation. *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*,¹² as Origen, the first Father of the Church, a theologian comparable in the depth of his thought to the Great Augustine himself, had said. Though he too had flirted with heresy, with the belief in the pre-natal existence of the soul and even with the so-called Doctrine of Larger Hope, the belief that all would be saved eventually. But that was beside the point. Christ was the last word on how Man should be in the world. The parable of the Good Samaritan was the last word on all moral philosophy. One’s neighbour was every man, the stranger, all humanity, not merely the man of one’s tribe, of one’s blood. Christ’s words had superseded Plato and all the Greeks; all that came after, from Augustine to Aquinas, was only an explanatory commentary on His message; and none who came after them – be that Erasmus, Leibniz or Denis Diderot – could add anything of substance. *He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone!* No modern system of new-fangled ethics would ever approach that, the most sublime of ethical precepts.

“... I went to the Imprimerie Charpentier on the pretext of purchasing a book,” Bossuet said, coming to the end of his account. “The man I thought was Charpentier was in fact only the manager

¹¹ Where is the glory of Babylon now?

¹² Outside the Church there is no salvation.

of the shop. His name is Bageuret, Sebastien Bageuret. Charpentier died last summer. The place belongs to the widow now.”

“How did you gain access to the storeroom,” the Jesuit asked him.

“A sheet of legal-looking paper and forty sous to keep quiet about it ... carrot and stick, or rather stick and carrot ...”

Bossuet had been more truthful than he had intended to be. He dared not risk enraging the Jesuit again, and cursed himself for his initial arrogance.

“You have done well, Monsieur Bossuet,” the Jesuit said.

Bossuet gave another muted bow.

Christ’s passion and death, His promise of salvation for all and the Church He founded was not to be mocked, least of all by the likes of his nephew, or d’Argenson and this nobody of a bookseller, Bageuret, or whatever his name was. The three of them deserved everything they got, d’Argenson in particular. The Abbé was a reprobate, a slave to his filthy lusts, but d’Argenson was an educated man, of good birth, he should know better; and perhaps he did, but chose to ignore it, motivated instead by the pride, arrogance and greed that was the hallmark of much of the nobility these days. And this Bageuret fellow? A self-deprecating and cunning would-be little petty bourgeois by the sound of him, and a man without connections.

It was clear what he had to do, where his duty lay. Sometimes the sum of pain in the world had to be temporarily increased in order to diminish the totality of it. Sometimes dirty work had to be done. And if the trail eventually led to Diderot, so much the better. So much the better.

“You have earned yourself a few more pieces of silver,” the Jesuit said. “Though not quite thirty.”

Bossuet wondered if the comment had been a surreptitious reference to his origins – and what the priest really knew or was pretending to know – or merely sheer Jesuitical venom. His ancestors’ deicide was the ostensible reason for the universal distrust and loathing of his race; but he sometimes suspected there was also some deep-seated fear at work, but of what he didn’t have an inkling.

“As for what is going to happen next,” the Jesuit continued, feeling a quiet satisfaction that Bossuet was not looking his usual cocky self anymore and, he had to admit, a twinge of something like pity for the cripple, though the feeling was far too disdainful to be that. “Your bookseller is going to be the recipient of an official visit. Because, Monsieur Bossuet, I am not a man who is

lightly mocked.”

“Sire,” said Bossuet in acknowledgement, in a futile attempt to be graceful. He had miscalculated, miscalculated badly. And now the police or whatever agency the Jesuit had in mind was going to be involved. This was not at all what he had intended. “But your nephew, sire, the Abbé de Graffigny ...” he said. “If the bookseller is arrested, his accomplices may also ...”

“Indeed, Monsieur Bossuet.”

Bossuet cringed inwardly.

The Jesuit was well aware of that possibility. Either the Abbé would have left the country by then or the lettre de cachet would be served, or he might even be arrested along with the bookseller. But so be it, if that’s the way it was to be. As for d’Argenson and this book peddler: Malesherbes would be informed, or Sartine – through on second thoughts perhaps not, Malesherbes was a Diderot sympathiser and Sartine and Diderot were old college chums. No, it would need to be somebody who had no sympathy for Diderot or his works, someone who could be depended on to give no quarter. Only one man came to mind, one who could, if approached in the right way, be expected to act discreetly and ruthlessly: Brass Head de la Haye. It would need to be done carefully. De la Haye was not a Jesuit sympathiser. And there was nothing like the wrath of a woman – in this case, a fop – spurned; he had once tried to find out why the Society has washed its hands of the clothes horse but had learnt nothing.

“There are higher values than those of blood, Monsieur Bossuet.”

D’Argenson would rue the day he thought he could play him for a fool. All he needed to do was inform on the book peddler. There would be no need to mention d’Argenson – no need to upset any contacts or relatives he had – he would be caught in the net and be none the wiser. This also meant of course that d’Argenson was unlikely to be able to supply him with the volume for the Romans, but there were other possibilities. As for approaching Brass Head de la Haye: Isabelle de Vereaux, the Society’s Mistress, was just the woman for that unpleasant task.

Ж

In the Imprimerie Charpentier there was nobody at the counter.

Von Klopstock was about to loudly announce his presence when he heard a familiar voice. But he couldn’t place it.

“Nothing a bottle or two of cheap perfume won’t take care of, I’m sure.”

“Pissed as a coot he was.” Then he heard Bageuret say: “Told him the next time he turns up with a much as whiff on his breath I’ll make him drink every bucket of piss in the place. Some of the pages are ruined. I don’t want to sell you tainted goods.”

Bageuret and whoever it was whose voice he couldn’t place were in the back room behind the counter. The door was ajar. But he couldn’t see them.

“I’ll offload them somewhere in the provinces,” the unknown voice said. “’Twould be a shame to waste them. *The Pearls of Debauchery*. A gem of a title.”

“You’ll want them delivered?” Bageuret asked.

“No, I’ll have them collected. I’ll send my lackeys around. Make hay while the sun shines, as they say.”

“Whatever you wish,” Bageuret said, a whiff of suspicion in his voice.

“Strike while the iron is hot,” the voice von Klopstock could not identify added: “He who hesitates is lost. And all that.”

Von Klopstock was on the verge of deciding to actually leave and brave the rain again and come back later but at that very instant Bageuret emerged from the storeroom, followed by a big man, whom von Klopstock, when he saw the purple-veined growth on his nose, recognised immediately; but for a second or two he could not for the life of him remember from where. Then he remembered. It had been at the Procope. And he’d seen him that time at the Deux Portes. Du Guesclin just winked at him – as if he had been expecting him to be there – and without saying anything, opened up his large floral umbrella and made for the shop door, the doorbell ringing behind him as disappeared out into the rain.

“Ah, ’err von Klopstock,” Bageuret said, typically unable to pronounce the German *h*. “What a pleasant surprise!”

The lad was obviously calling around to find out if he’d made a decision regarding his manuscript. Bageuret hadn’t heard him come in; the sound of the rain pounding on the skylights must have muffled the sound of the bell – and, come to think of it, the clunk-cluck of that cripple-boot the German dragged around with him.

“Just passing by and I thought I’d drop in,” von Klopstock said rather unconvincingly.

Bageuret decided to put off the inevitable by offering to show him around the workshop. He’d been rather short with the lad when he’d called around that time to deliver the thing to him.

“As you can see, it’s all rather dirtier and smellier than the impression given in engravings,” Bageuret said, forced to raise his voice above the sound of the rain, as they entered into the

workshop.

Von Klopstock had heard print shops described as smelling of human urine and linseed oil, but he not expected it to be quite so overwhelming.

“We can do up to two hundred and fifty impressions an hour on a good run,” Bageuret explained, showing him the press Patrick and his apprentice, Maurice, were working at.

They watched the printer position sheets of uncut paper in the hinged paper-holder at the end of the press bed, lower it down onto the blocks of type in the forme and slide it under the press. Then with a practised movement, he would tighten the screw-vice to bring the platen firmly and solidly down onto the paper to make the imprint, leaving it there for just a fraction longer than a second before removing it and handing it to Maurice, who was hanging the pages up to dry.

“The simplicity of the process is deceptive. It takes months to learn how much ink to put on blocks of type and acquire the knack of applying the exact amount of pressure for the exact amount of time to produce a cleanly printed sheet. The platen – that’s the upper part of the press – has to be planed perfectly smooth and kept that way. And the ink requires time to dry. Freshly printed sheets need to hang for an hour or so.”

Von Klopstock picked up one of the sheets being printed, a half-sized folio pamphlet advertising cast-iron pipes and accessories.

“Bread and butter work,” Bageuret explained. “But what you see here is but the end result of a great industry. The fonts need to be manufactured. Metal needs to be mined, smelted and cast. As for the paper: Paris’s linen needs to be collected and pulped. The wits say the trade is as much dependent on worn-out underwear as it is on scribblers.”

Two of the compositors were at work in their naturally illuminated alcove. For a moment Bageuret and von Klopstock observed one of them as he selected the minuscule letters of type from the compartmentalised wooden boxes they were kept in and inserted the tiny letters into a composing stick; the craftsman’s large ink-stained fingers were manipulating the pieces almost as quickly as a man could write. No wonder they were called monkeys, von Klopstock could not help thinking.

“Everything is in reverse of course,” Bageuret explained. “A mirror image.”

The compositor looked like any common artisan, yet he must have read more than many a man of letters, von Klopstock thought. Though how much of a large portion of it he might have of

understood was open to debate. Perhaps more than he was given credit for.

“The magic of words,” von Klopstock said. “The magic of books.”

Von Klopstock’s enthusiasm reminded Bageuret that these days he spent most of his time in the shop pandering to the idiosyncrasies of Imprimerie Charpentier’s customers, but his affection for the craft itself, his love for it even, had never left him. There was something intrinsically honest and manly about a trade. Jacques Charpentier had been right about that.

“The type is of English manufacture, from the Caslon foundry,” Bageuret went on, picking up a font as if it were a pinch of snuff and showing it to von Klopstock. “But – with the war – replacements for broken pieces have to come from Amsterdam. I imagine you are here about your manuscript.”

Von Klopstock smiled affirmatively.

When they were in his cubbyhole Bageuret retrieved the closely-written four-hundred-and-a-bit- page manuscript and, resisting the temptation to blow the dust off it, placed it on the table between them.

“A book needs a story,” Bageuret said.

There was nothing to be gained by beating around the bush.

“The Frenchman likes his stories told straightforward,” Bageuret went on. “Take this *Candide* book. It’s ridiculous. The story is ridiculous – people wandering all over the globe, Peru one minute, Constantinople the next – but it is a story. It has a beginning, a middle and an end. And it’s selling like hot cakes. The Chinaman, I imagine, likes his tales told in his way, whatever that may be. Maybe he likes his books to be like opium dreams, inhabited by hordes of genii. But the Frenchman is a down-to-earth creature. He likes to be able to follow what’s going on, for things to happen, one after the other.”

The optimistic smile that von Klopstock had been struggling to keep on his face became suddenly more rigid and began to fade.

“Of course, the reading public does have a taste for philosophy, speculations and grand schemes to put the world to rights and all that, but readers like their worthy dishes served with a little condiment, a bit of spice. The trick is to appear outrageous but at the same time pander to the prejudices of the reader. And it helps, at times, to tickle his baser instincts ...”

“A bit of spice?”

“Romance,” Bageuret explained, resisting the urge to wink. “A bit of skulduggery. A little less yap-yap. A duel or two. Buried

treasure. A whiff of scandal. Immoral goings-on. One doesn't have to lay it on with a trowel. Some readers won't mind of course, but the more discerning like to have their sense of literary taste flattered. Books need plots, a bit of cloak and dagger, stories ..."

"But in the real world ... Diderot says literature should reflect the real world."

The mention of Diderot reminded Bageuret that the barge was due to leave the next day. The *Encyclopédies* would be loaded onto it at dawn. He had been trying not to think about it.

"It's the real world I'm talking about. The clever scribbler uses his imagination. Characters may be dull in real life but dullness in books is fatal. The good scribbler takes the dull men around him and involves them in intrigues. He gives them simple motives – motivations the reader can understand: greed, lust, ambition. He spins a yarn. He takes a face and imagines what might be going in the recesses of its owner's soul. And nothing fascinates the reader more than a character who lacks moral restraints, who dares to tread where the reader himself would not dream of treading, especially in matters amorous. And the higher the rank the better. A sin committed by a cardinal is more interesting than one committed by a curé. A sermon in a brothel is more interesting than one in a church. Even those who write their own life histories exaggerate their exploits and, what is more interesting, their sins."

"But I want to write about good men, about goodness, about how it can be achieved."

"Oh dear, sermons," Bageuret said, but immediately half-regretted it. Youthful moralising was not a bad thing ... but not very practical to say the least ... in the real world. "You don't have to approve of what those you write about do, or even think. And nor indeed should you. I would be in the poor house if we only printed what I approved of and the composers would be begging for their suppers on the street. And, believe me, there is much of it of which I do not approve. But a man has to make a living. Of course, every society places boundaries on what it is acceptable to argue or promote, different boundaries, but boundaries none the less. Good Christians loath the blasphemer. The Turk abhors the painted image."

"One man's goodness is another man's evil," suggested von Klopstock.

The comment reminded Bageuret of the Abbé. It was exactly the kind of thing he could imagine him saying.

"Possibly, but that's not quite the way I'd put it."

"And the truth?" von Klopstock asked.

“Hardly to be found in the outpourings of scribblers. What the truth is for wiser heads than ours to ponder.” He decided to change the subject. “Of course, when a book is ... let us say of a worthier nature ... a bit of poetic license can also be used in the selling of it, in the way it is presented to the public. A little judicial exaggeration does not go amiss. But one should not overdo it; after all, one wants the fish to come back again. A snappy contents description, a flowery title illustration with a hint of the exotic, even the way it is bound, can sell a book. The style, the way a story is told – or an idea put across – needs to cater to the tastes of the time. Galilean dialogues, even if they occur in dreams, I’m afraid, have seen their day. Other bookmakers may see things differently. A second opinion is always advisable. I have been wrong about books before, not often, but it has happened.”

A ring on the doorbell – which he’d heard this time – saved Bageuret from having to elaborate.

“The bell tolls,” he said, making a gesture indicating that the visit was at an end. “You had better take your manuscript with you, I’m afraid.”

In the shop the Grammarian was at the counter, this time accompanied by the skinny Gascon. It was collection day again. As von Klopstock made his way out the door to the Rue Paradis, Bageuret could not help wondering what deformity his cripple-boot actually concealed.



Bageuret and the Abbé, both of them wearing black masks that covered their eyes and noses, followed the two workmen carrying the last of the *Encyclopédies*, packed in the oblong pinewood boxes Bageuret had procured, down the stairs, across the two courtyards of the warehouse complex and out onto the Quai des Potiers. The waterside was near-deserted. A cold sun was rising over the city and the twin towers of Notre Dame stood dark and featureless against the pink horizon. The muddy smell of the Seine was acrid in the dawn air.

The Margrave’s carriage was parked further down the quayside. From where he was standing, Bageuret could not see its occupants; but he knew that the German and Sophie-Françoise d’Argenson, also masked and decked out in Harlequin and Columbine costumes that must have cost a small fortune, were quietly watching them.

Gilles had positioned himself further up the quayside on the other side. He was wearing a glossy yellow mask and a dark grey riding

coat – not that he ever mounted a horse – and he was gazing meditatively over the oily expanse of the river as if oblivious to everything that was going on. Bageuret noticed him extract a pewter flask from his inside pocket and take a furtive swig of his habitual poison.

Bageuret turned to the Abbé.

“Good luck,” he said.

The Abbé nodded and turned to the two porters in the archway.

“Right, lads, let’s move!” he said.

Bageuret watched them cross the quayside, the sense of foreboding that he had begun to experience on the way back from Bicêtre still with him, despite part of him knowing that nothing was going to go wrong right then. It never did when you were worrying that it might.

When they reached the waterside, the Abbé exchanged some banter with the pipe-smoking clerk at the wooden hut, and then the porters filed down the jetty, the heavy white pinewood boxes slung over their shoulders like, Bageuret could not help thinking, cheap infants’ coffins. They went up the gangplank and disappeared down into the hold of the waiting barge, followed by the Abbé.

The Margrave’s carriage began to move slowly up the quayside, the iron-shod hooves of the two piebald horses clattering on the damp cobblestones. As it passed by Bageuret, the masked figures of the Margrave and Sophie-Françoise saluted him in unison. He returned the greeting and watched the carriage as it drove on, turn left and disappear from view down the next side street. Then he noticed Gilles – in his yellow mask – beginning to make his way casually towards him. What an absurd colour yellow was, he thought. No wonder Italian whores were obliged by law to wear nothing but.

They had succeeded, it seemed. In a few hours he would be nine hundred livres richer – with more to follow when the books arrived in Worms. And there were still another ten sets to sell.

✱

Isabelle de Vereaux and Stefan von Klopstock were on the bed in her apartment, their bodies illuminated by dim light from the fire. She was sucking his young cock, giving the swollen member a helping hand, literally, as she did so, with practised expertise; and he, his head buried between her massive buttocks, unable to make up his mind whether he was at the gates of paradise or the fabled entrance to the underworld, was licking and sucking her cunt with,

it must be acknowledged, considerably less expertise. It was a surprisingly small cunt – or rather, he supposed it was small – his experience in such matters was somewhat limited. Small but delicious, he had to admit.

He had destroyed his manuscript, ripped it up and thrown it in the fire in his lodgings. *Sermons!* What did that little gnome of a bookmaker know? *The outpourings of scribblers!* Bet he wasn't getting his cock sucked now. Probably never had. *Pander to the prejudices of the reader! Tickle his baser instincts!* He could feel Isabelle de Vereaux's tongue flicking his ... and her fingers tickling his balls ...

"You're making me climax," he said, and almost before he had finished saying it, he felt the familiar rush of pleasure and his warm sperm squirting onto his belly – she had removed her mouth from his cock at the last minute.

She heaved herself around and straddled him.

"Have you been looking in my Scarlet Book," she said, after wiping him down with one of her lavender-scented handkerchiefs.

"No," he said. "Why?" It surprised him somewhat that he wasn't annoyed by the accusation.

"Just a case of mild curiosity," she said.

"Mild curiosity?"

Her breasts, hanging free and massive above him, were arousing him again.

"Because I think you are a curious animal. There is something cat-like about you. I think you are a young man who likes to pry, who notices little things that others don't. Has a second, even a third glance at them. Calculating. Who likes secrets."

"Secrets have their charms," he said. "Like your delicious little cunt."

"I've decided something. About my delicious little cunt."

"What?" He felt suddenly uncomfortable.

"You will get tired of me," she said.

He said nothing.

"So I've decided we are only going to play this game another half a dozen times. Half a dozen times exactly."

He remained silent.

"If you know that the number of times I'm going to play with that little cock of yours, you'll be more attentive. And make the most of it."

"Does this time count?" he asked. His little cock was getting harder. Women, he was beginning to think, understood men's desires far better than men theirs, or at least, or maybe, far better

than he did his own.

“No,” she laughed. “But right now ...”

“Yes?”

“I want you to suck my nipples for a while,” she said, lowering one of her breasts onto his face.

As he felt her large brown nipple harden in his mouth, he began to think that perhaps he should have a peek in that Scarlet Book of hers. Half a dozen more times, not including this time. There would be opportunity enough.



The next morning Isabelle de Vereaux said she had some sort of an appointment at the Palais Royal. She was quite vague about it. Von Klopstock felt obliged to offer to accompany her part of the way.

When they reached Saint Sebastien's, a church wedged between the four-storey houses on one of the side streets off Saint Julien le Pauvre, she suddenly stopped.

“I need to pop in here for a moment,” she said. “I won't be long. You can wait here if you like.”

“No, no,” he said. “I'd like to see what it's like inside. Baroque, isn't it?”

A flurry of nuns in butterfly veils emerged from the church's weathered oak doors as they spoke.

“If you must,” she said.

There was a beggarwoman sitting on the steps with an infant at her half-exposed and frozen white breast. As he stood aside to let Isabelle de Vereaux enter the porch before him, removing his tricorne as he did so, she dropped a copper denier into the woman's begging bowl.

On entering the church, she genuflected and, peeling off one of her brown woollen gloves, dipped a finger into the holy water font and made a swift sign of the cross. He wondered if politeness dictated that he do likewise – he had not been inside many Catholic churches – but decided against it.

It took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the semi-darkness. A faint blue light from the stained-glass window above the altar illuminated the chancel. He had half-expected to be overwhelmed by clouds of incense, but there was only the barest whiff. The dominant smell was that of the dozens of burning candles.

The church was taller than it was wide. A baroque profusion of winged angels, carved in dark wood, and multi-coloured images of Christ's Passion lined the walls of the womb and sepulchre-like

interior. A statue of a near-naked Saint Sebastian stood at the base of one of the thick gyre-like columns supporting the roof. The martyr's pale flesh-coloured torso, its nipples dark pink and distinct, was pierced with lifelike arrows, and his lifeless ecstatic eyes were gazing upwards at the fresco on the vaulted ceiling, a heavenly vortex of clouds and whirling semi-naked angels and cherubs reminiscent of a pagan bacchanalia. There was a glass coffin-shaped case beside the altar, which looked as if it contained the corpse-like statue of some mitred saint or Church Father lying in eternal rest; and high above the altar, a glittering brass sunburst displayed the white host of the Eucharist in its glass centre. Skulls and scythe-wielding skeletons inhabited innumerable niches; and painted plaster flowers, blooms on the verge of putrefaction. The symbolism was obvious: death, the divine sacrifice and the promise of bodily resurrection. The asymmetry of the place was dizzying. He was reminded of what du Guesclin had said about even the most sublime ideas eventually decaying, putrefying ... yet there was something uncannily fascinating about it all.

"Take a pew until I'm done," she said, making her way up the aisle, her dress, the same one he had unlaced the previous evening, making a rustling sound that filled the fragile air of the place.

She entered one of the alcoves and knelt before a rack of small white candles flickering under a statue of the Virgin, its eyes also gazing vacantly heavenward. For a moment she seemed to be genuinely in prayer. That was not something he had ever imagined her doing. Then suddenly he glimpsed the shadowy outline of a male figure emerge from behind an archway, and she got up. He lost sight of both of them as they retreated further into the alcove.

For a minute he resisted the impulse, but his curiosity was too powerful. Carefully, almost tiptoeing so as not to make a sound on the marble floor, he made his way up the aisle, hugging the intricately-carved oak confession boxes in order to keep out of sight.

He heard her voice first.

"... illicit copies of Diderot's masterpiece," she was whispering, "quite a few of them."

"And who is this message from?"

Von Klopstock was sure he recognised the man's aristocratic accent but couldn't place it.

"A mutual friend," she said.

"You always did love intrigue," the aristocratic voice said. "I could guess, but I won't. Imprimerie Charpentier, you say."

Von Klopstock recognised the voice. It was from that theologian

type he'd met at the Hôtel de Walsh, the ginger-wig man ... de la Haye, the Comte de la Haye. Whom, Gilles d'Argenson had told him later, everyone called Brass Head behind his back.

"Do you know it?"

"Charpentier himself shuffled off his mortal coil a few months back. I was at the funeral. Seeing deceased Guild members dispatched to their eternal rewards falls within the ambit of my official duties."

"Well, the printer who runs the place now has twenty sets hidden away in a warehouse on the Quai des Potiers, Number 13. In a storeroom on the top floor."

"There is no law against that."

"He's in the process of selling them."

There was a moment's silence.

"Well, that does put a different complexion on it," Brass Head said. "And his name is Sebastien Bageuret?"

"So I've been told."

"Whose acquaintance, funnily enough, I recently made ... under rather unusual circumstances ... but go on! Was there any mention of a d'Argenson, a Gilles d'Argenson?"

"No. Why? Who is he?" she asked.

Von Klopstock could have sworn he detected an erotic tension hovering between the invisible voices, almost wanted to detect it ...

"An ugly little cunt who runs errands for Malesherbes," Brass Head said. "A slippery customer. In with the d'Holbach crowd, chummy with Diderot's dogsbody, a Jean-Baptiste something or other ... on whom I shall be paying an early morning not-very-social call in the very near future."

"I've never really understood why you hate these people so intensely."

"Words may be insubstantial, but like Newton's action at a distance, they have effects." He paused for a moment. "Damiens was motivated by words. I hate their arrogant sense of moral superiority. Freemasons, the lot of them, Le Breton, Helvétius, Montesquieu, Voltaire, even de Jaucourt, maybe Diderot too."

"If anyone is going to feel morally superior around here," she said, with obvious irony, "it's going to be me."

"Morality is the last thing you can accuse me of."

Von Klopstock heard the rustle of her dress and Brass Head whisper something. He couldn't make out the words but it sounded crude ... he imagined Brass Head lifting up her skirt, his hand cupping her close-cropped sex, a bejewelled finger ... he heard

Isabelle de Vereaux mumble something about not having enough time ... he only caught the tail-end of Brass Head's reply.

"... but I am a man who has a cause. I believe I would even sacrifice myself for it – though perhaps not now."

"*Oh Lord, give me chastity, but not just yet.*"

"Very clever." Von Klopstock heard the rustle of her dress again. "Augustine was a wise old bird. My sins, my weaknesses are of no account. What matters is the larger scheme ..."

"The divine plan?" she suggested scathingly. "History?"

"Something like that. Did our mutual friend mention a margrave, a German marquis?"

Von Klopstock found himself remembering Sophie-Françoise's words to her brother that evening outside the Comédie Française as they were crossing the street. Something about *if* her Teutonic Knight could be convinced to purchase *several sets of Diderot's book of books*, and needing to deliver them to *somewhere in the Germanies*. It had meant nothing to him at the time. But her Teutonic Knight was obviously the Margrave von Möllendorf. Was that what this was about? And was that the reason for Gilles and Bageuret's meeting with the Margrave – and Sophie-Françoise – that afternoon at the Hôtel de Walsh?

"A prisoner of war," Brass Head added. "A guest of the de Choiseuls and the de Walshes."

"No. Why?"

"He's involved in some business with Bageuret and d'Argenson. And I would dearly like to know what exactly that business might be."

"You're going to pay him a visit too?"

"Hardly. I have no wish to tangle with either of those distinguished clans, with either the de Choiseuls or the de Walshes. But this Bageuret is another matter. In fact, I think one of my not-so-very-social calls might be just the medicine for him."

Von Klopstock heard the large wooden church doors creak open and looked round. A thin woman, dressed in threadbare widow's weeds, was taking a place in a pew by the Saint Sebastian statute. He decided that it was time to terminate his eavesdropping.

"That's all I can tell you," he heard Isabelle de Vereaux say just before he began to slowly make his way back down the aisle, hugging the confession boxes again.

CHAPTER XV

THE REASON OF DOGS

“The Sun King was a great believer in selling hereditary offices and licences,” du Guesclin was saying as he finished off a bowl of leek and potato soup. “Extended it to funeral directors and oyster sellers. Even to the Sansons, I think.”

Another sparsely attended Grande Synagogue was in progress.

“Better than raising taxes,” said the Margrave. “Hereditary safeguards traditions. And without tradition, whence a sense of honour?”

“Honour?” Gilles repeated sardonically, helping himself to the macaroni.

Adélaïde’s mind was not quite on the conversation. She had a note for Jean-Baptiste from the Baron. And he hadn’t arrived yet. The Baron had said it was urgent.

“A concept as illusionary as religion but one just as necessary for the happiness of the individual and society as is religion,” suggested Sophie-Françoise, quoting more or less verbatim from *Thérèse philosophe*.

This evening she was smelling of ambergris, a fragrance that was simultaneously sweet, earthy, animalistic and oceanic. Bossuet could not help thinking how incongruous it was that the most seductive scents originated from the innards of animals – musk from the glands of Lapland deer, ambergris from the excrement of whales. His enquiries into what her brother actually did in his mysterious post had not yielded anything of particular use. There was, he noted, no sign of the Abbé this evening.

“An illusion without which we are hardly men,” said the Margrave. “Raises us above the beasts of the field.”

“Commissions are not sold in the navy anymore,” said Madame de Walsh.

“The only taxes in New France are import and export duties,” Gilles said, “members of the Second Estate are allowed to engage in trade ... a measure which if applied here would do no bloody harm. The sight of a country squire at the plough – in a state of what, to be polite, I shall call indigence – pathetically wearing his great-grandfather’s rust-encrusted sword, is not uncommon in

some country districts not far from Paris nowadays.”

“Lording it, as someone once so elegantly put it,” said du Guesclin, “over a dovecote, a frog marsh and a rabbit warren.”

The footman announced the arrival of von Klopstock.

“Ah, our young man from Westphalia,” Gilles jested.

Von Klopstock gave an embarrassed smile.

It wasn't the first time Gilles had referred to him as that – the phrase came from the latest Voltaire book, apparently, which he still hadn't managed to get a copy of – but this evening it made him cringe more than usual. He was introduced to du Guesclin. Mercifully the ageing aristocrat again gave no sign of recognising him. Knowing nods and winks from the likes of du Guesclin were the last thing he needed.

“The state is a necessary evil,” Gilles went on. “But the lesser evil is mon-archy, the rule of one, if – emphasis on *if*, on a rather optimistic *if* – the one is well advised and enlightened. Definitely preferable to the rule of self-interested castes, guilds and Jansenist-infested Parlements. But *tempered* perhaps, as the Monkey puts it, *by an occasional assassination*.”

“And by some vices, I hope,” Sophie-Françoise added.

“Give us this day a Nero or Caligula,” du Guesclin added. “Both of whom were extremely popular, by the way. Kept their despotic urges in the family. Only murdered their relatives.”

The footman announced the arrival of Jean-Baptiste.

Adélaïde got up. When she reached him, she ushered him out into the hallway.

“From the Baron,” she said, handing him the note.

The decision by the Conseil du Roi has been drawn up and awaits only the royal signature. M has informed me that the gentlemen of the Paris police will carry out a raid on the day this is done – before it is published or sent to the Parlement. Brass Head will lead the raid personally. The warrant, which was drawn up in conjunction with the decree itself, entitles him to confiscate all papers, but not – I repeat NOT – any other property. This includes copies of the Encyclopédie and other books in the library. This has been stated explicitly in the warrant. It is imperative that you be present when our fanatical friend arrives, who, I have been informed, has a proclivity for arriving at dawn. Demand to see the warrant and insist that he keeps to the letter of it. Do not let him intimidate you. This note is to be destroyed.

Yours, H

“The Baron says that Malesherbes drafted the warrant himself,” she said. “Has everything compromising been moved?”

“Yes. I’ll begin sleeping there tonight. I’ve set up one of those army camp beds.”

“Du Guesclin is here.”

“I’ve noticed,” Jean-Baptiste said, wondering if the merchant had moved the books to his Quai du Nord warehouse yet. That had been du Guesclin’s idea. He’d agreed to it without much need for du Guesclin having to argue that it really was the only thing to do under the circumstances.

Back in the dining room, Gilles was still dominating the conversation.

“The Marquise de Babylon,” he was saying. “The Whore of Babylon. I like it, Bossuet. Some of our wit is beginning to rub off on you at last, eh ...”

Bossuet had still not figured whether the Jesuit had actually known something about d’Argenson beyond the fact that he was a crony of the Abbé, and perhaps been mixed up with some previous book-smuggling episode. He liked d’Argenson. Despite their obvious differences of estate, the man treated him like an equal. He had utterly misjudged the Jesuit, ridiculously assuming the man would have been content to gnaw happily at the snippets of information he had been throwing at him. But the last thing he had expected was that the pompous ass – no, the ass persona was a show, the priest was far from being a dumb ass – would ... he searched for the word the Inquisition used ... *relax* his own flesh and blood to the secular arm. He wondered if anyone had ever thought that the ritualistic request that the relapsed heretic be shown mercy as he was handed over to the so-called secular arm had ever been anything other than some perverse ecclesiastical platitude, but then, he reminded himself, the worst crimes were committed in dreadful sincerity. There had obviously been more going on than he had been aware of. There always was. But whatever it was, it made bugger all difference now. He had landed himself in one of those situations where not acting was an impossibility. Simply letting events run their course – the wisest course of action most of the time – would be the easiest path to take, and the safest; neither the Abbé nor d’Argenson nor Bageuret were aware that he had been spying on them, he was sure of that. But that would be – to use another ecclesiastical turn of phrase – an act of omission.

“I notice the illustrious Abbé de Graffigny is absent,” he ventured, taking care to address no one in particular. “I do miss his

dark wit. I was hoping to have the opportunity to ask him if he was related to *the* Madame de Graffigny.”

Without thinking, Gilles winked at Sophie-Françoise and laughed.

“Off on his travels, I believe. Up to no good, I’m sure,” he said.

“Yes, I do believe he is related to the illustrious authoress,” said Sophie-Françoise, issuing Gilles a fierce admonition with an almost imperceptible piercing glance – but not so imperceptible that Bossuet, and von Klopstock, didn’t notice it. “But not closely. You know, they say she makes more money from her plays than that book.”

“The Abbé has a busy social life,” Gilles added, suitably admonished. “Bit of a wandering Jew. If the truth be told.”

The exchange made von Klopstock wonder what was really going on. Was all the endless clever chatter – or *cacouac-cacouac* as the old Comte had called it – really nothing but a witty camouflage for sordid scheming? Were men really motivated by nothing more than petty ambitions? *This city of spies and conspiracies!* Perhaps Isabelle de Vereaux’s description was apt. Was that was the true nature of Man: a being motivated by nothing more than petty ambitions? He thought of the title of his rejected manuscript and Gilles’s bookmaker gnome and felt like a fool. But writing a book full of nothing but intrigue and clever chatter, the kind of book the gnome had suggested ... The very thought of it, of spending hours, days, months bent over sheaves of paper in bad light, writing such a dark and unremittingly hopeless book, word by word, sentence by sentence – the futility of it! – the idea of such a thing filled him with horror. And the Raynal woman ushering Jean-Baptiste out of the room when he had arrived ... he also wondered what that was all about. And then there were Isabelle de Vereaux’s references to a *limping Janus-faced cabinet noir man*, a *Monsieur B* who attended *the d’Holbach synagogue* in those letters of hers – could she have been referring to Bossuet?

“New France is ruled on more absolutist principles than any part of France itself,” Gilles continued, a bit more mutedly, topping up his glass. “Offices and commissions are not auctioned off like second-hand ecclesiastical vestments and handed down like family heirlooms.”

“A better name for all these New Frances, New Englands and New Spains might be New Africa,” Jean-Baptiste said as he took a seat. “More slaves are settled there than Europeans – if you include the sugar islands. Two million African souls have been shipped across the Atlantic over the last thirty years, in floating hellholes.

And the American savages are dying off faster than they are being replaced by either.”

“But then, one does wonder about these Montesquieuvian niceties regarding republics and monarchies,” Gilles went on. “Take Corsica, a political entity that has what one could call a Montesquieuvian constitution. The country describes itself as a republic but, officially, the head of state is the Virgin Mary. And practically every Tom, Dick or Harry is allowed to vote, and even the women.”

The Margrave shook his head.

“At least hereditary kingship is seen as a sacred duty,” he said, “not something to be fought over as dogs would a bone.”

“Pasquale Paoli is one of Europe’s most enlightened statesmen,” said Jean-Baptiste. “He has put Montesquieu’s *De l’esprit des lois* into practice in Corsica. And he has also introduced the cultivation of the potato.”

“Potat-oes for the body,” Gilles added idly, scraping the last of the macaroni-cheese sauce from the bowl with a spoon. “Tomat-oes for the heart and the nether regions. Avocad-os for the rich. And tobacc-o for the stimulation of the mind.” XLIX

“The problem with books like Montesquieu’s,” the Margrave said, cutting himself a slice of smoked cheese, “is that they’re liable to put all sorts of crackpot ideas into the heads of the barely lettered. I don’t believe in all this change for change’s sake, all this thinking that the past is nothing but a history of mistakes, crimes and delusions. This idea that every generation that came before us – while utterly convinced that its view of the world was the right one – was wrong ... For if that is the case, then in all probability, all these modern ideas are very likely wrong too. I do rather think it’s unlikely that we are the first generation to see things as they really are, to see the light, as it were.”

“Today’s truths, tomorrow’s untruths,” suggested du Guesclin.

“*Autre temps, autre mœurs*,” added Sophie-Françoise.

“Men do not choose their physical constitutions,” said Madame de Walsh. “And I doubt if they chose their political constitutions either. Men’s characters are shaped by their physical constitutions. And their political constitutions emerge from the character of a people, the sum total of their individual characters. The body politic is an immaterial extension of the body physical.”

“So the laws which govern the animal kingdom govern human kingdoms,” Gilles suggested.

“Animals have the same needs as humans,” Madame de Walsh replied. “Food, shelter, warmth. And they suffer similar ailments.”

“And enjoy similar pleasures,” said Sophie-Françoise.

“And oddly enough, have less of a propensity to go mad,” said du Guesclin. “Mad dogs are much rarer than mad men – or mad women.”

“Men have consciences,” said the Margrave, helping himself to more of the smoked cheese. “Men can reason.”

“Some can,” Gilles admitted. “Sometimes.”

“Dogs can reason well enough when it comes to the things that matter to dogs,” said Madame de Walsh.

“There are different kinds of reason then?” suggested Bossuet. “The reason of dogs and the reason of men? Canine reason and human reason?”

“If the principles of reason are universal,” Gilles said, “if reason is merely a manifestation of our innate geometrical ideas, then surely the innate geometrical ideas of dogs, men and angels are the same in essence. And would that not suggest that the main difference between dogs and men is their respective ability to remember things? Canine reason is limited because the dog can’t make as many connections in its thought processes. Pooch forgets one thought as soon as he’s had another.”^L

Von Klopstock knew that, strictly speaking, he had a moral duty of some sorts to warn Gilles about what he had heard Brass Head de la Haye say to Isabelle de Vereaux in Saint Sebastien’s. But how? It would involve a lot of embarrassing explaining, and a man like Gilles would be difficult to fob off with half-truths.

“Men also have free will,” the Margrave said.

“*To imagine that a man is truly free and capable of self-determination is to place him on a par with God,*” said Sophie-Françoise. “Also from *Thérèse philosophe*. But suppose we disbelieved in free will as much as we usually take it for granted?”^{LI}

“I can never make up my mind if that book should be considered a series of debaucheries strung together by a series of philosophical dialogues,” said du Guesclin, “or a series of philosophical dialogues strung together by a series of debaucheries.”

“*Our life is a line that Nature compels us to draw,*” said Adélaïde. “My benefactor.”

“The Personal Enemy of God himself,” Gilles explained.

The Personal ... the Personal Enemy of God, so that is what it meant, Bossuet realised.

“Who gave him that *nom de guerre*,” he enquired, shaking his mane of unruly grey hair in mock exasperation.

“It’s what he calls himself,” Gilles informed him, winking. “I’m

afraid our absent and gracious host is a man who, if he were to find incontrovertible proof of the existence of a deity, would immediately suppress it – with the zeal of a Torquemada.”

“A man is only free when he is willing to die for something,” the Margrave said, “above and beyond himself.”

“*Dulce et decorum est ...?*” Adélaïde suggested.

“As a vixen will die for her cubs,” said Madame de Walsh.

“The day will come when the natural laws,” said Jean-Baptiste, “the formulae which govern the progress of society will be discerned and clearly stated and their use will become as commonplace as the use of the laws of heredity to breed superior livestock. Only then will men be truly free, free to be virtuous”

“I should be quite happy for a formula to make the workers in my factories fidget less and do some more bloody work,” said du Guesclin.

“Education is the key,” Jean-Baptiste went on. “Men need to be convinced of what is right, of the right way of living.”

“And *you* would instruct men on what to think?” du Guesclin suggested sarcastically.

“If need be,” said Jean-Baptiste cautiously, sensing a trap.

“So it’s all a matter of men holding the correct opinions,” du Guesclin teased him, “the correct *doctrines?*”

“Not a word I would use,” said Jean-Baptiste.

“Perhaps dogmas might be more to your taste,” du Guesclin said.

“Men need to be taught what is right,” said Jean-Baptiste. “Call it what you will.”

“I would suggest,” du Guesclin said, buttering a *croûton* and sprinkling some salt on it, “that education, or anything worth its name, is not telling men what they should think but rather telling them what they need to know in order to be able to think fruitfully.”

“Very clever,” said Jean-Baptiste contemptuously.

“During the Reformation,” the Margrave said, intervening, “the Anabaptists took over Münster and announced the establishment of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. They ended up banning curtains.”

“Curtains?” du Guesclin asked.

“A good Christian has nothing to hide,” the Margrave explained, and smiled.

Von Möllendorf seemed to be particularly sharp this evening. Gilles wondered if his usually apparently dim persona was a front.

“Nature is against New Jerusalem,” the Margrave added, amidst the general laughter.

Von Klopstock noticed that the footman was whispering

something to Adélaïde Raynal and that both of them were looking in his direction.

“*Nature did not build houses six or seven stories high,*” Jean-Baptiste countered, adding by way of explanation: “Monsieur Rousseau on Lisbon.”

Adélaïde got up and headed towards von Klopstock.

“The Good Lord has decided how much evil the world needs,” the Margrave was saying. “One cannot reduce the overall sum of it. One can shove it around a bit, perhaps. That’s all.”

When Adélaïde reached von Klopstock, she bent over and whispered into his ear: “There is a message for you. A Monsieur Starobinski. He’s waiting below.”

But the name meant nothing to him.

“Henri says it’s urgent.” Henri was the footman’s name. “That he needs to speak to you.”

“Starbo...” von Klopstock tried to repeat. “What does he look like?”

“Starobinski. A bit odd, according to Henri,” she said. “Not very well dressed,” she added, making a face.

As von Klopstock left the room, the Margrave was saying something about the need to choose the evils one wished to abolish with care.

The first thing he noticed about the man waiting for him in the hallway was his bulk and his drinker’s face, and that he looked like he had not changed his clothes for a few months. Von Klopstock was surprised he had even been let into the house at all. He was sure he recognised him from somewhere but had no idea from where.

“Monsieur Starb...” von Klopstock began.

“Starobinski, Alain Starobinski. Monsieur von Klopstock, I presume.”

“Do we know each other?” von Klopstock asked, but before the question was out, he remembered where he had seen him. It had been at the gnome’s place, at the Imprimerie Charpentier. His coming into the shop had rung the doorbell and put an abrupt end to his conversation with Bageuret, and he had been waiting at the counter when von Klopstock and Bageuret had gone into the shop. He’d been with a skinny character who looked as if he had not eaten for a month.

“The Comte de la Haye would leek very much to have a word with you,” the Grammarian said. “His Lordship’s cerredge is outside. He is somewhat pressed for time. A very beezy man. But the gentleman would be most obliged if you could spare him a few

minutes, sir.”

The Grammarian gestured towards the door.

“Shall I fetch sire’s greatcoat?” the footman asked.

Von Klopstock shook his head.

“I shall be only a few minutes,” he explained, as the footman opened the front door and he followed the Grammarian into the darkness of the street.



The carriage door was open.

“Monsieur von Klopstock,” he heard Brass Head de la Haye say from the carriage’s interior. “Please come in.”

Von Klopstock found himself putting his foot on the carriage step, climbing in and taking a seat opposite the near-invisible presence of its occupant. He knew something was wrong. But what? There’d been nothing amiss when he and de la Haye had met at the Hôtel de Walsh de Serrant ... and the Starobinski fellow had been polite, a bit odd, but polite ... The carriage door suddenly slammed shut and Brass Head knocked on the roof of the carriage with what must have been the hilt of his sword or walking stick. The carriage began to move.

“A little trip,” Brass Head said quietly, his smiling face momentarily half-illuminated by the glow of a streetlamp, before von Klopstock had a chance to even think of possibly objecting.

“You’ve been a naughty boy, Monsieur von Klopstock,” Brass Head added, as the horses settled into a comfortable trot.

Von Klopstock was forcing himself not to panic. Incongruous sights and sounds from the Deux Portes and the Vulcan flashed through his mind: du Guesclin puffing away on his waterpipe, the *maids*, that character in schoolboy uniform a few sizes too small for him, Gilles’s talk of a peephole. Or had Isabelle de Vereaux told him something?

“But that’s the human condition, I suppose,” Brass Head continued, barely visible in the darkness. “Weaknesses and contradictions. What pitiful creatures we are?”

Von Klopstock realised that the man had managed to induce in him a state that was not that far short of terror.

“What were you doing at that bookman’s place, the one d’Argenson’s so chummy with?”

“To retrieve a manuscript,” von Klopstock spluttered out.

“Nothing to do with these Diderot books?”

“Diderot books ...?” von Klopstock repeated.

Brass Head paused. Von Klopstock couldn't tell whether it was a deliberate tactic or whether he was actually thinking.

"This business that this bookman and d'Argenson are mixed up in ... with your compatriot ... what's his name?"

"The Margrave von Möllendorf. No, no, I have nothing to do at all to do with that."

He should have said *anything* – *nothing to do with anything* – something else, anything else.

"It could go very badly with you if you had something to do with it, you know. Very badly."

The carriage came to a sudden halt.

"We're here," Brass Head said as the Grammarian, suddenly outside, opened the carriage door. He must have been riding on the rear.

Brass Head gestured for von Klopstock to get out.

"Thank you," Brass Head said, as he obeyed. "You have been of incommensurable service."

"But how?" von Klopstock almost asked him. But then it struck him. The obviousness of it was glaring. In denying that he had anything to do with it, anything to do with Gilles and his sister – in cahoots with that bookmaker gnome Bageuret – selling the Margrave *illicit copies of Diderot's masterpiece*, he had inadvertently confirmed – in Brass Head's mind – what Brass Head had obviously suspected, that that was what was in fact going on. But he'd only suspected that that was what was going on ...

The Grammarian shut the carriage door.

Brass Head knocked on the carriage roof again and the carriage began to move off into the night. The Grammarian, mounted on the rear again, gave him a clownish wave.

When von Klopstock's eyes had half-adjusted to the darkness and he saw where he was, he almost felt the ground wobble beneath his feet, as if the world had suddenly lost its solidity. Before him stood the towering buttressed walls of the Bastille, slowly taking shape in the moonlight, and the massive, gated, drawbridged entrance to the prison-fortress.

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As Bossuet headed back to his lodgings that night, he found himself again considering what to do. Gilles, the Abbé and the bookseller were hardly innocent men, at least not within the strict letter of the law, but that would have been no excuse or, at the most, a measly one. No, he had to act. But how? He had heard it said more than once at the Grande Synagogue that all

philosophising, all moral systems and pretensions to honour, were no more than the search for justifications for prejudices already held, for actions one had already resolved oneself to, even been predestined to resolve oneself to. Or – as that de Walsh woman had more or less said – were simply a matter of a man's character in the end, that which circumstance and chance had made him, a given, like the colour of a man's eyes? Fat men felt big in the world and behaved accordingly. Small men learnt to be devious. Desirable women – like the d'Argenson woman with her luscious breasts and lips that sucked the flesh from the bones of dead birds with an indecent relish – were full of confidence, oozed it, and knew they were the objects of men's passions and lusts. And he himself? Was not his character shaped by the deformities of his body and the religion of his forefathers? If men had any free will, it was little enough. Perhaps that was why he loathed the idea of delivering any man to be judged. For who was really free enough to be called to account? Spying on diplomats and other spies, men who spied themselves and were expected to be spied on, was one thing. Delivering the unwary into the hands of judges was another. That much he had avoided so far, or so he hoped and liked to think. Honour among spies perhaps it might be, but a species of honour nonetheless. No. Despite the pieces of silver and his provenance – and his trade – he was no Judas Iscariot. He should really warn Gilles d'Argenson that the Jesuit knew about his book-smuggling scheme and had him in his sights; but the uncomfortable fact was that he found the civil servant – with his intellect, aristocratic confidence and God-knows-what connections – simply too intimidating, despite his amicability. His experience with the Jesuit had played havoc with his self-confidence. Why he had even told the priest about the Quai des Potiers, now, in retrospect, was not exactly clear to him. To somehow wriggle himself into the man's good books? In any case, what was done was done. If he didn't have the stomach to approach Gilles, then that left the Abbé. Though he had no idea how a man like that – one whose character bespoke nothing but unpredictability – would react.

Ж

The library was dark when Jean-Baptiste got back. Dark and quiet. Ghostly even. He fumbled with the tinderbox and eventually managed to light the candles in the two wax-encrusted brass candlesticks. Their flames flared for an instant before settling down, leaving most of the room hidden in the shadows. He did not relish having to stay there overnight for the next few days but it

had to be done. Having the police rummaging around the place without a witness was out of the question.

He noticed the file on the table just as he was about to turn in. It was the one with the letter from Linnaeus to Diderot in it. He'd meant to pack it away with the last of the others but had obviously forgotten. He opened it and looked for the letter.

There was just about enough light to decipher the two pages of cramped handwriting. He smiled when he read it again, but he was not entirely sure why. He would have to hide the file. God only knew what other papers it might contain. But where? Among the books? But it was too bulky. He felt a whiff of panic but forced himself to think. Behind one of the bookshelves? No, better some place outside the library. But where outside? It was too late to go downstairs and wake up Diderot's wife and daughters. Somewhere in the privy? There was a space behind the back of the commode which just might be ideal. They'd hardly go rummaging around in there.

He made his way across the corridor, practically tiptoeing – it was well past midnight – opened the door to the cubicle and, sure enough, the file fitted neatly between the back of the commode and the wall. Nobody would think of looking there. Or at least he hoped they wouldn't. He was about to finish up and take a piss when he noticed the faded copy of the proclamation pinned to the back of the door. Diderot had put it up there when it had come out. So it could be contemplated by those struggling with their bowel movements – Luther had his most profound insights in the squatting position he'd said.

Royal Declaration

16 April 1757

of His Most Christian Majesty,

Louis XV, King of France and Navarre

Article I: All those who shall be convicted of writing or of having had written or of printing any writing tending to attack religion, to upset minds, to impair Our Authority, and to trouble the order and tranquillity of Our States shall be punished by death.

Article II: With reference to all other writings of whatsoever kind, not falling under the description of Article I, it is our pleasure that, for not having observed the formalities prescribed by our ordinances, authors, printers, booksellers, peddlers, and all other persons disseminating such writings among the public shall be condemned to the galleys for life, or for terms suiting the gravity of the case.

Pinning a royal proclamation to the back of a shit-house door was ... well, probably not an act of humour your average police agent would appreciate, or magistrate for that matter. He took it down and quietly tore it into small manageable strips, opened the lid on the commode and using his candle slowly burned each one. As the ashes floated down and settled on onto a couple of meagre turds in the white ceramic pot, he vaguely wondered whose they were. When he was done, he pissed on the lot and the shards of burned paper disintegrated into the filthy mess.

Hopefully, he thought, as he buttoned himself up, that was the last of the loose ends and there was nothing else that he had overlooked.

CHAPTER XVI

THE DEAD FEEDING ON THE DEAD

“You have a warrant, I presume,” Jean-Baptiste said.

The ginger-wigged aristocrat in his purple velvet coat smiled and handed him the parchment-like sheet of paper.

Brass Head didn't wait for Jean-Baptiste to read it before starting to look around. His three *companions* – if that was the word – remained at the door, though, awaiting their master's instructions and looking slightly intimidated by the display of so much erudition in one place. One of them, some sort of sergeant, a fat man with the red face of a drinker, and unnerving cat-like eyes, was carrying a pistol in a holster. The other two – one a massive countryman, a Breton probably, the other a weasel-like creature – were armed with truncheons.

“Don't let my poodles disturb you,” Brass Head half-shouted, taking a book from a shelf at the far end of the library. “They only bite when I tell them to.”

Jean-Baptiste ignored the comment. He was too nervous to actually read every word of the warrant but was intent on giving the impression he was doing so. When he found the passage the Baron had alluded to in his note, he steeled himself and began to read it aloud.

“... empowered to confiscate all written documents, papers and files pertaining to,” he emphasised the word *written*, and skipped through some of the legal verbiage before continuing *“... and to search all printed books, both the property of Monsieur Denis Diderot and those in his care, including the copies of the dictionary which is the subject of this warrant, for concealed written documents and papers in the hand of Monsieur Diderot or others; and to make a note of all books which the executor of this order deems to attack religion, to impair royal authority, and to trouble the order and tranquillity of the realm ... said report to be delivered to the signatory ... It seems to be in order.”*

As d'Holbach had predicted, it gave Brass Head no power to confiscate any books – as definitively as possible, without actually saying so. No doubt about it, Malesherbes was an ingenious rogue.

“I should hope so,” Brass Head laughed. “Wouldn't want to be

accused of sloppy paperwork, would we?" The shelves where the files had been were embarrassingly bare. "Looks like Diderot's paper birds have flown the nest. You have been thorough. My compliments."

Jean-Baptiste said nothing.

Brass Head began perusing the bookshelves again.

"An imposing collection," he remarked.

He extracted one of the five volumes of Ascoli's encyclopaedic *Acerba*.

"You can wait below," he said to his men as he looked through the Latin poem.

He turned a few pages in silence before putting it back.

"Unkempt for poodles I know," he said when his men had shut the door behind them. "But as vicious as ... when I have a mind they be. What's that?" He indicated a leather-bound ledger on Jean-Baptiste's desk.

"The catalogue."

Brass Head picked it up and opened it.

"So how many books are there?"

"Eighteen hundred and forty-three volumes in total."

"It could be argued that this falls into the category of *hand-written documents that trouble the order and tranquillity of the realm*," Brass Head said and looked Jean-Baptiste in the eye for a moment. "Or at least worthy of investigation."

Then he laughed again and closed it.

"Another time perhaps," he said.

Brass Head turned his attention to the shelves of books again, running his fingers along the spines, stopping now and again to read a title.

"It seems to me," he said rather absent-mindedly, almost to himself, "the more we know, or rather that's written, the more meaningless it all becomes."

"It could appear that way," Jean-Baptiste said. "But ..."

"And where does he keep his porn?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Diderot?" Brass Head said. "Where does he keep his porn? Pornography. From the Greek, I believe."

Jean-Baptiste was suddenly speechless.

"Nothing more fascinating than to look through another man's filth, *n'est-ce pas?*"

"I ..."

But Brass Head burst out laughing before he could even begin to compose a reply.

“Joke,” Brass Head said. “Even us reactionaries have a sense of humour. Who do these belong to?” He indicated the volumes of the *Encyclopédie* on the shelves behind Diderot’s desk.

“They are Monsieur Diderot’s personal property.”

“Don’t worry. I won’t touch them. I am able to read a warrant.”

Jean-Baptiste remained mute.

“I am sure there are more pleasant experiences than having a policeman going through one’s books,” Brass Head said, putting on his braided fawn tricorn. “But duty is duty.”

Jean-Baptiste shrugged his shoulders.

“I’m sure we’ll meet again,” Brass Head added. “But hardly here. All the toing and froing and whoring between the Parlement and Versailles is at an end. Diderot is out of business now. That’s the main thing as far as my masters are concerned. Puts you out of a job too, I should imagine.”

“I’ll get by,” Jean-Baptiste said.

“One always does ... until one doesn’t. But I must be off,” Brass Head said as he went out the door. “Other fish to fry, as they say.”

Jean-Baptiste watched from the window as Brass Head left the building, his *poodles* trailing behind him. One of the carriage lackeys – there were two of them, both in brown livery – opened the carriage door for their master while the sergeant went over to the day’s watcher and had a word with him, whereupon the later immediately joined the Breton and the weasel on the rear of the carriage. The sergeant took a seat on top beside the coachman, and the carriage drove off into the light rain, the brown-liveried lackeys clinging precariously to the carriage sides. It looked like the watchers were finally being called off.



Bossuet was heading towards the Rue Paradis. Despite his misgivings, for three consecutive evenings he had stood vigil on the Place de Loudun. But the shutters on the windows of the Abbé’s fourth-floor rooms had remained stubbornly shut, not even a glimmer of light betraying a hint of activity within. Perhaps, as d’Argenson had let slip, the Abbé was actually out of town. That had left the bookseller. So Bossuet had decided he would warn Bageuret, tell him that the Jesuit knew about his and his co-conspirators’ book-smuggling scheme and that the priest was planning to ... only God knew what he was going to do. In hindsight, the bookseller – in all probability the most manageable of the three – had been the obvious choice all along really; he was

also the most vulnerable.

Retracing part of the route he had taken the evening he had followed Bageuret from his rendezvous with the Abbé and d'Argenson at the Quai des Potiers, Bossuet reached the corner to the Rue Paradis and began to make his way slowly down the narrow street. The sharp and oily smell of printer's ink was fresh and pungent in the damp miasma of the late morning air. He tried to remember the smells of Pondicherry and of Saint Petersburg. The Jesuit's office had smelled of sanctity and beeswax, but he only remembered that it had; he did not remember the actual smell itself. But what physical sensation – either pain or pleasure – was ever really remembered?

A labourer straining under the weight of a wooden chest emerged from one of the bookshops. As he watched the man deposit it with a thud onto the wooden planks of the open wagon half-blocking the pavement, Bossuet noticed three figures striding down the other side of the street. They had the look of men who knew exactly where they were going and he immediately sensed they were law. The one leading them wore a short wig and carried a pistol in a holster. For a moment Bossuet didn't recognise him from the back, but then he was sure. It was the Grammarian. The other two – one of them a bumpkin fresh from the wilds by the look of him, and the other as lean and mean as a Paris sewer rat – carried truncheons in leather shoulder-holsters. Taking care to keep a few paces behind, Bossuet followed them down the Rue Paradis, wondering idly what they might be up to. He would cross the street – Imprimerie Charpentier was on the other side, the side they were striding down – when they had passed it. He could already see the distinctive sign with its overlapping black discs. The last thing he expected was that, when they reached Imprimerie Charpentier, they would suddenly stop and file unceremoniously into the shop.

Bossuet acted quickly and slipped into the nearest shop on his side of the street, another bookshop. The doorbell rang as he went in. A middle-aged proprietorial-looking woman emerged from the back room and stood behind the counter. For a second he imagined he saw suspicion written on her heavily maquillaged face.

"If I may peruse?" he said, indicating a bookshelf with a movement of his head.

"Be my guest, Monsieur," she said, seating herself in what was obviously her usual observation point.

Bossuet went over to the bookshelf and, leaning his walking stick against the wall, feigned an interest in the rows of books, extracting a cloth-bound volume, a collection of long-winded sermons by

some rural curé. Opening it at random, as if he intended to read a paragraph or two, he positioned himself so that he had a near-unobstructed view of Imprimerie Charpentier, which was almost exactly opposite.

He was on his third book when the lawmen emerged with Bageuret, dressed in a dark greatcoat and a shabby tricorne, and looking particularly diminutive in the presence of his escort. As the lawmen waited for Bageuret to lock up the shop, Bossuet caught a glimpse of the bookseller's face. There was something almost comic in his attempts to preserve his dignity and at the same time pretend that what was happening was not happening. The Grammarian was looking up and down the street with those shifty eyes of his as they waited. For a moment Bossuet thought his glance lingered for a moment in his direction, long enough for him to wonder if the man had actually recognised him through the glass of the shop window. As Bageuret's captors led him back down the street in the direction from which they had originally come, it began to rain. Bossuet wondered if Desforges's arrest had been as similarly undramatic, and pathetic. For a moment he considered following them, but he realised it was too late. There was nothing he could do now.



When they turned left at the end of Rue Paradis, Bageuret realised they were taking him to Quai des Potiers. He was certain of it; they had not searched the shop, they were not looking for anything there. Not that they would have found anything if they had searched it, except the usual run-of-the-mill borderline stuff and a hand-written pamphlet that had arrived the day before in the public post from Neuchâtel offering to supply various works printed *chez William Tell* and *by the Imprimerie Priapus* – which he could hardly be held responsible for.

It was still raining when they got there. A carriage, attended by two lackeys in brown livery with brown umbrellas, its horses oblivious to the unfolding drama, was parked outside the warehouse. The ill-omened Number 13 had been a portent after all. There was a coat of arms on the carriage door but Bageuret did not recognise it. Not knowing into whose hands he was being delivered increased his sense of dread.

Leaving Bageuret in the custody of the two heavies, the Grammarian, who'd been unusually quiet, even pensive, as they'd more or less frogmarched him through the streets, approached the

carriage. A hand sporting a ring with a blood-red stone that glittered in the wet light drew the carriage window's green baize curtain open and Bageuret caught a glimpse of the young, unpockmarked face of the carriage's occupant. It was Brass Head de la Haye. The aristocrat exchanged some words with the Grammarian; and his clear blue eyes cast a cursory glance in Bageuret's direction.

The Grammarian opened the carriage door and Brass Head emerged under the shelter of a brown umbrella held aloft by one of the lackeys. The aristocrat was wearing the same ginger wig and purple coat he'd worn that afternoon at Hôtel de Walsh.

Brass Head signalled for Bageuret to be brought forward. Instinctively, he removed his tricorn. The aristocrat looked him over with undisguised contempt, giving absolutely no indication that he had ever seen him before, and then turned to the pistol-toting Grammarian.

"Well, has he said anything?"

Bageuret resisted the urge to raise his hand and wipe away the raindrops running down his face.

"No, sire," said the Grammarian, whose hat was still confidently in place.

Brass Head looked Bageuret directly in the eyes for a moment, just long enough to oblige him to divert his gaze downwards or else appear insolent. As he did so, he could not help noticing the bulge in the nobleman's skin-tight lambskin suede *culottes*.

Brass Head spoke again.

"Lead the way, Starobinski," he said. "And bring the prisoner."

Bageuret wondered if that was in fact the Grammarian's real name.

As the Grammarian led him through the door in the warehouse gate, Bageuret could not help feeling that a part of him had always sensed it would come to this, that his fantastical visions of himself among a gang of convicts being paraded through the streets en route to Marseilles and the Mediterranean galleys had been some sort of premonition.

They escorted him across the covered courtyard. The rich smell of spices, packing straw and tobacco was dreadfully familiar. This been predestined, Bageuret found himself thinking, and that he had been a fool to think that men such as himself were intended to amount to anything significant in the earthly scheme of things.

As they climbed the stairs, he wondered – with an almost idle detachment – how Brass Head was going to react when the crates containing the remaining *Encyclopédies* were prised open and the

evidence was undeniable. As yet there had been no overt threat of violence. There was at least that.

But there was some money now. It would see the boy through until he came of age, secure him a place in a school at least. That was something. And the money was safe with the goldsmith's, though some arranging would be necessary. But he doubted that any arrangements would be possible with regard to the situation he was in now. Gilles's verbal acrobatics and connections were unlikely to get him out of this one.

At the top of the stairs, a long-haired fellow with a crowbar in his hand was waiting; he had the lapdog demeanour of the underling ever-ready to be of grovelling service to his betters. There was no sign of the usual *gardien*. The Grammarian gave a cursory nod and the *gardien* fellow extracted two large iron keys from his waistcoat pocket and opened the first lock. Bageuret braced himself. He knew he should have been preparing himself while they had been leading him through the streets – there had been enough time – or at least rehearsed some plausible stories in his head, but he hadn't had the heart for it. The only determination he could muster was to steel himself to say nothing, to simply pretend he was more stupid than Brass Head probably thought he was.

The door opened and the long-haired *gardien* stood aside.

"If you please, Monsieur Bageuret," Brass Head said, and gestured to Bageuret to step inside first. The aristocrat's disdain reminded him of the way the Margrave had spoken to him that afternoon at the Hôtel de Walsh.

He muttered a silent prayer to himself and went in.

But the crates had been turned over on their sides ... and were empty. How? Why? Who? A thousand questions flooded his mind. Was this good or was it bad? The beginning of something or the end of this nightmare?

Brass Head shook his head, let a contemptuous snort escape through his nostrils and turned towards the *gardien*.

"You fucking dolt," he almost screamed in a high-pitched voice.

"There's been a lot of coming and going, milord," the *gardien* said, suddenly terrified. "I'm new here ..."

Brass Head slapped his face, twice in quick succession.

Bageuret felt the urge to actually laugh but managed to stifle it; and from the corner of his eye – the gesture was so fleeting he wasn't even sure it had happened – he thought he saw the Grammarian actually wink at him. But then Brass Head was speaking again.

"The best-laid schemes of mice and men," he was saying,

shaking his head, and for a moment Bageuret really thought the nightmare was over. But it wasn't. "So, bookman, where are they?"

The venom in the aristocrat's voice jolted him out of the fatalistic stupor he had been in since they had taken him from the bookshop. He realised he needed to think fast – faster than he'd ever thought. The new *gardien* fellow hadn't seen him before. That was at least something, maybe ... he needed to find out what Brass Head actually knew.

"I don't understand," he managed to say.

"*I don't understand*," Brass whined, mimicking him. "Silly me. Silly fucking me. And I thought you fucking bookmen knew everything." He turned to the Grammarian. "Take this pint-sized smart alec down to my carriage. I need to think. And you," he turned to the *gardien*, "get out of my fucking sight."

As the Grammarian escorted him silently down the flights of wooden stairs, Bageuret tried hard to think. What did the aristocrat really know? Did he know about the barge? About the Abbé? That the books had already been shipped? Had he been only expecting to find the ten sets that had miraculously – that was the only word that came to mind – disappeared? Say as little as possible, he told himself. The aristocrat had said he wanted *to think*. Maybe he knew very little. Maybe somebody had simply stumbled across the books and helped themselves. The new *gardien* had said there'd been a lot of coming and going. No lock was unpickable.

They crossed the covered courtyard and reached the arched entrance. It was locked of course, the new *gardien* had the key, and hadn't come down yet. Had Brass Head called him back?

"A word to the wise," the Grammarian said, as they waited. "Act stupido. Not too stupido but just eenough for him to think he's not going to get too much out of you about whatever you and your mates have been up to. He'll be expecting you to be a bit thick. You know what these aristos are like. Full of them fucking selves. But if you have to, spill the beans, pods an' all."

Bageuret nodded. The *gardien* had emerged from the stairway at the other end of the courtyard.

"Wouldn't worry too much about your partners in crime if I was you. I have a feeling they're in a better position to look out for themselves than you are. That's why he's after eevidence. Think of yourself. If you're lucky, he meeght simply think you're not worth the paperwork."

The *gardien* arrived and let them out.

The rain had stopped and the sun was shining again. The world had never looked so bright, and perfect. And, Bageuret could not

help thinking, at that moment as irrevocably beyond reach as the perfect world reflected in that glass mirror at the Hôtel de Walsh.

Brass Head emerged from the warehouse doorway.

“Put the bookman in my carriage,” he ordered the Grammarian, and then simply said to the coachman: “To Bicêtre!”

The Grammarian opened the carriage door and Bageuret got in, followed by Brass Head. He felt the vehicle rock as the Grammarian mounted behind. The carriage began to move.

“Well, bookman, have you ever been to Bicêtre?” Brass Head asked him contemptuously.

Bageuret felt another nauseating wave of terror. But the question had been genuine – in its way. Brass Head did not seem to know about the Abbé. Maybe he did really know very little, maybe ...

“No, sire,” Bageuret replied.

“You know they keep the loonies there.”

“Yes, sire.”

“They say at least half of them were quite *compos mentis* when they were admitted.”

Bageuret said nothing.

“We need to have a little chat. Assuming you haven’t lost your tongue, that is?”

“No, sire.”

“Don’t suppose you ever been to sea either?”

“No, sire,” managed to Bageuret reply again, before realising the man was referring to the galleys.

Bageuret felt he was going to be sick.

“They say it does a man good. All that sea air. The manual labour.”

They had reached the city gates.

“No doubt you’re wondering what I actually know,” Brass Head said after they were waved through. “In my experience – and believe me, I have a lot of experience in dealing with people like you – that’s usually the first thing that comes into a man’s head in your situation. So, to save time, mine and yours, I’m going to tell you. Then I expect you to tell me what you know. The rest. What I don’t know. All of it. Every last detail. And then, if I’m happy with what I hear I just *might* not ... well, I’ll leave that to your imagination.”

Outside, the suburbs passed by: tidy rows of single- and double-storied houses with well-kept gardens, exuding prosperous domesticity and seemingly effortless respectability, despite the bleak leaflessness of their ornamental bushes and their frost-wizened flowerbeds.

“I know that you and your chum d’Argenson have sold sets of Diderot’s *Encyclopédie* to that Möllendorf fellow, which I’m sure you know is an offence. You do know it’s an offence, don’t you?”

“Yes, sire.”

“A very serious offence.”

“Yes, sire.”

“You must have thought me a right idiot that afternoon at the Hôtel de Walsh.”

The houses and the gardens gave way to countryside.

They began to pass through a leafless forest.

“No, sire.”

“I’m sure d’Argenson did though. Probably joked about it afterwards. I don’t like that man. I don’t like him at all. A very bad sort. Bet you’re sorry now you got mixed up with him?”

The bareness of the trees passing outside the carriage window made Bageuret even more aware how utterly he was in Brass Head’s hands. But he still had enough of a grip on himself to realise that Brass Head had made no mention of the rest of the *Encyclopédies*, the ones that should have been in the other crates. The man had obviously been expecting to find all the *Encyclopédies* in the storeroom ... but now seemed to think that they’d sold all of them to the Margrave. He’d been as surprised as Bageuret had been to find the empty crates. He didn’t know everything.

“Now, what I want you to tell me ... Nice view, isn’t it? Are you listening?”

“Yes, sire.”

“You do repeat yourself, don’t you! So, where did you get the Diderot books? How did you smuggle them out of Paris? Where are they heading to? I want the names of everyone involved. Is that clear?”

Bageuret realised that they had finally reached the moment he had been dreading. Either he again tried to deny everything straight out – and bring the wrath of Brass Head down on him, a thought not worth bearing – or ... But how much could he get away with telling him? How much was it safe to tell him?

“I am waiting,” Brass Head said.

Bageuret opened his mouth to try and say something.

“Spill the beans, man, spill them, pods an’ all!”

Bageuret sank even further into despair. Had the Grammarian been simply softening him up? Or really trying to help? How many levels were there to this nightmare?

“Come on, bookman, spit it out!”

Bageuret tried to say something – he wasn't even sure what – but all that came out was a stutter. He tried again, and stuttered again.

“Blast!” Brass Head half-muttered and knocked on the roof of the carriage furiously with the hilt of his sword.

The carriage lurched to a sudden halt.

“Take off your shoes and stockings,” Brass Head ordered, his voice calm again. “And your wig!”

Bageuret was thrown into even greater confusion but began to fumble with his shoes.

“And toss the socks out the window! I don't want them stinking my carriage up.”

Bageuret obeyed.

“Now get out!”

Bageuret hesitated.

“Get out, I said. Out! Out!”

Bageuret opened the carriage door and stepped bare-footed into the roadway mud.

Brass Head followed.

“Give me your pistol,” he said to the Grammarian, who had also dismounted.

“Is it loaded?” Brass Head asked as he was handed the gun.

The Grammarian nodded.

“But the powder is probably damp.”

“Huh,” Brass snorted. “Or it might not be. We'll find out soon enough if our bookman here doesn't overcome his speech impediment.”

Brass Head pointed the gaping octagonal-shaped metal barrel at Bageuret.

“Walk,” he said. “Into the woods. Walk!”

Bageuret found himself putting one naked foot in front of the other. The soft cold mud of the road gave way to the harder forest floor.

“Walk,” Brass Head said again.

What felt like an eternity later Brass Head told him to stop and turn around. The road and the carriage were out of sight. Jacques Charpentier had died suddenly, without the benefit of the sacraments. Was the same fate to befall him? He tried to find his voice but again nothing came.

Brass Head raised the pistol, put the muzzle to the centre of Bageuret's forehead just above his eyes, and pressed it into his flesh. All Bageuret could see was the ring with the blood-red jewel on the aristocrat's trigger finger.

“The powder *might* be damp,” Brass Head said calmly. “Or it

might not be. If it's not ... well, you'll get to feel what it feels like to have a ball of lead blow your head apart ..."

Bageuret felt his bladder open and a stream of hot piss run down the inside of his thighs, soaking his *culottes*.

"Up to you now! Where did you get the Diderot books? Talk!"

Bageuret though he would stutter again, but miraculously he found his voice.

"Charpentier," he found himself saying, not recognising his own voice, "They were his, he'd collected them."

"Jacques Charpentier?"

"Yes."

"Go on!"

"A barge, we smuggled them out on a barge. De Graffigny ..."

"Who?" Brass Head asked, seemingly genuinely puzzled.

"De Graffigny."

"The Jesus Man?"

"No, no, his nephew, the Abbé."

Brass Head laughed.

"My, oh my, it is a smallish world. Continue!"

"The books are on their way to Worms. To be delivered to an agent of the Margrave."

"Where exactly in Worms."

Bageuret told him.

"And d'Argenson? What's his role in this shabby affair? Arranged it all, I suppose."

"Yes," Bageuret simply said.

"A very trusting fellow, the Margrave. How much did you make?"

"We haven't been paid yet," Bageuret replied, as if that was going to make a difference. "I mean ..."

"How does that work?"

"There'll be a letter. The Margrave's man will send him a letter. When the goods have been delivered. We'll be paid then." It was too late now to explain that they had already been paid half upfront.

Brass Head said nothing for a moment.

A crow cawed somewhere in the distance.

"A letter to the Margrave from Worms," Brass Head repeated.

"Yes, a sort of receipt," Bageuret explained.

"How pedantically clerkish!" Brass half-smiled and half-laughed. "A sort of receipt ..."

"Yes, sort of."

"Are you a religious man?" Brass Head asked.

Bageuret plunged further into the abyss of fear.

“Yes, sire, please, sire ...”

“Believe in purgatory?”

“Yes, sire,” Bageuret realised he was now begging for his very life. “Sire, you promised ...”

“Do you think – if I don’t blow your head off that is – I’d get a few years off, from purgatory, that is, for not blowing your head off?”

“Yes, sire, please, sire ...”

“It’s a gift you know, faith is. We should be thankful for it.”

“Yes, sire.”

“Turn around and kneel down.”

“For the love of God, sire, for the love of God,” Bageuret begged as he got down on his knees.

He felt the muzzle of the pistol against the back of his skull, and the hard, cold ground press into his knees.

The crow cawed again.

“Now I want you to say a prayer,” Brass Head said quietly. “I want you to thank God for Christianity. Because if it wasn’t for our glorious religion, I probably would blow your fucking head off.”

Ж

“Bit of a bugger-up, I’m afraid,” du Guesclin said.

Jean-Baptiste had known something was up when du Guesclin had sent the note asking to meet him at the Athénée instead of at some fancy knocking shop. Du Guesclin had been sitting by the railing grabbing a bit of sun when he’d got there.

“A bugger-up?”

“When I went to the Quai des Potiers with my men to collect the books and transport them to my warehouse, those pinewood boxes were gone.”

“What?”

“Gone. Vanished. Some buggers had moved them.”

“Some buggers? Who?”

Du Guesclin shrugged his shoulders in a gesture of helplessness.

“And the sets which were still in the original crates?” Jean-Baptiste asked aghast.

“They were still there. I managed to move those to my warehouse. The buggers – whoever they were – were too quick for us, I’m afraid. It happens.”

Du Guesclin looked genuinely apologetic. He’d had near enough to two weeks to arrange something.

“You haven’t had any further thoughts on who else might have known?” du Guesclin asked.

“No.”

He’d thought about Charpentier’s *Encyclopédies* for months, mulled the possibilities over endlessly in his mind, contemplated God knows how many options and permutations of options, kept his expectations modest, to a minimum. All he’d wanted was what was owed him. He had a right to that. And then ... and then ... all at once, within the matter of a few days – without him even noticing it – it had all taken on a life of its own. He should never have become involved with du Guesclin. The man was clever, but it was the cleverness of a pickpocket, of a pirate ... Maybe this whole thing had been insane right from the beginning. *Just take them*, she had said, *just take them all*. What had she been thinking? What had he been thinking? But what was done was done.

“And you’re sure nobody had access to your keys? Or knew what they were the keys to?”

“Absolutely!”

“Charpentier must have told someone else.”

“But who?”

“His widow?” du Guesclin suggested.

“Christine Charpentier?”

“The most obvious suspect ...”

“But ...” Jean-Baptiste began, attempting to think aloud.

“And even if he didn’t tell her,” du Guesclin said. “Well, dead men always leave a mess behind them. There must have been papers, receipts, unpaid bills, some scribbled notes ... it would be surprising if she did not go through them. And a set of mystery keys. Women are curious creatures – in both senses of the word – and shrewd enough. Christine Charpentier is no fool. She could well have figured it out.”

Jean-Baptiste was forced to admit that du Guesclin might be right. Blindingly, obviously right even. Why hadn’t he thought of that himself? He needed to get back in control again, untangle himself from this whole mess.

“Bring the set sets you have to the library!” Jean-Baptiste found himself saying. “I’ll store them there.” There was still an apologetic look on du Guesclin’s ugly, disfigured face, an almost guilty look. “No. Don’t! In fact, I’ll collect them.”

“Are you sure?” du Guesclin asked.

He was not certain whether du Guesclin was referring to his wanting to store the books in the library or his wanting to arrange collecting them from the warehouse himself. Not that it mattered.

“Yes. You send your customers to me. I will give them the books. They can either pay you or me directly. I don’t care. As long as I get what’s due me.”

The watchers had been called off. And even if Brass Head reappeared he has no authority to confiscate copies of the *Encyclopédie* – and Diderot would be away for weeks yet. Du Guesclin could not be relied on. He had no intention relying on him again.

“They *are* your books,” du Guesclin said, acquiescing surprisingly quickly.

The display of sheepish submission was the last thing Jean-Baptiste had expected. It was not like the man at all. Maybe he was not used to anyone standing up to him, or simply feeling a bit of an idiot ... he should have started moving the books to his warehouse immediately they’d discovered they’d been tampered with. But maybe he had, and had taken this long to work up the courage to tell him. Pathetic. Jean-Baptiste was beginning to feel in control again now.

Du Guesclin fumbled in his jacket pocket.

“Here are the keys,” he said, handing him the now useless keys to the Quai des Potiers storeroom. “I’ll send you the customers I have. It’s not as many as I thought it would be. Some of my potentials, it seems, have got cold feet.”

Ж

One moment there was the normally unnoticed sounds of life aboard the barge, and the next there was silence except for the sleepy lapping of the water on the wooden hull. The habitual banter between the barge master, his wife, their two girls and the crewman on the deck above had simply ceased. Thinking the sudden quiet might mean trouble – though surely, he thought, the appearance of *douaniers* or some other problem would have generated raised voices – the Abbé got up from his makeshift bunk in the cramped cabin space and made his way up the narrow wooden steps to the deck.

Emerging into the winter sunlight, he found them all standing motionless at the gunwales, staring into the water. The thick hemp tow rope was floating slack in the water, the barge horse and its driver were standing motionlessly on the towpath. When the Abbé looked over the side, he saw why. There were several bloated corpses floating past on the mud-brown water, face down, in

military uniforms, in French blue and the green of some other army. A half a dozen crows had descended on them, vulture-like, and were pecking the exposed flesh of several of the bodies; on one, one of the pitch-black birds was busy at the stump of a leg. A faint smell of decay mingled with the mutton-and-onion stew brewing over the charcoal stove at the stern kitchen. Despite the warmth of the day, the Abbé felt himself physically chill.

He counted the bodies. There were six of them: two on the port side, one on the starboard, one downriver, and another two just ahead of them about to pass by on the starboard side. For a moment he had the fleeting impression that he was looking at a painting and was vaguely surprised that he was not overcome by an overwhelming sense of horror.

One of the crows rose into the air, hovered for a moment over the water and then landed on another body, a green-coated one. He recalled the crows he had seen playing in the sky the day before, and remembered what that man with the Janus-face – he could not remember his name – had said that evening at the Grande Synagogue: something about the Indians believing that the dead could be reborn in the bodies of animals *in different times, in the future or in the past, as if time were a sort of river*. Perhaps the souls of these dead warriors – if they could be called that – had returned, comet-like, reincarnated as the crows that were now devouring the flesh of their previous incarnations. The dead feeding on the dead.

“There must have been a battle or something upriver,” the barge master’s wife said in her throaty Provençal accent and crossed herself. “Unlucky bastards.”

“Food for the birds,” muttered the barge master.

“And the fishes,” she added.

Modern warfare, the Abbé found himself thinking, was *supposed* to be more civilised. Cannons and muskets cost more than pikes and crossbows, the argument went, and drilled uniformed troops more than rabbles of levied peasants. Expensive armies were supposed to be risked less often, modern states less likely to fight to the death, as they had in previous centuries. One dreaded to think what *less* civilised warfare was like.

They stood there gazing at the macabre scene until the bodies had floated around a bend in the waterway and out of view. The driver began to lead the barge horse forward again. The tow rope tautened and the barge began to move. The bargemaster, his wife and the crewman returned to their lazy tasks.

The Abbé found himself a sunlit corner beside the

wheelhouse, sat down and lit his pipe. They were hundreds of miles away from where the armies were supposed to be, or so he had believed. He wondered why he was not feeling more than he was feeling: shocked, horrified, outraged even. But he was not. He felt merely numbed; and had a vague awareness of the sight he had just witnessed retreating into the recesses of his mind.

CHAPTER XVII

TOO MANY BOOKS IN THE WORLD

“I have come to Worms in person. I have never been a traveller – I am no Anton Wilhelm Amo – though in my 20s, I did walk from Dresden to Halle twice, there and back, but I thought an adventure would do me good. And, while it might be appropriate to send a lackey to take delivery of a few boxes of cookbooks, I thought Diderot’s oeuvre deserved to be taken delivery of in persona.”

Sophie-Françoise and the Margrave were whiling away another rainy afternoon in the four-poster bed in his apartment the Hôtel de Walsh. A letter had just arrived from the Margrave’s uncle.

“Your envoy has not yet arrived,” she read on, half-pretending to ignore the Margrave’s attempts to cajole her nipples into an erect state by tickling them lightly with the feather-end of a quill. *“But, I suppose, delays on the road are unavoidable and I am sure he will turn up shortly.”*

“I must admit I was a trifle perplexed by your choice of this de Graffigny fellow,” the Margrave said. “Struck me as more of a man for making risqué remarks than carrying out risky endeavours. The fellow didn’t quite inspire me with confidence.”

“You said nothing at the time.”

He shrugged.

“It’s not easy to find people for this kind of thing,” she said before continuing. *“The journey really brought it home to me how much a patchwork of principalities and bishoprics the German lands actually are. Armed with a passport – from neutral Mühlhausen – my man and I set out from Halle (in the Margraviate of Brandenburg), from whence we headed for Weimar (in the Saxon Duchies), then to Erfurt (in the Archbishopric of Mayence), made a stop at Mühlhausen itself (free imperial city), then through the Bishopric of Fulda and the Landgraviate of Hesse-Darmstadt, crossed the Main at Frankfurt (another free imperial city) from which we made the final leg of our journey to Worms (a bishopric). The roads were, for the most part, a barely passable mixture of slush and mud. But the countryside was surprising peaceful: the snow had more or less vanished from the fields and the peasants were emerging from their winter hibernation to begin the spring*

ploughing – a pastoral scene that made it difficult to believe there was a war going on, out there somewhere – somewhere over the many horizons we saw. The owner of this sub-urbia establishment is a local Israelite ... What caused you to choose this Schlemihl place?”

“A whim. I was billeted there once. And everyone is so sure they know what the Jews are up to they never bother to look too closely at what they really might be up to.”

“What?”

“Makes it a good place to do some discreet business.”

She frowned, not quite sure she had understood his Germanic logic, and read on.

“... *who speaks some French. His native tongue is Yiddish, rather than the Rhenish dialect. Yiddish?”*

“Jewish. A mishmash of Rhenish and Hebrew. Written in Hebrew characters. Perhaps with a bit of Sorbish and Wendish thrown in for good measure. The Sorbs and the Wends are Slavs but I’ve even come across the odd village of them this side of the Elbe.”

“*He says his kind,*” she continued reading, “*have been living in the Rhineland longer than Christians, which, of course, is correct. He also told me that Yiddish had been invented so that they would not have to use Hebrew when speaking of profane matters, Hebrew being a sacred language. Worms has a Judenbischof and local legend has it that the Jews of Worms tried to intercede with Pontius Pilate to spare Christ. A strange people: one does not know whether to believe the stories they tell about themselves or the stories others tell about them; though the last pope was obviously prone to believing in the latter. The Jewish cemetery here is supposed to be the oldest in Europe and the city has been home to not a few Kabbalists in previous ages. It goes back to before Roman times – being brought into the Empire by Drusus in 14 BC. The cathedral is on the site of the old temple to Minerva.*”^{LII}

“Ah, the quill *is* mightier than the sword,” the Margrave said. The nipple on the right breast had responded to his ministrations. “Go on, I am listening.” He turned his attention to her left breast.

“*Some Halle gossip which might be of interest in Paris if it has not already reached there: de Maupertuis has been arrested in Basel for getting some young hussy pregnant! The man is 61!!! I was introduced to him – a popinjay of a man (ginger bobtail wig, powdered yellow) – when he passed through Halle on his way to Berlin in 1740 or thenabouts. He had a blackamoor servant – though companion might be a better description, considering the*

familiarities he allowed him – whom he introduced as Orion. He already had quite a reputation as a scholar, as a conversationalist, and as a man of action – due to his Lapland exploits. Fritz was enamoured of him, which Voltaire did not like. (The only book Fritz ever ordered burned was *The Diatribe* – it was actually called that – in which Voltaire lampooned Maupertuis. Fritz sent Maupertuis some of the ashes.) Voltaire also savaged Maupertuis in his *Micromégas* ...”

“In his what?”

“His *Micromégas*. A tale of creatures from Sirius and Saturn visiting the Earth,” she explained and read on, “... *though Maupertuis – it must be said – gave as good as he got in that pamphlet he published under La Beaumelle’s name (imprisoned in the Bastille at the time). The two were once quite close apparently – vendettas of this kind usually have their origin in lovers’ tiffs (the fairy-tale princess becomes the fairy-tale witch etc.) – and they were both avid partisans of the Newtonian cosmology over the Cartesian, a controversial stance to take in the ’20s and ’30s. They also took Newton’s side together against Leibniz on the question of the calculus.*”

She felt his fingers tiptoeing across her belly, moving towards her sex.

“A change of tactics,” he explained, beginning to gently massage her clitoris. “Read on.”

“*But it must be said that Maupertuis does/did have some idiosyncratic ideas (brandy fuelled? – he is said to have taken to the distillate of the vine quite seriously in the last few years) such as blowing up the Egyptian pyramids to find out what is inside them and the vivisection of condemned prisoners to find out what is inside them, the goings-on in their living brains, as it were – though I believe La Mettrie and Diderot have also toyed with that idea. But I digress.*”

She paused for a minute to savour the sensation of his fingers on her sex.

“*The principal seat of pleasure in the female,*” he quoted absent-mindedly.

She turned the page, pretending not to have heard him.

“*I shall write you another brief epistle when the merchandise has arrived,*” she read on. “*I am planning to return with it to Halle via Hamelin – the mysterious event that took place there in 1284 has always fascinated me – and from there travel via Minden to Hannover to visit Leibniz’s tomb in the Neustädter Kirche. Leibniz the Optimist was the last true universal scholar, the last universal*

philosopher (he had over 1,000 correspondents scattered all over the Continent and he even corresponded with the Jesuit astronomer-missionaries in China), and was a man with a generous heart. While Newton was studying alchemy and hanging forgers or chopping their hands off or whatever they do with them in England, Leibniz was trying to bridge the rift of the Reformation – though he too had a curiosity for the esoteric/numerology. He reportedly argued that the binary number system he invented, (based on the number 1 and 0, and no more practical than poor Amo's suggestion to base all measurements on the number 10, I dare say), somehow proved that the world was created in 6 days – or 111 in his system, a trinity, 3 divine 1s. (1 = 1, 10 = 2, 11 = 3, 100 = 4, 101 = 5, 111 = 6, you see! Indeed, he argues that the whole of the universe could be explained by the numbers 1 and 0, 1 being God and 0 being Nothing! That basically this whole number system was an image of creation!)^{LIII} But I ramble again. With the Mühlhausen passport, I do not anticipate any difficulties on the road. I will keep your prize safely – assuming it does arrive safely – in my rooms until you return to claim it, unless otherwise instructed. I am sure you will forgive my perusing your precious volumes from time to time. I am arranging for the monies you require to be dispatched as per usual via the Amsterdamsche Wisselbank. My greetings to the Baron and the young von Klopstock. Your uncle and servant, Klaus von Möllendorf.” She let the letter fall from her hand and lay back.

“Faster,” she told him.



When Bossuet arrived at the *cabinet noir* the next morning, Roguin popped his head out the door of his lair and motioned for him to enter.

Brass Head was at the Rue de Nicot comptroller's desk, on which there was a half-empty bottle of white wine and two glasses. He and Roguin had obviously been having an early morning tipple.

“The Comte de la Haye and I,” Roguin informed him, “have just been having a little chinwag about you.”

For a moment Bossuet wondered if he should panic, but Roguin was his usual perky self.

“A rather pressing and delicate matter has come up,” Roguin explained as he got back behind his desk again, leaving Bossuet to stand.

“To be precise, a particular letter,” Brass Head said, taking over.

The scent of his eau de cologne filled the confined space. “A letter which a certain Margrave de Möllendorf, ...” – Bossuet hid his surprise – “... currently resident at the Hôtel de Walsh de Serrant, is about to receive. Monsieur Roguin has recommended you as somebody who could be of assistance. Indeed, he has spoken very highly of your abilities.”

Bossuet thought he felt himself blush.

“A letter from Worms,” Brass Head added.

“Worms?” Bossuet repeated.

“Yes. And it may well be on its way as we speak,” Brass Head said.

“Is the Hôtel de Walsh currently on the reading list?” Roguin asked, anxious not to be excluded from the exchange. “Or this Margrave de Möllendorf?”

Bossuet knew that Roguin knew they were not.

“No,” Bossuet said, playing along.

“I thought not,” Roguin said.

“The reading list?” Brass Head asked, momentarily confused.

“Every month or so,” Roguin explained, “Versailles sends us a list of those whom it is deemed – how shall I put it? – let’s say *prudent* to keep an eye on. We call it the reading list. A little in-office witticism to brighten up the tedium of our days.” But seeing Brass Head did not seem to find the witticism particularly amusing, he became serious again. “It’s all very official. In an unofficial sort of way of course.”

“The royal post delivers all the letters addressed to those on the list to us here,” Bossuet intervened. “When they have been examined, they are then returned to be delivered in the usual way.”

Brass Head probably knew all this of course, more or less, Bossuet thought. But the aristocrat did not interrupt.

“Material deemed of interest is copied, and passed on to Versailles,” Roguin added.

“And if the courier is someone other than the royal post?” Brass Head asked.

“The licensed couriers know which side their bread is buttered on,” Roguin told him. “Their cooperation is more than forthcoming. There’s not much that slips through. We are very thorough.”

“And how quickly could somebody, let’s say, be added to this list?” Brass Head asked. “And the couriers informed?”

Roguin let Bossuet answer.

“Very quickly, if necessary.”

“It is necessary,” Brass Head said.

“It can all be organised by tomorrow if you wish,” Bossuet said. “I can start making arrangements immediately.”

“Good, very, very good, that’s what I wanted to hear,” Brass Head said. “What is needed is the actual letter, not a copy of it. All we know at this stage is that it will be from Worms and will be addressed to de Möllendorf personally. We don’t know from whom it will be.”

“That will not be a problem,” Roguin reassured him.

“The minute it arrives I want a messenger sent round to the Hôtel de Malesherbes. To my bureau.”

Roguin and Bossuet nodded obediently.

“If I am not there, my people will know where I am,” Brass Head went on, addressing Roguin directly again. “I am on the move a lot. Your messenger will be instructed as to my whereabouts. Then I want Monsieur Bossuet here to bring the letter personally to me. And under no circumstances, it is to be opened.”

“Is that clear, Bossuet?” Roguin said.

“As a bell, sire.”

“Well then, Monsieur Bossuet,” Roguin said, dipping his quill in his inkpot and scribbling some lines on one of the small sheets of paper he used for internal office messages, “I suggest you set up everything immediately. Inform the royal post and the other couriers – all of them – personally.” He handed Bossuet the sheet of paper. “Here’s a requisition for some petty cash. Hire a carriage and see everyone today.”

Bossuet took the requisition sheet and bowed slightly.

“You may go now,” Roguin said.

Brass Head grinned at him conspiratorially as he left.

On the way down the corridor to Genet, the bookkeeper, Bossuet wondered what that had been all about. He knew the Margrave was a prisoner of war ... so it was quite possibly to do with something military. Brass Head was obviously a man with a finger in many pies. But if it was military, it was odd that Brass Head was not interested in seeing the contents of any letters the Margrave himself might be sending to the Germanies. But no doubt, he would find out what it was all about in due time. Roguin liked to gossip. However, his plan to visit Alligny-en-Morvan would now have to be postponed for a while, for as long as it took this mysterious letter from Worms to arrive.

“Gone?” Christine Charpentier repeated.

Bageuret nodded. He had just told her that the remaining unsold books in the Quai des Potiers storeroom were no longer there, that they had been *stolen*.

He had told her nothing of what had really happened; he’s said only that he had gone back to the warehouse to do some tidying up and had found the books gone. He had still not recovered from the nightmare that Brass Head had subjected him to, his horrendous walk back to Paris, barefoot, wigless, in the rain, his *culottes* soaked in his own piss ... Thank God it had been dark when he reached the city and nobody had recognised him as he made his way to the Rue Paradis.

“But the *gardiens* should know who’s been coming and going, shouldn’t they?” he said. The suggestion was more than half-hearted.

The drawing room of the Faubourg Victor house, with its royal portrait above the fireplace, upholstered furniture, harpsichord and view of the back garden through the bay window, reminded him of the suburban houses he had seen from Brass Head’s carriage. Inside, he supposed, they would have been very similar.

“Maybe,” she said. “But I doubt it. Anyone with a stamped key is let in. There are at least sixty storerooms. It’s a lot of coming and going. And, I imagine, not a small number of the place’s clients value their anonymity.”

“The *gardiens* have keys. Maybe ...”

“These warehouse masters pride themselves on their security. They handpick their men.”

“But who else could possibly have known?” he asked.

He hadn’t seen Gilles since but he’d sent him a cryptic and convoluted note, referring to Brass Head as BH, the *Encyclopédies* as the china, and the Margrave as the china collector. Which was all rather ridiculous really. He’d told him that Brass Head de la Haye had arrested him, brought him to the warehouse, but that in finding all the *Encyclopédies* gone, Brass Head, in a fit of rage, had suddenly began to rant and rave and then questioned him about Gilles, about the time he’d seen them together at the Hôtel de Walsh, and that Brass Head had said he knew that he and Gilles were involved in something with the Margrave, but then had simply let him go, warning him to not cross his path again. The thought of actually telling Gilles what had really happened did not bear thinking about. Gilles had made light of it all, saying, in his less cryptic reply, not to worry, that Brass Head had just been *fishing, clutching at straws*, that the *Encyclopédies* were gone, out

of the country, that there was no evidence; but he had suggested they lie low for a while, meaning not to meet up. Maybe Gilles was right, that there was nothing to worry about. He hoped to Christ he was. Yes, he had told Brass Head de la Haye the Abbé had taken the *Encyclopédies* away on the barge ... but Brass Head was hardly going to arrest a man like the Margrave, a guest of the de Choiseuls, on the basis of that. And Brass Head had simply let him go, discarded him like a burned-out clay pipe, as insignificant detritus. Sometimes there were advantages to being small fry.

“My husband obviously must have shared his secret with someone else. Maybe he had an accomplice. But as to who that might have been, I have no idea. Somebody he trusted enough to give a second set of keys to.”

Bageuret was not quite convinced; she must have some idea of who it could have been, some suspicions, but it was hardly his place to press her. Let well alone, he advised himself, the *Encyclopédies* they'd sold to the Margrave should be out of the country by now, out of harm's way, at least as far as he was concerned. And he was not locked up or worse.

“JC liked playing the conspirator,” she said.

JC? For a moment he was at a loss.

“He used to call himself that,” she explained. “JC. Jacques Charpentier. Jesus Christ. May I have the keys back?”

If Christine Charpentier suspected him of having something to do with the disappearance of the *Encyclopédies*, there wasn't a hint of it in her voice. If anything, she seemed resigned to the loss, almost relieved in fact. Not that he cared too much what she thought at this stage.



“The third volume of the book of books, as requested.”

Du Guesclin gave von Klopstock a surreptitious wink as he gave him the heavy tome.

“Of course, if you were interested in a complete set,” he said, turning to Isabelle de Vereaux, “or rather an incomplete set? Up to the letter G. There are unlikely to be any more volumes now. Dildoreedo's scheme for universal improvement seems to have finally bitten the dust ...”

“You have sets for sale?” she asked, visibly surprised.

Du Guesclin's warehouse on the Quai du Nord seemed an unlikely place, von Klopstock could not help thinking, for what she had described as another *confidential rendezvous* – as she had

subsequently described her meeting with Brass Head de la Haye in the gaudy sepulchre of Saint Sebastien's. The building was packed with bales of cloth and myriad boxes of God knew what. In one corner there was even a cage-like crate of glass jars half-wrapped in straw containing what he could have sworn was mercury, and beside that a neat stack of expensive-looking upholstered chairs that looked as if they had once adorned some country seat. There was even an expensive-looking four-poster bed at the back. It was somehow hard to believe that the roguish man they were talking to actually *owned* it all.

"In a manner of speaking," du Guesclin grinned.

"In a manner of speaking?" she repeated.

"Let's say that under certain circumstances I am empowered to act on behalf of someone who might have some sets for sale?"

"Dildoreedo?"

"He's out of town. But warm," he said.

"Le Breton!"

He shook his head.

"The Baron d'Holbach?"

Du Guesclin laughed.

"You are sharp, Isabelle, but no, it's not our atheist baron. But if you did want a set – which I don't for a moment think you do – on whose door would you knock? I think it would be that of someone a little lower down on the chain of bookish being ... But I've said too much. You owe me a hundred livres."

Isabelle de Vereaux made a sign to von Klopstock to give du Guesclin the purse she had entrusted him with.

"I presume there is no need to count it," du Guesclin said as he let von Klopstock drop the purse into his open hand. "Besides, it would be impolite."

She smiled as he pocketed it.

Someone a little lower down on the chain of bookish being, von Klopstock repeated the words to himself in his head. Somebody below Diderot? Somebody under Diderot? Diderot's secretary? Jean-Baptiste Longchamp? He wondered. Perhaps.

Ж

As the Chevalier d'Abyssinie counted out his gold and silver coins and arranged them in neat stacks on Diderot's desk beside the seven volumes of the *Encyclopédie* he had just purchased, Jean-Baptiste contemplated the texture of the man's skin. It was the colour of darkly-stained wood, even seemed to have the solidity of

wood. The contrast with the little white poodle in the Abyssinian's lap was slightly unreal, theatrical even; he wondered if the man had actually procured the dog primarily because of its colour, and if black skin was as sensitive as a European's.

"Seventeen louis d'ors and two livres," the Chevalier d'Abyssinie said. He had another name in his own language but had insisted it was too difficult for a Frenchman to pronounce. "Which, I believe, adds up to precisely four hundred and ten livres."

Jean-Baptiste glanced at Adélaïde, seated at what was usually his desk. Her response was a polite but non-committal smile.

It was the eighth set they had sold. And a Marquise de Bernis, a mysterious woman of Mediterranean looks and origins, was expected the next morning to purchase another. Six of du Guesclin's customers, or punters as he called them, had turned up, a motley bunch to say the least: but all of them stinking rich. The man certainly had contacts. There was now only one set left unsold, but he was already negotiating with two potential customers for it: a medical man from Versailles – bleeding the rich, in the literal sense, obviously paid off – and a tax farmer from the Faubourg Victor whose bleeding did not confine itself to aristocratic hypochondriacs. Then he would be rid of them, thank God. He would make twenty-nine hundred livres. Less five hundred livres to Adélaïde – he reckoned that was fair – not that she had asked him for anything, or even hinted that he might have any obligation to her. Which left him with a clear profit of twenty-four hundred livres. Not enough to ransom a king, or even a moderately well-off marquis, but not an amount to be sniffed at. And it was considerably more than du Guesclin was going to make, despite his so-called centuries of mercantile experience.

"Your master's book collection is impressive," the Chevalier d'Abyssinie said, making a gesture that attempted to encompass everything in Diderot's library. "But sometimes I think there will come a time when there will be too many books in the world."

"Too many books in the world?" said Jean-Baptiste, somewhat taken aback.

"Think of it this way," the Chevalier started to explain. "Before the invention of the printing press, a young man enters a monastery, one with a good library. If he lives out his scriptural threescore years and ten, he will have enough time to read all the books in that library. If it was a library of any consequence, it would have contained most, or at least a fair proportion of all the knowledge in the world at that time."

The black man's imaginary monk conjured up images of old men learning Latin texts by rote, fingering rosary beads and praying before gaudy images of tortured saints. But the monasteries of Christendom had once been seats of learning too, Jean-Baptiste reminded himself. Perhaps, as du Guesclin had argued, all religions did have their time.

"These days," the ebony-skinned aristocrat continued, "there are perhaps a hundred thousand books – titles – in the whole of Christendom. Nineteen-twentieths of these are either devotional, pornographic, fanciful or simply wrong. That leaves perhaps one-twentieth which are of some philosophical or practical use, perhaps. Five thousand books. To read them all in fifty years a man would have to read a hundred a year, two books a week. Possible. But only just, I should imagine."

"The Library of Alexandria housed over half a million scrolls," Adélaïde said.^{LIV}

"According to stories in books based on stories in other books," the Chevalier added.

"But too many books?" repeated Jean-Baptiste.

"It is becoming more and more difficult for a man to have a complete overview of all that is known," the Chevalier said. "Even the books in this room, chosen, I'm sure, with great discretion, can only give an incomplete picture of what is known – or rather thought to be known – about the world today. What any one individual modern man knows will always be but a fraction of what is known."

"Hence the need for the *Encyclopédie*!" Jean-Baptiste suggested.

"And someday there will be an *Encyclopédie* ten times the size of this," said the Chevalier, indicating the seven-volume set in front of him. "The rich will have all manner of knowledge at their fingertips – and be swamped in it – and the poor will be ten times more bewildered than they are now. And neither will be able to see the wood for the trees. One day it may even be a hundred times bigger."

"A hundred times?" said Jean-Baptiste sceptically.

"Not inconceivable," said the Chevalier. "If the universe is infinite it contains an infinity of facts, an infinity of information. In theory, the perfect encyclopaedia would be as big as the cosmos itself, indistinguishable from it."

"Information?" Jean-Baptiste asked. It was an unusual use of the word.

"Details, facts," said the Chevalier. "Commonly mistaken for knowledge."

“Which is?” Adélaïde asked, fascinated by this exotic creature.

“Achieved by thinking, not by the mere assemblage of so-called information, of facts,” the Chevalier said. “We think with ideas, not facts. And too many facts can ... Well, our minds *are* finite. They need a certain degree of tranquillity ... They need to be uncluttered for us to be able to think with clarity. Future generations could well drown in a cacophony of facts. But my man is waiting not far from here. Is there somebody we can send to fetch him?”

“I shall ring for someone from below,” Adélaïde offered.

“Is it not a trifle risky to store these here?” the Chevalier asked while they waited, indicating the two remaining sets of *Encyclopédies*. “This is surely one of the first places where the authorities would look. But then, on the other hand, when you think of it ... no better place to hide a book than in a library and all that ...”

“A cliché,” Jean-Baptiste replied, “but none the less true for all that. I promise you we are quite safe.”

He'd hired a large carriage immediately he'd left du Guesclin at the Athénée, waved one down on the street, in the heat of the moment as it were, and went straight back. He'd told du Guesclin he wanted to collect the *Encyclopédies* from his Quai du Nord warehouse right then – a request to which du Guesclin had, surprisingly, meekly acquiesced. There he'd loaded up the carriage with the half-dozen tobacco chests du Guesclin had decanted the books into. Perhaps he had been a trifle hasty. True, Diderot was not due back for weeks; but still, the possibility of his reappearing in Paris earlier than expected was not an impossibility. Perhaps, in hindsight, storing them in the library had not been the wisest thing to do. But was done was done. And, mercifully, things had happened quickly: the arrangements with the buyers had already been more or less made, and du Guesclin had been unexpectedly expeditious in sending his so-called punters over. Perhaps the man was still feeling sheepish, guilty even, about not moving the books from the Quai des Potiers over to his warehouse quickly enough – if that was actually what had happened. But then maybe he had, and had simply delayed telling him – strange, a display of sheepishness, restrained though it was, was the last thing he would have expected from du Guesclin. In any case, he was now twenty-four hundred livres richer and the last of the *Encyclopédies* would be out the door the next day. Evidence gone. Story ended. When it was all over, he would have time to think about what to do with the twenty-four hundred livres. Twenty-four hundred livres: a number,

words. He had difficulty imagining what it really meant.

Paul, one of the Diderot household lackeys, appeared.

“By the way,” he said to Adélaïde when the Abyssinian had left with his purchase, “the Young Man from Westphalia – as everyone insists on calling him – called the other day.”

“Herr von Klopstock?”

“He called a little after you left. He said he was passing and thought he would call in.” He paused for a moment. “Full of questions. You don’t think he is a spy or anything like that? He does seem to get around.”

“Extremely doubtful,” she laughed. “He’s probably just a curious soul. All this intrigue is affecting your judgement.”

With a key that he had been keeping around his neck on a brass chain, he opened a drawer in Diderot’s desk and extracted a hemp moneybag – part of the takings from earlier in the day – undid the neck of it, let the gold louis and silver livres tumble out of it onto Diderot’s desk, beside the Abyssinian’s coins, and began to reorder them. He still had not figured out where to actually store the money. He could hardly just leave it in the library unattended overnight, and carrying it back through the streets to his lodgings was hardly an option – and, besides, it was surprisingly heavy. He had even thought of using the privy as a hiding place again but somehow that did just not seem appropriate. He would have to stay the night – and have some meals brought up. The army camp bed was still there.

“The royal decree will ruin Diderot,” he said. “The subscribers will want their money back. Money of which a significant part has been spent. How much of it is left is anybody’s guess.”

“There is something terribly sad about money, don’t you think?” she said as she watched him sort the coins.

“There is something terribly sad about poverty, and about the world. But then maybe melancholia is the result of standing too far back from the world. When we try to see too much.”

“As when there are too many books?” she suggested.

But that was not quite what he meant.

“It seems to me that to remain sane, one needs to concern oneself with the details of things. The sense of the world – if it has any; and it is as inconceivable that it has any as it is as inconceivable that it has none – can only be discerned, however faintly, in its parts, not in the whole. The whole is too much for our limited minds.”

She gave him a funny look. He was not usually so contemplative.

“It’s something Diderot once said to me,” he explained. “I think

it makes sense. Compare the enthusiasm of the de Buffons of this world for their bones and seashells, or the Baron for his ores and minerals, or Madame de Walsh for her reptiles and fishes, or even the detail-obsessed Diderot himself to your average despairing poet.”

“Not all poets are despairing.”

He decided now was as good a time as any.

“There is a question I have been meaning to ask you,” he said.

His directness startled her for a moment.

“Yes.”

“Why did you suggest I just *take* the books?”

A smile flashed across her strong-boned face, a momentary inner chuckle. But then she quickly became serious again.

“It seemed the logical thing to do,” she said. “At the time. And ... and it was.”

“Yes. But ...”

“... it wasn't like me?”

He stopped counting the coins for a moment and waited for her to continue.

“You needed money. The books were there. They were unowned, unclaimed.” In fact, she wasn't quite sure why she had suggested it. At the time it had seemed like ... like a *pure* act. Selfless. She had not expected to gain anything from it. She remembered speaking the words, the certainty she'd felt at the time that it was simply the logical course of action, crystal clear ... but now, in hindsight, the memory of it made her shudder. She wasn't sure what she had really thought would happen, how he would react, if he would actually do it. It had set things in motion which ... could have gone wrong, horribly wrong. But they hadn't. “It was logical. I didn't think about it, the thought just ...” – she searched for a word – “... happened.”

“Happened?”

He had separated out four stacks of louis d'ors and put them to the side. She had rarely seen such an amount of money in one place. As he began to put the rest of the coins back in the money bag, she wondered what he was actually going to do with it.

“Yes,” she said. “It just came into my mind. Sort of emerged.”

He slipped the last of the coins into the moneybag and tied it closed. The lead-heavy weight of it, the feel of the coins through the rough hemp fabric – he found himself thinking there was almost something indecent, more than vaguely erotic, about the sensation.

“And what of your rages against the way the world is ordered and those who order it so?” she asked. “Your grand schemes to improve

it hardly concern themselves with mere details.”

He shrugged.

“Working for the common good,” he said, “as that unfashionable optimist, the Freiherr von Leibniz, put it, has a sense of its own, however tenuous. Or so I like to think.”

“So you will not be tempted?”

As, he thought, she had been when she suggested he simply take the books? Tempted by a momentary sense of clarity ... and a sense of power? The power to do good? The belief that one was acting selflessly? He tried to remember something du Guesclin had said about temptation – something about temptations coming clothed in virtue? – but he couldn't recall exactly what he'd said. Maybe he was reading too much into it. As somebody had once said, though with regard to the grand sweep of history, significant events can have their origin in mundane causes, or something like that. Though selling a few sets of the *Encyclopédie* on the quite was hardly even a footnote in the grand sweep of history.

“Tempted?” he asked, not sure what she had meant.

“Suetonius' *Twelve Caesars* is instructive. Twelve men, untouched by Christian teaching, who were given the power to satisfy every whim.” She wondered if *Les Femmes de douze Césars* – the Baron had just purchased a copy – was equally instructive. “Liberated from all restraints, the truth of human nature is revealed.”

“The paltry bourgeois pleasures my share of these glittering coins can buy are hardly comparable,” he said, putting the money bag back in the drawer and locking it.

“Not all pleasures need to be bought,” she said, looking at him oddly. He had a fleeting vision of Beauty metamorphosing into a Beast.

“Such as?”

But the moment, whatever it had been, had passed; if it had ever existed.

“My personal desires are modest,” he said, putting the key back around his neck.

“The Abbé Morelly's Utopia will never come to pass,” she said. She had read *Le Code de la Nature* and had found it ... well, frankly, boring. Though Morelly's idea of a rational system of weights and measures based on the number 10 was not without merit.

“Nobody expected the Reformation. The world can change,” he said.

“In a manner which is unpredictable, haphazard, incremental and

mostly unforeseeable,” she said, thinking how for such a timid man his ambitions were so impossibly ... ambitious – the word *Panglossian* came to mind.

“The Reformation happened because the Roman Church lost its hold – for a moment – over men’s souls,” he said. “The contradictions, the absurdities, the corruption had slowly become too much to bear ... Then all it took was a Martin Luther, a simple monk —”

“Hardy that simple, a professor of theology at Wittenberg.”

“... to blow the whole edifice away with his words.”

“Not quite *away*, and it was quite a lot of words,” she said. “He wrote how many books? I think it was more a case of the German princes seeing a golden opportunity to grab Church lands and divert the flow of Peter’s pence – which consisted of a considerable quantity of pennies – from the papal coffers into their own.”

“True, but for the first time,” he countered, “they felt they could do so with impunity, without endangering their immortal souls. Ideas had changed. When ideas change, the world changes. Ideas can, as Diderot puts it, *change the general way of thinking*. They can change the world. What else does?”

Maybe the world had need of its Panglosses, she thought.

“I find the way things are is intolerable,” he went on, suddenly passionate. “The ignorance, the poverty, the brutishness, the wastage of men’s lives, the senseless wars, the orgy of luxury that is Versailles ... Perhaps I can be part of giving birth to something better. I sincerely believe that one day the idea of universal improvement will hold the same place in men’s hearts as the idea of heavenly salvation does now. The poor need ideas, a vision of a better world if they are to improve their lot. Insurgency without a vision is no more than a mindless jacquerie. When Eunus led the slaves of Sicily against Rome, they put a crown on his head and called him king. But his court and rule were mirror images of the Rome they had rebelled against. And why? Because they lacked the capacity to imagine another social order. The naked anger of the poor may tumble the statue of an oppressor but it does not break the chains of ignorance or fill hungry bellies. The common man needs a vision.”

“But what can you do?” she asked.

“I am obviously neither an Erasmus nor a Thomas Müntzer,” he said, shrugging his shoulders. It was a gesture of helplessness, not of dismissal.

“Thomas Müntzer?” she asked.

“A follower of Luther who believed that not just religion but

society itself needed a reformation.”

“And martyred for his pains, no doubt.”^{LV}

“The current condition of mankind is intolerable,” he said. “Either a transformation is possible and is achieved, or it is not possible. And if is not possible, little matters that much. But I believe it is possible.”

“You expect too much from confused creatures.”

“I used to think the wonder of it was that men did not rise up more often. But all the peasants know is their parish. They live in ignorance of the wealth their labour has produced, of what is possible. They are awed by the glamour of the powerful – by the gilded carriages, the liveried lackeys, the coats of arms. Who among them has ever seen the inside of a chateau, never mind a palace? What peasant even knows that there are twenty million others like him in France? Or could even grasp that fact if he were told? Education is the key.”

“But who is to educate them, if not their betters? Inadvertently if not advertently.”

“When I was packing some files away the other day, I stumbled across something under V – V for variolation.”

“And?”

“I found a note – in de Jaucourt’s hand – an account of a physician – one Cotton Mather – in a place called Boston, an English town in North America – who learnt of variolation from an African slave of his – Onesimus was his name – and used the technique during an epidemic as far back as the ’20s – about the same time Lady Montagu was returning from her Turkish travels. He administered the pox powder as a snuff.”

“A case of history getting fuzzy when you look at the details?”

“And of who writes it. Not all ideas come from our so-called betters. Men need to learn to educate themselves. But I also came across something else.”

He opened the drawer of Diderot’s desk and took out the file he had hidden behind the commode the night he had first started sleeping in the library.

“*Homo homini lupus*,” he said.

“Man is a wolf to other men,” she translated. “I don’t understand.”

“But he’s a monkey to some.”

He sniffed the file before laying it on the desk and opening it.

“A monkey?” she repeated, wondering what on earth he was talking about.

“That afternoon,” he explained, “when we were at the Hôtel de

Walsh, I remembered that Diderot had engaged in correspondence with Linnaeus.”

He handed her the letter from the file.

“From Linnaeus to Diderot,” he said, indicating a passage. “It’s about men and apes.”

She read the handwriting with some effort:

I ask you and the whole world for a generic difference which conforms to the history of natural philosophy. I certainly know of none ... if I were to call Man ape or vice versa, I should bring down all the theologians on my head. But perhaps I could still do it according to the rules of science.

“For if men were apes,” he said, “to follow the logic of that proposition, then Adam was an ape, and so were all the prophets and the popes, and the Mother of God a she-ape, and Jesus himself half-ape half-god ... Though didn’t that fellow Bossuet say something about the Indians thinking some of their gods were monkeys? So presumably, if they believe Man is made in the image of their god ...”

“The fact that things have the similar skeletons hardly makes them the same in other respects,” she said, handing the letter back to him.

“The essence of natural philosophy is not to be deceived by surface appearances?”

For a moment she wondered whom the quote was from, but then she remembered it was something that ginger-wigged Brass Head de la Haye had said, that afternoon at the Hôtel de Walsh.

“Feet are feet and hands are hands in all creatures,” she said. “They perform the same functions. It is only natural they be similar in structure. They could hardly be otherwise. And men have the power of reason. Even idiots can be taught to count. Men have consciences. Even the most well-trained beast has neither. The theologians are not always wrong.”

“De Buffon ridicules the idea that – how does he put it? – *that Man and the monkey have sprung from a common stock ... and that the monkey is a man degenerated ...*”

“With good reason ...”

“But what if he is wrong? What if it is the other way around?”

“I don’t understand,” she said, somewhat mystified.

“What if we did spring from a common stock? What if the monkey and the apes were the common stock? And what if it is the case that Nature does tend to improvement, that it is a subtle natural

law that it tends in that direction? Diderot believes that that is the case.”

“Yes,” she said vaguely.

“And as a consequence of this tendency to improvement, might not apes have become men? And primitive men become the half-civilised men that we are? And, in the future, might not half-civilised men become even more civilised? And might not this process even be aided by science? Might not men, like beasts, also be purposely improved?”

She was about to point out that there was a great deal of difference between attempting to improve the condition of Man and attempting to improve Man – a very different proposition entirely – when he got up and walked towards her and deposited two stacks of gold coins in front of her on the desk.

“Your share,” he said.

CHAPTER XVIII

FOREVER HAPPENING SOMEWHERE

“The letter from Worms has arrived,” Bossuet said.

Roguin examined the address, written in an elegant copperplate, and the red seal on the back of the envelope.

“Tell Lepoitevin he’s to be careful when he opens it,” Roguin said, handing it back. “More than careful.”

“But ...” Bossuet began.

“It’s our business to know what is going on. The Comte de la Haye’s soliciting our services in this matter was a trifle – shall we say irregular? – not that we could have refused, of course.”

“But he’s an influential man ... with a reputation for ... some would say ruthlessness ...”

“All the more reason to know what this is about. If it’s about anything. Wouldn’t you say?”



“The royal decree has been published,” said Gilles, depositing a paper bag containing half a dozen clementines on Bageuret’s desk. “I though some edible sunlight would not go amiss. We only live once.”

Bageuret began to peel one. He was looking unusually tidy and was wearing a freshly pressed black jacket and *culottes*.

“Now it remains only for the Parlement to register it,” Gilles said, also helping himself to one. “Somehow I don’t imagine any respectful remonstrances pleading for amendments and elucidations will be dispatched post-haste to Versailles.”

From where he was sitting, through the internal window, Gilles could see that the bears and apprentices were being unusually industrious. He did not feel overly comfortable being at the Imprimerie, it was too much Bageuret’s domain, but the ice needed to be broken. The publication of the decree was a pretext more than anything else.

“This is always a busy time of year,” Bageuret said. “We’re running off a few thousand copies of a tract for the Capuchins right now. Lent is always good for that sort of thing.” Nice safe work

too, he could not help thinking.

“The Lord’s work by day and the Devil’s by night.”

Bageuret let the comment pass.

“Front page,” said Gilles, handing him the latest copy of the *Mercure* and indicating the article.

Bageuret took the news-sheet and moved his chair towards the window so that he could decipher the smudgy newsprint more easily, but even so, he had to squint – he really should invest in a pair of reading spectacles – and began to read aloud.

“The advantages to be derived from a work of this sort, in respect to progress in the arts and the sciences, can never compensate for the irreparable damage that results from it in regard to morality and religion.”

“I find that a little of the skin complements the sweetness of the fruit,” Gilles said, chewing on some of the clementine peel. “Embarrassing for them to have to so unequivocally condemn something which they had previously approved – albeit grudgingly – but they have. It’s the end of the line for Diderot. There is no way he can continue now. At least not in France.”

“Yes, I suppose it is,” said Bageuret. He had not meant to sound curt but it was how he felt like sounding. He skipped down the page and began to read again.

“Whatever new precautions might be taken to prevent features as reprehensible as those in the earlier ones creeping into the last volumes, there would always be an inherent drawback in allowing the work to continue, namely, that it would allow the dissemination of new volumes but also of those that have already appeared.” He glanced through the rest of it. *“Signed by His Most Christian Majesty, Louis XV, King of France and Navarre, 8 March 1759 Anno Domini.”*

Bageuret folded the news-sheet and offered it back. Gilles’s nonchalance was beginning to infuriate him. Despite his worldly-wise act, men like Gilles, with their privileges, knew bugger all of how the world really worked. Fat chance of Brass Head forcing Gilles to kneel barefoot in the mud of some godforsaken wood and threatening to blow his head off ... no, that sort of treatment was reserved for the lesser breeds.

“Keep it,” said Gilles. He could feel Bageuret’s smouldering animosity. “Look, I swear to you, I never breathed a word, not a word, not a hint. I swear on the body of Christ.”

“That is not necessary.”

“Sorry,” Gilles apologised. “I would have come earlier but I thought it best to lie low in the circumstances. I have spoken to my

sister. She assures me that she never said a word to a soul.”

“And the German?” Bageuret asked.

“She’s sure he didn’t say a word to anyone either. It’s possible that he did but I think that it’s highly unlikely. A man in his position ...”

That was a load of shit, thought Bageuret, a slap on the wrist, that’s all a man like that would get for a dabbling in illicit literature.

“And the Abbé?” he asked. He wasn’t in the mood for Gilles’s protestations.

“Unthinkable,” said Gilles. But the Abbé could well have blathered something out before he left. He wondered how much Bageuret really knew about the reason for the Abbé’s arrest. The Abbé had assured him that he had said nothing to Bageuret when Bageuret had brought him back from Bicêtre.

Unthinkable my arse, Bageuret felt like saying. The Abbé was a loose cannon, probably capable of anything. But even if he had told someone, it did not explain what happened to the rest of the sets ... or did it? Suppose he had a crony, an accomplice – it was not the first time the thought had passed through his mind – who went back to Quai des Potters after they had loaded the barge and helped himself to the rest of the sets when the Abbé was on this way to Germany; that would be a perfect alibi of course ... and then passed on information to Brass Head ... no, that didn’t make sense, the Abbé didn’t have any keys ... Maybe somebody had been spying on them all along ... the city was teeming with informers of one kind or another.

“I’ll speak to him when he gets back,” said Gilles. He was being disingenuous again – though he was sure Bageuret did not think he was being so – and he felt slightly ashamed of it. “There is another possibility.”

Bageuret looked at him.

“The husband,” Gilles said. “Jacques Charpentier.”

“Happens to be dead. Hardly a minor detail.”

“Surely he must have had accomplices. It must have taken him years to collect the volumes. Somebody else must have known. Nine years – assuming he collected them himself and did not buy them from somebody else – is a hell of a long time to have kept a secret.”

“Four years more likely, five at the most,” said Bageuret.

“I don’t understand ...”

“When I was repacking the books into those pinewood boxes I’d had made, I had a proper look at them,” Bageuret explained. “The first three volumes seem to have been printed all at the same time.

I cannot be sure, but the paper type and the bindings were similar. They did not have the sorts of minor discrepancies or irregularities one would expect to find if the books were printed in separate runs over three years. The first three volumes were reprinted in '54, as a set. My guess is, he probably started collecting them then, maybe even in '55."

"Still a long time," Gilles said. But, in fact, he doubted that someone Charpentier had taken into his confidence had been the source of the information leading to Bageuret's arrest. The timing had been just too precise. But then again, it was possible. Someone might have known all along and decided that now was the time to act. It was only in the last few months that the *Encyclopédie* had ceased from being a controversial but legal and respectable enterprise – and one involving large sums of money – to being seen as such a threat to the good order of society and men's souls that it had been deemed necessary to suppress it, to saw it off like a gangrenous leg, as it were. Leading the authorities to a hidden cache of the books would not have gone unrewarded. But that did not explain what had happened to the remaining sets. In fact, every half-plausible explanation of their betrayal immediately nullified any half-plausible explanation of what had happened to the remaining sets. And vice versa. Maybe they had simply been watched all along. Perhaps they were still being watched. But by whom? And if that was the case, did whoever might be watching them know the details of how the *Encyclopédies* were being transported to Worms? And if they did ... "Even so, Charpentier must have had accomplices ..."

"It's possible," Bageuret admitted. A clever move, Gilles, he found himself thinking. Blame the dead. Though he had to admit it was possible. Jacques Charpentier must have had accomplices; and perhaps it was they who took the remaining ten sets and then, peeved at not getting their hands on the originally twenty, had set Brass Head on them. But it still left questions unanswered, such as the fact that Brass Head came for him in particular. More disturbing was that he could not get out of his mind the possibility that Gilles, through some thoughtless recklessness, had put him at risk. And why had Gilles not told him who exactly Brass Head was that time at the Hôtel de Walsh? An oversight? God knows. Knowing Gilles, that was also possible.

And there was still the matter of the rest of the money due him when the German received a letter confirming the shipment had arrived safely in Worms – if it had arrived in Worms – so now was hardly the time to finish their friendship, if it came to that, and if

that indeed was the true nature of their relationship. And Gilles had opened doors for him: Madame de Walsh had sent him several sample chapters of that natural history book of hers to look over. And they looked promising. A *privilège* was out of the question – too expensive – but a tacit permission just might be possible and worth the effort, at least worth looking into.

“I will speak to the Abbé when he gets back,” Gilles said. “I promise. You have my word on it.”

“Has there been any news from Worms?”

“No, not yet. It’s early days. And, as they say, no news is good news.”

The cliché sounded even more of cliché that it usually did.

Bageuret decided to change the subject.

“*The Beast in Man* is ready. I’ve had three hundred copies printed – at another print shop. A bit too risky to print them here right now.”

“Of course.”

“I’m swapping them against something safe I am printing here, something I can just run off some extra copies of on the quiet. If it sells, we can do another run.”

He wondered how much of the thing was a description of Gilles’s own proclivities, not that that was something he was ever likely to find out.

“Oh, by the way, did you read the manuscript by our young Westphalian friend?” Gilles asked.

“*On the Reformation of Social Mores and Manners based on the Precepts of Reason in the Form of a Galilean Dialogue ...* More glanced at it than read it.”

“And?”

“A lot of waffle about ancient Greeks and Romans, ignorance being the cause of vice, and that if we could overcome our passions blah blah blah a new age would dawn. Unreadable and unsellable. Our clubfooted German is a funny fish. I doubt I’ll hear from him again.”

“Well, I’ve got to be off,” Gilles said as he stood up. “Have got to pay my last respects.”

“Anyone I know?”

“The Vicomte du Guesclin. The purchaser of our piss-stained masterpieces. You hadn’t heard?”

“No.”

“Dropped dead on the pavement outside the Louvre last week. Terrible shock. Sometimes I think maybe the best way to deal with this dying business is to try and not take it too seriously. Let the

dead bury the dead and all that. Bugger all we can do about it in any case.”

Bageuret escorted him to the shop door.

“Which reminds me,” Gilles said as Bageuret opened the door for him and the sounds of the street entered the shop. “New joke.”

“Yes?”

“What did the optimist who said that this is the best of all possible worlds say to the pessimist?”

Bageuret shook his head. He hoped it wasn't going to be something filthy.

“I fear, monsieur, that you may be right.”

Bageuret smiled despite himself. Maybe Gilles had a point about not taking things too seriously.

“I've heard Diderot is back in town,” Gilles added as he left. “There's talk of some sort of emergency hush-hush meeting.”

As he watched Gilles walk up the street, Bageuret noticed the Grammarian in the distance waddling towards the shop. Today was collection day. In an odd way, the sight of the ruffian was reassuring, a sign that this whole affair was sliding into the past. He would probably never really find out what had happened, but such was life.



“Have you read it?” Roguin asked when he had finished reading the intercepted letter.

“I had a look,” Bossuet said.

“And what do you make of it?”

Bossuet shrugged.

“Enigmatic.”

“Quite. The Comte de la Haye is a dark horse. Can't make head nor tail of it myself either.”

Bossuet said nothing.

“His Lordship wants you to take it round to the Hôtel de Malesherbes. He says you're to wait in his bureau till he turns up, not to give it to anyone else. And for Christ's sake, make sure Lepoitevin reseals it properly.”



As Gilles left Saint-Roch's the sight of the brass-handled varnished oak coffin containing du Guesclin's lifeless body being lowered into the wet ground by the gravediggers kept coming back to him.

Such was the capricious nature of earthly existence, he supposed, not that he believed there was any sense in dwelling on such things. Life went on, one just had to get through it. The big surprise, of course, had been Diderot's turning up. He'd arrived in a hired carriage, but had only stayed a few minutes, talked to nobody except the Baron – and von Klopstock, who had been chatting with the Baron about God knew what – so he'd only caught a glimpse of the man half Paris was talking about: a black-suited vaguely plump wigless figure – anyone who hadn't know who he was he would probably have taken him for ... a shabbily dressed draper perhaps.

He became aware of a carriage behind him, and thinking he was impeding its progress, stepped aside. As he pressed himself up against the cemetery wall – the alleyway was inordinately narrow – he thought he vaguely recognised it. And as it drew level to him, it stopped and he found himself staring in through the carriage window at its occupant: Brass Head de la Haye.

“Monsieur d'Argenson,” de la Haye said, pushing the carriage door open. “I believe we are heading in the same direction.”

“I am returning to the Malaquais,” Gilles said.

Brass Head continued to hold the door open.

Gilles decided to step in.

“Quite a turnout for the old rogue,” Brass Head said as the carriage began to gather pace again. “Terrible shame this dying business.”

“But for you men of faith ...”

Funny, Gilles thought, he hadn't seen him at the funeral, but then, as Brass Head had pointed out, there had been quite a turnout.

“Doesn't stop one growing dreadfully attached to the earthly sphere,” Brass Head said, “and its ways. And, of course, to one's own frail flesh and its habits. Faith is a matter of *faith*, not certainty. And that's no small part of the virtue of it. Reason has its uses, many and varied, but at the end of the day the reasoning mind cannot provide us with an explanation ...” He made a gesture encompassing the city passing by outside the carriage and the grey sky above it. “... of all this. Or even imagine what a satisfactory explanation might be.”

“Yes, I suppose,” Gilles grunted. He was not in the mood for theology. “How's the jihad going?”

He was fairly sure Brass Head in fact knew very little, that he'd had simply seen the Bageuret and himself hobnobbing with von Möllendorf at the Hôtel de Walsh, done some speculating, and simply been trying to give Bageuret the impression that he knew

more than he did. A typical policeman's trick. But, of course, he couldn't be absolutely certain.

"The jihad?"

"The crusade," Gilles said. "The crusade against those who would damage religion, waged by the men who take their responsibilities seriously."

Brass Head laughed.

"Oh, we make progress. Yes, I think I can say we make progress."

The carriage jolted as it drove over a pothole.

"A little bird tells me Diderot is among us again," Brass Head said.

So he mustn't have been at the funeral, Gilles thought. If he had been, he would surely have seen the *encyclopédiste*. Maybe he had simply been late and missed it. Or, Gilles wondered, was he actually playing some cat and mouse game with him?

"The big fish," Gilles said non-committally.

"Yes, I suppose he is that, in his way." For a moment the joviality or politeness or whatever it was vanished from Brass Head's annoyingly-handsome face, but only for a moment. "Sometimes," he said slowly, "the fisherman has to make do with smaller fry," and smiled.

Gilles began to distinctly feel there had been more than coincidence to Brass Head picking him up. They were nowhere near the Malaquais; in fact, if anything, they were heading away from it.

"Are you sure I'm not taking you out of your way?" he asked.

"Not at all."

A few minutes later the carriage veered off the street, went through a gateway and suddenly they were in the courtyard of the Hôtel de Malesherbes.

"There is something I would like to show you," Brass Head said as they drew up in front of the entrance. "Something I think you'll find of interest."



Bossuet stood up as they entered Brass Head's spacious bureau.

"Your letter, sire," he said hastily. "From Worms. Monsieur Roguin said I was to wait."

Brass Head took the brown envelope.

"I believe you two gentlemen know each other so I shall dispense with introductions. Take a seat Monsieur d'Argenson. And you too, Monsieur Bossuet, I may have further need of your services."

Brass Head took off his coat and installed himself behind his

Louis XIV desk.

Bossuet and Gilles exchanged bewildered glances.

"A crime has been committed," Brass Head said, or rather, pronounced.

"A crime?" Gilles repeated, recognising the von Möllendorf seal on the back of the envelope as Brass Head broke it open.

"Yes," Brass Head said as he glanced through the single-page letter. "Sets of Diderot's so-called *Encyclopédie des sciences et des arts* have been exported contrary to the recent – and widely publicised – decree issued by the Parlement forbidding said publication's distribution and sale. And this letter – addressed to the Margrave von Möllendorf, with whom you and your associate, that bookman chap whose name escapes me for the moment, have *some dreadfully boring worldly dealings* – which Monsieur Bossuet has been instrumental in intercepting, I believe contains the evidence of that crime. Read," he said, handing the closely-written sheet of paper to Bossuet. "Read it out."

A shudder of fear went through him as Gilles realised that it could only be the letter they were expecting from the Margrave's uncle confirming that the *Encyclopédies* had been delivered. He'd known Bossuet worked for some government agency but he'd assumed ... surely d'Holbach wouldn't have given him a standing invitation to the Grande Synagogue if he'd even ...

"My eyes are not what they used to be," Brass Head explained.

Bossuet cleared his throat.

"*What kind of an idiot do you take me for?*"

"What?" Brass Head exclaimed.

"That's what it says," Bossuet explained.

"Go on!"

"*Did you really think that I would not schlep your boxes of filth half way across Europe without so much as having a look at what was inside?*" Bossuet read on, trying not very successfully to hide his reluctance. "*I should have known better than to think that your sojourn in Paris, among such men as my dear friend Heinrich d'Holbach, would have had some virtuous effect on you. But you seem to have picked up the idea that the reasoned critique of traditional doctrines and ossified institutions is a license to disregard all ideas of propriety, all restraints? So much for my crossing half of Europe expecting at the end of the journey to behold something truly new, truly novel, something actually in the world of which I had hitherto only dreamed of, the result of centuries of intellectual toil, a seam of gold that philosophy's miners have worked through centuries of rock to reach, the child*

of generations of thinking men among whom I humbly hope I can number myself! But as they say: there's one born every minute! I can still hear your pawn de Graffigny's laugh ..."

"Name ring a bell?" Brass Head said, looking at Gilles.

Gilles raised his bushy eyebrows in an attempt to feign something like bemused bewilderment.

"He's an acquaintance of yours, I believe," Brass Head added.

"The Jesuit Provincial-General?" Gilles said. "Father de Graffigny?"

"Very clever!" Brass Head turned to Bossuet. "Read on!"

"I can still hear your pawn de Graffigny's laugh – if that sound he makes can be called laughter – when we opened the boxes and under a layer of prayer books we found layer upon stinking layer – it actually physically stank, of cat piss – of shop-soiled libertine filth. My first unworthy thought was that de Graffigny was part of this cruel deception. But the look on his face belied such suspicions. His laugh had been the laugh of a man most cruelly betrayed, a laugh of despair. The man was obviously as surprised as I. 'An old smugglers' trick,' he told me later, 'packing the smut beneath the prayer books.' Obviously not the only one!"

Gilles's thoughts had become a torrent of confusion. Somebody had obviously swapped the *Encyclopédies* for some sort of pornography. Bageuret? No, that made no sense, there was no way he could have hoped to have got away with that ... He tried to remain stone-faced.

"Continue," Brass Head said, obviously trying to hide the fact that this was not quite what he had expected.

"Needless to say – though on second thoughts there is a need to say it – your tomfoolery has placed me in a somewhat delicate situation. De Graffigny has informed me that he will only be paid on presentation of a receipt – a written confirmation from myself that the books had been delivered safely. But which books? Several hundred copies of a work of cheap French pornography? (Not that I have deigned to count them!) I explained to him that in all conscience I could not sign such a document, and would not. (Though, feeling somewhat and unreasonably partly responsible for his predicament, I loaned him fifty Prussian Reichstaler, not that I expect to see that again. He drinks like a fish, and apparently had some unhappy experiences on the road – he didn't want to talk about the details.) But I did inform him that I would write to you. So you can take this letter as a receipt of sorts, and if you have any scruples, any shred of common decency, you will see to it that your merry pessimist – as he calls himself – is paid what he is owed. As

for your so-called Pearls of Debauchery ... ”

“The perils of debauchery?”

“*Pearls*,” Bossuet explained. “P-E-A-R-L-S – it’s the title of the books, I think.”

Brass Head shook his head.

Du Guesclin, Gilles thought. The copies Bageuret’s printers had spilled the bucket of piss over and sold to du Guesclin ... Had du Guesclin substituted the *Encyclopédies* with them? It must have been him. But how? When? It didn’t make sense.

“... a pathetic pun!” Bossuet went on, “*I have left them in de Graffigny’s care, and as far as I am concerned he may do what he will with them, burn them, sell them, chuck them in the Rhine. And you could have at least have had the decency to pack one complete set. The third volume, for some reason I dare not even speculate about, is missing. Your uncle, Klaus von Möllendorf.*”

“The third volume of what?” Brass Head asked.

“It doesn’t say, sire,” Bossuet replied.

“Is that all?” Brass Head growled.

“There’s a postscript.”

“Well, read it, man,” Brass Head barked.

Gilles found himself trying to breathe slowly. The Jesuit had wanted a copy of Volume III – not that he had the slightest idea what that had been about. And he had idiotically muttered something about it *might be easier to locate a set*. This was getting more absurd with every sentence Bossuet read out. Concentrate, he told himself, the third volume was a detail. There would be time to think about that later – if he managed to get himself out of this mess. He’d known de la Haye was a fanatic but he’s underestimated the bastard’s sheer vindictiveness ... the man was obviously out to shaft him.

“*PS. And the Schlemihl! Was that too supposed to be part of the joke?*”

“Schlemihl?” Brass Head repeated. “What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“It’s the Jewish word for a sort of fool,” Bossuet informed him, “after some character in the Bible, I believe.”^{LVI}

“Ha, ha!” Brass Head said, pretending to laugh.

But Gilles found himself realising, slowly, that there had actually been no mention of the *Encyclopédie* in the letter. Not a word, not a single word. Uncle Klaus, in his rage, has completely forgotten to mention the thing.

He looked at Brass Head and realised that the fanatical bastard had just realised that too.



Two days later, Bossuet rode the Chalon-sur-Saône post-chaise to Saulieu and stayed there overnight, and the next morning set off on foot for Alligny-en-Morvan. The fields and the woods were showing the first signs of spring. Easter was in the air. Corneille would have loved it.

What had really happened at the Hôtel de Malesherbes he had still not quite made out. After he had finished reading the letter there had been a short and uncomfortably ominous silence. Brass Head de la Haye and Gilles d'Argenson had looked at each other almost as if they were reading each other's thoughts; and for a moment Brass Head seemed as if he was about to explode in a storm of rage, but he hadn't. In fact, he had suddenly become almost defensive, having seemingly realised that the letter had not exactly contained what he had expected it to. Gilles d'Argenson had looked equally confused but had the good sense to wait for Brass Head to speak first.

"So, Monsieur d'Argenson," Brass Head had said, putting on a conciliatory tone that obviously hid his true feelings, "what do you make of that?"

"Difficult to say," Gilles had replied, accepting the poisoned olive branch with self-interested grace.

"This third volume sounds to me like a reference to a third volume of Diderot's *Encyclopédie* ..." Brass Head had suggested.

"But so many books are published in multi-volume sets nowadays ..." Gilles had replied, seemingly attempting not to sound sarcastic "... even prayer books, I imagine."

"Do you now?" Brass Head had retorted

"But it certainly does seem as if the Margrave von Möllendorf has been up to a bit of mischief," Gilles had admitted. "Of course, officially, the smuggling of books like that is probably not quite legal. Though I'm not a lawyer. But, well, the Margrave is a hot-blooded young man, a 'horses and cards' man, a soldier, no doubt prone to youthful indiscretions and the like ... and very well connected, I believe."

The confrontation between the two men had petered out after that but as he'd escorted Gilles to the door, Brass Head had said, in an odd, politely threatening tone of voice: "Oh, and please convey my regards to our Westphalian friend!" Gilles had not replied. Bossuet presumed it must have been the von Klopstock fellow he was referring to, and that Brass Head was hinting that he'd had something to do with it all.

Before Bossuet himself left, Brass Head had said to him: "This is one of those conversations that never took place. Convey my regards to Monsieur Roguin." The aristocrat, who had obviously been certain that the letter would somehow land d'Argenson in the shit, had obviously been undone by his own zealotry. In reply Bossuet had simply nodded; though he had momentarily fantasised saying *to be human is to be wrong*, a phrase he once heard the d'Argenson woman use. Bossuet realised though that at some point in the near future he would have to have to explain his part in intercepting the letter to Gilles; perhaps he would learn more then.

The village was, as the Grammarian had said it would be, a dismal-looking place: two rows of dwellings on either side of a muddy open thoroughfare that one would be hard-pressed to call a street. There were countless like it in France and everywhere else he had ever been. Its one redeeming architectural feature was the fifteenth-century church with the needle-point steeple.

He was wearing the shabbier of his two greatcoats, a grey affair that looked as if it had previously belonged to a coachman. The last thing he wanted was to come to the notice of the local gentry and be obliged to engage in tiring social pleasantries and ensuing explanations, or indeed to engage in conversation with anyone. He'd made a point, when renting a room at the local inn, of peppering his speech with Parisian argot, though that was probably overdoing it a bit; the locals spoke patois rather than proper French, so had some difficulty in understanding him anyway.

Hoping the Grammarian's directions to the cottage were accurate, he crossed over what the Grammarian had described as the local open sewer, the Ternin – the three-arched bridge was impressively solid – and found the thatched whitewashed cottage easily enough on the road to Autun. More or less exactly as the Grammarian had said, it was set back from the road about a quarter of a mile from the village. It looked more prosperous than he had expected. Pale blue curtains hung in its shuttered windows and the garden looked well tended, despite the fact that the only things growing in it were some purple and yellow crocuses on one side of the path leading up to the weather-worn front door. Idyllic in its way, he had to admit.

Emilie Blanche was blond-haired, freckled and petite; and, as the Grammarian had intimated, ample in the chest. Quite stunningly so, in fact. She was sitting in the sun on the doorstep, a drawing board on her lap, a scrawny fawn-coloured half-spaniel asleep at her feet. A young girl – no more eight years old, Bossuet supposed – was playing with the remains of a barrow wheel, trying to roll it

in a straight line along the pathway with the help of a stick.

He introduced himself as the acquaintance of a mutual acquaintance, mentioning the Grammarian. He had to use the nickname. He had no idea what the man's real name was.

"Starobinski," she informed him. "A bit of a mouthful. Hungarian or something. Alain Starobinski."

He didn't mention Deforges.

She fetched a stool for him and while she prepared a pot of what she called country tea, he watched the child at its game. The vulnerability of her unblemished cream-skinned face, free of smallpox scars, gave him a momentary sense of foreboding. He picked up the drawing board and had a look at it. The sketch, done on cheap paper in black and rust-red pencil lead, was of a flower, and skilfully drawn.

The country tea was a concoction of herbs that was actually quite refreshing, though it could have done with a lump of sugar, but he did not ask for one in case she didn't have any.

"I had a little money so I moved here for the child's sake," she said. "The little ones die quicker in the city. There was a position as a wet nurse, with lodgings at the château. The Grammarian arranged it."

"He told me he comes from hereabouts," said Bossuet, hiding his surprise.

"Did he?" she said. "He knew the family from Paris. I don't know what the connection is. He doesn't give much away. You know he once used to go from village peddling philosophy under his cloak – literally. I was a bit of a philosopher myself once. That's how we met."

The twists and turns of men's lives, he thought, who could predict them? Yet when done, they were as if carved in stone. His life and the Grammarian's. All lives.

In the distance, on the other side of the road, the slate roof of the château was visible among the trees. It looked prosperous enough, but you could never tell. This part of the Morvan did not look particularly fertile, but he knew little of country ways, and besides, noble families tended to have their fingers in a number of pies.

"One of the daughters-in-law had twins," she continued, "and I had milk enough. And, as I said, I had a little money, enough to purchase a marriage certificate. Nobody here was likely to check a parish register in Brittany – and war widows, even then, were not such a rarity. The Grammarian helped with that too. Knowing my situation, their lordships let me stay on here. They paid generously. I was able to buy whitewash and pay a thatcher to do a proper job

on the roof. There is a good well out back. They also give me work from time to time nannying the twins. They are good people. I could live with the servants at the château but I prefer it here.” Frankness seemed to come naturally to her.

Eventually he mentioned Desforges, and told her that, in truth, Desforges was the real reason for his visit. He said they’d been friends once, a long time ago, that Desforges had been arrested for writing some poem – but that he didn’t know the details, he’d been out of the country at the time.

“He died in the Bastille,” he said. He could not remember exactly when he had decided that this was the lie he was going to tell her, but it seemed a long time ago now, so long that it almost felt true, or at least somehow less of a lie. “Gaol fever. I was told it was not a long illness.” He hoped that sounded better than some platitude about him not suffering much. For some reason, he was not overly surprised that she seemed to take the news stoically. Or perhaps she was merely storing it away to react to later. Some people were like that.

“I am finding —” he began to speak again but was interrupted when the dog suddenly got up and wandered down the path and onto the road, heading towards an old man in a peasant’s smock walking in the direction of the village with the aid of a staff.

“He’s blind in one eye,” she said. “The dog I mean. I’m surprised he’s still alive.”

The old man was reaching into his pocket and feeding something to the dog.

“He always carries crusts to give to the dog,” she explained. “I didn’t think he – the old man, well either of them in fact – would see the winter through, but they did. Perhaps they’ll see another summer. You were finding ...?”

“I was going to say I was finding it difficult to tell you all this.”

“Desforges is the father of my child, but we were never that intimate,” she said. “I found out I was pregnant after he was arrested. I bear him no grudge. Things have not worked out too badly for me.”

“Before he died,” Bossuet continued. “Desforges came into some money. He wanted you to have it. His dying wish, as it were. I would have come years ago, but I was abroad and it was not that easy to find your whereabouts. It is not a lot.” He reached into his coat, took out a leather purse and handed it to her. Most of what the Jesuit had given him was in it. There had been some expenses.

She hesitated a moment before taking it, but then she relaxed and made something approaching an embarrassed smile.

“What is the flower?” he asked, indicating her sketch.

“Lungwort. *Pulmonaria* in scholar’s language,” she said. “I looked it up in a plant book in the château library. Good for the lungs.”

“The original is over there,” she said and pointed it out to him. It was growing in a crevice in the stone wall behind him. “It usually comes out a bit later.”

He turned around and looked at it. It was a delicate blue and purple thing, minute really, vaguely reminiscent of the shape of a sheep’s lungs.

“We are having an early spring,” he said. “They say it’s because of the comet.”

“I sometimes think the beauty in the world is like fire. It burns itself out. And that’s what withering is, and everything withers. The nuns used to say that the face of God was so beautiful that if anyone were to see it, they would be instantly struck dead by the glory of it. Perhaps there is a big bit of God in the flowers. In all natural things. And the fire of that beauty burns us out too, withers us – even if we are oblivious to it. You don’t think that is blasphemous, do you?”

“No,” he said. “No, no.”

“Pretentious then? After all, who am I to speculate on the nature of things.”

“No, not that either.”

Before he left he said, “The child. I see she hasn’t caught the pox yet. There’s a new treatment, or rather a prevention. It’s called variolation. It’s not that expensive. There are quite a few physicians in Paris doing it. It’s become quite the fashion. There are a lot of new things in the world these days.”

On the way back to the village, as the dusk settled over the sweet-smelling countryside – living in Paris a man forgot what it was like not to have the constant stink of the city perpetually in his nostrils – he thought about what she had said about beauty. Some of those old Romans and Greeks were supposed to have believed that everything was a kind of fire. *The world began with a conflagration and will end with one*, the Raynal woman had said once, when the subject of how the ancients saw the world had come up at the Grande Synagogue one evening. *The beauty in the world is like fire. It burns itself out*. Like a forest fire. He thought of other images that combined magnificence and destruction: an army on the march, banners flying; a tiger prowling through the darkness of an Indian jungle. The Indians had a coal-black idol called Kalee, a garish red-lipped creature with eight arms and a necklace of white

skulls, a goddess both of creation and destruction, decay and regeneration, appeased only by sacrifices of alcohol and blood. Creation and destruction. Ad infinitum.

He saw the old man in the smock coming towards him, returning from wherever he had been. They saluted each other as they passed. As a young man, Bossuet had half-believed that the old belonged to another species. Diderot had once said at the Grande Synagogue, *at the age of twenty I believed I had in me the germ of an eternal existence*. But now Bossuet suspected that the existence of each particular thing was utterly transitory, nothing more than what it appeared to be – at best a moment of glory, like the bloom of the lungwort, in a pitiless stretch of time and silence, yet ...

The thought came to him that perhaps he should not be leaving this place at all, that he could turn back and ask the strange frank woman he had just met to take him in, to see past his tired face and his limp, and that night by the flickering light of the fire, ask her to open her bodice and offer him her brown-nippled breasts to suckle ... and he would live each day as it came, simply taking pleasure in her, watching the child grow, and now and again remembering to witness the passing glories of a world in which everything eventually withered – and enjoy a kind of happiness, that elusive and mysterious state of being that is more recalled than experienced. But even if such a thing were ever even remotely possible, and not merely the product of the frustrated imagination of a lonely man, how could it be now? He had lied to her; even if it was for half-noble motive. It was as if he had forever removed the possibility of his really believing anything she might ever subsequently say to him. A lie was an accursed thing, somebody had once said, the most accursed thing. He could not remember who.

As he walked on, a memory emerged from the clutter of the countless half-remembered images from his past that inhabited the recesses of his mind. The ship to Saint Petersburg had been one day out from Le Havre, but still within sight of the Picardy-Flanders coast. It had been a moonlit, windy night, the speeding clouds giving the illusion that the moon and the stars, when they fleetingly appeared, were moving too; and the heavens seemed to be one vast expanse of turmoil, the universe itself a ceaseless writhing, and each moment of it utterly unique. And out of this turmoil I have come, he had thought, and into it I shall return; I will pass but am I more than my awareness; I am part of this vast pulsation which is the world and out of which the world has emerged ... Another time at the Grande Synagogue, someone had

said that Pascal had seen in the inexplicable nature of the world the promise of a better existence ... perhaps ... the world was full of contradictions ... For a few moments, as he stood on the deck of the ship, the winter wind billowing in the sails above him, he had been filled with an inexplicable confidence, but it had been a confidence so fragile it hovered on the edge of despair. At least, that was how he remembered it. At times it seemed that all the daydreaming of his youth – which cumulated in his sailing down the Seine and to the East – had brought him little more than moments like that. But then, he had seen things most Frenchmen could not even imagine: tropical sunsets, Russian winters, other lands and cities, other continents, even if they were just things and places somewhere else.

The power of these snippets of memory sometimes led him to wonder if in some way, incomprehensibly, the past still existed, exists, out there, back there, somewhere unimaginable. Lately he sometimes found himself dreaming of places in the past and, on awakening in the mornings, for a fleeting instance, imagining that by some mysterious and overwhelming act of will it would be possible to transport himself back through the years – to a moment in the past. Perhaps time was like one of those picture books that gave the impression of movement. He recalled one he had once seen with a drawing of a horse in it. On each page the limbs of the animal had been drawn in a slightly different position: on the first the horse was in a standing position; on the second, its legs had begun to move; and on the next page it was in a slightly different position again; and so on for about fifty or sixty pages, so that when one flicked through the pages one had the impression that the horse was trotting; but opening it at any one particular page the horse was, in a manner of speaking, frozen in time. The overall effect gave an impression of movement where, in fact, there was none. Perhaps time was similar. Perhaps, even, we made our own heavens, and our hells. Or they were made for us, and remained forever happening somewhere. He thought of hells existing somewhere eternally: the woman dying in childbirth; the soldier having a leg sawn off in some blood-spattered tent at the edge of some godforsaken battlefield; the years of misery born of sickness and poverty that was the lot of so many; the murderer being dismembered alive on the scaffold. And what of Madame de Walsh's imagined time before Man, he wondered, the aeons of dumb creation of which there was no memory or even memories of memories? According to Augustine, he had heard a theologian say once, God is outside time; thus, in some sense, from the divine

point of view, events in time all happen at once ...

It was dark when he saw the spire of the village church, its lead roof gleaming in the light from the crescent moon that hung in the night sky. He looked up at the celestial body. A falling star flashed across the firmament, its tail burning a bright yellow-green for an instant. Perhaps, he thought, that was what we most resembled, falling stars, manifestations that were by their essential nature temporary – flash occurrences in a universe that was by its essential nature incomprehensible to any mortal intelligence.

He crossed the bridge and saw some commotion ahead of him. A group of mainly men and children, some carrying lanterns, had gathered around something on the ground. One of the men had a battered-looking old musket; another had a pair of hunting hounds on leashes. When he got closer, he saw what it was all about. A dead she-wolf, her paws tied together, a gaping wound in her chest, her neck ripped open, her grey fur caked with dried blood and mud, lay on the ground. The dog-like creature, her open eyes as lifelike and as lifeless as the glass eyes in a stuffed animal, was smaller than he had expected. According to La Fontaine, the wolf was the nobler creature, for unlike his cousin, the dog, he hadn't sold his freedom for the warmth of his master's hearth and the leavings from his table. Well, noble or base, in a few hours the process of decay would begin and the once living beast would begin the slow process of becoming mere hair, bones and teeth. For no reason he could think of, Bossuet found himself beginning to remember the Indian shopkeeper in Pondicherry who had committed suicide ...

“I'm sure she's the last of the pack,” one of the hunters said.

EPILOGUE & SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE WAY OF THE WORLD BY THE AUTHOR

The pages of this book have been set and printed but my bookmaker, called a ‘publisher’ nowadays, insists on an epilogue, to ‘tidy things up’. He says it is what the reader expects, and that nowadays the customer is king. And he does have a point when he suggests the reader might wonder what happened next. Needless to say, Gilles and Sophie-Françoise d’Argenson found themselves in an embarrassing situation – to say the least – vis-à-vis the Margrave von Möllendorf; but, luckily for them, the Comte de la Haye, in his fit of zealotry, had neglected to return the letter from Worms to the *cabinet noir* for delivery to the Margrave, as would normally have been done. (What the Margrave would have made of the letter is impossible to know. He would certainly not have been able to deduce what had really happened. Which was, of course, that du Guesclin, on being given the keys to the Quai des Potiers warehouse by Jean-Baptiste, had helped himself to the Charpentier’s *Encyclopédies* which had been packed in the pinewood boxes by Bageuret for transport to Worms and replaced them with the urine-scented copies of *The Pearls of Debauchery* he had purchased from Bageuret; and subsequently told Jean-Baptiste that when he went to the warehouse later the pinewood boxes had simply disappeared; and that from the one set he had left in the pinewood boxes (for whatever reason), he had helped himself to the ‘third volume’, which he subsequently sold to Isabelle de Vereaux, which she in turn supplied to the Jesuit General.) In any case, after much consideration, the Margrave was told that the *douaniers* had intercepted the books on the Lorraine border and confiscated them. This rather simple and plausible explanation had the advantage of it being highly unlikely that the Margrave would feel inclined to pop around to the Hôtel de Bretonvilliers and make official enquiries as to its veracity. Gilles and Sophie-Françoise also reassured him that the Abbé had ‘escaped’ – the details were left distinctly fuzzy – so that he had no need to worry about his name being revealed in the inevitable interrogations which would have followed had the Abbé been arrested; and since it would be a few years before the Abbé could

return to France, there was little danger of his revealing the secret in some Paris drinking den. Being essentially a good-natured soul, the Margrave took all this in his stride. The Professor did not write to the Margrave again, understandably; but there was, of course, the problem that the Margrave was expecting some correspondence from him, some account of the books not turning up in Worms. When no letter arrived, the Margrave took it upon himself to write to the Professor; but the Professor, under the impression that his nephew was merely being disingenuous in his enquiries, did not deign to reply; and, well – as Sophie-Françoise gently pointed out – there was a war going on, and the international post was not quite as reliable as it had been. But secrets will in the end out, even if that end takes quite some time to come about. The war itself was brought to a conclusion in February '63 with the Treaties of Paris and Hubertusburg, though the Margrave was released on parole in '61. When he returned to Brandenburg it was only a matter of weeks before he found out what had really happened; but by then, far away from Paris, the days of his Babylonian captivity nostalgically behind him, and, as they say, much water having passed under the bridge, there was little he could do, even if he was so inclined. Christine Charpentier had of course still expected the 'half' owed her when the books were to have arrived in Worms but Bageuret managed to convince her that there were times in the trade when one had to simply write off losses; the commotion in the weeks that followed the final banning decree did not make it difficult to convince her of the wisdom of not making a fuss. Jean-Baptiste left Diderot's employ shortly after; there was convenient talk of an unexpected inheritance. As for the others: their lives went on, as lives do, each tracing its idiosyncratic chalk-like comet tail in the firmament of human history before fading into all that is forgotten; which is most things.

Of course, the *Encyclopédie* itself survived, and thrived. The originally envisaged eight volumes of text and two of plates eventually became seventeen volumes of text and eleven volumes of plates, and later four supplementary volumes of text and one of plates were added to that. Diderot, Le Breton and others met – on Easter Monday in '59 – to discuss its resurrection. D'Alembert is reported to have said any attempt at continuing the work would be madness and washed his hands of the whole affair yet again. But the work was continued – 'in secret', under the pretext that only the volumes of plates were being printed – which meant it was even less of a secret than the aborted invasion of England. In July the Parlement issued a half-hearted and impossible-to-enforce decree

ordering all monies owed to subscribers be refunded forthwith. But the money had been spent, and the subscribers wanted the goods they had paid for and not their money back.

To prepare the final volumes – the whole affair had now taken on a new urgency – Diderot employed over two hundred scholars and, towards the end, Le Breton had a thousand printers, compositors, copper engravers and bookbinders in his employ. Previously, when the books were being produced at the rate of one a year, the numbers involved were only a fraction of this. By August '61 all the text volume articles had been written. The war was just about over then; Spain's joining the fortuitous Catholic alliance in '61 had not forestalled its defeat. The ten remaining volumes – and some of the volumes of plates – were published simultaneously in '65. The announcement of this not insignificant event in the Paris news-sheets named a totally fictional personage, one Samuel Fauche of Neuchâtel, as the printer. Officially, exactly the same number of copies was printed as were subscribed to and those wishing to purchase were obliged to turn up with an affidavit or other written proof that they were bona fide subscribers to the original volumes – as well as an extra two hundred livres. Le Breton was locked up in the Bastille for a few days for sending some copies to Versailles but otherwise, there was no attempt by the authorities to suppress it. The books looked like the original volumes, the type and the binding were indistinguishable (to the untrained eye) from that of the early volumes, but no reference anywhere was made to the actual *Encyclopédie*. Most of those who had bought the 'Charpentier *Encyclopédie*' volumes probably simply got themselves onto the official subscription list, one way or another.

The last of the eleven volumes of plates came out in '72 and an index to the complete work was published in '80. Since then there have been several editions, the last one running to over twenty thousand copies. But it was not all plain sailing, despite the efforts of its faithful protector, Malesherbes. At one stage in the late '70s, six thousand copies of a new edition were under lock and key in the Bastille. The late '70s were a busy time for the censors and the Guild – there were so many confiscated books that additional storerooms in the fortress had to be built to house them.

A lot of money was made. It is believed the investors put in a million livres over the years and came out with a profit of a two and a half million in the end. Each set fetched about eight hundred and fifty livres. Le Breton made a fortune and added to it when he independently published the *Supplément au Dictionnaire raisonné*,

five supplementary volumes, in the years '76 and '77. Diderot, on the other hand, did not make a fortune. Not that he died in poverty, though he did have trouble getting the money together for his daughters' dowry; but he did eventually make some money selling off the contents of his library to the new Tsarina of the Russias for – it is said – fifteen thousand livres. Katherine allowed him to retain the library while he was still alive and paid him a thousand a year to 'upkeep' it. It is now in Saint Petersburg. (Diderot, in due course, in '64, found out about Le Breton's surreptitious alterations and was by all accounts, and understandably, much aggrieved by the deception. He discovered them first in the article on SARACENS, but at that stage of the project there was little he could do about it except rage, which he did. He accused Le Breton of *massacring* the work, and compared him to an Ostrogoth. The alterations in the last ten volumes are reportedly much more substantial than they were in the earlier ones, but to what extent we shall never know, as Le Breton took care to destroy as many of the original manuscripts as he could.)

The Chevalier de Jaucourt was nearly bankrupted by the whole thing. Le Breton never paid him a sou; he paid him in books – two thousand in all. He had to put one of his houses on the market – and Le Breton had the effrontery to buy it. This unassuming man, who led a simple life, wrote about seventeen thousand of the seventy-two thousand articles in the finished work; fifteen thousand of those between '59 and '65, an average of eight a day. (D'Alembert wrote eighteen hundred, mainly on mathematics, astronomy and physics. Rousseau wrote about four hundred.) He used to work thirteen or fourteen hours a day. They called him the Slave, the Slave of the *Encyclopédie*. Though admittedly he did have an army of secretaries, to whom he was far more generous than to himself, one of whom the Author of this humble work had the honour of being for some years immediately following the events described in this manuscript.^{LVII} The Chevalier may have been eclipsed by the brilliance of Diderot and d'Alembert but as somebody once said: "The honest man himself was not eclipsed by his being an Author, as so often is the case". In his work on the *Encyclopédie* he may not have outshone Diderot in the shaping of witty phrases and ironic arguments, but he made up for that deficiency several times over by the provision of sheer hard facts, something which Diderot, to tell the truth, was sometimes amiss at, preferring to wield his pen in a more flamboyant manner. Thanks to the Chevalier's dedication, there is not a trade that is not described in detail in the finished work. And unbrilliant he was not,

he had studied theology at Geneva – he was a Huguenot – natural philosophy in Cambridge and medicine in Leiden. He also collaborated with Buffon and wrote a life of Leibniz.

But others made money, and quite a lot of it, particularly in the late '70s. They say that at one stage all the print shops in Neuchâtel and half of those in Geneva, Bern and Lausanne were producing nothing else. A so-called Protestant version was even printed in Yverdon. How many editions were eventually produced it is impossible to say.

The Jesuits were suppressed in '64 by the Paris Parlement, a measure to which the late Louis – definitely the Mal Aimé by then – acquiesced “for the sake of the peace of my kingdom”. They were blamed for (among other things) the ultimately disastrous alliance of Catholic France and Catholic Austria. In '69 they were expelled from the Spanish Empire. And in '73 Clement XIV put the final nail in the Society's coffin by dissolving the order completely. A few isolated houses still survive in Brandenburg-Prussia and the Russias – by some sort of special papal dispensation, one supposes (the Roman Church is adept in such matters). In a hundred years' time the name of the Jesuits, like the Templars, will be of interest only to ecclesiastical historians and gentlemen antiquarians who spend their days poring over the moth-eaten books of another age.

At this point, my esteemed reader, you probably expect a brief summary of the subsequent biographies of my characters, as is the practice in epilogues, but I have refrained from following that practice. It appears to me that it would be a merely mechanical exercise, an attempt to give a sort of symmetry to that *line that Nature compels us to draw* which that line does not possess. (The Baron died a mere six months ago. He published his *Christianisme dévoilé* in '61 – under a nom de plume, he did not make the same mistake as Helvétius. But everyone knew it stemmed from his pen. A married couple and a grocer's boy were caught with a copy of it a few years later and exposed in chains on Place de Grève, the Quai des Augustines and Place de Barnabites for several days; the two men were branded and sent to the galleys, the woman condemned to forced labour in the Salpêtrière – needless to say, they did not have good connections.)

That said, I will, however, relate one incident. Two months ago, business brought me to Paris. The Estates-General was engaged in its preliminary sessions at Versailles.¹³ Paris was abuzz with all the

¹³ Editor's note: The Estates-General met in May 1789. It declared itself the Assemblée nationale constituante on 17th June.

gentry up from the country, providing no shortage of occasions to socialise, at one of which I happened to meet the d'Argenson twins. The old pornographer, despite her years, could still charm (despite her missing a few of her teeth). Her brother's appearance had achieved a certain dignity with the years and he looked well preserved – the curative properties of Hennessey-Charante one presumes – though he did have a bad cough and I noticed blood on his handkerchief. (They had, after many and various legal manouverings, managed to hold on to most of their Normandy lands.)^{LVIII}

The occasion was one of these 'political dinners' which are quite the fashion at the moment, held in the house of a medical man by the name of G. (Note: The names of all characters in this book, excepting those of public figures have, of course, been invented or changed. However, 'Sanders' the optician was a real person, and was blind, not an invention of Diderot. His real name was Nicholas Saunderson. He lectured in optics at the university in Cambridge in England.) But to continue: Doctor G, an elected representative of the Third Estate, is one of this new breed of bourgeois whose more venal political ambitions seem to sit easily alongside a dewy-eyed idealism. During the course of the evening, he read us the draft of a motion he was intending to present to the Third Estate proposing that the privilege of decapitation be extended to all citizens condemned for capital crimes. Eventually, he said, he would like to actually abolish the execution of criminals altogether but sees decapitation as a reasonably humane and intermediate alternative. He argued that a machine constructed on the most modern scientific principles would be capable of removing the head from the body in a fraction of a second, with the condemned feeling, he claimed, "no more than a slight sensation of coolness at the back of the neck". Such machines have been used in the past, he explained, in Bavaria, in Ireland and in Scotland. (By a curious coincidence, both Bageuret's and Jean-Baptiste's sons have also been elected as representatives of the Third Estate. Bageuret's son, Christophe Bageuret, has made a tidy sum of money, though hardly a fortune, from publishing books especially for children. I remember seeing one sometime in the early '60s. Who would have thought that such a thing would have caught on? Though I am not sure that Rousseau would have approved. In his *Emile*, another bestseller, he suggested that the only book children be given be the Englishman Defoe's *Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*; it would, he maintained, if I remember his argument correctly, teach them how to survive in primitive

circumstances.) Later, over coffee and brandy, for a brief moment, the conversation became reminiscent of times past when Gilles d'Argenson, glass in hand, still as much in love with his own words as he ever was, said something along the lines of, "If there is no God – or creatures living in the stars – then Man, poor creature that he is, is the sole source of all the goodness and the beauty that exists."

Looking back on that year of the comet I find myself still posing myself many of the questions that I remembered us posing then. Despite the fact that the actions of men are imperfectly conceived, imperfectly carried out and the eventual consequences as often as not unintended and unforeseen, is there all the same some inevitable pattern in historical events, as the Neapolitan Vico argued? Do men learn from their mistakes or, as Voltaire maintained, typically, the only thing we learn from history that we learn nothing from it? Or is history – and the individual lives that make it up – really little more than one thing after another? And what of the telling of it? And is any history possible without conjecture? Even the driest of history-tellers must of necessity use his imagination. For how can that which is not imagined be written down? No storyteller is privy to everything. And the faculty of memory, even at the best of times, is imperfect. But though phantasy may be necessary, loyalty to the truth is equally required. (Note: Of course, your Author also had to rely on a few witnesses for parts of this narrative; though to decide if they were telling the truth was not always easy. For example, Starobinski, or the Grammarian, with whom Bossuet subsequently became quite friendly, provided much intelligence on goings-on to which I was not privy, but he was a rogue and a liar, and his account needed to be handled with kid gloves. However, the reader may be assured that the utmost diligence was exercised. Your Author also had the good fortune to hold a position as a librarian to a notable family, who for discretion's sake shall remain unnamed; this private library contains many of the volumes mentioned in the narrative and proved invaluable where memory failed.) I hope I have succeeded in striking that balance between truth and phantasy as I scribbled (and re-scribbled) down this tale in those hours before and after midnight granted to me by the scribbler's blessing, insomnia, when all the world is asleep and the mind is set free to travel the highways and the byways of the imagination – in a modest attempt, I suppose, to leave a trace of myself behind in the world, though always with the humbling thought in mind that if a man leaves a single memorable verse behind him, he has done well.

Rousseau in his *Confessions* did not spare himself as regards recounting shameful incidents and acquaintances made in his youth, and neither has the narrator of this tale, I hope; though I do take some consolation in the possibility that Socrates was correct in his belief that men do not sin willingly or wittingly (by acting unvirtuously or by sins of omission), but principally out of ignorance and stupidity (both of which all of mankind possess in large quantity).

Over the last thirty years, there has been much of what is nowadays more commonly called 'progress' (rather than 'improvement', an idea which it incorporates). In the realm of ideas, the realm of the human '*Geist*', the Prussian scholar Emmanuel Kant has called this process the '*Aufklärung*' or 'enlightenment', but it has also involved many practical improvements and inventions.

Variolation (called 'inoculation' now) is much more frequently practiced nowadays. (Louis XVI died of the smallpox – and, breaking with tradition, his heart was not removed from his body – but his descendants have all submitted to the procedure.) The new English method (or rather the original Turkish method: two pricks in the skin introducing only as much infectious material as is on the head of a needle) appears to be far superior. The English Sutton brothers are said to have carried out over forty thousand variolations, of which a mere five were fatal. Being businessmen, not medical men, they are no doubt experts in the art of self-promotion, but there is no reason to doubt their claims. However, no one has improved on laudanum as a palliative for toothache.

The science of chemistry has also taken some interesting and unexpected turns. Nowadays, natural philosophers, or 'scientists' as they now call themselves, dispute that there is any such thing as phlogiston. Foremost among this new school is the Marquis de Lavoisier, whose *Traité élémentaire de chimie* has just been published. This seems to me, admittedly a mere layman, to be denying the evidence of one's senses and common sense; fire is obviously the release of something, call it what one will. The 'essence of natural philosophy' may be 'not to be deceived by surface appearances', but that hardly means that one should ignore them altogether, which is what those who deny the existence of phlogiston would appear to be doing. Monsieur Black's fixed air – a totally benign substance – is nowadays known as carbonium. A Swede by the name of Torbern Bergman has invented an apparatus that can extract it from chalk using acid of sulphur. The process enables the manufacture of artificial lemonade in large quantities;

and it is used to effervesce the spring water sold by the street hawkers of the *Compagnie de Limonadiers*. (According to Lavoisier it is also released by the combustion of wood, and coal.) A third type of air, called 'inflammable air' has also since been discovered.

There is very little talk about transformism, Vulcanism or Neptunism, nowadays. It's been years since I have even heard the words spoken. Natural philosophers, or scientists they are now more commonly called, seem to have an uncanny ability to lose interest in dilemmas to which they have no solutions, though d'Holbach did speculate somewhat on the origin of different species of animals and plants in his *Le Système de la Nature* (1770).^{LIX} But, in reality, what effect do such speculations have on our daily lives? Probably as little as the presence of black men on Mercury, or their absence! Newton's infinite cosmos – a concept inconceivable to our ancestors – is now seen as blindingly obvious by most all and sundry, and previous cosmologies viewed with the wry amusement with which one views the phantasies of children: clever phantasies no doubt, but phantasies nonetheless. Is it simply a case of yesterday's truths being today's untruths and today's truths being tomorrow's untruths? Or that new truths do take a long time to be accepted, but are then declared blatantly obvious once they have been accepted? And that when old truths which were once deemed to be so glaringly obvious that all who questioned them were declared mad are rejected, those who continue to believe in them are declared mad in their turn? Today it would take a brave savant (or a foolish one?) to say that Newton has not had the last word on the movements of falling apples, the Earth and the heavens.

Many new and quite wonderful mechanical devices have been invented and improved during the last thirty years. In '75 Jacques Perrier demonstrated a boat powered by steam on the Seine; and in '76 an American by the name of David Bushnell constructed a boat capable of travelling under the water. (The Americans, as Europeans in the New World are now called, have based the constitution of their new republic on the separation of powers almost exactly as Montesquieu suggested. The actual American savages, a word which originally merely meant 'a human creature of the woods', are more commonly called American Indians or aboriginals these days.) And in '83 the heavens themselves were conquered by the Montgolfier brothers. But there is no sign yet of abolishing current weights and measures and replacing them with a system based on the number 10, despite the increasing influence

of the economists in government circles. The effect of trying to institute such a change would obviously be utter chaos. Reform by all means, but one needs to keep at least one foot firmly on terra firma. ^{LX}

The principal change in the book trade since the '50s is that there are now simply many more books, both illegal and legal. The edict of '77 permitted authors to sell their own works and allowed for two public annual book fairs in Paris.

While the *Encyclopédie* has been the most prestigious, by far the most popular book of recent decades has been *L'An 2440*, which came out in '71 and tells the tale of a man who falls asleep in the Paris of our own time and wakes up in the Paris of the year 2440 to find a city of parks and roof gardens. There are no poorhouses. The Hôtel-Dieu has been replaced by a Hôtel of Inoculation. The Bastille has become a Temple of Clemency. Public festivals do not lead to debauchery. The religion is deism and the men of the future believe in the transmigration of souls, rebirth occurring not only in this world but in all the other worlds of the universe as well. Versailles is a ruin. The *Encyclopédie* is used in primary schools. But when our time traveller visits the Royal Library he is surprised to find that the books there only take up about four cupboards. The men of the future had decided that indeed there were too many books – they had burned 800,000 volumes of law, 50,000 dictionaries, 100,000 works of poetry and 1,000,000,000 novels, and nothing written before the year 1500 had been kept. All of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's work had been retained but only half of Voltaire's. They had kept some works of theology – but under lock and key because they were so considered so dangerous. The days of the anonymous writer had gone, but those who wrote 'bad books' were obliged to go around wearing masks – until convinced of the error of their ways by their fellow citizens. Helvétius' *De l'esprit*, by the way, is still selling well. As is *Thérèse philosophe*.

And, oh yes, Voltaire's play, *Le fanatisme*, has since been performed again. It was chosen by the Comédie Française as a tribute to Voltaire on his death in '81 at the ripe old age of eighty-four; in the portraits of him which are so common now one can see that he became even more to resemble a simian in his later years than he did in the '50s. The play ran for a month without a fuss. It appears what is blasphemous and outrageous for one generation is respectable entertainment for another. Today, *Le fanatisme* can be performed without raising an

eyebrow anywhere in the civilised world. Persuading the authorities to allow a Requiem Mass to be said for the Monkey was more difficult. The irony of the spectacle of assorted philosophes and *encyclopédistes* organising a petition to the Archbishop of Paris to permit one would not have been lost on him. Diderot himself was buried at Saint-Roch five years ago, with fifty priests in attendance – paid for by his daughters; a sum of fifteen hundred livres has been mentioned. Rousseau had himself died five years previously, in '78 in Ermenonville. Some suspect he took his own life. He had stopped dressing like a workman in '62 and started dressing like an Armenian. D'Alembert, who died the same year as Diderot, but as an 'unrepentant unbeliever', lies in an unmarked grave. Madam Gourdan eventually fell foul of the authorities in '76 and was forced to flee Paris. The Parlement subsequently condemned her to be *paraded through all the city, mounted backwards on an ass, wearing a straw hat bearing the word PROCURESS, and then to be birched by the public executor at various crossroads, to be branded by a hot iron in the shape of a fleur-de-lys on her right shoulder and banished for nine years from the City and Viscounty of Paris.* The sentence was carried out in effigy and, by all accounts, thoroughly enjoyed by the public. She passed on in '83 and after her death a collection of her alleged letters, *The Correspondence of Madam Gourdan*, was published and continues to sell well, discreetly, needless to say.¹⁴ The

¹⁴ Editor's note: The list of those who frequented Marguerite Gourdan's warehouses is a veritable roll call of aristocratic and ecclesiastical infamy: the Prince de Conti, the Marquis de Fitz-James, the Chevalier de Coigny, the Duc de Chartres, the Duc de Mazarin, the Duc de Grammont, the Marquis de Romcy, the Marquis de Nesle, the Duc de Fronsac, the Duc de Chartres, Farmer-General Dangé, the Marquis de Genlis, the Duc de Luynes, the Marquis César de Talaru, the Marquis de Duras, the Duc de la Trémouille, the Chevalier de Piis, the King's and Queen's chaplains Gaspard Bardonnnet and Joseph-Marie Mocet, the Jesuit-Bishop of Sisteron Lafiteau, Professor of Theology Adrien Aubert, Doctor of the Sorbonne Pierre-Gallon Francesqui, Seminarist de Calonne, Archdeacon Jean-Baptiste d'Aguesseau, Grand Vicar Joachim de Gobriacle, Archdeacon Jean Mongin, Prevost Pierre-Joseph Artaud, Almoner François de Clugny, the Abbé Grisel, the Abbé de Voisenon and the Abbé Tencin. Many more could be added. One will note the frequency of members of the Roman cult in the above list.

Printer's note: Should the reader wish to inform himself further of these ignominies, we are now able to offer, in two volumes, *The Chastity of the Clergy Exposed*; this contains 189 reports on the clergy's endless

Murphyse, in her sixties now, though she has not gone by the name of O'Murphy for decades, is still going strong, and is reported to be engaged to some fellow thirty years her junior. The Marquis de Malesherbes, of course, is still enjoying high office under the current monarch.¹⁵

And finally, the other day some news reached me which my publisher insists merits mention. The Marquis de Sade,¹⁶ (now the Comte de Sade since the death of his father, but still calling himself Marquis – a refusal to take on the responsibilities and subsequent duties of the father perhaps), can be seen waving and shouting about ‘liberty’ from the window of his cell in the Bastille, where he has been detained for several years under a *lettre de cachet* granted to his mother-in-law.¹⁷ He has contrived a megaphone from some piping and is cajoling the gaping crowd to storm the fortress. The man is a perfect example of how power, even in those born and raised to exercise it diligently, if not ruled by the most demanding codes of public honour, tends to corrupt, even leads to madness. The Paris mob, for whom he is a figure of fun, no doubt wallows in joy at the sight of one of their betters sunk so low. I am informed that he is shortly to be removed to the madhouse at Charenton. Among the Marquis’ fellow prisoners is an ‘accomplice’ of Damiens by the name of Tavernier. He has been there for the last thirty

patronage of the warehouses of the Old Regime which were composed by the spies of the father of the former tyrant, Louis Capet, during the years 1755 to 1766, and which were found in the Bastille when it was stormed by the People.

¹⁵ Editor’s note: Citizen Malesherbes was tried and condemned by the Revolutionary Tribunal for conspiring with émigré aristocrats against the Revolution and executed by the public executioner Sanson on the 2nd Floréal, Year II of the Republic, along with his daughter, her husband and two of his secretaries, convicted of the same crimes. The reader is advised to take the kindly depiction of this man (and of other aristocrats) in the narrative with healthy scepticism. The Farmer-General Lavoisier, mentioned previously, was convicted of the same and executed in the same month.

¹⁶ Printer’s note: The following works by Citizen Sade are also available from the publisher of this narrative: *Dialogue between a Priest and a Dying Man*; *Aline and Valcour* – a philosophical novel, which compares a brutal African Kingdom with a utopian Pacific island called Tamoé; and *Misfortunes of Virtue*.

¹⁷ Editor’s note: This took place on the 2nd of July in the year 1789 of the Old Regime calendar. The Bastille was stormed on the 14th of July, a mere twelve days later.

years. It seems he was arrested in the first sweep. There are only a handful of prisoners (some say seven, others thirteen) in the fortress as I write, a fact which makes the current fashionable demands for 'liberty' (a fashion which has infected the febrile mind of the Comte de Sade) seem somewhat hyperbolic, to say the least.¹⁸ But I must end here. The bookmakers await.

*A Man of Letters who wishes to remain anonymous,
Fontainebleau, July 1789*

¹⁸ This was the opinion of the Author at the time of writing. It is not an opinion shared by the Printer or Editor of this work.

ENDNOTES

The original edition of *An Atheists' Bible* contained many footnotes. Your Editor has taken the liberty of including many of these as endnotes here rather than as footnotes on individual pages – so as not to have unduly interrupted the flow of the narrative; these are labelled AUTHOR'S ORIGINAL FOOTNOTE. I have also included a modest number of endnotes of my own. The purpose of the latter is to provide the reader with guidance and information which will hopefully add to his reading pleasure and provide elucidation on a number of points.

ⁱ The Byzantine *Suda Lexicon*, containing 30,000 articles, published in the tenth century, was also ordered alphabetically.

ⁱⁱ A few words about the order of society in France under the Old Regime might be appropriate here, particularly for younger and foreign readers. Like the rest of Europe, French society then consisted of three Estates or orders. But in France, this feudalistic order was more formally defined than elsewhere. The clergy, high and low, constituted the First Estate, the so-called *oratores* (those who prayed – I shall refrain from ironic comment). The Second Estate, the *bellatores* (those who fight), had two branches: the nobility of the Sword, which, in theory, served in the military; and that of the Robe, which served in the Parlements, the administration and the courts; though even by mid-century the distinction was not as strict as it used to be. The Third Estate, the *laboratores* (those who work), consisted of the bourgeoisie and the peasants, basically the vast bulk of honest Frenchmen and Frenchwomen. The French peasant was generally not a serf, and in fact, he enjoyed quite a few liberties in comparison to his fellow men in other countries. Instead of one law for all men, the plethora of orders, guilds, academies and the corporations of the Old Regime enjoyed a near infinite number of *leges privatae*, private laws or privileges. For example, in 1759 the Comédie Française possessed the monopoly for the public performance of plays in Paris, the *Gazette de France* the monopoly for reporting foreign affairs, and the *Mercure de France* that for literary criticism.

ⁱⁱⁱ The reference here is to a description by Descartes of the appearance to him of what he called his Angel of Truth as a blinding revelation in which he maintained he was given a secret that would enable him to *lay the foundations for a new method of understanding and a new and marvellous science*. This *secret* was to be revealed in his *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, a book he commenced but never finished.

^{IV} There was much more tedious reference to Augustine in the original text. For example: Augustine, when faced with the dilemma of there possibly being manlike creatures on those parts of the earth not reachable in his time (the so-called antipodes), decided that such creatures, if they did exist, and if they could demonstrate even rudimentary reason, would have to be considered as possessing souls and thus be capable of redemption; hence, other races had rights to personal liberty and property similar to Christians and other reasoning (sic!) men. Needless to say, to base the Revolutionary Idea of *Egalité* on such notions would be preposterous.

^V AUTHOR'S ORIGINAL FOOTNOTE: For example, Helvétius criticised the institution of slavery – *not a single hogshead of sugar*, he wrote, *reaches Europe undyed with human blood* – as indeed did the Jesuits themselves on numerous occasions. But the Roman Church has always been reasonably clear on this subject. In *Sublimus Dei*, issued in 1537, Paul III condemned those who would treat other men as *dumb brutes created for our service. Indians and all other people who may later be discovered by Christians*, the pope decreed, *are by no means to be deprived of their liberty or the possession of their property, even though they be outside the faith of Jesus Christ; and that they may and should, freely and legitimately, enjoy their liberty and the possession of their property; nor should they be in any way enslaved.* Subsequent pontiffs also pronounced upon the matter: Gregory XIV in *Cum Sicuti* (1591), Urban VIII in *Commissum Nobis* (1639), and of course Benedict XIV in *Immensa Pastorum* (1741). Helvétius also condemned the *corvée*, the effectiveness of which was questionable even then – the best roads being often in provinces, such as the Languedoc, where it was not practiced. (The *Assemblée constituante* is debating its abolition as the Author writes.) His comparison of young girls being forced to take the nun's veil (which the Roman Church, to be fair, does not condone) with the Chinese custom of exposing infant girls caused much offence. As did his proposing that there was no difference between the soul of a man and that of an animal – if indeed, either had one at all; his singing the praises of Julian the Apostate; and his declaring that the Indians of the Americas and Africans were happier than the Catholic peasants of France.

EDITOR'S NOTE: At times the author seems strangely apologetic vis-à-vis of the Roman cult. The Convention nationale ended slavery in all French territory on the 16th Pluviôse, Year II of the Republic.

^{VI} The original text contained three pages of book titles and read like a librarian's ledger. Your Editor felt obliged to trim it. But to mention just a few: Descartes's *Les Météores*; Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes*; Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples's first translation of the Bible into French; Maupertuis's *Venus physique*, a book described as containing Maupertuis's theory of generation and erotic musings; *The History of Miss Betsy Thoughtless* by Elizabeth Haywood, in English; Leibniz's *Discours sur la théologie naturelle des Chinoise*, his *Hypothesis Physica Nova* and his *Societät und Wirtschaft*; Moses Mendelssohn's *Philosophische Gespräche*; Bartolomé

de las Casas's *Brevisima relación de la destrucción de las Indias*; and Halley's *Synopsis Astronomia Cometicæ*.

^{VII} A long and digressionary passage here on the the Jesuit *reduções* of the Maranhão has been removed. They were described as an example of a Christian commonwealth. To precis what the author wrote: all land, buildings and livestock was common property; some fields were cultivated communally but families were allocated a house and plot for their own use by their chiefs, which they were not allowed to sell or to rent to another; agricultural implements, tools and beasts of burden were held in common; the products of the common fields were put in a common storehouse and used to for charitable purposes and trade; some say that the Jesuits grew rich from exploiting the labour of their charges but the author doubts this (sic!); there is no record of a revolt among the American Indians of the Jesuit *reduções*, while revolts on the Spanish and Portuguese *encomiendas* are common to this day, and there are numerous accounts of the Jesuit-organised American Indian militias on their *reduções* defending the settlements from attacks by bandits in search of slaves; that the Jesuits did not generally attempt to oblige their charges to adopt those European customs that they considered unnecessary to the Roman Catholic religion – and that many of the American Indians were reportedly avid enthusiasts of the European organ and violin music of the period and formed orchestras. While the outline of the above appears to be true in its particulars, the reader is advised to exercise some caution in its interpretation. The hypocrisy of the Roman cult in these matters is well documented.

^{VIII} AUTHOR'S ORIGINAL FOOTNOTE: Seats on the stage at the Comédie Française were highly sought after but the practice was abolished later that year. The Comte de Lauraguais made it the condition of a large donation to the company.

^{IX} AUTHOR'S ORIGINAL FOOTNOTE: The Indian ancient holy books are more numerous than the books in the Bible, and the Tibetans also have ancient books. Both Indian and Tibetan alphabets are depicted on plates in the *Encyclopédie*.

^X AUTHOR'S ORIGINAL FOOTNOTE: The first work actually calling itself an encyclopaedia was Johann Heinrich Alsted's seven-volume *Encyclopaedia Cursus Philosophici*, published in 1630. Alsted was one of the last to organise his work around a system of knowledge rather than alphabetically. He used Roman Lull's *arbre de ciência* (tree of science). Lull, a thirteenth century Catalan neo-Platonist, who wrote in Latin, Catalan and Arabic, also constructed what he called a 'logic machine'. It reportedly consisted of six discs or drums – each one representing one of his six categories of knowledge – and by which one could order knowledge, or relate one field of it to another. Giordano Bruno, Athanasius Kircher and Leibniz were reported to have been quite impressed by it.

^{XI} AUTHOR'S ORIGINAL FOOTNOTE: There were about a hundred official censors mid-century.

^{xii} Herodotus was an ancient with whom any modern man could have carried on a mutually comprehensible conversation – something hardly possible with, for example, many of the theologian-philosophers of the dark ages that followed the fall of Rome, or indeed with Moses himself, Herodotus’s near-contemporary. Herodotus treated with a healthy scepticism anything which did not concur with his own knowledge of the world. One enlightening account of his illustrates this – even though the premises on which he doubted parts of the tale were incorrect. He was told in Egypt of how the Pharaoh Necho commissioned a Phoenician fleet to sail from the Red Sea to circumnavigate Africa and which returned through the Pillars of Hercules two or three years later. The part of the tale he did not believe was the claim by the Phoenician sailors that while travelling westwards around the southern end of ‘Libya’ (meaning Africa), the sun was to their north, which of course it would have been when they were sailing south of the equator.

^{xiii} The inhabitants of Versailles have long had the contemptible habit of referring to Parisians as *frogs* – because they live in, or rather, are surrounded by a marsh. The Editor has heard that the English have extended this cognomen to all Frenchmen.

^{xiv} AUTHOR’S ORIGINAL FOOTNOTE: The reference is to Leibniz’s *Essais de Théodice sur la bonté de Dieu, la liberté de l’homme et l’origine du mal*.

^{xv} Urban X is the fictional pope in Voltaire’s *Candide*. By poking fun at a fictional pope, he believed that it would be more difficult to accuse him of blasphemy, a serious offence under the Old Regime.

^{xvi} When the young Chevalier de la Barre and his companion, Gaillard d’Étallonde, were convicted of blasphemy in 1766 in Abbéville, both were sentenced to have their tongues cut out, their right hands cut off and to be put to death – by slow fire in the case of d’Étallonde, by beheading after torture in the case of de la Barre, his body to be burned. The sentence was confirmed by the magistrates of the Paris Parlement and carried out in Abbéville. Some reports relate that the Chevalier was simply beheaded and did not actually have his tongue cut out. D’Étallonde had managed to flee and his sentence was carried out in effigy. A copy of Voltaire’s *Dictionnaire philosophique portatif* found in the young men’s rooms, along with – allegedly – two pornographic books, was also burned with de la Barre’s corpse. The Chevalier de la Barre was fully rehabilitated by a decree of the Convention nationale on the 25th Brumaire, Year II.

^{xvii} The absurdities to which the aristocrats of the Old Regime went to justify their feudal privileges knew few bounds. For example, it was claimed, and believed, that the Second Estate was descended from the Franks and the Third Estate from the conquered Gauls, and even that kingly authority was the inherited paternal authority of Adam in his capacity as our primary father.

^{xviii} The pagan temple referred to is the Pantheon in Rome, the only significant pagan temple from the Ancient World to survive intact. Its survival can be put down exclusively to it being converted into a church shortly after pagan rites were banned. Its original brass doors are still

extant as; as are those of the Temple of Romulus on the Forum Romanum, part of which was also once used as a church.

^{XIX} AUTHOR'S ORIGINAL FOOTNOTE: The general outline of the story of Pandora and her box, or rather jar, is well known; but, in fact, it is quite an intricate tale. Pandora, which actually means *she who received all gifts*, was the Greek Eve. The brothers Epimetheus and Prometheus had the task of dispensing gifts to Man and the animals; but when Epimetheus, who was responsible for the animal kingdom, had finished giving all the animals their various traits and characters, there was nothing left for Prometheus, who was responsible for dispensing gifts to Man. So Prometheus decided to steal the secret of fire from Zeus and give it to Man. This so enraged Zeus that he had Prometheus chained to a rock to have his liver pecked at for eternity by a flock of vultures. But Zeus also decided to punish Man for accepting stolen property. So he gave him Woman: i.e. Pandora. Hephaestus took earth and water and gave her a human form. Aphrodite gave her the beauty of a goddess. Athena gave her a dress for modesty. Apollo taught her to sing and heal sicknesses. Demeter gave her green fingers. Hermes gave her charm. But Zeus himself gave her a lazy nature, fickleness and the spirit of a naughty child, and Hera gave her curiosity. She was married off to Epimetheus and given the box or rather jar by Zeus as a dowry, who instructed them never to open it. When she did open it she released disease, poverty, sorrow, greed and the despair engendered by the awareness of mortality into the world. The statue of her in the gardens at Versailles depicts her holding a jar rather than a box. And she is also portrayed holding a jar in Jean Cousin le Père's *Eva Prima Pandora*, a nude painted in the reign of Henri II.

^{XX} AUTHOR'S ORIGINAL FOOTNOTE: Of course, what Pascal actually said was: *Le cœur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît point*.

^{XXI} AUTHOR'S ORIGINAL FOOTNOTE: The Stoics believed that the world began with a conflagration and will end with one. And that out of the conflagration in which this world will inevitably end, a new world, a new universe will be born again, in a process that goes on ad infinitum.

^{XXII} AUTHOR'S ORIGINAL FOOTNOTE: The Comte de Buffon once did an experiment with mirrors in the Jardin de Plants. He ignited a pile of wood at a distance of two hundred feet by reflecting the focused rays of the sun onto it. He said it was proof that the story of Archimedes burning the Roman fleet at Syracuse using a similar mechanism could be true. If such devices were mounted on Montgolfier flying balloons perhaps entire cities could indeed be destroyed this way.

^{XXIII} AUTHOR'S ORIGINAL FOOTNOTE: The word *gas* was not much used mid-century, though the word was coined by Ioannes Baptista van Helmont in the seventeenth century. Paracelsus referred to air as *chaos*, the word the Greeks used to describe the nothingness which existed before the creation of the universe; *chaos* sounds like *gas* in Flemish. Van Helmont, who was as much alchemist as natural philosopher, claimed to have identified more than a dozen so-called gases. He used to call himself a *philosophus per ignem* – a philosopher by fire. He noticed that if one

burns about sixty pounds of charcoal one is left with about a pound of ash and suggested that the missing matter might have been turned into a gas, a *gas sylvestre*. He was convinced that matter could neither be created nor destroyed, only transformed from one form into another. He was led to this conclusion by being able to retrieve and reconstitute substances which appeared to have disappeared. He is said to have developed a method for dissolving metal in acid and then by some sort of reverse chemical process recovering the exact same weight of metal originally dissolved.

Paracelsus believed the principal constituent of matter was earth but van Helmont believed that it was mainly water. In an attempt to prove this, he did an experiment. He grew a willow in a pot, but first weighed it all: the willow, the pot and the soil. Then he watered it, making sure to add no earth. He even used rainwater to make sure that there would be no earth added at all. Several years later he weighed the pot and the earth. He found that the earth had reduced in weight somewhat but not enough to account for the weight added to the tree. So he concluded that trees are mainly water.

His son, François Mercure van Helmont, was also a man of science. In *The Alphabet of Nature*, he outlined a system by which the deaf could communicate with each other using finger signs based on Hebrew characters. He believed Hebrew was the original language. He ended his days as a Quaker (a religious sect) in England; the word *Quaker* means more or less *cacouac-cacouac* in English.

Fixed air was discovered in the mid-1750s by the Scotsman Joseph Black (though he was actually born in Bordeaux). Black extracted it from heated-up *magnesia alba*. Previously to this, it was generally thought – despite the efforts of van Helmont – that there was only one type of air or gas, as in Empedocles’ classical four elements: earth, fire, air and water. These days, of course, most chemical philosophers believe that elements are made up of individual atoms or molecules, the smallest possible particles of matter that can exist, but nobody really knows how many elements there actually are, nor how small these particles are. Halley maintained that a cube of gold with sides one-hundredth of an English inch long would contain 2,433,000,000 atoms. In his *An account of the measure of the thickness of gold upon gilt wire, together with a demonstration of the minuteness of the atoms or constituent particles of gold*, he describes an experiment he performed involving the drawing out of a length of gold-covered silver wire very, very slowly, until it snapped, and then measuring it at its thinnest point. Natural philosophy strives to be exact. Exactitude demands, more often than not, that one says not what a thing is, but rather what it is not. Réaumur did a similar experiment and managed to produce a gilt thirteen times thinner.

Galileo Galilei proved that air had weight. He put two pig bladders on a balance, one full of water and one full of air. He then punctured the bladder containing the air. By the movement of the scales, he was able to deduce that the weight of air was one-hundredth the weight of water. And Pascal’s experiments confirmed Torricelli’s theory that the variations in barometers

were caused by the weight of air. Though in fact, it was his brother – on Pascal’s instructions – who actually did the experiments on the Puy-de-Dôme. They say there is a rather impressive ruin of a Roman temple to Mercury on the summit.

^{XXIV} AUTHOR’S ORIGINAL FOOTNOTE: The pamphlet in question, which has been preserved among the Author’s papers, entitled *A Fitting Punishment For Parricide*, is perhaps worthy of quoting in more detail:

There can be no greater crime against God, against one’s nation and against mankind than to kill one’s father; and is not our King the father of us all. And there is no punishment that can be too harsh or exemplary for such an act of treason, or which can too forcibly express the anger of the people at the injury suffered. For such a crime is not just the breaking of a law, for by attacking the Sacred Person, all laws are attacked, and the foundation of all laws. And God, the Supreme Good, is the foundation of all laws. God does not leave men to their own devices when it comes to making laws. He has ordained kings to rule over nations as he has ordained fathers to rule over families. God, being all-caring and all-wise, cannot but provide lawmakers for men. For is His Son not the King of Kings? Murder and theft are not crimes because powerful men have gathered together and decided that it is so. If that was so, powerful men would be at liberty to decide that anything that served their purposes was a law, that only the murder of the powerful and theft from the rich are crimes. That cannot be so. Murder and theft are crimes because God, in His infinite wisdom and love for Man, has decreed them to be so. He has appointed kings to give these moral laws a particular form and to choose the judges to enforce them and pass sentences that both punish justly and strike terror into the hearts of evil-doers. The Parlement was wise to compare the regicide Damiens to the parricide Ravaillac who murdered Henri IV in the year 1610, and right to decree that the punishment of the parricide Damiens should be the same in all particulars.

At the time it would have taken no great insight to detect a Jansenist pen at work. The Jansenists always claimed that Ravaillac was an instrument of the Jesuits. But in fact, Ravaillac had been rejected by the Society. They were fussy about whom they admitted into their hallowed ranks; though it is true that Ravaillac requested that his heart be entombed at La Flèche, the Jesuit motherhouse at the time. Ravaillac, a mad monk if there ever was one, believed he had been elected by God to convince Henri IV to revoke the Edict of Nantes and force the Huguenots to convert. Perhaps he fancied himself as a latter-day Maid of Orléans. Of course, the Sun King thought it not so mad an idea.

Of an even earlier regicide the pamphlet said: *The body of Jacques Clément, who murdered Henri III in 1589, was quartered and burned, though he was killed by the King’s guards in the commission of his crime, and thus escaped the live dismemberment that he deserved.* It is reported that Sixtus V actually considered canonising Clément.

^{XXV} Your Editor has taken the liberty of expunging some rather misleading, pedantic and turgid passages from the end of this section of

the narrative in which the author, a man whose sympathies are at times ambivalent, to say the least, refers in some detail to a papal encyclical entitled *A Quo Primum* to the Bishops of Poland which deals of the question of Jews and Christians living in the same places. In this document Benedict XIV had instructed Catholics to *do no business with them* [the Jews] *and neither lend them money nor borrow from them and thus you will be free from and unaffected by all dealings with them*, pointing out that he had also bidden good Catholics to heed the words of Saint Bernard who had supposedly written, *the Jews are not to be persecuted: they are not to be slaughtered: they are not even to be driven out*. The Roman cult, throughout history, has excelled in hypocrisy and fine words. It may have condemned usury but how many popes availed the services of the usurers they officially condemned to secure their thrones! The Assemblée nationale constituante passed the decree that enabled the Jews in France to enjoy the privileges of full citizens on 27 September 1791.

^{XXVI} AUTHOR'S ORIGINAL FOOTNOTE: A proposition argued by Diderot in *Lettre sur les aveugles à l'usage de ceux qui voient*.

^{XXVII} AUTHOR'S ORIGINAL FOOTNOTE: Perhaps about one in ten of full-grown men and women in Paris could probably read at the time; and now, 35,000 souls at the most. While no one can say with certainty what the population of Paris was in mid-century, using the *Plan de Turgot*, it is possible to make an estimate. By counting the houses on this map and allocating so many souls to each house – it's precise enough to do that – one gets a figure of 700,000 (more than in Naples supposedly). Assuming half of these were children, that leaves 350,000 adults. One tenth of that number is 35,000. Using the similar methods, some of the economists of the time suggested that the population of France was about 20,000,000 – more than that of any other country in Europe, including the Russias.

^{XXVIII} AUTHOR'S ORIGINAL FOOTNOTE: To quote Descartes in full: *For since we are finite, it would be absurd for us to determine anything concerning the infinite; for this would be an attempt to limit it and grasp it. So we shall not bother to reply to those who ask if half an infinite line would itself be infinite, or whether an infinite number is odd or even, and so on. It seems that nobody has any business to think about such matters unless he regards his own mind as infinite.*

^{XXIX} AUTHOR'S ORIGINAL FOOTNOTE: The reference is to Pascal's so-called *nuit de feu*, on 23 November 1654, during the course of which he claimed to have been the recipient of a personal divine revelation. On a more general note, Pascal believed that all human activity, including all science and scholarship, is a diversion, an escape from reality, from a life amidst mystery and horror, and eventual sickness and death – and that, while Christianity is superior to all other religions, one cannot prove the truth of it, but that truth can only be revealed by grace.

^{XXX} AUTHOR'S ORIGINAL FOOTNOTE: The healing properties of opium were known to the ancients. Homer and Virgil refer to it. The Theriac of Andromachus – Andromachus was Nero's physician – was a concoction of opium, wine, hashish and sixty-one other ingredients. As for mercury

(or indeed guaiacum bark) being a cure for syphilis: it can hardly be said to be universally efficacious; but then, what cure is?

XXXI AUTHOR'S ORIGINAL FOOTNOTE: Titus Lucretius Carus himself committed suicide, some say as the result of drinking a love potion that drove him mad.

XXXII AUTHOR'S ORIGINAL FOOTNOTE: In the course of his researches the Author also came across an account of a decree of 1277 by the then Bishop of Paris, Pierre Etienne, which forbade the teaching of certain doctrines of Aristotle, specifically those which maintained that God could *not* have created a world in which the movements of the heavens were not perfectly circular and in which a vacuum could exist. Ironically, it could be argued, that by forcing (or allowing) philosophers to consider the possibility of such a universe, the decree, by forbidding one thought, gave the freedom to think many others.

XXXIII AUTHOR'S ORIGINAL FOOTNOTE: Giordano Bruno believed that matter had a sort of immanent intelligence and that the universe was acentric (being infinite it could not have a centre) and that the stars were suns with their own planets, inhabited by other beings.

EDITOR'S COMMENT: and, it seems, he also believed that it was to the good that we would never be able to communicate with these beings on other planets, citing the misery that befell the noble savages of the American continents after Europeans had landed uninvited on their shores. Bruno was found guilty of heresy by the Roman Inquisition in 1600 and *handed over to the secular arm* (the secular arm in the Papal States being the pope himself!) and, gagged to *prevent him repeating his heresies*, burned to death on the Campo de' Fiori, a central Roman market square. His ashes were dumped in the Tiber and his books placed on the Index.

XXXIV AUTHOR'S ORIGINAL FOOTNOTE: In mid-century, John Law, a Scotsman, and his ideas about printing money and various other schemes for generating endless wealth were still within living memory. He advocated the establishment of a royal bank which would issue paper notes of various denominations, their value being backed by gold, silver and land (principally the swamps of Louisiana!). The profits of this national institution were to go to paying off the royal debt. Philippe d'Orléans appointed him Controller-General and he was able to put many of his ideas into practice. His ideas led to pecuniary chaos, both in France and abroad.

XXXV AUTHOR'S ORIGINAL FOOTNOTE: The Nantes share of the African trade had declined in the previous thirty years. Under the terms of the Asiento de Negros, the South Sea Company in London held the monopoly on the supply of slaves to all the Spanish colonies up until 1750, and the English traders had substantial markets in their own colonies as well – all secured by the London assurance companies. But the trade to Guadeloupe and Martinique was lucrative enough on its own, though of course at the time it had been interrupted by the war. Fifty to sixty thousand slaves a year were being exported from Africa.

XXXVI AUTHOR'S ORIGINAL FOOTNOTE: The Italian, Francesco Redi, had discovered as far back as 1668 that flies did not spontaneously self-

generate in rotting meat – nor, one presumes, that maggots self-generate in cheese – yet the idea seems to have persisted. But here the reference is to the self-generation of the original individuals of particular species, a belief held by Diderot, and others. Bishop Bossuet had also pointed out that story of the Flood is not only found in Scripture and among the Greeks – Aristotle, Herodotus and Pliny noted numerous instances of seashells and the remains of other marine creatures in high places – but in the legends of other peoples as well. As for the evidence of there having been other floods: Bishop Nicolaus Steno (a convert to Roman Catholicism from Danish Lutheranism), pointed out in his *Discours sur l'Histoire universelle* that the strata of many rocks have the appearance of having been formed by sediments deposited by turbid seawater and that these different strata were unlikely to have all been deposited on the one occasion. The article on FOSSILS in the *Encyclopédie* was written by the Baron d'Holbach.

XXXVII AUTHOR'S ORIGINAL FOOTNOTE: The lowliest living things on the great chain of being, according to Aristotle's *Scala Naturae*, are moulds and lichens. The more complex plants are on the next rung. Polyps, a sort of part-plant part-animal, come next. Above these are the different types of animals, in an ascending scale: fish, the simplest animal, then flying fish, followed by aquatic birds, followed by terrestrial birds, and so on up to monkeys. Man is at the top. Each form of life can be seen as a more perfect form of the one directly beneath it. Some scholars believe the different species emerged one after the other, each one an improvement, a more complex form of the one preceding it. Leibniz imagined it very much like a real chain, its links being so closely intertwined with one another that it is impossible to determine the point at which one ends and the next one begins. Nature, he said, was ruled by a principle of continuity: *All advances by degrees in nature, and nothing by leaps.*

XXXVIII AUTHOR'S ORIGINAL FOOTNOTE: The question of species is not as straightforward as one would think. For example, the horse and the ass can mate, so are they of the same species? And some mules have been known to give birth; though the Author has not been able to ascertain if this is as a result of coupling with horses or asses or with other mules. The Comte de Buffon also suggested it would not be unreasonable to believe that sometime in the past some horses degenerated into asses, an inferior creature which eventually lost the ability to interbreed successfully with those horses that had not degenerated. And there is also the issue of those plants and other organisms which reproduce without mating.

XXXIX AUTHOR'S ORIGINAL FOOTNOTE: The Englishman William Whiston maintained that the Flood was caused by the moisture from the tail of a comet falling to earth as rain, and even that the Earth itself originated as a comet. In the *Encyclopédie* article on HELL, the Abbé Edeme Mallet maintained that Whiston believed that the location of hell was on comets.

XL AUTHOR'S ORIGINAL FOOTNOTE: In his *Pensées sur l'interprétation de la nature*, Diderot wrote: *If beings change successively, passing through the most imperceptible nuances, time, which does not stop, must eventually*

put the greatest difference between forms that existed in ancient times, those which exist today and those that will exist in far-off centuries; and the idea of nihil sub sole novum (nothing new under the sun) is only a prejudice based on the weakness of our organs, the imperfection of our instruments and the shortness of our lives. He believed that on occasion what he calls mutants are born and reproduce, and that this is what gives rise to variations, and that this process can give rise to completely new species over very long periods of time. However, in his *Pensées philosophiques*, he ventured the thought that the existence of a Supreme Being might be incompatible with the occurrence of monstrosities and the disorder of nature, but it was probably his suggestion that religion might be likened to a pair of crutches that caused that book to be condemned and subsequently burned by Sanson.

Whether one believes in the possibility of such transformations depends very much on how one believes plants and animals regenerate, on the actual mechanics of heredity. Two theories were much discussed mid-century. The advocates of preformationism, known as preformists, believed that all creatures were *pre-formed* before they entered the womb to be incubated, that the semen of an animal contains an animalcule – and in the case of Man, a homunculus. The logical consequence of which, the Author cannot resist concluding, would be that Adam had miniature versions of all men and women ever born and yet to be born all swimming about in his semen: homunculi within homunculi ad infinitum. This encasement idea of preformation also presupposes the immutability of species. So those who argue against species being eternally fixed and incapable of change rejected it, or at least the cruder versions of this theory. The other theory, held by Maupertuis, taught that both male and female semens supply chemical parts which have a greater affinity to unite with those of the same species than with those of another – but that on occasion, when an animal mates with another of similar but different species and produces hybrids, some of these resulting hybrids are not sterile and can actually form new species. It is worth noting, however, that no new species has appeared within history.

Many plants also come in both male and female forms, a fact known to the ancients. Theophrastus – Aristotle’s favourite pupil – describes how the Mesopotamians pollinated date plants using this knowledge. At the end of the last century, Rudolf Jacob Camerarius discovered how insects carry pollen from male to female and the hermaphroditic nature of some plants. He also carried out experiments on hybridisation. His suggestion that the Creator made fossils to decorate the interior of the earth in the same way as He decorated the exterior of the earth with foliage is taken less seriously.

^{XL1} Your Editor has taken the liberty of abridging much of the content of this chapter, mainly passages relating to de Maillet’s belief that in the beginning the world was submerged beneath a universal ocean which contained the *semences* of all species and, like a womb, gave birth to the original forms of all living creatures. As this ocean receded, de Maillet maintained, some of these sea animals were trapped in marshes, learnt how

to walk and slowly became their land equivalents; sea-dogs became land-dogs; flying fishes became birds; and sea-men – mermaids – became the first men. (In his *Système d'Épicure*, La Mettrie put forward a similar theory; he believed that lower life forms first emerged from the ocean and gradually transformed themselves into higher forms, from plants to animals and then to Man himself.) De Maillet said he came to his belief that the world was once submerged beneath a universal ocean after seeing sea shells in the hills of Egypt. He maintained that the Earth was over ten million millennia old, a figure he arrived at after he had calculated that the original universal ocean had receded at a rate of three feet a year – a figure derived from the position of towns which in ancient times were coastal and are now miles inland. He put his arguments about the Earth's antiquity into the mouth of an Indian sage named Telliamed, his own name spelt backwards. The Indians maintains that the Earth is immeasurably old.

^{XLII} Under the Old Regime one-fifth of the land in France was owned by the First Estate, another fifth by the Second, and the Third Estate – who were not all peasants – owned the rest.

^{XLIII} AUTHOR'S ORIGINAL FOOTNOTE: Pierre Waldo of Lyons was a rich merchant who gave away all his wealth to the poor. The belief, apparently quite common at that time, that Christ held no property, and by implication neither should the Church, was *corrected* by the papal bull *Cum inter nonnullos* in 1326 by John XXII, at Avignon. The Poor Men of Lyon also preached against the death penalty. Like Prince Vladimir of Kiev, who converted the Russias to Christianity, they believed that putting a man to death was incompatible with the teachings of the Prince of Peace. Though the Author remembers hearing a report at the time that the Empress Elizabeth had deemed it necessary to abolish it again.

^{XLIV} AUTHOR'S ORIGINAL FOOTNOTE: The original Adamites were a sect who performed their religious observances naked and even went about unclothed in their daily lives. Augustine mentioned them. But even the pagans had similar sects – the Greeks called naked philosophers *gymnosophists*. Alexander is also reported to have encountered a naked sect in India. In more recent times, the Bohemian Brethren, also called the Picards after their founder Picard of Flanders, who called himself the New Adam, were considered Adamites, or more accurately, neo-Adamites. They are said to have set up a commune on an island in the river Nezarka, to have held all goods in common and called their churches *paradise*; they were suppressed by the Hussite Jan Ziska in 1421.

^{XLV} AUTHOR'S ORIGINAL FOOTNOTE: Magic lanterns were a rarity in the 1750s, at least in France. Athanasius Kircher, SJ, described one in the 1671 edition of his *Ars Magna Lucis et Umbrae* but he did not claim to have invented it. He believed it was a very ancient device and that the rabbis at the court of King Solomon possessed one. Giambattista della Porta, the Neapolitan, describes one in his *Magiae Naturalis*, published in the 1580s, a twenty-volume and widely translated encyclopaedic compendium. He even claimed to have perfected the camera obscura and actually invented the telescope. Madame Gourdon's device was probably

of the type described in William Jacobs Gravsande's *Physices elementa mathematica, experimentis confirmata*, which worked using an oil lamp with four flames, a concave mirror and a complex lens arrangement. The smoke and heat escaped through a tin chimney. He claimed it could project images as far as thirty feet.

^{XLVI} Your Editor has taken the liberty of removing a two-page passage here regarding the *memoirs* of the Abbé François Timoleon de Choisy (a member of the Académie Française) in which he relates how his mother brought him up as a girl and he thus acquired a taste for dresses and frills. He preferred to be addressed as Comtesse des Barres. He also penned a novel on the subject, *Histoire de Marquise-Marquis de Banneville*, about a boy brought up to be a girl. The heroine, or hero rather, was forced to wear an iron bodice as a child. She, or rather he, married a young man who turns out, happily, to be a young woman in masquerade. This sort of literature is a notable feature of the Old Regime. Evidence of similar attitudes can be found in the much of the meritless literature produced in Ancient Rome as it entered its final epoch of decay. It could indeed be argued that such obsessions are a sign of the loss of manly vigour, of the decline of both manly and womanly virtues, and evidence of the lack of will to assert themselves that civilisations in terminal decline display.

^{XLVII} AUTHOR'S ORIGINAL FOOTNOTE: Saint Appolline, the virgin deaconess of Alexandria, is the patron saint of dentists. She is usually portrayed with a pincer in one hand and a golden tooth in the other. The story of her martyrdom is that her persecutors broke all her teeth and then threatened to burn her if she did not deny Christ; but she jumped into the flames of her own accord.

^{XLVIII} AUTHOR'S ORIGINAL FOOTNOTE: At the time, Luigi Cornado was still considered the authority on how to live to a ripe old age. He recommended bread, soup, eggs and always eating slightly less than the appetite demands and, of course, avoiding fruit and vegetables. He lived to the age of ninety-eight. L'Orme, the Sun King's physician, believed that the key to longevity was in avoiding draughts. Fish, he used to say, lived to the age they do because they are never subjected to draughts. It is said that he used to wear an overcoat lined with the fur of hares in the height of summer, several hats at once, six pairs of stockings, sleep in sort of brick oven, and live on sheep's tongues and some syrupy concoction made from greens; and to have always kept a clove of garlic in his mouth, and a stalk of rue in each nostril. But that is all no doubt exaggeration. He also avoided vegetables and fresh fruit, as well as pastries and jams. He lived to the age of ninety-four, outliving his last wife, who was considerably younger than him and whom he married when he was eighty-seven. The Marquis de Mansera, de L'Orme's contemporary, who is reported to have sustained himself on little more than chocolate in his latter years, lived to a hundred and seven. Fontenelle, who lived to a hundred, attributed his longevity to strawberries.

^{XLIX} AUTHOR'S ORIGINAL FOOTNOTE: Tomatoes are called *love apples* in some parts. *Potato*, *tobacco*, *avocado* and *tomato* are all American words.

^L AUTHOR'S ORIGINAL FOOTNOTE: The Supreme Being, Descartes had argued, being perfect and thus infinitely merciful, infinitely knowing and incapable of deception, could not have equipped man with a faulty reason (innate geometrical ideas). Hence the ability of our innate geometrical ideas to describe the real world. So too, it could be argued, the same holds true regarding the deep-seated and universal conviction that we are endowed with eternal souls.

^{LI} AUTHOR'S ORIGINAL FOOTNOTE: To quote the *Address to the Theologians on the Liberty of Man*, from the same source of worldly wisdom (*Thérèse philosophe*): *The will has no force of its own and only operates in response to the force of the passions and the appetites which drive us. Reason only serves to make a man aware of the strength of the desire he has to do or not do something. Free will is only possible if the soul is completely indifferent to its fate.*

^{LII} Again here, your Editor has taken the liberty of judiciously expunging several pedantic and turgid passages in which the author relates, in some detail, how the 1755 papal bull *Beatus Andreas* issued by Benedict confirmed the canonisation of Saint Simon of Trent, a three-year-old reportedly murdered by the Jews of that city, but claiming that generally such stories had no basis in fact. The author also relates an incident in 1757 in which a Polish Jew by the name of Ben Asher Selig purportedly travelled to Rome to plead innocence on behalf of the Jews of Yanopol, who were being accused of using Christian blood in their ceremonies, and how Benedict purportedly asked the so-called Holy Office to investigate the manner. The subsequent report, *Non solis accusatoribus credendum*, compiled by a man destined himself to become pope in 1769, the future Clement XIV, found that the accusations, and most similar accusations, were without cause and pointed out that the heathens of the Roman Empire had also accused the first Christians of similar practices. Benedict subsequently ordered the Bishop of Warsaw to intercede on behalf of the Jews. Clement XIV, when he became pope, placed the Jews of Rome under the jurisdiction of the Vicariato di Roma; previously they had been under the jurisdiction of the Roman Inquisition.

^{LIII} AUTHOR'S ORIGINAL FOOTNOTE: Leibniz also designed a mechanical arithmetic machine, had a model of it made in Paris and demonstrated it to the Royal Society in London. While Pascal's machine only added and subtracted, Leibniz's apparatus also multiplied, divided and extracted roots.

^{LIV} The Library of Alexandria's was burned by a Christian mob in 391 Anno Domini by the old calendar. Its last great teacher was Hypatia of Alexandria, who combined great learning as an astronomer and mathematician with the womanly virtues of kindness and modesty; she was murdered by the Christians of that city in 415. Diderot, in his article on ECLECTICISM in the *Encyclopédie*, gives her considerable prominence, describing her life – in words which are almost a literary translation from Toland's *Hypatia* (the first book dedicated entirely to this last pagan philosopher and one of Toland's better works) – as *being the glory of her*

own sex, and the disgrace of ours. Toland's work appeared in London in 1753, perhaps a year or two before Diderot wrote the article. Voltaire dedicates an entire article to her in his *Dictionnaire philosophique*.

^{LV} It is curious that the author mentioned Thomas Müntzer without further explanation, a figure largely unknown in France. Müntzer was a follower of Martin Luther who supported the German peasants in their struggle against feudal privileges in the 1520s, in what is often called the Great German Peasant Insurrection. The attempt was defeated and the peasants of the German lands have been enserfed until this day. Müntzer was executed in 1525 along with his fellow insurrectionist, Heinrich Pfeiffer.

^{LVI} AUTHOR'S ORIGINAL FOOTNOTE: The word *Schlemihl* is believed to be derived from Shelumiel, a hapless biblical character who was killed by accident (Numbers 1.6). But it is also attributed to a 13th century Jew by the name of Schlemihl who on returning from an eleven-month journey to find his wife pregnant allowed himself to be convinced by her that the child she was carrying was his. The word and its exact meaning is a cause of some controversy among Talmudic scholars. EDITOR'S COMMENT: As no doubt is the number of angels who can fit on the head of a pin!

^{LVII} The author's claim that for a time he belonged to de Jaucourt's *army of secretaries* was, on first consideration, an obvious place for your Editor to commence his investigations into his identity, and this was attempted. But it proved impossible to gather any but a few names – none of whom I had the slightest reason to believe could have been the author or in any way involved with the events related in the narrative. Of course, the claim may also not be true.

^{LVIII} AUTHOR'S ORIGINAL FOOTNOTE: The Estates-General is a meeting of all three Estates. The last time it was convoked was in 1614. Though representatives of the First Estate do meet every five years or so in what is called the Assembly of the Clergy, mainly to decide its gift to the Royal Treasury; the Church may not be taxed, hence *gift*.

^{LIX} D'Holbach was an unshamed atheist and his *Système de la nature, ou Des lois du monde physique et du monde moral* is an unshamed argument denying the existence of any Supreme Being. The Baron's atheistic materialist universe is naught but matter in motion subject to laws of cause and effect which just simply – and inexplicably! – exist. Voltaire refuted the book very quickly in the article on Deity in his *Dictionnaire philosophique*. While the Baron's arguments against Christianity are not without serious merit, his ideas on virtue were rather naive: *It would be useless and almost unjust to insist upon a man's being virtuous if he cannot be so without being unhappy, so long as vice renders him happy, he should love vice*. That he was a man of his time and an aristocrat (with a distaste for the idea of Government by the Common Man typical of his feudal rank) will be apparent to discerning readers of his nefarious works, though his contribution to Diderot's *Encyclopédie* – some four hundred articles – can hardly be criticised. His feudal rank protected him from personal oppression under the Capet tyranny.

^{LX} The rational system of weights and measures based on the number 10

was successfully introduced by the Convention in Thermidor, Year I, replacing what was estimated to be the 800 or so units of measurement in use up to then, each town and county having its own. So much for *keeping one foot firmly on terra firma* – the eternal argument of those who would stand in the way of Virtue and Progress!

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Not forgetting the many books mentioned in the text.

