Daughter of the Guillotine

Linden Salter

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In this novel, Jeanne and Jacques Berger are fictional.
All other named characters are based, at least in part, on real people of the time.
The Author's Notes give links to images and details of the originals of the characters.

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Part 3: Language

A well-made language ... will not allow those who profess chemistry to deviate from the march of nature; it will be necessary, either to reject the nomenclature, or to follow irresistibly the path which it indicates.
A-L Lavoisier
On the necessity of reforming and perfecting the nomenclature of chemistry.

Robespierre had moved first: Danton and his companions had been arrested at two o'clock that morning. Around me in the café the argument raged.

'Is this why we fought the Revolution?' Pierre was shouting. 'Is this why so many have died, to see our heroes – men who fought along side us, men who led us – to see them sent the way of Royalists and traitors? Danton, who inspired us to fight Valmy! Desmoulins, who led us against the Bastille! Are these men traitors? What is Robespierre doing, to accuse his old comrades? Has he forgotten what they have done for *la patrie*? What crime have they committed except disagreeing with him? Is *civisme* to be defined as *Robespierrism*? Citizens, shall allow this to happen? Or shall we rise, as we've risen before, and show the Convention what sans-culottes can do?'

'Pierre, are you saying we should rise against the Revolution?' cried Constance. 'Because if you are, what's the difference between you and counter-revolutionary scum? You're dancing to the tune of the bloody English! It comes to this, citizens. We must choose between Danton and Robespierre. Which is it to be? Which will lead the Revolution, and which will die?'

But while everyone else was standing on tables shouting, all I could think about was that damned tax farmer.

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When I arrived at René's apartment for the next meeting, he was waiting for me outside his door, looking worried. 'Citoyenne Berger,' he said. 'How pleasant to see you. Is it not a fine evening? Let's go and enjoy the spring air.' He began to pull me down the stairs.

'Stop fooling around and let me in,' I said, but he stood in my way.

I pushed past him and opened the door, to see a young, well-dressed woman coming towards us from one of the rooms. 'René, what's—?' She stopped speaking as she saw me. Behind her was
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a tall man; René would look very like him in twenty or thirty years time.

'Ah, Citoyen Pluvinet!' came René's voice, full of relief. 'Citoyenne Berger was just asking where you were, so she could accompany you.' I felt his hand firmly on my elbow. 'You mustn't keep Citoyen Pluvinet waiting, Citoyenne.' He almost dragged me out of the house, and slammed the door in my face.

'Well! What was all that?' I exclaimed.

Pluvinet took my arm and we walked down the stairs together. 'Shall we go for a walk, Citoyenne Berger? I don't think that we're welcome here this evening.' As we were walking away from the building, I saw something that looked very much like Marie-Anne Lavoisier's blue and red berline drive past us.

We walked in silence to the Pont-Neuf, and stood watching the lights on the boats on the Seine. 'Citoyen Pluvinet, you are a man who wants to keep within the law. I would be very pleased if you can convince me that we don't have to report what we just saw.'

'What did you see?'

'I think I saw Pierre du Pont de Nemours, who is a proscribed noble and shouldn't be in Paris, about to have a meeting with his son, his son's wife, and Marie-Anne Lavoisier. Then you and I, the law-abiding apothecary and the revolutionary who's told him she doesn't want anything to do with an attempt to break Monsieur Lavoisier out of prison, were hustled out of the way.'

'"We should proceed from known facts to what is unknown." What do you know? You saw a man who may be Pierre du Pont – or may be René's uncle, cousin, or even unrelated to him. You saw a young woman who was, I agree, René's wife – but no harm in that; she may visit her husband any time she wants. And you saw a carriage that belongs to an old friend of the family. What is there to report in all that?'

'But why were we hurried off so quickly? It all seemed very suspicious. But you'll tell me I have a suspicious mind, I suppose.'

He laughed. 'I think you're as innocent as a new-born baby! When a man's wife arrives home unexpectedly, and an attractive young woman appears at his door, I don't think we need to look far for an explanation of why he hurries her away!'

'Oh!' I laughed too. 'Thank you, you've eased my mind. I'm not his mistress, you know.'

'I believe you – and I'm sure he is working very hard right at this moment to convince his wife of that too.'

'I wonder what he's saying to her.'

'Probably that you aren't his mistress but mine. You wouldn't – er – care to prevent him being a liar, would you?'

'I told him I'd kick him in the balls if he tried; do you want the same?'

'There are less dramatic but equally effective ways of saying no. You will do serious damage to the virility of France if you do that to every man who asks you.'

'Well, no, then. Will that do?'

'It will do, Citoyenne. Our relationship will be platonic.'

'Platonic?' I asked suspiciously. 'What's that?'

'Of the kind described by Plato,' he said, male superiority lurking in his face and waiting for me to ask who Plato was, so I didn't. Instead I turned the conversation to more relevant matters, where I was in no danger of being patronised: what we had done in our project.

He'd found a way of reaching the investigator Dupin, whose sister-in-law, it turned out, was a distant relation, and he was busy reviving the relationship. He had other information too: 'Dupin has an assistant; he calls himself Citoyen Septembre.'

He paused; I understood. A man who called himself Citizen September had not only taken part in the massacre in the prisons in September 1792, but was boasting of it. There were probably several Septembriseurs among Constance's customers, but they kept it quiet; there was the same feeling about them that there was about executioners. Dupin's assistant was proclaiming that he was as ruthless a revolutionary as you could hope not to find investigating the tax farmers.

Pluvinet continued. 'I haven't approached him; I thought—'

'You thought that a revolutionary like me might be the best person.'

'Normally I'd be reluctant to ask a woman to undertake such a mission, but not in view your

forthright opinion on the uselessness of chivalry.'

We discussed the best approach; his ideas involved more diplomacy, if not outright deception, than I was capable of. 'Leave it to me,' I said, and then I produced the letter to Fourcroy. 'Monsieur Lavoisier wrote this and sealed it – there's nothing much in it, only his appreciation. What if we could open it, write a message in it saying we'd done so, then re-seal it in such a way that Fourcroy can't tell until he reads the message? That'd show him that there's another possibility than the Lavoisiers' treachery – he's eager to believe it. And if Fourcroy can't get him off, nobody can.'

'How do you suggest we open and re-seal it undetectably?'

'I don't know! I'm not an apothecary or the manager of a printery. I expect you two clever fellows to work that out.'

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I'd finished the tax farmers' mending, so I could start knitting stockings for soldiers in the way that Constance approved. She and I sat together in my room talking over nothing very much in a way we hadn't done for some time, preoccupied as she'd been by Pierre. She was still preoccupied by him, to judge from the times when she'd stop talking and sit there with a quiet smile. I let my own thoughts drift too.

Suddenly she asked, 'Are you thinking of becoming that aristo's whore?'

'What aristo?' I asked, feeling irrationally guilty.

'That one who came round here the other day. That oh-so-handsome, well-dressed, charming gentleman who can even worm his way into the estimation of a good sans-culotte like Pierre ...' I let her abuse René du Pont as long as she wanted to.

'No,' I said when she'd finished.

'Oh.' She seemed disappointed; it was a waste of a good diatribe.

'He asked me to,' I said, offering her some consolation. 'And I was asked by a bourgeois too yesterday evening.'

'Don't sound so pleased with yourself. You should find a good sans-culotte.'

'Who? The Lucky Sailor? And spend the rest of my life listening to stories about kangaroos?'

'There are others.'

'You've already found the best sans-culotte I know.'

Her stern revolutionary scowl vanished. 'He is, isn't he? He thinks I'm pretty. Nobody's ever thought that I was pretty before.' Pierre, I realised, was very deeply in love. 'Don't tell anybody yet, but he's asked me to marry him.'

I embraced her. 'I'm so glad! You're perfect for each other.'

'Really? You don't think that there's too much difference between our politics?'

I laughed. 'Constance, my aristo and my bourgeois would have to work hard to see any difference in politics at all between you and Pierre.'

'That just shows how ignorant they are! Pierre thinks that—'

I interrupted her. 'Before you list all the differences between a Robespierrist Jacobin-sympathising sans-culotte and a Dantonist Jacobin-sympathising sans-culotte, let me tell you that you and Pierre would find political differences between the way you wipe your arses.'

'Not that the topic has ever been raised,' she said, 'but I can see how there might well be significance in that.'

'I don't want to know! But you two have got one very important thing between you: you suit each other very well in bed.'

'How do you know?' she asked, shocked; it was the only time I saw her blushing.

'The wall between our rooms is very thin.' I had heard them all too often as I lay in my empty bed. 'I don't complain, Constance – I'm very happy for both of you. I only wish my husband and I had ever been so passionate about it.'

'Weren't you? How sad.'

'Yes, it is sad.' I put down my knitting. 'I've just made a decision. You and Pierre: you love each other. I'm never going to do it again except with a man I love. I'm not going to do it just

because he's my husband, or because he's set me up as his mistress. It's going to be love or celibacy for me from now on.'

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I was feeling low for many reasons. Jacques was nearly weaned and I was depressed about the idea of cutting the final link; everyone in the café was talking about the trial of the Dantonists and saying it was the end of the Revolution; and the chances of saving Monsieur were getting even smaller. If men like Danton and Desmoulins could face the guillotine, what chance did a tax farmer have?

That's why I accepted René's invitation to the theatre. His visitors had left; that's all he told me about them, and I didn't want to know any more. I salved my conscience by choosing a play that Constance recommended: full of republican fervour, inspiring songs, and a good story, about the dilemma of a man who discovered his wife was betraying the Revolution; would he report her or not? He did in the end, to thunderous applause from the audience.

I let René take my arm and slip it through his as we left. It might not be *civiste*, but there was something very pleasant about walking on a warm spring evening through the crowds near the theatres, arm in arm with a handsome young man.

He was unusually silent until we had left the crowds behind us, and then he said, 'Jeanne, what did you think of that play?' in a tone that was much more serious than the usual after-theatre conversation.

'I enjoyed it. Didn't you?'

'It was the most frightening experience I've had for a long time.'

'Frightening? It was excellent!'

'Your enjoyment makes it all the more terrifying. How could everybody cheer when he betrayed his wife? That was a foul, wicked thing to do, but everyone in the audience except me seemed to think he was a hero.'

'But she betrayed the Revolution; he had to choose between her and his principles, and he chose right in the end. That's why he was a hero.'

'Would you do that?'

I stopped walking, took my arm out of his, and said seriously, 'I might well do so, René. You'd better understand that. I like you, and I like the Lavoisiers, but if you're thinking of doing the sort of thing the woman in the play did – well, I'd prefer not to have the pain of making the choice.'

'I understand.' He put my arm back in his, and we continued walking. 'But I don't understand why. I hope you won't accuse me of being a counter-revolutionary, but I want to learn. What is it about the Revolution that makes people love it more than their husbands or wives?'

'Because it's ours. For the first time in history, ordinary people have the power. In the early days of the Revolution, when liberal aristos like your father and Monsieur Lavoisier were in charge, they were full of concern for the people, and had wonderful schemes for what they'd do for us. And it was better than the Old Regime, I grant, when they did nothing. But now we do it for ourselves. And we love it, and we'll kill and die for it.'

'You made it clear from the start, but I kept thinking you were different.'

'I am in a way. I don't like the guillotine – you'll understand why. And I know something that nobody else in the faubourg-Antoine does. They think that the best thing to do with a tax farmer is to chop his head off. But I find that it's a much better thing to be able to help him. Who would have thought five years ago that someone like him would need someone like me? And now he does, and it's one of the most satisfying feelings I've ever had.'

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But there were some things that I would not do for him.

'It would mean so much to both of us,' his wife pleaded.

'Marie-Anne, I told you: I'm not kind, I can't lie, and I won't do anything that a good

Republican shouldn't do. And so I will not smuggle you into the Ferme just so that you can have a private meeting with him. It'd mean my head if it was discovered – and it probably would be. You can't imitate a poor needlewoman any more convincingly than I can lie.'

'I could if you taught me.'

'No! If you want to see him in private, go in yourself; don't involve me.'

'I'd get caught.'

'Risk your own head, Marie-Anne, not mine.'

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Maman and I were discussing what clothes Jacques needed in the warm weather when Papa came in. I'd often seen him white-faced and shaking with what he'd just done; I'd rarely seen him red-faced and angry with what he had to do.

'It's a travesty!' he was shouting, as if we could do anything. 'A mockery of justice! Look at this!' he said, producing a note. 'It's from Fouquier-Tinville.' Father's immediate superior, he was prosecutor at the trial of the Dantonists, which Papa had gone to watch, like anyone else who could spare the time. 'The evidence isn't all in yet; the jury hasn't even started to consider a verdict. And *That Man*—' putting so much venom into those two words that they sounded like curses '—that man sends this note telling me to make sure that I'm prepared for them all tomorrow!' He stormed around the room. 'I tell you, I've a good mind to – to – Oh, damn!' he said, and sat down with defeat written in every line of his face. 'I'm going to do it, aren't I?'

'You always have, Charlot.'

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My cousin escorted me as usual, regretting that he was on duty so he was missing the execution of the Dantonists. 'I'm surprised you aren't going, Jeanne.'

'I've had enough executions.' Jacques was with me; this wasn't the day to leave him at the executioner's house. I didn't think the crowd would rise up in protest and storm the tumbrels; they'd never done so before. But Danton and Desmoulins and the others had never been executed before.

I gave Monsieur the letter from his wife, which he read and read again, as if she'd said something new and wonderful. I wouldn't have thought that there were very many different ways of saying 'I love you', but perhaps there are to people who love.

I sat with Jacques on my lap; the tax farmers' kitten tried to climb on too. I pushed her down, tickling her head in consolation. She was no longer a scrap of fur part dead and part alive, but one of the most indulged cats in Paris: sleek and well fed, twice the size that she had been. She disdained my caresses and moved silently to Monsieur, who stroked her absent-mindedly while he re-read his letter. They made an interesting comparison, these two polished black figures: her small delicate form contrasted with his large virile one; she, sensual and affectionate; he, logical and restrained. But both were full of a graceful energy that was firmly under their control – and both the prisoner and the pet gave every impression of owning the Ferme.

I set Jacques down on one of the beds and soothed him to sleep, and while I was doing so I heard a noise from outside which I recognised; the Ferme was close to the route to the guillotine. Danton, Desmoulins and the others were taking their last ride.

I went to the open window to hear better; after a few moments Monsieur joined me. 'That's not the usual sound, is it?' I said, turning slightly to look up at his face. He was standing close beside me, but he was such a self-contained man that there was no chance of him touching me inadvertently. I recalled his belief that his body was under the control of his mind; he might be right after all.

'We've all become expert in crowd noises since the start of the Revolution, haven't we?' he said dryly. 'That's large, and it's discontented.'

'But it's not going to rise.'

'No. I don't think it is.' We listened until the sound died down as the tumbrels passed. 'Is this

what you wanted in your Revolution, Citoyenne?' he asked quietly, still looking out of the window.

'Of course it's not. But it's better than leaving your lot in power.'

'I wonder if they think that now, the men in the tumbrel. I wonder if Camille Desmoulins regrets standing up and shouting, "To the Bastille!" If he'd known how he'd end today, would he still have done it?'

I couldn't answer, and I was confounded until I realised that nobody could. 'It's not like you to ask unanswerable questions, Monsieur.'

He turned to me. 'Very well, I'll ask a question you can answer; everyone knows their answer to this one. What were you doing on the day the world changed?' He didn't need to say when that was: 14 July 1789 – the day the Bastille fell.

'In fact I don't know, and neither do most people who lived outside Paris. We didn't hear about it until later.'

'Well, when you heard of it; what were you doing then?'

'I was at home with my husband, and we could hear cheering. It was quiet at first, but then people started to cheer all around us, and we heard celebrations as more and more people were getting the news from Paris. But we didn't know what it was, and we couldn't ask – nobody talks to executioners. Then our letters were delivered, and I opened one from Maman, and I understood. We rushed out into the street and we joined in the celebration, and nobody cared what he did for a living. We were just like everyone else that day.' It had been a good day. 'What were you doing?'

'I was watching it happen. Marie-Anne and I had a house in the Arsenal then – I was Commissioner for Gunpowder. I was feeling rather glad that I hadn't already been strung from a lamp post, and wondering whether I'd continue so lucky – the people had started to destroy the gates in our wall and were likely to turn on us. There were thousands of people in the Arsenal grounds, but I'd had all the powder moved into the Bastille, so that's where they went. I saw a young man in the lead, his head full of glory and heroics, and I thought: Do you know what you're unleashing, young man?' He looked out of the window. 'Camille Desmoulins, you could have been shot that day, or I could have been strung from a lamp post. But neither of us could have predicted that the Revolution would kill you before it killed me. Nobody predicted anything like this.'

'My mother did. She predicted that Papa would have more work whatever happened. Sansons take an unusual view of events.'

'My congratulations to her.' He looked out of the window again. 'Poor Camille Desmoulins, victim of your own rhetoric. You stood up and you called for Liberty, Equality, Fraternity – or Death, and you never imagined anyone would take you seriously about the Death part. You've been waving the words around like the tricoleur for years, and with just as much idea of the meaning.'

I couldn't let him get away with that. 'Liberty, Equality and Fraternity are worth killing and dying for.'

He turned back to me. 'But what exactly are you prepared to kill and die for? Is your meaning of the words Liberty, Equality and Fraternity the same as mine? Or Robespierre's? Or Danton's?'

'We aren't killing and dying over the meanings of words. It's something much more important than that.'

'What, then?'

'It's the right to decide for ourselves what those words mean. We don't have to accept the meanings of aristos like you any more. You are no longer the authority.'

'Today, Citoyenne, the authority is your father.'

'I prefer my father to the King and the Academies. Five years ago, the King made up his mind about justice, and that's what justice meant. The Academies made up their minds about truth, and that's what truth meant. But now – we make up our own minds about Liberty, Equality and Fraternity, and that's what those words mean.'

'Nonsense! Truth is truth; the Academies had nothing to do with it.'

'Antoine-Laurent Lavoisier is the last person in the world who can say that. You created a language to describe the world of substances, and the Academy of Sciences accepted your meaning and imposed it on the world of people. Without you, we'd be using words like pure air, vitriolic acid and blue vitriol. Because of you, the world will call these things oxygen, sulphuric acid and copper sulphate from now on. People won't be able to talk about chemistry without using the

language you created, without accepting your truth, without thinking the way you think.'

'That sounds like accusation of conspiracy. Remember my fellow conspirators: Fourcroy, de Morveau, Berthollet. Perhaps we did conspire – but unlike most conspiracies, we were successful, and we're proud of it. We created a language that is clear, elegant, adaptable and powerful to describe the way the world is. It has nothing to do with anyone's mind – it describes the truth.'

'Oh, Monsieur,' I said, almost laughing at him. 'You call it "clear, elegant, adaptable and powerful" and you say it has nothing to do with anyone's mind? That's the best description of your mind I've ever heard. It may be the truth, but don't pretend it has nothing to do with your mind.'

'Yes, but that's—'

He stopped as we heard an unmistakable roar from the Place de la Révolution. Someone's head had just fallen.

'You hear, Citoyenne? That's the sound of Danton's Liberty, Equality and Fraternity becoming meaningless.'

'That wasn't Danton. He's going last.' Papa had told me of the arrangements.

'He would, of course. That's his style.'

'Not his choice; it was Fouquier-Tinville's decision. But I imagine he approves. So you see, even those two can agree that it means something.'

'What?' he cried, turning on me as if I were responsible for the whole thing. 'That it makes a better show? More dramatic?'

'Yes. Fouquier-Tinville, Danton, you, me: we all agree that it means more if Danton dies last. Does it matter if we can't agree what that meaning is?'

'Was I wasting my time all those years when I wrote those letters to you?' He was as angry as I'd ever seen him. 'Was I wasting my time when I wrote the *Elements*—' He broke off and turned away from me.

I didn't know what I'd done to cause that, but I knew that there was something for me to remedy. 'No, Monsieur, you were not wasting your time when you wrote those letters to me. I understand what you mean about the need for language to be precise. I certainly learned that from your letters. All I meant was that perhaps the rest of the world can't be described in the way that substances can.' He didn't say anything; my explanation wasn't working. 'But one thing I don't understand; why should anything I say or do mean that you were wasting your time when you wrote the *Elements*? It's a book for the world; the world doesn't think you were wasting your time. What has it to do with me?'

He didn't answer.

There was another roar that told us that another head had fallen.

'I wrote it for you,' I heard him say; it sounded as if the words were being dragged out of him.

'What?' I couldn't believe it.

'Oh, yes.' He turned round to look at me again. 'I've never told anyone this, and I wasn't going to tell you; I don't know why I let it slip. But I wrote every line of *The Elements of Chemistry* with you in my mind. There was a good reason why you found it a comfort in your prison. You didn't know it, but what you were reading was a very long letter from someone you'd been corresponding with for years.'

I had to sit down; this was a shock. 'Why me?'

'My other scientific papers were written for academicians and *savants*, but I wanted the *Elements* to reach the world. I thought of you: someone with a good mind and the keen desire to learn, but also someone who didn't have much education or any formal training in chemistry, so I had to be clear and I couldn't use long words or obscure references. I'd been writing to you for years, so when I came to write the *Elements*, I carried on doing so. I asked myself, "How can I best explain this to Mademoiselle Sanson?" Then I'd look at what I'd written, and I'd ask myself, "Is she going to understand this?" and I'd change it if I thought you wouldn't. I hope you won't reveal this; I want to spare the feelings of *savants* who can't understand something that was written for an adolescent girl who'd never gone to school.'

If I'd had any feelings apart from amazement at that moment, I would have felt overwhelming gratification. It had always been clear to me that the *Elements* was going to be one of those books that changed the way the world thought, like the ones by the famous Frenchmen that René had

talked about. And it was written to me? Everyone else was just reading copies of a letter to me?

'You were my link with the world that I wanted to reach,' he went on. 'When you showed me that battered copy, I was happy to know that my letter had been delivered and had proved useful. It wasn't really a wedding present; I'd have sent it to you anyway. That's why I didn't go to your wedding, by the way. I didn't want to see my muse getting married; I didn't want to spoil my picture of you with reality so I couldn't write to you again. I'd planned to, but—' There was another roar from outside. 'Things happened to stop me.'

'What was your picture of me, Monsieur?' I asked, fascinated.

He laughed. 'It was nothing like a fine female sans-culotte, blooming with life, with a baby on her hip! I was as startled at the sight of you in the flesh as I was when I first learned that water was composed of two gases – they didn't seem to fit in the same world.' He smiled ruefully. 'You'll think me abominably self-centred, but I didn't imagine Mademoiselle Sanson having much of an independent life of her own – that's probably why I didn't connect your name with your father's, because I didn't picture her having a father. I saw her as a pale, thin, withdrawn girl, who never went out, who didn't have many emotions, and who spent all her time studying oxygen theory and thinking about my letters to her.'

'Your picture was very close to the truth,' I said quietly, looking down – I couldn't meet his eyes.

'Oh.' There was a pause. 'I didn't mean to hurt you.'

'You didn't. You simply reminded me of how much I want to get away from Mademoiselle Sanson.'

'If I may say, Citoyenne Berger, you have come a long way already.'

'She's still here. She'd be even more here if it weren't for my baby and the Revolution. That's one of many reasons why I love them both so.'

He looked at me; I looked at him. I wasn't going to tell him what he wanted to know unless he asked. 'All right, Citoyenne Berger, tell me. Were you as surprised when you saw me in the flesh as I was when I saw you?'

'No, Monsieur Lavoisier, I was not. But I was looking for you, and I am who I am now. Mademoiselle Sanson would have been most disappointed that you aren't three metres tall and you don't have sunbeams coming out of your head.'

'Well, I'm glad he's gone,' he laughed.

I laughed with him, but I was thinking, Perhaps he's still here too.

Then our laughter stopped as another roar came from the window.

'I suggest we ignore it,' I said.

'It's not easy. I haven't had the benefit of your upbringing.'

That hurt me. 'A tax farmer must find it as easy as an executioner's daughter to ignore other people's suffering.'

That hurt him. 'I deserved that,' he admitted.

'Forget it. And forget what's going on outside. It's no worse than what happens every day, just louder.'

He closed the window so we could no longer hear the sound of the Revolution eating its children. The room would soon become stifling, but it was better to be hot at that time than chilled. I went to look at Jacques on the bed; he was already sweating and stirring uncomfortably. 'Do you have something I can use as a fan?' I asked. 'I don't want him to get overheated.'

He passed me some paper that he'd discarded. I wondered what gem of genius it might contain, so I glanced at it as I folded it into a fan. *Paulze – 2 shirts; Verdun – 1 pr breeches, 1 coat*... It was the tally of mending that I'd done.

I saw him looking at Jacques; I understood from his expression at that moment that Marie-Anne was not the only one to regret their childless state. 'Life,' I heard him say. 'There's a lot to be said for it.'

'It's a miracle, isn't it?'

'No,' he said coolly. 'We don't understand it, but it's not a miracle.'

'Can anyone ever understand it?'

'Yes. One day we shall know the secrets of life.' He produced this astonishing statement as if

he were announcing that a set of accounts would be finished next week; it was only a matter of time and calculation.

'That sounds – melodramatic.'

'It's the literal truth. Shall I explain? Putting my scientific papers together while I've been in prison has allowed me to see the whole in a way that I've never had the time to do before. I know what I can do – if I'm allowed life myself – and it will be as important as what I've done already. But I'd like to talk matters over with you; it would help get my ideas sorted out. Will you let me?'

'Who with, Monsieur? Mademoiselle Sanson or Citoyenne Berger?'

'When Citoyenne Berger is here in the flesh before my eyes, I can no more think of Mademoiselle Sanson than I can see the moon when the sun's in the sky. You know more chemistry than everyone else in this building put together. I won't have to explain what oxygen is – something that I'm rather tired of doing.'

'In that case, I'd find it a privilege to listen.'

'Will you give me permission to appear in my shirt in your company?' he asked. 'It's getting hot.' No other man I knew would have thought twice about it in these revolutionary days; even René and Pluvinet would just have done it. There were still some aristos who'd ask a lady for permission to take off their coats, but none of those would have asked a female sans-culotte.

'Of course. Whatever makes you feel comfortable.'

'How does life work? That is the question,' he said, taking his coat off and hanging it up. 'How does Nature carry out its marvellous circulation between the animal, the vegetable and the mineral kingdoms?' He took off his waistcoat. 'What are the processes that create life out of simple elements like carbon, hydrogen and oxygen, and then decompose them again?' He untied his neck cloth and loosened his collar.

I sat fanning my baby while my father was lopping the heads off the Dantonists, and I listened to the mind of Antoine-Laurent Lavoisier at work. He could take only a few steps before he had to turn, but it made no difference. I had never seen him so vital; the whole world seemed to be contained in this one man. From the waist up he was in loose clean white linen that allowed him to move freely; from the waist down he was in close-fitting black breeches and stockings that showed me his vigorous form.

I wished it hadn't occurred to me that this was how men appeared when they were prepared for the guillotine: stripped to their shirts, with nothing around their necks. This was how the Dantonists were dressed, those that were waiting their turn. And this was how he would appear too.

'Respiration: I've solved that one – it's just slow combustion. Transpiration, fermentation – the details still need to be worked out, but the principles are now clear. Creation is next.' He held his hand out as if he had it in his grasp.

'You want to create life?' I asked, awe-struck. '*De l'audace, encore de l'audace, et toujours de l'audace*, as Danton would say.' We both turned to look at the window, then turned back to each other.

'The creation of life – so much more difficult than its destruction,' he said, standing for a moment poised between the window and the bed where my baby slept. 'But I know what you mean. Creating life itself in the laboratory is beyond my reach, and would be if I lived another fifty years.' He resumed his pacing. 'But I can take something that is clearly the product of life and part of the process of its creation and decomposition, analyse it to see exactly what it's made of, and then synthesise it. Blood, or milk— No, urine would be the simplest, wouldn't it?' he asked as if I could give an opinion on the matter.

I did my best. 'Could you do that? Even if it looked the same, would it be – how shall I say? – real?'

He stopped pacing and held his hands out beside him as if they were two pans of a balance. 'What do you mean, "real"? If two substances are made of the same elements, if they have the same properties, if you can't tell them apart, then they are the same.'

'You do not believe in – well, some life force, that distinguishes the two?'

'Show me the life force. Tell me how to distinguish between its presence and its absence, and how to measure it. Then I'll believe in it.'

'But tears are not just salt and water.'

‘Perhaps they are.’ He paced the room again. ‘Perhaps I should analyse tears; God knows, there’s no shortage in France at the moment. Should I distil them, do you think, Marie-Anne? What a picture it—’ And then he realised what he’d called me.

He slumped into a chair by the desk. ‘My apologies, Citoyenne Berger.’ His face was buried in his hands, his elbows on the desk propping up his head.

‘There is no need to apologise.’ I was not wounded by his mistake, but I was grieved by his sudden vulnerability. I had seen men in far greater depths of despair than this, but never one who had fallen so rapidly from such a height.

‘Yes, there is.’ He sighed wearily. ‘The seductive power of the imagination! For a few moments, I was as I used to be, with the wife I love beside me, exploring the processes of creation. As it is, the only process the future is likely to hold for me is putrefaction.’

If I’d seen my husband so despondent I’d have known what to do. But this was not my husband, so I could only sit still, unspeaking, and let him haul himself out of the pit alone.

‘I seem perilously close to self-pity, don’t I? My apologies for that too.’ He lifted his head and looked in my face. ‘I can distinguish between one woman and another.’

‘Your error is understandable,’ I said. ‘Marie-Anne and I have one very important thing in common, don’t we?’

I held his gaze for a moment; he did not speak.

‘After all,’ I continued lightly, ‘we both know what a logarithm is.’

He gave a sudden laugh. ‘An essential quality in a woman!’ I had given him the hand he needed to climb out of the pit.

‘Essential in any woman who has much to do with you. I expect your cleaner from the faubourg-Montmartre knows what a logarithm is.’

‘I confess that I’ve never asked her.’ He got up; and although he did not recover the vigour that I’d seen in him, he was no longer in the mire. ‘You and Marie-Anne have other important things in common,’ he said as he stood beside my chair looking down at me, affection clear in his face. ‘We both know that.’

‘And important differences as well, Monsieur Lavoisier.’

‘I am aware of them too, Citoyenne Berger; be assured I am fully aware of them.’

There were a lot of words unspoken between us that should stay that way, so I changed the subject. ‘By the way, who’s Plato?’

There was something in his expression that showed that, for some reason, I hadn’t changed the subject as much as I’d thought. ‘Why do you ask?’

‘Somebody mentioned him, and I didn’t want to appear stupid by asking him.’

‘So you know that you won’t appear stupid to me?’

‘Monsieur, everyone appears stupid to you.’

‘Is that an insult or a compliment?’

‘Both.’

‘I don’t deserve either. I have a high regard for the minds of many men – and two women.’

Again we were on uneasy ground, so I persisted. ‘Tell me: who is Plato?’

He sat down and began to explain. ‘He was a philosopher, a *savant*. He said that people could never know reality; that we are like dwellers in a cave, trying to work out the truth from the shadows its light casts on the cave wall, never able to see things as they really are.’

‘That’s nonsense! You’ve seen the truth, haven’t you? And told the rest of us.’

‘Not such nonsense as you think. It took many years of hard work, a thorough exchange of ideas with other *savants*, and some bitter disappointments. I didn’t just wake up one morning and think, “Ah, oxygen! What a good idea!”’

‘What else did Plato say? It must have been more than that to make clever *bougres* like you think that he’s worth knowing about.’

‘Well, he tried to work out the nature of a just society. He said the Republic would be best if it were in the hands of a small group of people, virtuous and wise, acting as the guardians of the rest.’

‘That’s nonsense too. Who guards the guardians?’

He burst out laughing.

I stood up to go, trying not to show how hurt I was. ‘I thought better of you, Monsieur. I did

not expect you to laugh at my stupidity.'

'Oh, no, no!' he cried, wiping tears of laughter from his eyes. 'Please, Citoyenne, on my word I was not laughing at you, and certainly not at your stupidity – quite the opposite, I assure you.'

I sat down again. 'Well?'

'I was laughing at my own kind, the *savants*, the clever *bougres* as you'd call them. It took several hundred years of thought by all those *savants* to produce exactly the question that you asked at once. Citoyenne Berger, I think that you're something of a clever *bougre* yourself.'

'It's such an obvious question,' I said, trying to conceal my pleasure as much as I'd earlier tried to conceal my hurt. 'I don't think I'm so clever.'

'I do.'

There was a roar so loud that we could hear it even through the closed window.

'Danton,' we both said at once.

He went to the window to open it now we didn't have to ignore what was happening outside. 'Yes, your question is obvious – today.'

I could stop fanning Jacques, and I was thirsty in the heat. 'May I have some water?'

'Of course. Help yourself. Will you bring me some, too, please?'

That was unlike his usual old-fashioned gentlemanlike way, but I did what he asked, joining him at the window where it was cooler. I gave him the crystal glass and took the prison tin mug; when I saw his slight smile, I understood why he'd asked me to do it.

We were standing so close together that I could smell him: nothing offensive, and nor did he wear the scents that men had worn in the Old Regime, just clean male sweat from a hot day. He was a clean man: clean in his body, and his science was clean too – cleaning up the mess from a dislike of disorder. How could he have done such a dirty thing as joining the tax farm? How could he have spent half his life wallowing in the filth of money?

I noticed that he had a very shapely neck: strong, well-shaven, with no sign of a double chin. I saw the movement of his throat when he swallowed. If I could smell him, he could probably smell me too. I was glad I'd taken the chance for a wash at Papa's; staying clean in the faubourg-Antoine was difficult, but there is always plenty of water at an executioner's.

I broke the silence that hung between us; he hadn't explained what I really wanted to know. 'What's a platonic relationship?'

'Ah.' He finished his water. 'A man has offered you one?'

'Yes.'

'What he probably meant was that he would stay on terms of friendship with you, not engaging in physical love. Does that seem his likely meaning?'

'That's right. I'd just refused to become his mistress.'

He frowned. 'If I have put you in a position where you've been given such a cause for offence — I have no right to enquire, but if it was young du Pont—'

'It wasn't.' He seemed relieved, so I didn't tell him that it was Pluvinet, nor did I add that René was offering me a far from platonic relationship. 'Don't worry about me,' I said, looking up at him. 'I know how to say no. I can look after myself.'

'Of course you can,' he said, reassured. 'Your strength of mind and character will equip you well to deal with the kind of insulting proposition that a woman as beautiful as you are must frequently attract.'

'I—' I stopped, confused. A man standing so close to me that I could smell him had just called me beautiful; but he'd done it with such a dispassionate air that it was out of place to blush. He was merely mentioning a quality that he'd observed in me, like molybdenum's resistance to heat. I had to say something to cover my confusion. 'I'm an executioner's daughter; I was an executioner's wife. I spent months in prison being called a stupid Republican cow, and worse. Believe me, a man showing his attraction for me, asking politely and accepting my refusal with good grace is not much of an insult.'

'In that case, I commend the man's manners, though I deplore his scholarship. He used the word "platonic" in a way that has become all too commonplace. It's a trivialisation, a debasement of the platonic ideal.'

'And that is?'

‘The man you spoke of was accepting second best: a union with something missing. But a true platonic union is far more.’ He took my cup and put it and his glass back near the water jug, and then started pacing round the room as he’d done before. ‘Plato did not have a high opinion of the usual relation between man and woman, and for that I pity him, as I pity everyone who does not know the joys of marriage as I do. Plato had another ideal, one that— one that is different from a happy marriage, one that may occur between anyone: two men, two women, or a man and a woman.’ He stopped pacing and looked at me. ‘In a true platonic relation, the two do not resort to the physical because they have something better between them. Such a union may be called friendship, or it may be called love; they are both poor words to describe what happens when two people bring life to each other, and pleasure far greater than the pleasures of the body. Plato thought that such a union was greater than the union of husband and wife. I do not. But I think –’ He stopped, then went on. ‘I think that a man might be fortunate, and have both, with two different people, without being unfaithful to either, without saying that one was better than the other.’

He paused for a moment, giving me a chance to speak, but I could not. I looked out of the window to avoid looking at him.

‘Can you conceive it? When minds meet, bodies do not have to,’ he said quietly, and I could tell that he was standing very close behind me. ‘They do not need to touch; often they do not even need to speak. They understand each other without words.’

He could have touched me; he did not need to. He could have spoken the words; he did not need to. He was offering me a splendid and generous thing; a union of my mind with the greatest mind in France.

I was stunned, even frightened at its magnificence, and I didn’t know what to reply. ‘I— This — this is a new idea to me. I do not know—’ I stammered, thinking, I am not worthy of this.

‘I do not think it is new to you,’ I head him say. ‘Do I need to tell you of the consolation and delight that the meeting of minds can bring? You met my mind in your prison; I have met yours in mine.’

I said nothing, still awe-struck and uncertain.

‘Now, Citoyenne, I ask you to turn round, to look me in the eyes, and to tell me whether you think this idea of Plato’s is nonsense.’

If he’d put his hands to my body I could have resisted him; I could not resist his voice. I turned round, I looked up at his face close to mine, and I whispered, ‘No, Monsieur. It is not nonsense.’

*

The café was quiet that evening. Those who’d been to the executions described it to those who had not, but there were few comments. Everyone seemed to be guarding their tongues, so nobody noticed my silence. The events of the day – both those inside the Ferme and those outside – had wrung me out. I wanted to go to bed, but I had to stay with Constance, who was worried about Pierre; he hadn’t been seen all day.

I thought all the time of what I’d been given, the words that had been spoken – and unspoken – and I exulted inwardly. But it was not the sort of thing I could exult about outwardly in a café in the faubourg-Antoine.

Everyone left early; I helped Constance lock up. As she was putting out the last of the lamps, Pierre appeared, staggering in off the street. He reeked of wine, and he had a bottle in his hand. ‘Good evening, my beautiful Constance!’ he cried, trying to embrace her.

She pushed him away. ‘You’re drunk!’

‘Not drunk enough, my love! I can still walk!’ he said, lurching round the empty room. ‘I can still sing!’ He roared out the Marseillaise:

‘Allons, enfants de la Patrie,

Le jour de gloire est arrivé!’

He stopped singing and stood up straight, one hand on his chest and the other outflung in the approved style of revolutionary oratory. ‘Yes, citizens, the day of glory has arrived! This is the day when we chopped off the head of Danton! What a glorious day today is! Hooray, hooray, hooray!’

‘Help me with him,’ Constance asked me, her eyes rolling towards the ceiling in weary

toleration. ‘Now, come on, love, come to bed,’ she said, putting her hand on his arm.

‘To bed! To sleep! Danton is sleeping, and Desmoulins is sleeping, and ...’ He listed all the other people who had gone to the guillotine that day as Constance and I guided him into her room; the two of us had no chance of getting that big man up the stairs to his own.

We tried to put him into her bed, but he resisted. ‘Not going to sleep.’

‘All right, love, you don’t have to sleep. Just sit down.’

We got him into a chair. Constance tried to take his bottle, but he clutched it. ‘Need it. Need to drink.’

‘You’ve had quite enough,’ she said.

‘Not enough. Not nearly enough. Not enough to forget.’ He took a long swallow. ‘Still not enough. Get me some more.’

Constance and I exchanged glances; she nodded, and I went to fetch him a glass from the barrel in the café – if he was in a stupor he’d be easier to handle.

‘You’re beautiful too, Jeanne,’ he said as I brought it in. ‘Not as beautiful as my beautiful Constance, but beautiful enough.’

That’s the second time I’ve been called beautiful today, I reflected. And both times by a man who’s in love with another woman.

Pierre stared at the wine I offered him; he didn’t take it. ‘I’ve got two beautiful women, and some good wine, and it’s been a glorious day!’ His lip quivered, and he put his hand to his eyes. ‘I should be happy!’ He sniffed. ‘Happy as Robespierre! I bet he’s happy. I bet he’s laughing, and joking, and saying what a fine day he’s had.’ He put his head in his hands.

Constance and I looked at each other in alarm. ‘Jeanne, will you–’ she began.

Pierre lifted his head, and I could see tears in his eyes. He took the glass from me and raised it to his mouth, but he didn’t drink. Instead he stared at the red wine. ‘Oh, fuck Robespierre!’

‘Pierre!’ Constance cried, but he took no notice of her.

‘Fuck the Convention! Fuck us too, for letting it happen!’ He lifted the glass and hurled it at the wall. ‘And fuck the Revolution!’

The glass smashed, and red wine dripped down the plaster and on to the floor.

*

The knocking on my door broke into my consciousness; I had fallen into bed exhausted last night, barely able to give Jacques his nightly feed. Jacques woke up too and began to cry. I opened the door to Pierre; he looked ghastly. ‘Where’s Constance?’ he asked. ‘Is she with you?’

‘No, I haven’t seen her since I left you together last night.’

‘When I woke up this morning she was gone!’ He stared at me with the horror of a man whose memory has returned. ‘Last night – did I say—?’

‘You did.’

His face went even whiter. ‘I was drunk!’

‘You were. Look, Pierre, go to work – you must be late already.’ Jacques’s hungry cries were making my nerves ragged. ‘I’ll stay here and wait for Constance; I’ll manage the café till she gets back.’

He didn’t want to go, but I persuaded him that this was not the day for him to seem unpatriotic by missing his work at the Arsenal. I wanted to see Constance before he did, to calm her down. She had been shocked to the heart by his drunken outburst; I would have stayed with her longer if only I hadn’t been falling asleep on my feet.

I had to feed Jacques before I did anything else, so everything was still disordered when Constance’s young kitchen maid arrived for work, wanting to know what she should do. ‘Do what you usually do – clean the kitchen, chop vegetables, whatever!’

‘I usually do what Constance tells me,’ she said, looking helpless. I could see that this was going to be a busy day.

Maman arrived to look after Jacques, and I fell on her shoulders with relief. ‘I’ll take him home with me,’ she said. ‘He can stay all night; you’re exhausted already, and you’ll be desperate for a good sleep.’

‘I’m still feeding him.’

‘He’s nearly weaned. Make it today.’ I hesitated. ‘Your Papa would like to have his grandson with him today. It would help him.’ So while she indulged in the pleasurable occupation of ordering the servant around in someone else’s kitchen, I found a quiet place and suckled my baby for the last time.

He was so beautiful as he put his hand close to my breast and stroked it. Would I ever again have another so dependent on me as this? I’d given him life, now I gave him nourishment, and soon he would be on his own. There would be other links to break: his first step away from me, his first day at school, the day he’d leave home, and the day he’d bring a girl home and say, ‘Maman, she is going to be my wife.’

Perhaps I’d never have another child. I was sincere in my resolution: it would be love or celibacy for me. If that meant that I never again would sit like this with a baby at my breast, then so be it; the thought of using a man merely as a stud bull revolted me as much as the thought of selling my own body for money.

I remembered the day he’d been born amid the battle. And the day he’d been conceived, and why. For the first time it occurred to me to wonder what horrors my conception had eased in my father’s soul. Perhaps Monsieur is wrong, I thought. Perhaps there is some life force, something that insists on creation in the face of destruction.

What would Jacques become? A scientist, perhaps? A judge? A doctor? A general? The world was open to the son of a sans-culotte, thanks to the Revolution; no more were some careers restricted only to sons of the rich and noble.

But there was one career that my son would never have. Jacques would not follow in the footsteps of his father and grandfather.

*

‘Lovers’ quarrel, eh?’

I nodded, in explanation to yet another customer why neither Constance nor Pierre was there. I hoped that it was nothing more than that: something to be smoothed over and laughed at in the years to come: ‘Do you remember the time you got drunk and shouted, “Fuck the Revolution!” my love?’

Without the two faction leaders, the evening’s debate was tepid; nobody could get worked up about whether or not to celebrate Easter this year. Nobody shook a fist denouncing someone for wanting to keep the remnants of superstition alive; nobody thrust a finger in anyone’s face for depriving the workers of a well-deserved holiday. When I had an urge for diplomacy, and suggested that we could all have a party on the day that would have been Easter to celebrate the final cleaning and decoration of the courtyard, everybody said it was a wonderful idea.

A hush fell as Pierre entered on his return from work. ‘Is she back yet?’

‘No.’

He walked straight out again, returning hours later, his face still grey, and staggered unspeaking up the stairs to his own room.

She didn’t return until the last customer had gone, and I was locking up, as I’d helped her to lock up only the night before – it seemed much longer than that. She looked around the café, noticing that I’d managed: ‘Thank you, Jeanne.’ She didn’t invite me into her room, but she left the door open for me to follow her in. She was staring at the splash of wine on her wall and on the floor; it had dried dark red.

‘Fuck the Revolution,’ she whispered; I didn’t know whether it was a quotation from him or an expression of hers. ‘I love him. I wanted to marry him, Jeanne.’

‘I know.’ I made her sit down. ‘Constance, you shouldn’t take it seriously. Men often say things when they’re drunk that they don’t mean.’

‘No, Jeanne; when they’re drunk they say what they do mean.’

‘You can’t believe that. You know him; he loves the Revolution almost as much as he loves you.’

‘That’s the point. Do I love him more or less than I love the Revolution? I’ve been wandering

around Paris all day, trying to think what to do. And I came to the theatre, where they showed that play that I recommended to you – you went to it with your fancy aristo.'

'I remember.'

'And I remembered how we all cheered when he denounced his wife. It was a bad play, I know that now. It made it look so easy for him to do it. And it isn't. It's hard; I never knew how hard.'

'Don't do it, then. Let him explain to you; let him show you that he didn't mean it. Go to bed now and get some sleep, and in the morning have it out with him.'

She looked at me, tears streaming. 'You don't understand. I've already done it. I put a letter under the door of the Revolutionary Tribunal; they'll open it in the morning, and come round to arrest him. And what shall I do when I see him taken, and he looks at me, and he knows that I've betrayed him?'

*

I put her to bed; I didn't know how much she'd sleep. Then I left her room and leaned against her door, and tried to decide what to do. Should I go into my own room, and close the door, and let it happen? Or should I go up the stairs, and knock on Pierre's, and warn him?

Suddenly I realised what Constance wanted: that's why she left the denunciation under the door so it wouldn't be read till morning; that's why she told me what she'd done. She couldn't bring herself to ask me, but she hoped above all hope that I'd do it.

And I realised that I was in much the same position. I loved the Revolution too much to rescue Monsieur by breaking its laws. But how much I hoped that René du Pont and his father would be willing to do what I would not!

I had never had a chance to repay Constance for what she'd done for me; she'd always been so strong and independent. But now I could: I'd save a life that she loved.

I had a key to Pierre's room, so I took it with me when I crept up the stairs. I scratched on his door; there was no answer, so I opened it and went in. It was pitch black – there was almost no moon that night – but his snores guided me towards his bed. I found his shoulder and shook it. 'Pierre,' I whispered. 'Wake up.'

He groaned and stirred. 'Jeanne? What is it? What's the matter?'

'Shh, Pierre, be as quiet as you can. I'm here to warn you.'

'What about?'

'You've been denounced. They'll be here in the morning; you must get away.'

'What for? Who's denounced me?'

'There isn't time to talk,' I said, wondering how long I could avoid answering his question. 'Pack your things and leave. I'll help you.'

He slept naked in the heat, so I turned my eyes away as he got up, lit a lamp and pulled his trousers on. I helped him pack his bag. He insisted on bringing everything: his pike, his tricoleur banner, all the symbols of the Revolution, even the brick from the Bastille. 'Give me time to say farewell to Constance,' he said, shouldering his bag.

Now would be a very good time to be able to lie, I thought. 'You can't see her.' I didn't know what his reaction would be to the truth, but he was a big man with a sharp pike. I had to get him out of the house.

'She's not back yet?'

I didn't answer, and he didn't insist as I started down the stairs before he could question me more. But there was another difficulty as we passed her door. 'I'll just go in and leave her a note,' he whispered.

'No.' I pulled his arm. 'Leave it with me. Trust me; you must come now.' Could she hear what was happening through the thin walls?

'Where to?'

'Shh!' I said; it satisfied him for the moment, and we left quietly. At least he was out of the house.

It was a dark night, and the faubourg-Antoine doesn't have much lighting in the streets. I kept on walking, and for a few moments he was content to follow me. But I couldn't ignore his

whispered questions for ever. ‘What am I denounced for?’

‘What do you think?’

‘Fuck the Revolution?’

‘Yes.’

‘But who reported it? There was only you and Constance. Jeanne, you didn’t—’

‘No, of course I didn’t. Why should I be helping you escape if I did?’

‘Then who was it?’

‘Pierre, shouldn’t we be thinking about where you’re to go?’

He grabbed my shoulders. ‘Jeanne, tell me. Who heard me? Who reported me? If it wasn’t you, how do you know about it?’

‘I—’

‘Constance found out that I was denounced, didn’t she?’

‘Well—’

‘She’s home, isn’t she? I’ll go back and ask her if you won’t tell me.’

I said nothing as I tried to pull him along – anywhere, I didn’t care.

‘Then—’ I heard his breath, as if someone had punched him in the stomach. ‘It was— No, tell me it wasn’t, Jeanne. Please, tell me it wasn’t.’

I tried, but I couldn’t say the words. And when I didn’t answer, he knew the truth.

‘No!’ His howl of pain echoed through the darkness of the faubourg-Antoine.

He put up no resistance as I pulled him through the streets to the only place I could think of. He could do nothing; he had fallen apart, and followed dumbly where I led. We reached the building where René du Pont lived, and I dragged him up the stairs. I knocked on the apartment door, waited, then knocked again, and kept knocking till René answered in his nightshirt.

‘Jeanne, what’s the matter?’

‘Before we do anything else, René, I admit it: you were right and I was wrong.’

‘Yes, but—’ He saw the man slumped mutely beside me. ‘Pierre, what’s—?’

‘He’s just been denounced by the woman he loves,’ I said quietly in case any of his neighbours were listening. ‘I’ll understand if you don’t want to have anything to do with this, but if I don’t get him somewhere safe he’ll be picked up in the morning. And in the state he’s in, he’ll run up the steps of the scaffold and put his own neck in the lunettes. Will you help?’

‘Of course. Bring him in.’

Pierre let himself be led into the house, and put into what was obviously a spare room; there was a bed in it which was left unmade from its previous occupant. We put Pierre Rose into the place which had almost certainly been used not many days before by Pierre du Pont de Nemours. The Revolution made strange bedfellows.

There was a scrap of lace on the floor that I probably wouldn’t have noticed if René hadn’t tried to whisk it away. ‘Don’t worry, René; I don’t want to know.’

René shrugged. ‘Good. It’s best you don’t.’ He handed me Pierre’s pike. ‘Take this away. I’ll make sure there aren’t any razors left here where he—’ He didn’t finish. I don’t know if Pierre was sleeping when we left him, but he wasn’t moving and his eyes were closed.

It was the best we could do for him.

*

René took me into another room, sat me down, and handed me a large glass of brandy. ‘Drink this.’

‘No, I—’

‘Drink it. You need it.’

I did. ‘You’re right again,’ I said, as I felt the spirit warm me. ‘Clever, aren’t you?’ I looked up at him gratefully. ‘And brave and generous too, but don’t let it go to your head.’

‘If I’m to shelter a denounced man, may I know what he’s denounced for?’

‘He said, “Fuck the Revolution”.’

‘Is that all? I say it all the time.’

‘Well, don’t say it in front of me.’

He poured me another brandy, then sat down next to me. ‘What happened?’

I told him. ‘It’s not that serious a crime,’ I finished. ‘I’ll go home, and in the morning they’ll come looking for him, and I’ll tell them he’s gone, and that’ll be the end of it. They’ve got far worse criminals to look for than a sans-culotte who gets drunk and says something he shouldn’t.’

‘Your friend Constance thought it was serious.’

‘I could have talked her out of it if I’d had a chance to. Perhaps that’s why she did it that way, so that I couldn’t. And I know—’ I stopped.

‘Here,’ he said, filling my glass again. ‘Tell your friend René all about it.’ He put his arm around me; I didn’t push him away.

I emptied the glass, trying to find the words to say what I wanted to say without saying it. ‘I understand exactly why she wanted something done, but couldn’t do it herself, or even ask someone to do it, but hoped desperately that they would do it anyway. Do you understand me?’

‘I understand.’

‘Do you?’

‘I understand you very well, Jeanne.’ He took my glass and set it to one side. ‘You aren’t the unfeeling revolutionary you pretend to be, are you?’ He put his hand on my chin, then lifted my face up to look at his. ‘In fact, I think you could be very soft—’ he said as he kissed my hair ‘—and sweet—’ he kissed my cheek ‘—and gentle.’ He kissed my lips, and brought his other arm round me and held me in his embrace; and I didn’t stop him.

This is it, I thought as my body went unresisting into his arms; I could feel the strength of his muscles underneath his shirt as he pulled me to him. This is the test of my resolution; I didn’t expect it to come so soon. He’s handsome and likeable, and I’ve learned tonight of his courage and magnanimity. He’d pamper me, and I’d enjoy it.

‘No, René,’ I said quietly as I put my hands to his face and pushed him away from me. ‘You’re very nice, but—’

‘I’m married, eh?’ he said, not resisting my push, but not letting go either.

‘Partly. But mainly it’s because I don’t love you.’

He ran his finger gently down my cheek, and I couldn’t help softening to his touch. ‘Don’t you?’

‘No. And you don’t love me either.’

‘Don’t I?’ he said, as he kissed me again; and for a moment I let him, and even kissed him back.

Then— ‘René, what would you do if I denounced you?’

He put his hand gently round my throat. ‘I’d wring your neck,’ he said, belying the fierceness of his words by nuzzling my ear.

I pulled away from him. ‘Pierre doesn’t want to kill Constance. He wants to kill himself. That’s love.’

He sat back, though he still had his arm round me. ‘For a woman who denounced him?’

‘She loved him too. It tore her apart to do it.’

‘That doesn’t sound much like love to me.’ He put his hand to my cheek, and I saw affection as well as passion in him. ‘Jeanne, are you sure that you know what love is?’ he asked gently. ‘Would you recognise it if you felt it?’

‘Yes, I would. I make Monsieur burn the letters from Marie-Anne after he’s read them, and I can see that for him it’s like burning his own flesh. I’d recognise it if I felt what they feel for each other.’

His caresses stopped. ‘Jeanne, I—’ He looked up at the ceiling for a moment, clearly trying to come to a decision about something. ‘No, I’d better not tell you.’

‘You’d better not.’

He let me go and sighed. ‘I have to make you love me, is that right?’

‘You won’t.’

‘But will you kick me in the balls if I try?’

‘Yes, but not very hard.’

He laughed, and I laughed, and the moment passed. We discussed other matters, concluding that, if possible, he would get Pierre to Nemours. ‘My father will find him a safe place – he’ll have no objection to taking on a worker as good as Pierre.’

I got up to go, and felt slightly dizzy as I stood. ‘You gave me more brandy than I thought, you bastard!’

‘Of course.’ His smile was unrepentant. ‘Would you care to stay here the night?’ he added hopefully.

‘No, I would not! I’ll walk – and don’t offer to accompany me; I wouldn’t let you.’

‘I’m quite sure you can look after yourself, Jeanne.’ He couldn’t suppress a yawn. ‘Besides, I’ve got to go to work in the morning.’

‘I thought an aristo like you didn’t need to lift a finger.’

‘Not these days. I need to lift more than a finger; the printery’s not making as much as I’d like. It’ll be hard to pay the debt to Lavoisier.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I told you, my father owes Monsieur Lavoisier a lot of money. That was the capital used to set up the printery.’

‘Oh! I thought you meant a debt in the sense of friendship.’ Of course! What better place to keep a reserve of seed corn than in a firm run by your best friend?

‘Well, I meant that too.’ He looked uncomfortable.

‘I shan’t inform on you all. I’ve had enough denunciations for one day.’

I moved to the door; he got up to follow me and leaned against it with one arm, stopping me from opening it. ‘Remember the balls,’ I warned.

‘I’m acutely aware of them right now.’ He stopped leaning, and wrapped me in his arms. ‘It might not be love, but it’s very close to it,’ he murmured, and his lips touched mine again.

Is it close enough? I wondered. My body certainly thought so; I’d never felt anything like this in my husband’s embrace.

Then he made his mistake: his hand fondled my breast. My rock-solid, milk-engorged, sore and tender breast. ‘No,’ I said, trying to pull away.

But he didn’t listen and clasped even tighter. ‘Oh, Jeanne,’ he breathed. ‘Beautiful Jeanne, I want you so much.’

There was only one thing to do. I felt down, where he was pressed hard into me, and with a moan of satisfaction he let me. ‘Oh, that’s good, that’s marvellous, that’s—Argh!’ he yelled as I gripped.

‘You stop squeezing my equipment, boy, and I’ll stop squeezing yours.’

*

In the morning they came to pick Pierre up. ‘Where’s he gone?’ they asked me.

I stood up from the floor I had been scrubbing while waiting for them; that would account for the flush in my face. I wiped my hands on my apron, then folded my arms across my chest in the finest tradition of landladies. ‘Don’t ask me,’ I said in the words I had been practising all morning. ‘If you find him, tell the bastard he owes me ten days’ rent.’

Constance silently came out of her room as they left. She pressed my hand – she didn’t smile.

I didn’t see her smile ever again.

*

I went round to my parents’ house to collect Jacques; it was the longest we’d ever been apart, and the reunion was happy for both of us. I took the chance while I was there to do what I’d longed to do for two days: compare the mind I was united with now with the mind in the letters he’d written many years ago, and also the mind in the *Elements*. I went up to my old room and found the letters, which I’d kept there – letters from a tax farmer were not a good idea in the faubourg-Antoine. I untied the ribbon and began to read them, with the *Elements* open in front of me.

The first thing I noticed was that he’d written to me at twelve in almost the same way as he’d written to me at eighteen; I felt proud of my twelve-year-old self having been able to understand him. The *Elements* was similar; some of it was word for word the same. Not entirely – there were a couple of Latin mottoes which he hadn’t translated into French. You missed there, Monsieur, I

thought. I still don't understand those.

Looking at these letters again was like reading a story. I could see discovery and creation taking place; he certainly had not just woken up one morning and thought, 'Ah, oxygen! What a good idea!' In the early ones he was still using the phrase *vital air*, only later did he call it *oxygen*. One of the earliest letters expressed his wonder at hearing that someone in England had performed experiments indicating that water was composed of two gases. He wrote of how he intended to prove it, by his usual means of analysis and synthesis: first breaking water down into the gases, then taking the same two and creating water from scratch. And later, he wrote of calling one of those gases 'hydrogen' because it generated water.

Now I could see how had written the *Elements* for me – or for the world through me. It was, as he said, presented *in such an order as shall render it most easy for beginners in the study of chemistry thoroughly to understand them*. I wasn't that much of a beginner, Monsieur! But, as he said, *It is almost impossible to become a chemist in less than three or four years*.

Now I understood why he had been angered by what I'd said about meaning, so angry that he'd let slip the truth: *Every branch of physical science must consist of three things: the series of facts which are the objects of the science, the ideas which represent these facts, and the words by which these ideas are expressed. Like three impressions of the same seal, the word ought to produce the idea, and the idea to be a picture of the fact*. Clear, logical and elegant – as he was. Not waving words around like the tricoleur.

But also no idea that words can be waved round like the tricoleur, to inspire deeds of glory – or butchery. Oh, Monsieur, all the time you were writing these letters to me, you were planning and building that wall around Paris. Sulphur and phosphorus either get oxygenated or they don't; they don't have any opinions in the matter. But people do. Sometimes they won't explode – and sometimes they will.

Consider what changes would take place in the various substances in the atmosphere if the temperature were suddenly altered, he had written to me. *For example, imagine what would happen if the earth were suddenly transported to the region of the planet Mercury.* You certainly have a strong imagination. Why didn't you imagine what would happen when you taxed people so much that they couldn't feed their children? It's a lot more imaginable than moving us all to Mercury.

There are two methods of dividing bodies, the mechanical and the chemical. The former only separates a body into a number of smaller bodies. Chemical analysis, on the other hand, divides bodies into their constituent substances.

You wrote of analysing substances; why didn't you analyse yourself? One part genius, one part honourable man, one part loving husband – and one part blood-sucking bastard. Why didn't you synthesise something better? You had all the constituent substances you needed. And because you didn't, my father will probably mechanically divide you into two parts – and nobody can synthesise you after.

*

My father was unusually agitated later that evening when we were alone after dinner. He set down his violin which he often played to take his mind off his work, and reached for his pipe and tobacco. Then he spoke. 'Jeanne, I know you don't – you don't want to have anything to do with —'

'What is it, Papa?'

'I – well, I need your help. Not at the scaffold,' he added hastily. 'Just preparing a prisoner, a woman, helping her to die well. I know you can do this; you helped your husband. Can I ask you to do it once for me?'

I had vowed never to return to the family trade. But I couldn't face Monsieur again knowing that I'd refused to help someone face the guillotine. 'Who is she?'

'Desmoulins's wife Lucile. They were devoted to each other, and now she's been arrested. I don't think she'll escape.'

Poor Camille Desmoulins, I thought. Now I knew the answer to Monsieur's unanswerable

question; if he'd known his wife would die too, he would not have stood up and shouted, 'To the Bastille!'

'Why do you want me to help you with Lucile Desmoulins, Papa, rather than any of the other women?'

Now he'd asked me, his agitation was over. He leaned back in his chair smoking his pipe, scratching the ears of Blanche, the little white dog who now adored him as once she adored a man he'd executed, and he took his time about telling me why. 'The Dantonists were good.' He meant brave and not causing any trouble. 'Danton himself – he died as he lived. He roared out defiance as we passed Robespierre's window, saying that it'd be his turn soon. He was the last to go, of course; he watched his friends, as if his gaze could give them courage. When it was his turn, he made a joke that I'd not heard before.' That was a rare achievement. 'He said, "Remember to hold up my head to the crowd: it's worth a look," and it was, that huge head of his. The other Dantonists were almost as brave, as if he'd inspired them. But Camille Desmoulins—' He stopped and refilled his pipe. 'He wasn't so good.'

'He was a coward?' I asked in surprise; I hadn't heard this.

'No, he wasn't a coward. But he made it difficult. He tried to get the crowd to rise and rescue him, saying that he was the one who'd led them to the Bastille; but there were plenty of guards, and there was no rising.'

'A spontaneous revolt needs a lot of advance preparation.'

'Indeed. When Danton told him to leave it, he began to despair. He wasn't afraid for himself, but for his wife and baby – he'd just heard that she'd been arrested. He was almost distracted; he tore his hair and his clothes – his shirt was in ribbons by the time we got there. The only way I could keep him quiet was by promising to do everything I could for her.'

I thought of what Monsieur would do if he heard that Marie-Anne had been arrested. He wouldn't tear his clothes to ribbons; that was not his way. But he would die inside at that moment; there'd be nothing left but a shell for my father to deal with. 'Is that why you want me to prepare her? It would come better from another young woman?'

'Partly that. Apparently she's screaming and raging, demented with grief.'

And Marie-Anne would not scream or rage if Monsieur went; that was not her way either. She would continue to breathe and eat and sleep, because that's what people do when they're alive, but there would be nothing to make her want to do so.

Papa continued, 'If you can help Lucile to die well, it would be good for her and for me. But there's more. Desmoulins made me promise to take a lock of his hair to her parents – they're looking after their little boy. I went round next morning and tried to leave it with a servant, but they insisted on inviting me in. They didn't recognise me; they kept saying how kind I was to bring it round for them. It was horrible.'

'I can imagine.'

'But something even worse. They showed me a portrait of him and her and the baby. And that's why I'm going to have so much difficulty with her if she struggles and I have to hold her down. Oh, Jeanne, she looks just like you.'

*

It was time for my interview with Citoyen Septembre to squeeze out from him what I could about the charges against Monsieur (oh, and against the other tax farmers; I might end up saving them too, the bastards).

I wore my lowest cut dress, and pinned my tricoleur cockade where it would draw most attention to my cleavage – I didn't need tactful diplomacy. I set off to battle humming the Marseillaise.

Citizen September looked the part of a ruthless revolutionary: scarred and haggard, with a moustache and the growth of beard that contrives to look as if it's always thirty hours away from a shave. He welcomed me as a good female sans-culotte. 'How may I help you, Citoyenne Berger?'

'It's more that I can help you, Citoyen. You are investigating the tax farmers, eh? Well, I've been doing their mending for them in the Ferme – I'm the widow of a man who died for *la patrie*,

and I have his orphan child to bring up. And they say things in my hearing that I bet they don't want you to know about.'

His attention came away from my breasts. 'What sort of things?'

'The sort of things rich men and aristos used to say in the old days in front of their servants, as if we had no ears or eyes.'

I gave him a few snippets, like the sneer by one of them, 'What vexes me is the unpleasantness of our successors.' I had no compunction about throwing the other tax farmers to this man. I might lift a finger to save Marie-Anne's father, Jacques Paulze, but probably not a whole arm.

I watched him as he listened and wrote down what I said. He hated the tax farmers. Not in the general 'Chop-the-bastards'-heads-off' way of the faubourg-Antoine, but a deep, personal, obsessive loathing. He licked his lips from time to time as he wrote down a juicy morsel, as he'd earlier licked his lips over my breasts. 'And the worst of them?' he asked. 'Lavoisier?'

I shrugged. 'Lavoisier is clever.' No need to lie about that.

'Not clever enough to get away from me.' He smiled for the first time.

I don't want to be anywhere near this man when Monsieur goes to the guillotine, I thought. His satisfaction will not be pleasant to watch.

'Anything else?' he asked. 'Anything about their money?'

'I'm a needlewoman, not a financier. How could I understand such things?'

He pulled out some papers from his desk. 'If I show you the work that I've done so far, do you think it could help you to understand better?'

'It might. Show me.' I had hoped only to get his confidence, and now I was seeing his whole report! At the end of an hour, I knew all the details of the case against the tax farmers. He was delighted to explain everything to me (staring down my cleavage all the while) and I was careful not to grasp things too quickly – not that details about interest rates and tobacco mixtures were easy for me to grasp in any case. 'Can I write this down?' I asked. 'It will help me to understand and remember, so I'll know what to listen for.'

'Of course.'

At length he sat back satisfied. 'You are a good patriot, Citoyenne. And also a beautiful woman.' My breasts seemed far more exposed than they'd ever been when I'd fed Jacques in public. 'I would like to see more of you.'

I bet you would, I thought, conscious that he was undressing me with his eyes. I didn't want to put him off completely, but on the other hand I did not want to be alone with him. I compromised: I invited him to the party to celebrate the cleaning of the courtyard on the day when we wouldn't celebrate Easter.

'I would prefer something more intimate, Citoyenne.'

'Well, I would not.'

'How would it be if I suggested that a patriotic woman should do everything she could to support an officer of the Republic?'

'How would it be if I kicked you in the balls?'

'I'd think that was very close to *incivisme*.'

'Not as close as an officer of the Republic using his position to force his attentions on the widow of a man who died for *la patrie*.' I stood up. 'My husband could kill a dozen men like you without thinking about it. I learned a lot from him. You be careful, Citizen, if you want to see another September.'

*

I needed some help, so I went to see Pluvinet. We had to be discreet about meeting, but Jacques was teething again, and could pass as sufficiently unwell that taking him to see an apothecary was reasonable.

René was away escorting Pierre to his father, which was fortunate, as I didn't want to see him just yet. It wasn't that I was embarrassed at the near success of his seduction attempt – I'd been tired, grateful and drunk, so I could forgive myself for what my body had almost led me to do. And at last I knew what it was to feel a *frisson* when a man touched me – though it might have been the

brandy. What disturbed me from that night was his question: ‘Are you sure that you know what love is? Would you recognise it if you felt it?’ I still believed the answer I’d given him; it was what Monsieur and Marie-Anne felt for each other. But could I ever feel it myself?

Monsieur had given me something rare and wonderful, but could I have with a man what he had with his wife? I recalled his voice: ‘A man might be fortunate, and have both, with two different people, without being unfaithful to either, without saying that one was better than the other.’ Could this woman be fortunate too?

I arrived at Pluvinet’s shop in the rue des Lombards, and he grasped my excuse of a sick baby to usher me into a small private room at the back. ‘Is there anything really wrong with him?’ he asked over Jacques’s cries.

‘Only teething.’ I gave him the notes from my meeting with Citoyen Septembre. ‘Read these.’

He passed me a pot of salve. ‘Put this on your baby’s gums; it will quieten him.’ I did so as he read the notes – it worked.

He finished reading. ‘I am impressed, Citoyenne. Very impressed,’ he said – quietly, now we didn’t have Jacques’s cries to drown our voices.

I felt pleased with myself. ‘Now, what are we to do with them?’

‘You take them to Monsieur Lavoisier, of course.’

‘No. That’s why I need your help. I’m the only direct link between Citoyen Septembre and Monsieur. I want a false trail, something to point away from me.’

‘You are wise. I’ll re-write them to disguise your part. There are a few things that I’ve discovered from Dupin and his other investigators, and I’ll add them to yours. Bring your baby for another consultation tomorrow morning and I’ll have everything ready for you.’

‘Can you smuggle the papers in to another tax farmer?’

‘Well, I could bribe one of the guards or the cleaners, but—’ He broke off.

‘There’s always a risk that they’d read it, or hand it in to the authorities,’ I finished for him.

‘Yes, I’m afraid so.’

‘There’s really nobody else you can trust to take them in?’

‘Plenty I’d trust, Citoyenne, but none who would escape the scrutiny of the guards.’

I saw the inevitable. ‘I’ll take them in. I know how to do it.’ Breaking the law to help tax farmers! The things I do for you, Monsieur; I never thought I would stoop so low.

‘You are brave.’ Then, to restore his male pride in the face of my female success and courage, he said, ‘I have had some success too. You recall the sister-in-law of Dupin? I told you she was a distant relation. Well, she is – ah – a somewhat nearer relation now.’

I wasn’t prepared to sacrifice my honour in our project, but he obviously had – and he didn’t seem to mind at all. He went on to suggest that he and she could go out together with René and me, to see if we could work a meeting for all of us with her brother-in-law on a friendly basis.

‘Right,’ I said as I prepared to leave. ‘How much is that consultation?’

He protested. ‘I won’t charge you for that.’

‘Charge me, I insist.’

He shrugged, and wrote me out a bill.

‘Thank you,’ I said, taking it. ‘Now give me that amount of money.’

‘Eh?’

‘Do what I say. It’s to pay me for smuggling the report in.’

He shrugged again, and passed me the money. I passed it back, along with the bill.

‘Citoyenne, can you explain that little drama, please?’

‘I can’t tell a lie. I don’t intend to be caught when I take these papers in. But if the worst happens, I’m going to look pathetic, and say I’m the poor widow of a man who died for *la patrie*, and I have his orphan child to bring up, and I had my baby’s bill at the apothecary to pay, and a man gave me money to smuggle them in. The point of that little drama was to make it close enough to the truth for me to be able to say it.’

He laughed, then looked grave. ‘Be very careful. Your head is too beautiful to lose.’

I didn’t reply, but silently counted off my fingers while he looked at me puzzled. Monsieur, Pierre, René, Citoyen Septembre, and now him. ‘You’re the fifth man who’s called me beautiful in the past few days. There must be something in the air.’

‘All it takes is good eyesight,’ he laughed. ‘But remember, my regard for you is purely platonic.’ He smiled at me, waiting for me to ask again what it meant.

I smiled back at him, hugging to myself the knowledge that I had a true platonic union with a mind far greater than his. I could deplore his scholarship, too.

*

It was sunset the next day as I walked into the Ferme; I had to wait for a time when I knew my cousin Nécard was off duty, because I’d mentioned to him that I’d finished the tax farmers’ mending, so he’d know that the bundle I carried contained more than clothes.

I didn’t think I was in much danger. I’d never been searched since the first time – by now I could have smuggled in enough weapons for a small army. All the same, I didn’t bring Jacques. On the other hand, I did bring the Lucky Sailor. He’d expressed a desire to see one of the tax farmers who’d lost two sons on La Pérouse’s expedition, so that he could bring the bereaved father news of their last months. As well as being an act of charity, it also provided me with a useful excuse for arriving after work hours.

I introduced him at the gate, and the guards waved us through, barely looking up as we passed. After he asked for Citizen Laborde and went to speak to him, I walked in unannounced to the cell which Monsieur shared with his father-in-law as if I was paying a call on one of my neighbours.

They both stood up, greeting me in some surprise, then Jacques Paulze started to leave as he’d always done before. I stopped him. ‘Citoyen Paulze, I have something for you,’ I said, producing the report from underneath the clothes in my bundle. ‘Can I trust you to disguise the fact that I’ve brought it?’

‘Of course, Citoyenne Berger.’ I passed them to him, and gave Monsieur a letter from Marie-Anne, and they both sat reading intently. I lit the lamps so they could do so more easily in the growing dark. Paulze needed spectacles to read, but Monsieur did not, and I reflected that such good eyesight was unusual in a man of his age. But then, everything about him seemed younger than his fifty years – except his achievements, which any other *savant* would have needed two hundred to accomplish.

Paulze kept exclaiming, ‘Good God! This is wonderful!’ as he read, but Monsieur took no notice; Marie-Anne’s letter was far more important to him. I sat down to wait, and the tax farmers’ cat jumped up on my lap; I stroked her and she purred contentedly. Paulze finished first; he was bursting with impatience until Marie-Anne’s letter was burnt, and then at last he could say, ‘Antoine, this is marvellous!’

‘What is it?’ said Monsieur, looking at me, not at him.

‘Citoyenne Berger has just brought in a report – signed only “A friend” – that gives all the details of the charges against us, and the progress of their investigation! It could save our lives!’ He passed it over, and Monsieur became absorbed in it too.

‘How did you come by it?’ Paulze asked me.

I shrugged.

‘Ah, foolish of me to ask. Someone – a friend – knew you could move freely in the Ferme, so he gave it to you to deliver.’

I shrugged again.

Paulze felt in his pocket, then emptied it into my hand. ‘I’m sorry, Citoyenne; this is all the money I have on me.’

It seemed a great deal to me. ‘I— I don’t want it, thank you.’

‘Our friend has paid you already, eh? Believe me, it’s not enough. Whatever he gave you, it’s not enough for what you’ve brought to us.’ I couldn’t refuse, or his convenient assumption would be disproved. I’d add it to the collection we were making for the family of the cess pit cleaner – they wouldn’t mind dirty money.

Paulze turned to Monsieur. ‘Antoine, what can you give Citoyenne Berger?’

Monsieur looked up from the papers, smiled wryly at me, and said nothing.

‘Oh, come, Antoine, don’t be ungenerous. You must see that this is priceless!’

‘Yes, it is.’ He put a pile of money on the desk, not in my hand.

‘Citoyen Paulze,’ I said. ‘There is one thing I ask. Wait a few days before showing this to the others, so that it’s not obvious that I brought it. I trust you, but not them.’

‘Of course, Citoyenne. I won’t endanger you after this.’ He hid the papers in a large pile of others. ‘Now I’ll leave you; I know you want to talk together.’ He smiled. ‘There aren’t many men who’d trust their sons-in-law alone with a beautiful woman – but then there aren’t many sons-in-law like he is.’ Monsieur carried on reading intently as he left.

That’s six, I thought. There really must be something in the air. Then I realised what it was. Monsieur had discovered that I was beautiful, and so I had become so, as if molybdenum became resistant to heat only when he decided that it was. Would that be an advantage or a hindrance in his scientific research? I wondered, suppressing a laugh by burying my face in the cat’s fur. Perhaps she really had been neither dead nor alive until he had observed which.

He put the papers down, and swept his own pile of money back in his pocket. ‘I’m afraid you’ll have to keep the rest,’ he said with a smile. ‘Otherwise he’ll guess that you’re our friend.’

I didn’t bother to ask how he knew; he just did. ‘It’s not only my work; Citoyen Pluvinet contributed too.’

‘Please pass on my thanks to him. Most of it is yours, isn’t it?’ I nodded. ‘How did you discover it?’

Now, in front of him, what had seemed a perfectly justifiable thing to do at the time suddenly appeared in a different light, and I was shamed into blushing.

He looked at me in alarm. ‘You didn’t— No, of course you didn’t.’

‘Monsieur, were you even considering the notion that I’d sacrificed my honour for a load of tax farmers?’

‘I confess that I was, but I dismissed it as soon as it entered my mind.’

‘I tossed a few scraps to the dog that’s hunting you. He gave me that in the hope that I could toss him a few more.’

‘Scraps?’

‘Things like “What vexes me is the unpleasantness of our successors,” that your colleagues say in my hearing.’

‘Oh, Citoyenne,’ he sighed sadly. ‘You did sacrifice your honour, after all.’

It made me angry and defensive. ‘You’ve never been ignored in your life, have you? You haven’t been treated as though you’re an automaton, as some of those bastards out there treat me when I give them their mending back. We’re nearly five years into the Revolution, and if they haven’t learned by now to hold their tongues in front of servants, then chopping their heads off won’t make any difference to their ability to use their brains.’

‘You have a point,’ he acknowledged. ‘And you have given them something in return. They might well think it worth it in exchange for such priceless information. We’ve been working in the dark, not knowing what we are accused of. But now we can prepare a defence.’

‘It’s not priceless, Monsieur. It’s worthless.’ My angry words had brought home to me what I should have realised before. ‘If it takes you away from setting your scientific affairs in order, then I regret I gave it to you.’

‘What? You expect me to give up a chance to defend us?’

‘None of you has a defence against the most important charge: you’re all guilty. It doesn’t matter a *sou* whether any of you adulterated the tobacco or set the interest rates too high; you could all be pure as snow for the difference it makes. You aren’t going to the guillotine for fraud; you’re going to the guillotine for being tax farmers.’

He said nothing, merely walked to the window and stood looking at me. His silence made me even more annoyed than his reproach. ‘Let the others work on the defence; it’ll keep their minds occupied. But you’ve got better things to do. You have enough insights into the way the world works to keep mere mortals working for decades to understand them.’ Why couldn’t he see what I saw? It made me even angrier, as if he’d failed me by not understanding me. ‘Write everything down while your head’s still on; that’ll last for ever. But the papers of your defence will be wiping the arses of the Committee of Public Safety the day after they’re received.’

At last he spoke. ‘Thank you for your opinion, Citoyenne Berger. I shall treat it with the respect it deserves.’ For the first time, I caught a glimpse of the courteous contempt that could turn

grown men into quivering schoolboys or mortal enemies.

But I was neither a schoolboy nor an enemy, and I could withstand my mother's sniffs. He didn't intimidate me; he infuriated me. 'For the greatest mind that France has produced in a hundred years, Monsieur, you can sometimes be very stupid.'

He turned his back on me as he looked out of the window at the Parisian gloom, and I wondered if I had made the one criticism of him that he would not take.

I stood up to go. 'I keep the promise I made to you. I'm not gaining any pleasure from this visit, so I shall leave.'

At once he left the window. He stepped quickly to me, and stopped me from leaving him by putting his hand gently on my arm.

It was the first time that he'd touched me.

'I need you,' he said quietly. 'What must I do to give you pleasure?'

Keep touching me and telling me that you need me, I thought. That's as much pleasure as I can stand right now. It was shocking and incredible, the effect of this light contact on my skin; far greater in that one instant than all René's brandy and embraces. I couldn't speak; all I was aware of was his face and his touch. I closed my eyes, and that made matters worse, because now it was only his touch.

'What's the matter?' I heard his voice.

Somehow I had to answer him, but what could I say? 'Nothing.'

'Ah, I have offended you. I understand.'

I was deeply grateful that he did not.

'Just tell me what to do to make amends, and I shall.'

He was still holding my arm. It didn't help me to think, so I tried opening my eyes and looking at him. That didn't help either, so I closed them again. 'Just—' At last I found something coherent to say. 'Just don't ignore me.' I opened my eyes again.

'I shall not ignore you – far from it. I need the benefit of your mind.'

I nodded; it was all I could do. He let go my arm. I sat down as if he'd let go the strings on a puppet. You're not going to find much benefit in my mind at the moment, Monsieur. It isn't much use to me.

'Are you sure that there's nothing the matter?' he asked, concerned.

'I'll be fine in a moment,' I whispered. He reached for a lamp and brought it towards my face. 'No!' I waved it away. The last thing I wanted was for him to look closely at me. 'Just let me sit quietly for a while. Let me have some air.'

He did, and walked back to the window, waiting for me to recover. Though my eyes were closed, I was acutely conscious of him on the other side of the cell as I breathed deeply, trying to bring my mind and my body under control. Whatever had come over me? Why was I feeling so stunned?

'Would you like some water?'

'No, thanks.' I didn't want him coming closer to me. At least he hadn't realised what his touch had done to me. Before, I'd been angered by his failure to understand me; now I was immensely relieved. I began to feel calmer. He'd wanted the benefit of my mind. I'd better give it to him – and try to forget his effect on my body. I looked up at him and smiled. 'I feel better now.'

'Is it – er – women's troubles?'

I nodded, grateful for his suggestion, and grateful also that my blush of falsehood could be taken as a blush of embarrassment. And then I thought, Perhaps in a sense it's the truth.

'You are unwell; you'd better go home.'

'No, I don't need to go home. Monsieur, I assure you that I am feeling well, and quite composed – and you know I don't tell polite fictions.'

'Well, I'll take your word. I always shall.'

He smiled at me, and I began to feel less than composed again. 'There was something you wanted to tell me,' I said quickly. 'What was it?'

'No, I'll leave it for another occasion, when you're feeling better.'

'Monsieur!' I reproached him. 'I thought you'd taken my word that I was. Now, why do you want the benefit of my mind?'

He accepted it. ‘Because – well, like many another facing death, I’ve been examining my life, and I don’t altogether like what I’ve found. I want to talk about it with you to get my thoughts in order – and I promise not to forget who you are this time. It is *your* mind that I need, not just that of any convenient listener.’

It was as if he wanted to make his confession. ‘I shall listen.’ I wondered what penance would be in order; perhaps admitting he could be wrong was, for this man, penance enough.

‘I can trust you to tell me what you think,’ he continued. ‘Marie-Anne loves me too much and my colleagues respect me too much to be always frank with me. I know I can be overpowering at times, but I don’t overpower you.’

You don’t know how wrong you are, I thought. Then I realised that he was right; he didn’t overpower me. His touch had given me some of his power, that I needed in order to do what he needed me to do. Doctors sometimes need to hurt the body in order to cure it; he needed me to cure his mind. It would hurt him, and it would hurt me to hurt him. But it had to be done. Unions could bring pain as well as consolation and delight, and the union of minds was no exception.

‘You asked me not to ignore you,’ he said. ‘I wanted to – or rather, I wanted to ignore what you told me. When I saw that material you brought us on the charges against us, I felt such a joy at the prospect of life that I realised the hollowness of my claims to stoical resignation; I do not want to die. And then you cut off my new hope as efficiently and as quickly as your father will cut off my head.’

‘It’s the best way to do it.’

‘You’re right, and you were right to do it. Truth is better than kindness. I didn’t resent you telling me I was stupid: I know that I’m not. What I resented was that you were too near what I have been discovering for myself. Because as well as a joy at the prospect of life, I felt a weariness at the prospect of going over all those figures again. Taxes, interest rates, the price of tobacco and salt: now I see how trivial all that is – how futile were the years I spent caring about such matters. It took me away from science; it took me away from my wife. The wealth it brought me: what did I do with it? It allowed me to appear generous to people who forgot me as soon as a good memory became dangerous. The only thing of any value it brought was my laboratory.’

‘Not even that. If you’d spent more time and less money on science, you would have achieved more.’

‘Yes,’ he sighed. ‘I would have created a revolution in science if I’d been working as a clerk in an office.’ The pride in those words was matched only by the shame with which he said them.

‘And you wouldn’t have taken money from the poor. You wouldn’t have put up that damned wall.’

He looked out of the window; it was completely dark now. ‘I heard today that my old friend Condorcet is dead.’ From his tone it wasn’t such a change of subject as it seemed. I’d heard the news too; it had just reached Paris. Condorcet the mathematician, almost as influential in the Academy of Sciences as Monsieur; Condorcet the Conventionnel and political theorist – another who’d disagreed with Robespierre. He’d been captured while escaping and was found dead in his cell. ‘I would have liked to have confessed all this to him – he would have appreciated it.’

‘Why?’

‘Before the Revolution there was a group of us – Pierre du Pont was another. We knew France’s finances were heading for disaster; we knew it as well as we knew that two and two equals four and not five. Condorcet, du Pont and the others proposed reforms: free trade, cutting back on privilege, lessening taxes, that sort of thing. If they’d succeeded I doubt if there would have been a Revolution. But I fought the reforms, because they would have damaged the tax farm and damaged my own pocket. Condorcet accused me of betrayal. I remember his words: “Instead of using what you know to make your colleagues more reasonable, you are only providing them with arguments against reform”.’

‘Was he right?’

‘Yes, he was. I betrayed what a *savant* must do, why we are here. We must seek the truth, and we must tell it to the world, no matter how little the world wants to hear it. Condorcet knew that. He has a place in our list of martyrs: the people who died because they told the unwelcome truth.’

‘And you might die because you did not.’

He turned away from me; he moved away from the window. He stood in the darkest shadow of the room with his face to the wall. ‘The unwelcome truth, Citoyenne,’ I heard him say bitterly. ‘How good you are at telling it.’

‘It’s what you asked of me.’

‘Yes, it was.’

I said nothing. There was nothing I could say. He was silent and still, and I could barely see him in the dark in his black clothes with the back of his head turned towards me. But I knew that he was going through a torment in his mind as bad as anything my father could have done to his body. The sleek, well-fed cat jumped back on my lap, and started purring. There were plenty who would believe that she was better off than he was at that moment: peaceful and unthinking, not wracked by the truth. I didn’t believe that, and neither did he.

‘Citoyenne,’ I heard him say, and his voice was as cool and dispassionate as usual. ‘You know I have doubts about the imagination, but can I ask you to imagine a country in the grip of a pestilence, one that strikes at random?’

‘One where terror reigns?’

‘Exactly. For most of its victims, there is no sense in regretting what they have done to be infected. But what would you say to a man in this country who had engaged with a pox-bitten whore?’

‘I would tell him that I hope he escapes infection.’

‘That wasn’t what I was asking.’

‘May I assume that he feels ashamed of what he has done? It is not that he merely fears the consequences?’

‘You may, Citoyenne. You may assume that he feels a disgust for himself and his life greater than he has ever felt before.’

‘I may assume that he will never do it again, even if he has the chance?’

‘He will not.’

‘Then, if he is a sensible man— Is he?’

‘Most people would consider him far from stupid, though I have my doubts at this moment.’

‘Then I would expect him to be capable of working out for himself what to do; he would not need me to tell him. The greater his talents, the more I would expect of him. And, whether his life is many years or a few weeks, I would expect him to live it as well as he can.’

‘Is that all?’

‘What else is there? I assume that the country we are imagining is one that has done away with the superstition of priests and their Hail Marys and Our Fathers.’

‘It is not all superstition, Citoyenne. At the heart of it is a man who once said, “Go, and sin no more.” You are saying the same.’

‘He was a sans-culotte too.’

He said nothing for a few moments, then turned round. I could see his face, but he was still too much in the dark for me to read his expression. ‘I doubt if the sans-culottes of the faubourgs would agree with him or you.’

‘So the man we have been discussing should assume that his life will be short, and he must do his best with what he has of it.’

‘Thank you.’ He came into the light, and I saw that he could face both the brief future and the shameful past with chilly clear-sighted courage. ‘You’ve taught me the secrets of life that I would not have discovered for myself. You told me I was a blood-sucking bastard just after we met; you told me I was very stupid just this evening. Plenty of people have called me the first, and a few have called me the second. But they did it from enmity and ignorance, like your Friend of the People Marat. Only three people have done it from friendship and understanding. I wouldn’t listen to Condorcet, because I was deafened by my own greed. I wouldn’t listen to Fourcroy, because I thought he was betraying me – and I now know that I was wrong there too. Thank God I have the sense to listen to you now. And thank God you told me in the way you did.’

‘What was special about me?’

‘You provided physical evidence to support your position: that counts with me. Condorcet and Fourcroy used arguments, and I’m good at dealing with those; given time I could probably produce

an argument that that cat on your lap could be in two places at once. But you – I offered you money, and you refused. You didn't do it with scorn or offence, but simply, as you did when I offered you a drink of water when you weren't thirsty. It was unnecessary to you, and you began to teach me how unnecessary it was to me. We need some money, as we need some water, but I spent half my life gorging myself on it, and it now seems to me as immoral and futile as trying to drink all the rivers in France while others were dying of thirst.' He smiled bleakly. 'So now I see that you were right. I was a blood-sucking bastard, and I can be very stupid.'

'I asked you this before: you may have changed your mind. Do you now regret joining the tax farm?'

'No,' he said after a moment in thought. 'I know how wrong it all was; I know it will probably cost me my head. But, you see, it brought me my wife, and she is worth all the rest to me, and more.'

I said nothing, then I put the cat from my lap. 'Now I shall go. I have done what you needed of me.'

'You have. I can't believe that it brought you much pleasure.'

'Being needed always brings me more pleasure than being ignored.'

He turned away from me and went to the wash stand in the corner. 'I am, in fact, thirsty after that. Exposing one's soul evidently dries it out. Would you like some water before you go?'

'Is that a symbolic gesture?'

'No. Only hydrogen and oxygen; no residue of meaning at the bottom of the glass.'

'Well, in that case, yes, please.'

He poured water from the jug and brought it over; in one hand was the crystal glass, in the other was the tin cup. 'It's difficult to avoid symbolism sometimes, isn't it?' he said ruefully, wondering which to offer me.

'Look, I'm thirsty,' I said impatiently. 'We each drink half, and then we exchange. All right?'

'All right,' he said, and handed me the crystal glass. I carefully drank only half, as did he, and then we solemnly exchanged.

I put my mouth to the tin cup and drank where he'd put his mouth and drunk, and I felt that stunning shock from him flood right through my body.

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It's lucky for me that he reminded me how much he loves his wife, I told myself that night as I rocked Jacques off to sleep. Because if he hadn't, I might have mistaken what I felt as— *love*, go on, use the word, I commanded myself.

If I loved him, I'd be jealous of Marie-Anne; it would have hurt me when he said that she was worth losing his life for – but it didn't. Their love was almost as precious to me as it was to them; it held out hope for us all. After so many years together, such fidelity and passion for each other that I saw when he read her letters proved that there was such a thing as true love, and that my mother was wrong when she accused me of sentimentality for seeking it.

He'd thought it was offensive to me if a man asked me to be his mistress. It wasn't; not from René, or Pluvinet, or Citoyen Septembre. But it would have been deeply offensive from him. It would have shattered my belief in him, a belief that had grown far greater since that evening. He had seen where he was wrong, and he had faced it and its likely consequences with courage and honesty. He knew what he'd done, so I no longer had to worry about it; he could listen to his conscience and he didn't need to listen to me. Now I could admire him whole-heartedly and with no reservations, as I'd wanted to do since I was a girl. But love? No.

Jacques was asleep – Pluvinet's salve was effective – and I prepared myself to sleep too. I don't love Monsieur, I reassured myself as I got into my empty bed. Platonic, that's the word. And, to be practical about it, as my mother would wish, a man who was devoted to his wife and was likely to have his head chopped off by my father was not the world's finest prospect for giving me lasting future happiness.

I need to be needed, I realised. Jacques needs me; Monsieur needs me. It is impossible for me to resist them. My need is so powerful that it took me into the cess pit because the men in there

needed me. It's a wonderful experience for an executioner's daughter.

But why had a mere touch overset me so much? That was not the result of need; Pierre didn't make me feel like that – and certainly the cess pit cleaner did not. But nor was it lust, not what René's seduction attempt had roused. René's touch had given me a *frisson* – but Monsieur's? *Frisson* was the wrong word to describe the turbulence in my body, the chaos in my mind when he touched me. It was as if there was some strange attractor in him, a power like – like –

I couldn't think what it was for some time, but just as I drifted off to sleep I realised. People had fainted and gone into convulsions when touched by Mesmer, I remembered. Monsieur had proved Mesmer's ideas fraudulent – and now he was having a similar effect on me! I had to press my face into my pillow to stop myself waking Jacques by laughing so loudly at the irony of it.

Next day, I procured a copy of the report on Mesmerism; I'd heard of it ten years ago when I was a girl but I'd never read it. I could almost hear his voice as I read it now: *Animal magnetism may well exist without being useful, but it cannot be useful if it does not exist.* The man who wrote this report was honourable and admirable, and he was certainly someone whose life should not be cut short. But he wasn't lovable – I must remember that.

One experiment especially struck me. Cups of water were treated by one of the practitioners of Animal Magnetism to fill them with mysterious fluid; and cups of water were presented to a woman who had been invited to Monsieur's house – his old one, in the Arsenal – to take part in the experiment. She suitably went into a convulsion. But she hadn't been drinking from the treated cups. The treated cup was the one Monsieur handed to her afterwards, which she drank quietly and said relieved the effects. Oh, well, I thought. At least I didn't go into a convulsion.

I was struck by the clarity of the reasoning, the rigour of the experiments, and the understated scorn of the conclusion: *Touching, imagination, imitation, these are the real causes of the effects attributed to Animal Magnetism.* Touching and imagination I could vouch for myself.

But there was an irony far greater and far less amusing in the report. It had been signed by all the Commissioners taking part in the investigation: the first signature was Benjamin Franklin's and the last was Monsieur's. But just above his was another I recognised. I had met the fashionable doctor turned politician at Papa's a couple of years ago, when he had come to consult the expert about the new, humane and efficient means of execution he proposed that would be named after him.

The last two words of the report on Animal Magnetism formed a spine-chilling prophecy: 'Guillotin, Lavoisier.'

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End of Section 3

Go to the author's web page for subsequent sections
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