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 2: Oxygen

The atmospheric air is composed of two gases,... one of which is capable, by respiration, of contributing to animal life, and in which metals are calcinable and combustible bodies may burn; the other, on the contrary, is endowed with directly opposite qualities.... We have given to the base of the former, or respirable portion of the air, the name of oxygen.
A-L Lavoisier
The Elements of Chemistry

Eleuthère Irénée du Pont de Nemours? I thought as I looked at the name on the letter Monsieur had given me. Nobody's called Eleuthère Irénée du Pont de Nemours. I didn't feel capable of meeting someone with such an imposing name. Besides, I'd had an idea about how to approach Pierre Rose about my courtyard.

I went back home and waited for him to return from his work at the Arsenal until I heard his jaunty whistle. 'Pierre,' I said as I waylaid him. 'Will you spare a moment? I want your advice.'

'Of course.'

'You've been here longer than I have, so you know the place better than I do.' Flattery to male pride; that's the way. 'You know you said that I was to over-charge the tax farmers? Well, look what they've given me, just for one bundle of mending!' I showed him.

'That's generous!' he exclaimed, then remembered his sans-culotte sympathies. 'I mean, well done for screwing the rich *bougres*.'

'I'll have plenty more work from them; I could make quite a lot of money.'

'Good for you! What are you going to do with it?'

'With the way that prices are going up all the time, I want to invest the money in improving this property. I'll charge more when a new tenant comes in, but for an old one like you it'll stay the same.'

'Very good. How can I help?'

'What's your advice on what improvement I should make first?'

He looked up at the rotting window frames and the peeling plaster, but it had been another hot day, and I had manoeuvred us close to the crack in the cess pit; it wasn't a difficult choice. He pointed downwards. 'Get this fixed. It shouldn't stink like this, and it's dangerous. One day it will
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collapse and someone will fall in; I can think of no worse way to die than in a cess pit.'

'Hmm. I could do that, though I'd have to have it cleaned out first. But is there much point if the rest of the yard is left filthy?'

'Well, get that cleaned too.'

'I don't know. There are the other landlords and owners to think about.'

'Ask 'em. And if they say no, we'll get the rest of the tenants on them.'

'Would the tenants themselves stop throwing rubbish around? It would have to be something that everyone agrees to.'

'I think people will agree – if that woman Evrard doesn't raise any stupid objections.'

'Thank you, Pierre,' I said, smiling at him. 'I knew I could rely on you.'

So this was diplomacy! No need to lie, no need to threaten. Just a spoonful of suggestion, a pinch of flattery, and a bucket of understanding of what people wanted.

The café was unusually quiet after last evening's fury; I thought it was just exhaustion until I overheard someone explaining to the Lucky Sailor what had happened that day. Some revolutionaries whom we'd always thought on our side, almost as much as Danton and Robespierre themselves, had been arrested; they would face trial and possible execution as enemies of the people. Many of Constance's customers had been their friends and supporters, and there was unease and confusion all around.

'But if such men as these can face trial, then who can avoid it?' asked the Lucky Sailor. Nobody answered him.

Time for my new-found diplomatic skill. In the belief that it was a good opportunity to give everyone something else to talk about, I raised the issue of the courtyard.

'Of course we should get it cleaned up,' said Constance. 'We'll raise it at the next Section meeting.'

'We should consult the other landlords first,' said Pierre.

'What need to ask a bunch of property-owners?'

Everyone joined in with relief; it would get nobody into trouble to argue about whether to consult the landlords before or after the Section meeting.

'But shall I go ahead with getting the cess pit cleaned?' I asked in a moment when not everybody was shouting at once.

'Of course, Jeanne,' said Constance, then turned to Pierre, pointing her knitting needles at him viciously. 'Make the bastard landlords pay!'

'Naturally,' said Pierre at the same time, then shook his spoon in her face. 'You can't call a good sans-culotte like Jeanne a bastard!'

The debate raged on; diplomacy in the faubourg-Antoine could sometimes get very noisy.

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Next morning, Jacques was fretful for some reason, so I took him to Maman's for her advice. 'He's teething,' she said promptly. 'You'll have to wean him.' I didn't want to; it was cutting a link between us that I loved. Maman saw my expression. 'He'll bite your nipples to shreds otherwise.'

'I won't mind.'

'Say that the first time he does it! I know it's not easy. Take your time, so he gets used to it.' She was much more concerned with him than me. She had brought me and my brothers up strictly, suppressing our feelings and hers; now in the role of grandmother she could indulge herself.

'How long will it take?'

'A week, a month; whatever suits you both. Start right now.' She wanted to take Jacques for a few hours each morning, and it would be convenient. There might be times in my mission to save Monsieur that a small baby would not be a great help.

I felt slightly desolate as I left my son with his grandmother, and my breasts were already uncomfortably full. I chided myself; this was all part of being a mother.

I decided to tackle Eleuthère Irénée du Pont de Nemours. There were two addresses on the envelope. The first was the printing house which he managed; I didn't want to conduct a conspiracy in the din of a printery, so I went straight round to the second.

He lived in an apartment on the first floor of a building in a moderately good area, and he opened his own door when I knocked. Tall, about my age, his hair was unpowdered, and he wore the tightly-fitting pantalons and boots of a fashionable young man, rather than the breeches of the rich or the loose baggy trousers of the working man. He was also, I noticed, rather handsome.

I took a deep breath. 'Citoyen Eleuthère Irénée du Pont de Nemours?'

'Well, yes. But I prefer to be called René du Pont.' That was a relief.

He was flustered, and I wondered why until I saw where he was looking. Well, they were enormously full, and I had just taken a deep breath. 'When you can tear your eyes away from my tits, perhaps you'll read this.' I handed him Monsieur's letter.

He blushed as he opened it. So much for a careful inspection of the seal, I thought. It didn't take him long to read, and then he looked at me in perplexity. 'You are Citoyenne Jeanne Berger?' he asked incredulously.

'I am, and I don't want to hang around your front door any longer.'

'Oh, I am forgetting my manners. Please come in, Citoyenne; let me get you something to eat or drink.' The place bore the marks of a man whose wife was away: china ornaments left undusted, a bunch of flowers so dried up the petals crackled, and a comfortable clutter of boots, papers and empty plates. But the coffee he brought me was good, and the brioches were fresh and buttery.

'Have you read what's in this letter?'

'Yes. I don't carry sealed letters unless I know what's in them,' I said, then amended it in the grip of truth. 'Not usually, anyway.'

'He says you will be useful in our project.' He looked at me doubtfully. 'Are we talking about the same project?'

'I am talking about saving Monsieur Antoine-Laurent Lavoisier from the guillotine. What are you talking about?'

'Exactly the same, Citoyenne, but— Well, you'll pardon me, but you seem an unlikely ally of a tax farmer.'

'That's why I'll be a good one. Even a sans-culotte can think that *la patrie* will be better served if his head stays on his shoulders.'

He jumped up and began to pace the room, waving his hands enthusiastically. 'Oh, yes! He has a superb mind: the finest that France has produced. Better than Descartes, better than Voltaire ...' I was content to eat his brioches as he told me all the other famous Frenchmen that Monsieur was better than. 'And a great man! Consider his achievements: his contribution in creating the metric system, his work in agriculture, economics, education ...' While he spouted on, I hunted for the last crumbs; starting to wean Jacques hadn't stopped my voracious appetite. 'And when the history of chemistry comes to be written, everything before his work will be so much rubbish!' He finally ran out of praise and I ran out of brioche.

'He's also very kind.'

'Kind?' He looked confounded.

'He was kind to me when I was a young girl.'

'Kind?' he said again, turning the word over like an interesting new mineral. 'It's not a word that's usually associated with him. Inspiring, even generous; but not kind.'

'All I know is what he did for me, and that's why I'm repaying it.'

'I too, Citoyenne; he gave me my love of chemistry and found me my first position in the Gunpowder Commission. My father is his best friend.'

'Your father?'

'Pierre du Pont de Nemours; he owes Monsieur Lavoisier a lot.' I should have recognised the name earlier; the young man was from a far more aristocratic origin than he appeared (not unusual in the Revolution, of course).

'Is he doing anything for our project?'

'He can't afford to; as a former noble he must stay out of Paris or his own head's in danger. My wife's with him,' he said, making his marital status clear to a young widow.

'Who else is involved? Though I'll tell you what I told Monsieur: if you're planning to help him escape from prison or something like that, I don't want to know.'

'I shan't tell you any names without the person's consent, Citoyenne; you'll understand my

caution.'

'Well, what have your efforts been so far?'

'For one thing, we're trying to find exactly what the charges against the tax farmers are, but they are apparently a state secret – we've had no success. But we have persuaded representatives from the many committees Lavoisier used to be on to write letters on his behalf: the Committee on Weights and Measures, the one on the currency, Arts and Crafts, Gunpowder, and so on. All to no effect.'

'How many of them are good Jacobins? They're the people with power; their support is far more important.'

He sat down. 'There's one very good Jacobin; he used to be like that—' he twisted two fingers together '—with him: Fourcroy.'

'I've heard of him.' It was his public lecture that my brothers and their tutor had attended, the one that had sparked off my interest in oxygen theory; now he was a member of the Convention.

'He could really do something; he's one of the most influential people in the Committee of General Instruction. There are plenty of others who owe Lavoisier gratitude and haven't repaid it, either from cowardice or politics, but he's the worst ingrate.'

'Do you know why?'

'He's turned Maratist.'

'Citoyen du Pont, I may have missed events recently, having been in a Royalist prison, but I think I'd have heard if Marat had risen from the grave.' Marat – the Friend of the People – had been stabbed to death in his bath the year before. Constance was a relation of his wife. Papa had final dealings with his assassin.

'He might as well have done. Long before the Revolution, Marat was rejected for membership of the Academy of Sciences; he never forgave them, nor Lavoisier, who represented all the humiliation he'd suffered in the Old Regime. Marat claimed grand theories and great experiments on the nature of fire to prove that a candle flame in a closed container goes out because hot air pressed on it.' He paused for a moment and smiled patronisingly at me. 'I ask your pardon, Citoyenne: I talk matters of science that are beyond you.'

I gave a silent expression of gratitude to Monsieur for my ability to reply in my sweetest tones, 'No need to ask pardon, Citoyen du Pont, I understand. You mean that Marat was trying to put the old phlogiston theory into a new guise, and took no account of the properties of oxygen?'

I have said few things in my life that have given me greater satisfaction. The expression on his face was comical: here I was, a female sans-culotte with big tits, who'd given a better summary of the position than he had. I could almost see the wheels in his mind change direction as he re-evaluated me.

'Well – er – yes – that's – I see that I don't need to – to—'

'I imagine that Monsieur disagreed with Marat's position.'

'Yes – er – he—'

'And no doubt expressed his view forcefully.'

'Ah, now I know why you call him kind: you have never received one of his rebukes,' he said, recovering himself. 'He expresses his views precisely, logically and courteously, as if it's not worth his while to get annoyed with lesser mortals.'

'Oh, dear.' Yes, I could picture Monsieur doing it – it would be deadly. 'I imagine that Marat took it badly.'

'Indeed he did: Lavoisier could hardly move without being denounced. Of course, when the tax farmers built the wall round Paris, Marat led the attack.'

'Now you talk nonsense. Parisians didn't need Marat to tell them to hate the wall. What was Monsieur thinking of when he had it built?'

'He was trying to regulate the finances of— Citoyenne, we'll be here all day on the subject of the tax farmers' wall. It's not something we'll ever agree on.'

'True. Tell me more about Marat.'

'Not much to tell. He attacked Lavoisier and the Academy of Sciences till the day he died. The Academy was closed last year, and Lavoisier won no friends in his last-ditch defence of it. The attacks were continued by Marat's successors, and Fourcroy is one of them; he took over Marat's

seat in the Convention after he was assassinated. What I can't understand is why a man of Fourcroy's excellence in science can't see that Marat wrote nonsense.'

'In science, perhaps, but not in politics. I can understand it very well. People such as me and Conventionnel Fourcroy – we put Monsieur's science in one pan of the balance, and his tax farming in the other. For me, the weight comes down one side, but I'm not going to blame a man if in his scales it's the other. I have Monsieur's kindness to me to add to my balance.'

'So does Fourcroy. The Lavoisiers gave him a lot of help when he was a young and struggling chemist; he's from a poor background, and he needed all the help he could get in the Old Regime.'

'Hmm. I wonder if it's worth trying him again, the two of us. You talk the science and I'll talk the politics.'

'It might be. I'll see if I can get an appointment with him – he's a busy man.'

'And there's a chance that the developments in the Convention may help us.'

'What do you mean?'

Now it was my turn to be patronising, and I blessed Constance's customers for my political education. 'If Danton and his allies win the battle that's going on, they'll end the Reign of Terror.'

'Yes, that's true,' he said, brightening up.

'On the other hand, if they don't, then it'll get worse under Robespierre, so we'd better not count on it. What else are you doing?'

'We're investigating the investigators. The commission in charge of looking at the tax farmers' accounts is led by a man called Antoine Dupin; we're finding out about him and the other commissioners to see if there's any way to influence them.'

'You mean, to bribe or blackmail them?'

He shrugged. 'It's a possibility – but you probably don't want to know about it.'

I wondered how far I would go for Monsieur. Bribery and blackmail? Well— perhaps. If all else failed – if somebody else did it – if it wasn't thrust under my nose. 'Anything else I can know about?'

'No, Citoyenne, that's all.'

I told him how to get a message to me, and prepared to go. He didn't stand up as I rose, but sat there surveying me, his feet outstretched lazily. 'I wonder if Monsieur Lavoisier is losing his eyesight,' he said with a smile.

'What do you mean?'

'Very clever, very republican, very rude. He missed something: very attractive.'

'Monsieur Lavoisier loves his wife,' I said coldly.

'I love mine, but I have eyes – and other things.'

'He has one thing you don't have: honour.' I went to stand between his outstretched legs, glowering down at him. 'See here, Citoyen Eleuthère Irénée du Pont de Nemours. If I find out you're breaking the law, I'll denounce you. If you try to make me your mistress, I'll kick you in the balls. Can we work together or not?'

Still smiling, he held up his hands in submission. 'Yes, Citoyenne Jeanne Berger, I think we can.'

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The cleaning of the cess pit had a symbolism to my neighbours that escaped me. I thought of it as just shovelling shit, but to them it was the beginning of a new pride in the street. All the other landlords and property owners had agreed to pay their share; those inclined not to had received a hint about their *incivisme* from Constance and had changed their minds.

'I'll take the day off work,' said Pierre the evening before it was due to be cleaned. 'You'll fill in for me, won't you?' he asked the Lucky Sailor, who nodded.

'How can you do that?' exclaimed Constance. 'You, a gunpowder maker, neglecting your duty to work for our soldiers!'

'I reckon I'm due one extra day off a month.'

'If you were a good patriot, you wouldn't take the ones you're given.'

'Listen to her! That's a boss talking!' (Constance's status as an employer rested on the thin

shoulders of a fifteen-year-old kitchen maid.) ‘It’s the bosses who benefit from the new Revolutionary calendar, I reckon.’ Here he got nods of approval from all the journeymen. ‘In the old days, we got Sundays off, right? One day off in seven. With the new thirty-day month, we only get one day off in ten. So if I take an extra day every month, that evens things up, eh?’ Constance found it hard to argue with such arithmetic, and she was wavering, until he handed her some more ammunition by saying, ‘Besides, you’ll need a man around the place to help.’

In the morning, the courtyard was full of people; even my mother, who had volunteered to look after Jacques while I took charge of the cleaning, decided to stay to watch the proceedings. The two cess pit cleaners arrived with their cart and bins to a welcome which surprised them; the odour of their trade hung around them and tended to put off such demonstrations. ‘Everybody wants the job done,’ said the bigger of the two men. ‘But nobody wants to have anything to do with the men who do it.’ Maman and I exchanged glances – that was much what people thought about executioners.

Even the bigger of the two wasn’t much of a size, and the smaller was tiny; he looked as if he’d never had a decent meal in his life. More than likely, I reflected: no-one one would do his job unless they were starved into it – executioners are at least paid better than cess pit cleaners. They were surprised that the cess pit was half empty; cleaning them caused such a disgusting smell that most people waited until they were full – or overflowing.

I’d thought the reek was bad already, but it was nothing compared to the gut-turning stench once the cover was taken off; everyone drew back as if they’d been pushed. The men put their ladder down into the hole and lowered a bin on the end of a rope; the small man climbed down with a spade. How can he do that? I wondered.

For a few moments nothing seemed to happen. Then we heard the bigger man shout to his companion down the hole, ‘Are you all right?’ Then he called his name, with increasing desperation. ‘Come up! Come up now!’

‘What’s the matter?’ I called.

‘He’s passed out! There must be some sort of poisonous fumes down there, and he’s passed out!’ Poisonous fumes! The courtyard emptied suddenly. Maman grabbed Jacques from me and carried him away as fast as her sixty-year-old legs could run.

But I had to stay; this was my responsibility. Pierre brushed past me and ran to the hole; with unbelievable courage he started down the ladder. ‘No, Pierre!’ I shouted, and Constance beside me called even louder to stop him. But we couldn’t. The other cess pit cleaner had stayed by his post outside the hole; he too tried to stop Pierre, but he was no match for Pierre’s size.

Constance and I stood in the reek of the courtyard chewing our nails, while the cess pit cleaner leaned over the hole to try to help Pierre up with his mate. Then he shouted in dismay. ‘He’s passed out too.’ He ran over to us, tears streaking his filthy face. ‘We must cover it up!’ he cried, agony in every word. ‘If we don’t cover it, the fumes will escape and kill us all.’

‘But you can’t leave them down there!’ Constance cried, horrified.

‘What else can we do? He’s my brother – you think I want to leave him to die?’

Suddenly I knew what to do. I could see in my mind the letter from Monsieur, all those years ago, explaining the principles on which I now acted. ‘We don’t have to cover it,’ I said. ‘The fumes won’t escape – indeed, there are no poisonous fumes.’

‘What’s killing my brother then, you stupid cow?’

‘He’s being suffocated, not poisoned. There’s no oxygen down there.’

Constance and the cleaner stared at me blankly; they had no idea what oxygen was, and this wasn’t the time for a lecture on the behaviour of gases in enclosed spaces. With a lurching feeling in my stomach, I knew that I had to be a heroine.

‘Get me a length of pipe,’ I said to them, hoping that they’d find something useful in all the junk that was lying around. ‘Quick as you can – every second counts.’ I went to the open hole; the stench was so foul that I felt I was swimming against it.

There wasn’t much light into the pit, just enough to show me the top of Pierre’s body slumped against the ladder. He must have known what was happening to him and tried to climb out – but too late. This is only what I clean from Jacques several times a day, I told myself to control my nausea. Just a lot more of it.

I started to climb down the ladder as Constance came running with the pipe, the cleaner following her. ‘Jeanne! No! Don’t make it three!’ she cried.

‘I know what I’m doing, Constance,’ I said, hoping that I did. ‘I’ll be perfectly safe, just as long as you hold the pipe steady; one end up above the surface, the other end down to me so I can breathe through it.’

‘But the poisonous fumes—’

‘There are no poisonous fumes. Trust me, Constance; I’m trusting you with my life here. You’ve got to hold this pipe or there will be three of us.’

I took a deep breath of that horrible – but oxygen-ful – air and descended into the noisome pit. I couldn’t get far down the ladder because Pierre’s body was in the way. I’d have to jump. Monsieur, I hope your theories are right or I swear I’ll never speak to you again, I thought as I stepped off the ladder. I landed waist-deep in the noxious ooze, and almost vomited as mephitic bubbles rose to the surface and filth splashed my face.

Constance, brave and trusting Constance, let down the pipe that meant life to me and the two men. I tried to get Pierre’s mouth to the end of the pipe, but of course that didn’t work; he’d still be breathing the oxygen-less air down here. I’d better breathe myself. I put my mouth to the end of the pipe using my hands to form a crude seal; I breathed in through my mouth, and out through my nose. The air was so foul, especially the first breath, that I gagged, but I kept on breathing. I couldn’t tell whether I was breathing oxygen in with the air; I had to trust the theory. Fine time to conduct an experiment.

The bursting in my lungs seemed to clear, and I wasn’t feeling dizzy. There was enough light for me to untie the rope round the handle of the bin that had been let down there. I took a breath, then wrapped it round Pierre’s body. Another breath, and I could tie a knot. Another breath, and I checked that it was firm. ‘Pull him up!’ I shouted to the man at the top of the hole.

But Pierre was a big man, and the cleaner was small. I tried to support the weight, but I couldn’t do it, and the pipe was in the way. ‘Constance, you’ll have to put the pipe down and give a hand pulling on the rope.’ Then, at her obvious reluctance: ‘Do it, Constance!’ The rope tightened as they pulled, and I reached down into the ooze and pushed from below, and I tried to remember everything I’d ever learned about diffusion of oxygen. I was feeling tightness in my lungs and there was a roaring in my ears that seemed to send a hammer in my brain. ‘Send down the pipe, Constance!’ I yelled. She had to drop the rope to do so, and I could breathe the disgusting, life-giving air from the world above the cess pit. I don’t know how long it took – for ever, it seemed. But eventually I could see that Pierre’s head was above the top of the hole. ‘Take the rope off and let him breathe!’ I shouted as he was pulled over the edge.

The rope snaked down again. Now for the cleaner. I could see him, his head barely above the level of the foulness where he’d slipped against the wall of the pit; at least he hadn’t drowned in the filth. This time it was easier; he was lighter, and we’d had the practice. At last I could begin my own climb up the ladder.

The air at the top, foul though I’d thought it before, was sweet in my lungs as I collapsed reeking. For a long time I lay flat on my back, staring at the rectangle of blue sky above the high, narrow houses around the courtyard, singing in my head the praises of oxygen. Beautiful oxygen, I can’t see you, I can’t smell you, I can’t taste you, but I know you’re here, and I love you.

Eventually I could take note of my surroundings. People were cautiously coming back into the courtyard, and I heard shouts of acclaim, though from a prudent distance. On one side of me, the bigger cleaner was bent over the body of his brother, patting his hand – but it was futile. The little man had had too many minutes without oxygen, and too many years without food.

Then I became aware of Pierre and Constance. Ignoring the stink in the air, the gobbets on the courtyard around them, the tragedy beside them, me, the people gathering about us, and the filth that covered them both, they were falling in love. He was on all fours breathing heavily, but he lifted his hand to her face as she knelt beside him and gently stroked her cheek; and she took his hand and kissed it. They stood up together, still holding hands, still staring at each other. ‘Pierre,’ she said wonderingly. ‘I thought you were dead.’

‘I would have been, but for you.’

With a little help, I thought. But I didn’t begrudge them what they’d found. They’d both been

braver than I, because I'd known what I was doing and they hadn't, and they'd still done it.

'Jeanne, get clean this minute,' said my mother. 'What a filthy mess this is!' She sniffed. But she would never intimidate me again with that sniff, because I saw in her face her relief that she hadn't lost me as she'd lost Gabriel; I'd come out of the pit alive.

We were heroes in the café that evening. 'How did you know what to do?' I was asked. Now did seem the right time for a lecture on oxygen theory and the behaviour of gases in enclosed spaces, and Constance's glasses and bowls were put to use demonstrating.

'Why doesn't that always happen?' someone asked me. 'You'd have thought that cess pit cleaners were aware of the risk.'

'I don't know.' But I knew who would. Seizing my chance to win him friends among the sans-culottes, I said, 'This was one of Lavoisier's discoveries, by the way.'

'See, I told you that France has better use for him than chopping his head off,' said Pierre.

'After the way he imprisoned Paris with his wall? I'd shove him in the cess pit and close the cover!' cried Constance.

The argument was on again. But somehow it lacked conviction when she was sitting on his lap and he was nibbling her ear.

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The tax farmers were gathered round a table as I'd first seen them, but this time they weren't looking at accounts. When my cousin and I joined them out of curiosity, we saw on the table a small black scrap of fur: a tiny, motionless kitten.

'It's dead,' said one tax farmer.

'It's alive,' said another.

'Impossible to tell,' said a third.

Monsieur picked it up gently and held it for a moment. 'It's alive.' As if in response to his decision, it quivered and opened its eyes.

The tax farmers were delighted. These ruthless financiers, who had ground the faces of the poor and would be tried as enemies of the people, fussed around the little cat, discussing what to call it, sending out for milk, and preparing a box for it to sleep in. Monsieur put the scrap of life carefully into the box, then ushered me into his cell.

He smiled as he closed the door. 'You may think that foolish sentimentality, Citoyenne. But there is something to be said for cherishing life when you face death.'

'I don't think it foolish at all; I've known prisoners make pets of the rats in their cells.' I gave him Marie-Anne's letter, then sat feeding Jacques while he read it.

When I had his attention again, I told him briefly about the cess pit. 'Why doesn't that happen every time that a cess pit is cleaned?' I finished.

'I presume that the pit wasn't completely full?'

I nodded; I hadn't told him. 'How did you know?'

'If the pit is full, the oxygenated air is drawn in as the excremental matter is removed; there is no problem other than the foetid odour. But with a half-empty pit the oxygen was consumed in the process of putrefaction. There would have been a layer of carbon gas, formed by the combination of carbon and oxygen. It's heavier than air so it stayed in the pit; it's harmless but it does not support life. You were lucky – there could have been something more noxious, such as sulphurated hydrogen gas.'

'I learn this now! But it was only Pierre and me who were lucky; the cess pit cleaner wasn't.' Jacques finished one breast, so I moved him to the other. I looked up to find Monsieur looking at me with a puzzled frown. 'What's the matter? Haven't you ever seen a woman feed her baby before?'

'Yes, I have – and with that tricoleur scarf round your hair you could have every artist in Paris begging you to sit as a model of Republican Motherhood. But at the same time I have been listening to someone discussing the implications of oxygen theory for cess pit cleaning in a manner that would do credit to any of my scientific colleagues. And I have had to work out for myself – because you didn't tell me – that this young woman presented to my eyes and my ears is also

immensely courageous. It's a little disconcerting to find all that in one person.'

I was a little disconcerted myself at his words, and at the weight of the esteem that he was showing for me. I needed time to compose myself, so I asked for a drink of water – in any case, I was thirsty. He went to the wash stand in the corner (a crude table with expensive and elegant china ware) and brought me a glass. I drank, then looked at it thoughtfully as I held it up: superb fine-cut crystal.

'You are about to tell me that the price of that glass could feed a family of four for a month, aren't you, Citoyenne?' he asked. That's exactly what I was about to say. 'You may drink out of a prison-issue tin cup if you prefer.'

'No, this will do. Water is just hydrogen and oxygen.'

'So I believe,' he said – the man who'd proved that fact as well as giving those gases their names. 'Some more?'

'No, thanks.'

'Is that a symbolic gesture?'

'No, I'm just not thirsty any more.'

He took the glass from my hand and put it away. 'Your story has reassured me. I have reproached myself that I have allowed you to endanger yourself by helping me. But I cannot believe that anything you will do for me could be one tenth so heroic as what you did for your friend Pierre and an unknown cess pit cleaner.'

'It wasn't that heroic. It was the only thing to do. When my friends are in the shit, I try to get them out. I don't have enough friends to lose any.'

He bowed his head. 'I'm honoured to be in such select company.'

'That isn't what I— Yes, I suppose it was.' I frowned. 'It's not easy for a good sans-culotte to admit a regard for a bloody extortionist left over from the Old Regime, you know.'

'Whereas I am happy to acknowledge that my regard for a pitiless and insulting daughter of an executioner is very high indeed.'

Such unflattering words – and such a good feeling from them. 'Why should I pity you? You made your own decision. You didn't have to become a tax farmer.'

'Did your father have to become an executioner?'

'Oh yes, he was brought up to it. His father was an executioner, and so was his, and so was his. Sansons have been Executioners of Paris for well over a hundred years.'

'There's a touch of family pride in your voice.'

'There's something to be proud of. Papa does his duty, hard though it is for him.'

'I hope you'll forgive my selfishness if I reflect that I'll come worse out of our encounter than he will.'

'France – under the King or under the Republic – wants the job done. He does it, even though it's often repugnant.'

'Like a cess pit cleaner?'

'That comparison has occurred to me. The point is to be a good cess pit cleaner or executioner, and my father's the best. You'll find out when you— sorry, *if* you meet him. He or his assistants will have you prepared in good time, with dignity and efficiency, but no cruelty. If the crowd around the tumbrels jeer at you, he won't let any of his men join in. When your tumbrel gets to the scaffold, he'll place you with your back to the guillotine so you won't be forced to watch your friends die. He won't be rough with you; unless you struggle he'll just put you into place on the bascule and hold you down, then he'll turn the bascule into position, and your neck will be held securely but not painfully in the lunettes. It will be very quick. You'll feel nothing.'

'Are you sure of that?'

'Nobody's ever protested.'

'I may be in a position to find out. You make me almost look forward to an interesting experience.'

'You wouldn't have had the chance of the experience if you hadn't entered the tax farm. Why did you do it? You must have known it was there to exploit the poor.'

'It had other functions, like raising revenue to pay for armies to defend our country.' I gave a sniff – not so contemptuous as my mother could make it, but I was catching her up. 'Very well, I

shan't argue. Would you believe me if I said I was aiming to reform France's financial system?'

'Did you succeed?'

'Not significantly.'

'Then I won't believe you. If you'd set your mind to it you would have done it. Try another excuse.'

'It did fund my scientific research; I had one of the best laboratories in the world.'

'Nonsense. You had plenty of money already. If anything, it took you away from science. You spent the time oppressing the poor which you should have spent discovering the truth about the way the world works.'

'Citoyenne, will you accept any other reason from me than that it was an easy way to make a lot of money?'

'Probably not,' I acknowledged. 'Do you regret it?'

'No. I've had a reasonably long life, and a very happy one. I'd prefer to continue it, but if it must end soon I believe I'll be remembered with regret by some, and perhaps with honour. What more can a man want? After all, dying in one's prime has the advantage that one is spared the troubles of old age. The Terror is a pestilence ravaging our land, Citoyenne; it strikes at random. There's no sense in wishing one had done something else to avoid it.'

I didn't know whether to admire his courage or abuse his complacency. But I never undermined whatever consolation anyone found in the face of death, so I let it pass and stood up to take my leave.

'Before you go, Citoyenne, there is one thing I'd like to ask you. I've been trying to find a way to put it delicately, and I can't, so I shall have to copy your own refreshing candour. May I give you some money?'

'No, thanks. I have all I need with what I'm getting for this mending. Why should you give me any?'

'Because you might want some more, and I have plenty.'

'Then you shouldn't have. The tax farmers' assets were all supposed to be seized. How do you and so many of the other blood-suckers still have so much?'

'Citoyenne, what would you think of a wheat farmer who kept all his seed corn in a place where one disaster could wipe it out?'

'I take your point. But I shan't take your money.'

'It's a pity. I'd like to give you something to show how grateful I am. Even if you did no more than visit me and give me the benefit of your most original opinions it would be more than has been done by many people I thought were my friends. When I think of what I gave you, and what I gave them— It seems disproportionate, what you're doing for me.'

'You gave them money, of which you had a great deal. You gave me time, of which you had very little. It isn't disproportionate at all.'

'Most original,' he said with a smile.

'Give me your friendship; I'll give you mine.'

'I am reluctant to make such a profit on the exchange.'

'Profit, exchange? Don't talk to me like a financier.'

'I'll talk to you like a chemist, then; there must be an equality.'

'And I'll talk to you like a Republican; there is.'

'So, let there be fraternity.' Another would have shaken hands at that point, but he was not a man who much used his body to express himself. Instead, for the first time, the smile that he gave me showed more than cool benevolence; I could see that there was warmth in him, and he would share it with me.

Neither of us mentioned the rest of the Republican slogan: liberty – or death.

*

Fourcroy agreed to see René du Pont and me. I left Jacques with Maman, telling her that I was going to buy myself a new dress – I deserved and needed one after the ruin of the one I'd worn into the cess pit.

As I stood in the shop looking at myself in the mirror I felt suddenly pretty. The effects of prison had disappeared, my figure was coming back after Jacques's birth, and my new dress showed it all to best advantage. 'Very attractive,' René du Pont had called me. Nobody had called me that for years; who finds an executioner's daughter or wife attractive? (Well, there are some men who do, but no woman wants dealings with that sort.) Even my husband had seen other qualities in me: hard work, loyalty and support – and the fact that I was the daughter of France's greatest professional.

When I met du Pont and his admiration showed, I didn't mind a bit. I didn't want things to go beyond admiration, but few women much object to inspiring lust in handsome young men.

We planned our strategy as we walked to Fourcroy's office, and to give du Pont his due he didn't try to browbeat me with his male superiority. 'Have you ever met Fourcroy?' I asked.

'Oh, yes, at the Lavoisiers in the old days. I was only a boy, and I was inclined to hero-worship him; that's why it hurts that he's shown himself an ingrate.'

We had to wait as Fourcroy was very busy, but eventually we got into his office. Fourcroy recognised my companion. 'Eleuthère Irénée!' he said with pleasure. 'It's been a long time since we used to meet at— since we met. What can I do for you both?'

'Citoyen Fourcroy,' I began – I'd talk the politics before du Pont talked the science. 'We've come to ask your opinion on the issue of *vandalisme*.' It was a new word to describe the practice of destroying works of art of the Old Regime if they were unduly royalist or religious. I'd started a debate on the subject in the café the evening before, so I was well primed with the arguments.

He was against it, as I'd guessed; educated men usually were. 'To knock the heads off the statues of Notre Dame – it's a sad day for France when the work of centuries of sans-culotte craftsmen is destroyed like that.'

'Would you support us, if we tried to preserve the greatness of Frenchmen for the benefit of our heirs?'

'Of course.'

'Even if they were perhaps not in tune with current Revolutionary thinking?'

'Yes, so long as we preserve only what is good about them, and they don't become a resource for royalism and superstition.'

'I have one example in mind, Citoyen Fourcroy, a head which some think is the greatest that France has ever produced. What's your opinion about destroying it just because of what it represented in the past, if it could still be valuable in future?'

'I'd oppose its destruction, so long as it poses no threat to *la patrie*. What do you refer to? Where is it?'

'In the Ferme. It's on Antoine-Laurent Lavoisier's shoulders.'

He jumped up. 'Get out!'

We stayed seated. 'What's the difference between the head of a statue in Notre Dame and the head of Lavoisier?'

'The statue in Notre Dame is not a traitor!'

'Traitor?' du Pont asked in surprise. 'I've heard many charges against him, but never that!'

'I didn't mean traitor, I meant tax farmer,' Fourcroy said hastily, worry replacing anger.

'That's an odd slip of the tongue, if I may say.'

'You may not say. Get out before I have you charged with wasting my time.'

This time we took the hint and left. Both of us were bursting to speak, but we dared not do so until we'd returned to the privacy of du Pont's apartment. But as soon as he'd shut the door, we both cried out at once: 'Traitor?'

'I don't believe it!' du Pont said.

'Neither do I. But Fourcroy does.'

'Why?'

'Don't know. And why did he retreat so rapidly when we pressed him?'

'I haven't the slightest idea. What's he hiding?'

'Haven't a notion. How do we get it out of him?'

And that was the real puzzle.

'You could get him drunk,' I suggested.

‘I wouldn’t know where to start. Besides, as I remember, he has a better capacity than I do. What about you seducing him?’

‘Seductive wiles are not my way, as you should be well aware.’

‘A pity we can’t use torture. Thumbscrews and the rack would do it.’

I stopped speaking, and waved him silent when he asked why. ‘Shut up. I’m thinking. Get me some coffee and more of those good brioches.’

He obeyed – he was good that way. When he came back, I asked him, ‘Do you think that Fourcroy has a vivid imagination?’

‘Why?’

‘Just answer the question. You know him; what do you think?’

‘He’s a brilliant teacher; perhaps you need a good imagination to teach well.’

‘What about physical courage? Do you think he’s brave?’

‘I have no idea. Can I ask where this is leading to?’

‘One more question. Do you think you can look menacing, without actually threatening violence?’

‘How’s this?’ he said, demonstrating.

‘You look constipated, but you’re a big *bougre*; we can work on it.’

‘Now, for the love of God, the Supreme Being, or any other of your favourite deities, tell me what this is about!’

So I did.

*

The next evening René du Pont collected me from the faubourg-Antoine. He insisted; he was to meet my parents, and he would hardly make a good impression by letting me walk alone after dark with a small baby. He arrived punctually, looking smart rather than menacing. We were just leaving when Pierre Rose appeared.

‘Pierre! It’s good to see you!’ du Pont cried, obviously pleased to meet an old friend. ‘How are things going?’

‘Pretty well, René. What about you? What brings you here?’

I gathered that they knew each other from the Gunpowder Commission. René du Pont had been a very young aristo made Pierre’s superior in the way that happened before the Revolution, but even in those days there could be equality and fraternity between men who respected each other’s character and skills.

Constance came out of her room and we exchanged weary womanly glances as the two men reminisced about their time together, which from their conversation seemed to consist entirely of narrow escapes from death.

‘Remember the explosion at Essonne, René?’

‘I wasn’t there – I had a fever that day; it saved my life.’

‘No, you would have been safe. You’ve got sense enough to do what I did while we were trying the experimental mix: obey Lavoisier’s orders to stay behind the bloody great wall of beams he’d had put up in the mill.’

‘If only everyone else had!’

‘That’s one wall he put up that I approve of. The last thing I remember before everything went up was that stupid *bougre* of a director showing off to his lady visitor by poking his cane in the crusher and saying it was perfectly safe. And the next thing I was standing with the mill in rubble around me and both of them blown to pieces.’

‘Those were the days,’ du Pont sighed. ‘I wish I hadn’t had to leave.’

‘A sad day for *la patrie* when you did; you made good gunpowder.’ That was Pierre’s highest term of praise.

‘I had to look after my father’s printery; he’s – er – in the country.’

Pierre didn’t ask why. Instead he looked at me, looked at du Pont, and jumped to the obvious conclusion. ‘And how’s your *wife*?’

‘She’s very well, thanks. She’s staying with my father.’

‘Is she indeed?’ Then, standing beside me and doing a magnificent job of looking menacing without actually threatening violence, he said, ‘I owe Jeanne my life. Remember that, René.’

We left, and du Pont breathed out heavily. ‘That’s what you meant, was it?’

‘A perfect example.’

‘I’ll do my best to copy it.’ He offered to carry Jacques, but I declined. ‘By the way, I’m intrigued to learn how you approached your father on this. “Please, Papa, may I borrow the tumbrel?” was it?’

‘More or less.’

‘Fascinating. I’m probably the only person in France who is actually looking forward to meeting Charlot Sanson.’

I stopped walking. ‘No jokes.’

‘Your father doesn’t have much of a sense of humour, eh?’

‘He has a very good sense of humour, but you can’t possibly come up with anything that he hasn’t heard a hundred times before.’

We walked in silence for a while, and then he said, ‘I apologise.’

‘Accepted.’

‘Do your parents know the truth about why we want the tumbrel?’

‘No. They jumped to the same conclusion as Pierre. I denied it but they still think that you’re trying to understand my background before making me your mistress.’

‘What did your father say to that?’

‘He muttered something about not letting his daughter become a rich man’s whore.’

‘Hmm. Perhaps I’m not looking forward so much to meeting him as I thought.’

‘Maman has a different view, and she’s the boss. She knows it’s not easy for a widow with a baby to find a husband these days. So if you can contrive to give the impression that you want to set me up in a good apartment and pamper me, she’ll be happy.’

‘No contrivance needed, Jeanne. That’s exactly what I want to do.’

‘Be glad I’m holding Jacques, Citoyen du Pont. He stops me from kicking you where you’d remember.’

‘I’ll remember. But can we add some plausibility by becoming Jeanne and René?’

‘Oh, all right. I’ll even contrive to give the impression that I like you.’

But there too no contrivance was needed. René was wonderful with my parents. With Maman he appealed to her repressed longing for the old days by delicately hinting at his father’s nobility, and to her current republicanism by indicating that he’d abandoned it. With Papa he confined himself to showing that he could be trusted with the horse and tumbrel for a few hours, and that it wasn’t a youthful jest or drunken wager. And he didn’t once rub the back of his neck.

Jacques was to stay with Maman while we went out; she was very happy, and offered to look after him any time my young man wanted to take me out again. ‘I like him,’ she whispered unduly loudly.

‘You take care of my horse, young man,’ said Papa as we left. Everybody understood that he meant: Take care of my daughter.

‘I will, Citoyen Sanson. You can rely on me.’

‘Well, you can put on the charm,’ I said as he drove us away. ‘How are you with menace?’

‘What’s the matter, Jeanne? You’ve just said something pleasant to me.’

By means of the usual investigative methods (bribing servants), René had discovered that Fourcroy was in the habit of walking home after a long day’s work; he wasn’t important enough to fear assassination. René had spend the day finding a suitable spot to waylay him; not perfect, as there was nowhere near at hand to lurk discreetly with the instantly recognisable tumbrel, but good enough.

We checked that a lamp was still burning in Fourcroy’s office; we hadn’t missed him. René set me down and drove off to the nearest convenient lurking place, and I was on my own. I waited until I saw my quarry walking wearily homeward.

I stepped forward. ‘Citoyen Fourcroy.’

He stepped backward. ‘I have nothing to talk to you about.’

I exulted; I was experienced in recognising fear, and he reeked of it. ‘Yes, Citoyen Fourcroy,

but I have. Something very important.' I moved towards him, and he kept backing away. 'What are you afraid of? I can't hurt you. I'm only a defenceless woman. In fact, you should offer me your protection.' I slipped my arm through his. 'There, Citoyen. Now we can take a friendly walk together.' He tried to pull away, but I gripped his hand. 'Let's have a nice talk, shall we? It would be a good idea if you came along with me.' Well, it'd be a good idea for me, though perhaps not for him.

He wouldn't move, and I was beginning to wonder how to get him to co-operate, when René suddenly loomed ahead of us. 'Good evening, Citoyen Fourcroy. What a pleasant surprise.' He was good; he seemed several inches taller than usual as he towered over Fourcroy, and he was cleaning his nails with a small but very shiny pen-knife. All the same, the stupid man had left my father's horse and tumbrel unattended – we'd look idiots if the horse wandered off. But it was very good at staying where it was through all distractions, and it was waiting peacefully for us.

Fourcroy knew a tumbrel when he saw one, and he turned and would have run; but René anticipated him, and blocked his way without saying a word. 'Can I offer you a ride home?' A tumbrel is designed to get people in and out of when they don't want to; my hand on his arm was quite enough. I sat beside him on the wooden bench where so many had sat on their last ride, and René drove off.

For a moment Fourcroy rallied. 'I'll have you before the Revolutionary Tribunal for this, you know.'

'What for, Citoyen? For taking you on a pleasant drive on a warm evening? Nobody forced you to get in, remember?'

'For stealing this!' he cried, indicating the tumbrel and the horse.

'Oh, no, Citoyen. We have permission to use it.'

'Who from?' he sneered. 'Sanson?'

'Of course. He's my father.' All those years of appalled expressions when I revealed my parentage suddenly seemed worthwhile, as I watched him turn into clay in my hand. 'Yes, Citoyen Fourcroy, I'm Charlot's daughter. If he lends me his vehicle to go for a drive on a spring evening with a young man, and the young man meets an old friend and offers him a lift home, what's the crime in that? Don't you think the Revolutionary Tribunal has better things to investigate? Like treason, for example?'

'Nobody mentioned treason.'

'Yes, you did, Citoyen. And then you tried to hide it. Hiding treason is a very serious offence. Oh look, here we are at the Conciergerie!' René was taking us along the route from the final prison to the Place de la Révolution. There may have been men in the Convention who hadn't imagined themselves in a tumbrel along that deadly way if politics went badly for them, but Fourcroy wasn't one of them. It was dark and nearly deserted, unlike the journey during the day, but it was still the way to the guillotine.

'I'm surprised you didn't guess he's my father; people say we're very much alike. But you won't remember him when he was my age; he's been Executioner of Paris these forty years. That was in the bad old days, before the Revolution, before the quick, painless guillotine. My father had to torture people then; it was all part of his job. He had to break people on the wheel, of course. Did you ever see anyone broken on the wheel?'

I paused to let Fourcroy answer, but he sat staring at me, his eyes wide open with horror, so I continued in a cheerful conversational tone.

'Perhaps you never saw it, so I'll tell you. It was the most common sentence for crimes like robbery, even more common than hanging in the Old Regime. The condemned man was stretched out, arms and legs apart, and then each of his limbs were smashed in turn with an iron bar. It wasn't very nice for Papa, and he'd give the death blow to the chest as soon as he could. Papa was happy when the Revolution put an end to torture.'

I paused again; Fourcroy still showed no sign of wanting to say anything.

'Papa has had some very famous criminals in his hands. He did Damiens; you know, the man who tried to assassinate the old king?'

He did know; he recoiled in revulsion.

'Papa was younger than I am now at the time, so he probably found it more difficult than I

would. After the sentence of being tortured to death was given, Damiens was brought in; he was covered in a large leather bag, only his head sticking out. Then Papa was responsible for questioning him about his accomplices. His legs were put in leather boots reaching to the knees, and the cords were tightened and tightened until he screamed with pain and fainted. When he was revived, he had the *estrapade*; you know that? His wrists were tied behind him, and then he was hoisted from the ground so his shoulder blades were dislocated. But it was all a waste of time from Papa's point of view; Damiens didn't say anything. So they gave up after a couple of hours and carried him to the tumbrel – much like this one, probably. In those days, execution was carried out at the Place de Grève – yes, just over there, Citoyen Fourcroy. Papa wasn't as efficient then as he is now; things weren't ready, and Damiens had to sit on the scaffold and wait, which was all rather embarrassing for Papa, because there was a big crowd. But eventually the coals were hot enough, so Damiens was lifted onto the platform – he couldn't walk, of course.'

René began to whistle that jolly tune *Ça ira*; Fourcroy would know the words, all about hanging aristocrats from lamp posts. Good boy, I thought; it was a touch that we hadn't planned, but it was perfect.

I carried on speaking. 'Damiens's right arm was tied to an iron bar to hold his wrist out, and then my great-uncle Nicholas brought the flames to his skin – they say I'm rather like great-uncle Nicholas, too, by the way. He could only manage to do it for three minutes or so, because Damiens's screams were too much even for an experienced torturer like he was. So they went onto the next stage, the red hot pincers. His chest and limbs were torn open, and they poured molten lead into the wounds. Then it was time to finish him off. They carried him off the scaffold into the square, and laid him on the ground. They tied his ankles and wrists with ropes, then harnessed each one to a horse, and whipped them in different directions. But the horses were young and untrained – not like this one – and things went wrong. It was taking too long, and the crowd was getting impatient; Damiens's arms and legs just wouldn't come off. So Papa had to get a knife and cut the sinews in his groin and armpits, and then everything was all right; he was pulled apart fairly quickly. He didn't live for much longer after that – well, not very much longer.'

I looked around; René's driving and my story-telling had worked together with perfect timing. 'Ah, here we are in the Place de la Révolution. Oh, look! There's Papa's scaffold!' I pointed to it as if indicating an old friend. 'There's so much work these days that he leaves it up during the night, though he takes the blade home, of course – he doesn't want anyone to get hurt. It looks so elegant in the moonlight! Though we can't see the colour now, which is a shame. It's painted rather a pretty shade of red. Are you all right, Citoyen Fourcroy? You don't seem at all well.'

He couldn't hold back any longer; he leaned forward and vomited over the floor.

I leaned forward where he was bent over retching, and spoke into his ear. 'Citoyen Fourcroy, listen to the wheels on the stones. They're loud enough that nobody will be able to hear you. Now tell me: why did you accuse Lavoisier of treason?' He said nothing, just wiped his mouth on his sleeve. 'The guillotine is quick and painless. But I'm my father's daughter.'

'Because he's guilty,' he whispered, his head in his hands.

'Lavoisier a traitor? You're a man of science, Citoyen; you need evidence for that sort of statement.'

'I've seen it.' René looked round; I made a discreet signal of victory to him, and he stopped driving.

'What?'

'A letter.' The dam had broken and he would talk freely. 'Listen, daughter of Sanson; for some reason you want to keep Lavoisier alive. If a word of this gets out, I'll bring you and du Pont down with me, and Lavoisier and his wife will be on that scaffold and looking through the lunettes long before the rest of the tax farmers get charged. Do you understand?'

'Yes.' René climbed down and got closer so he could listen; Fourcroy made no objection.

'Last autumn,' Fourcroy began, 'Lavoisier was already in trouble, but he hadn't been charged. They were going to seal his place up, but he was on the Weights and Measures Committee designing the new metric system, and we didn't want all his work on that to be sealed up too, so I was told to go round to his house with representatives of the local Revolutionary Committee to check everything. We had to sort out his papers: what was private, what was scientific, what was to

do with the tax farm and so on. It's not my favourite memory, having to do that to him, but it was better that I did it than a set of guards who wouldn't know one end of a gas pump from the other.'

'How did he behave?' asked René.

'He was – courteous.' Fourcroy shuddered at the recollection, and René winced as he pictured it. I began to understand what Monsieur's courtesy could do to a man – it seemed to have an effect as least as bad as my story. 'Among his papers was a bundle of letters from abroad, mostly written in English from what I could see; I didn't have time to look at them properly. We couldn't ignore them when we're at war with the British. So we wrapped them up, sealed them, and I took them away for further inspection. When the tax farmers were eventually charged, I opened the packet and read them. Most of them were harmless – one from Benjamin Franklin written before the Revolution, one from the man who translated the *Elements* into English, that sort of thing. There were also translations of the letters into French – Marie-Anne did them; he can read only French, so she's always done that for him.' He paused for a moment, reluctant to go on.

'Continue, Citoyen; you've told us nothing significant yet.'

'I'm just about to. Among all the others was one written in French. It didn't have a signature, but it seemed to come from a woman close to the Spanish border, and it was addressed to Marie-Anne. It was dated September 11 1792.' He paused. 'You understand the significance of that date?'

Who couldn't? That was the most brutal, the most glorious, the most crucial month in the Revolution. The enemy was at the gates; the Prussian army had already crossed the border, and its leader had vowed to destroy Paris if the royal family was molested. But the enemy was inside the gates too; French generals had already deserted to the other side, and there were still plenty of counter-revolutionaries around, some arrested and some still at large. The citizens of Paris, fearing an escape and an attack from within, had broken open the gates of the prisons and slaughtered more than a thousand prisoners, not caring much whether they were thieves or Royalists. Danton, then Minister of Justice, had stood back and let it happen, believing that unity was more important than pity. *De l'audace, encore de l'audace, et toujours de l'audace*, he had called for – 'Audacity, again audacity, and always audacity.' He inspired the French Republican Army to march out singing the Marseillaise; and on 20 September, they won the Battle of Valmy. The Revolution was saved.

'This woman,' Fourcroy continued, 'writing when France was threatened with destruction, makes no attempt at concealing her hopes for the end of the Revolution; she goes on at length about how barbarous everything is. But she takes comfort from the fact that, by the time the letter arrives, the Prussians might already be in Paris.'

René and I exchanged glances; this was bad news. 'You can't blame Marie-Anne Lavoisier for receiving someone else's opinions,' René said gamely.

'I can blame her for not reporting the sender. I can blame her for at least not destroying it instantly. The Lavoisiers aren't fools; what could they have meant by keeping it? If you can think of any other purpose but treason, I'd be glad to hear it.'

'It's a fake,' I said. 'It stinks of planted evidence – the significant date, the missing signature, the obvious piece of treachery, carefully placed where you would read it. Surely you see that?'

'Of course I do. Except that it can't have been. In front of my eyes, that packet was sealed in Lavoisier's presence, with the seal of the Revolutionary Tribunal – and with his own. And both seals were intact when I opened it later.'

Monsieur a traitor? I couldn't believe it. But Fourcroy did, and he was obviously as reluctant as I was. 'I don't understand,' I said. 'This letter – if it's real – would send both of them to the guillotine. Why is everyone fooling about with figures on the tax farm when this could be produced?'

He looked around to check that we couldn't be overheard. 'I know that you and the rest of his friends call me "that ingrate Fourcroy" because I won't help him. But I've put my neck into the lunettes for him. Don't you understand, you two? Would either of you do as much as I've done for him? That letter can't be produced because I hid it.'

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René barely said a word after we left Fourcroy at his home, but drove in silence. 'Why so down-

hearted?' I asked. 'I thought we had a very successful expedition.'

'I'm glad you're happy. Me, I think I've a reason to be down-hearted, discovering that a man I've always thought of as little less than a god is little more than a traitor.'

'Remember what Monsieur has written?' I quoted from his preface to *The Elements of Chemistry*: '"Proceed from known facts to what is unknown". What do we know?'

'That he kept a treasonous letter.'

'Nonsense. We don't know that at all. What we know is that Fourcroy says that he found a treasonous letter.'

'You think he's lying? I don't. I wish I did.'

'Fourcroy might believe everything he told us, but that doesn't mean we must. You and him, you're men of science. You're used to people telling you things because they believe them; people don't set out to deceive you. But they do set out to deceive executioners; that's why I've got a suspicious mind.'

He started to look more cheerful. 'You think the letter is a fraud?'

'Don't proceed so fast. Do we know that Fourcroy wasn't trying to deceive us about the letter?'

'Close enough to certainty – he looked as if he was telling the truth, and there's absolutely no reason why he should make such a story up.'

'Right. So there was a letter, and Fourcroy found it when he opened the packet. What else do we know?'

'It must be one of two things. *Either* it was a genuine letter which was kept among his papers and so included in the packet when it was sealed, *or* someone forged it to incriminate him, got hold of the packet, opened it up, put the letter inside, and then sealed it – with two seals – in such a way as to fool Fourcroy. I'd like to believe the second, but the first is more likely.'

'You're still proceeding too fast to the unknown. I can think of at least one other possibility right now, and I might come up with half a dozen more.'

'What's your possibility?'

'This is just my imagination – "which is ever wandering beyond the bounds of truth",' I quoted again from the *Elements*. 'But imagine if Marie-Anne got the letter from her friend. Now, she should have reported the friend, but we won't blame her if she didn't. She threw the letter away rather than burning it, which is incautious but understandable. A servant picked it up, kept it as a weapon against the Lavoisiers, and then when it was time to seal the packet, slipped it in with the rest when Fourcroy and the Revolutionary Committee weren't looking.'

He sat upright. 'Oh, I like that! It fits!'

'Could be complete nonsense. But it's worth looking at. Is there anyone else involved in our project that I can meet? Perhaps they could find something useful.'

'Yes, an apothecary, Jean-Baptiste Pluvinet. Very bourgeois, very cautious, and he's no more prepared to break the law than you are. But he says that he'd be happy to work with you to keep a great head on its shoulders, so long as he doesn't endanger his own. I'll arrange a meeting one evening at my apartment.'

'It's probably not a good idea to tell him who my father is – indeed, keep it to yourself as much as you can.'

He was quiet for a moment, looking straight ahead, then said, 'Yes, I shall.'

I had a suspicion about the reason for his silence, but I ignored it. 'In the meantime, I'll ask Monsieur about it; he won't admit to treason, of course, but at least we'll know his side of the story.'

'Jeanne, doesn't it occur to you that his wife might be a traitor? Is it kind to tell him about the letter and give him that sort of worry in what may be his last month of life?'

'Forget kindness! Truth is more important – as he would be the first to say. Of course I'm going to tell him.'

'Kindness doesn't run in your blood, does it?' There was something close to a sneer in his voice; my suspicion was confirmed.

'You hypocrite! You want a dirty job done, but you won't have anything to do with the person who does it.'

‘Jeanne—’

‘Thinking twice about that offer of a good apartment and pampering, eh?’

‘Jeanne—’

‘Oh, you’re just the same as everyone else.’

‘Jeanne, listen to me. You’ve had your lifetime to get used to it; let me have a day or two, please?’

‘What is there to get used to?’

‘When you told me about your father, I wasn’t shocked, was I? I was intrigued, I admit. So I met him; and instead of the ogre that everyone in Paris believes him to be, I found a civil, well-informed bourgeois, concerned about his property and his daughter, indistinguishable from a thousand other men. I liked him. Then I heard you tell that story about Damiens, and I thought of the hand that had done those dreadful things – and it was the same hand that had shortly before given me a glass of fairly good burgundy. Well, the burgundy nearly came straight out again. That’s why I started whistling, so I couldn’t hear you any more. I didn’t think I’d look menacing if I vomited before Fourcroy did.’

‘I’m glad you said that, René.’

‘You understand me, do you?’

‘No, it’s not that. You just reminded me that we must clean the vomit up before we return this to Papa. If we take it back in this state he’ll kill us.’

He looked at me for a stunned moment, then burst out laughing.

‘What’s so funny? Do let me share the joke.’

‘Don’t you see, Jeanne, that is the joke? You saying he’ll kill us, when you think of how many he has killed? Of course people make all those jokes that you’ve heard so often – that’s the only way we can deal with it.’

*

‘How can you say that, Constance?’ Pierre asked as he helped carry provisions into the café for her. Jacques was asleep in his cradle, and I was doing the mending. ‘How can you believe that men who were on our side only a month ago deserve to be sent to the guillotine?’

‘They were traitors, charged and convicted by the Revolutionary Tribunal.’

‘Trouble-makers perhaps, but not traitors. Is this the place for the cheese?’

‘No, put it over there. Are you saying that the Revolutionary Tribunal was wrong to condemn them?’

‘Why not? They’re only human beings – they can make mistakes.’

‘Don’t say that, Pierre. They’re the ones who are ridding the Republic of its enemies: the traitors, the trouble-makers who sow dissension among the people, the predators of the Old Regime – all of them must be eliminated before we can achieve our goals.’

‘And what are your goals?’

‘The same as Robespierre’s: the Republic of Virtue.’

‘Go on, Constance. Tell me about the Republic of Virtue.’ The café was closed, but people started to come in from the street; this promised to be an interesting fight.

‘Of course, Pierre. Our aim – and I’m sure it’s yours as well as mine – must be the peaceful and fraternal enjoyment of liberty and equality. The reign of eternal justice, whose laws are engraved in the heart of every man and woman: that’s virtue.’

‘Every man and woman? Including the hearts of trouble-makers and predators? Oh, look; these beans have got weevils in them.’

‘That’s the best I could get at the price. Of course I mean only the true patriot. We, the French people. We, who have fought tyranny at home and abroad, and must continue to fight it at home and abroad by destroying our enemies.’

‘That’s the point, Constance. Who are our enemies? Who is to decide?’

‘The patriots, of course. You know what I’m talking about, Pierre, of course you do. You know that traitors are enemies of the people, that Royalists and trouble-makers and tax farmers are enemies of the people. Don’t lose sight of the fact that *la patrie* is under threat, and we have no

time to waste on pointless arguments or scruples about mercy and justice. We must be on our guard against the traitors and destroy them wherever they appear. Don't put that barrel there; it'll leak all over the floor.'

'But the guillotine makes enemies; knock one man's head off and his friends become your enemies.'

'Then their heads must be knocked off too.'

'And when Charlot Sanson is the only man left in France, is he to knock his own head off? Where does this basket go?'

'On the shelf. Liberty and equality can't be secured unless criminals die.'

'But whatever happened to fraternity?'

'Pierre, can't you and the other Dantonists see? We need the Terror; without it we shall have no virtue.'

'Must people be terrified into virtue?'

Suddenly they became aware of their audience. 'We're closed,' said Constance, shooing everyone out. 'Come back in an hour.'

As she shut the door, Pierre crept up behind her and suddenly picked her up. 'Excuse us, won't you, Jeanne? We just have time for me to show her my biggest virtue.' She giggled as he carried her off into her room.

*

Jean-Baptiste Pluvinet, the apothecary who was happy to work with me and René, was about forty. He was a civil, well-informed bourgeois – as was Papa. I wondered how I'd feel if I heard that he'd had somebody's arms and legs pulled off, and I began to see René's point of view.

He'd supplied Monsieur's laboratory with chemicals in the old days, and done well out of it; Monsieur was not one to stint himself on scientific material. But he was doing well out of the Revolution too. 'In the old days, poor people had to die without help from an apothecary. Now, they can afford to die with our help.'

The three of us first drank a toast to our project: 'The nobility, the bourgeoisie, and the sans-culotterie; united, we shall succeed.' Then we exchanged information and ideas.

Pluvinet was having success with Antoine Dupin, the Conventionnel in charge of the investigation into the tax farmers' affairs. 'I don't think he would take a bribe,' Pluvinet said, and there was a definite tone of regret in his voice for someone who had vowed to stay within the law. 'But I think he is susceptible to – how shall I say? – not flattery, but recognition of his position. There are many like him in the Convention, alas; men who are tasting power for the first time in their lives, and finding it sweet. He has principles, certainly, but they will sway in a strong wind.'

René knew Pluvinet well enough to trust him with Fourcroy's secret, and he said he'd find out as much as he could about former servants of the Lavoisiers who might have a grudge against one or the other. 'Not just servants,' I said. 'Could anyone else have a grudge against Monsieur?'

They exchanged glances. 'I'm afraid so,' said René. 'You may be the only person in France who has seen nothing but kindness from him. He has been kind to me, but I've felt his scorn when I failed to live up to his high standards, and it's not pleasant.'

'He has a way of saying, "That was not satisfactory," that makes one want to hide in a dark corner,' Pluvinet agreed. 'And I regret to say that he has not always been as generous as he could have been about giving credit to others for their discoveries.'

'He has many, many talents,' added René, 'and a talent for making enemies is one of them.'

'How easy would it be to get at that packet?' I asked. 'How many people could have got hold of it in the offices of the Committee of General Instruction?'

Pluvinet spread his hands wide. 'Many, Citoyenne. It is not kept secure. What secrets does it have? Plans for a universal system of education or reports on the progress of the metric system are not of much interest to English spies.'

'This isn't looking good. We'd better find out whether the letter is a fake or not.'

'How?'

'I'll ask the Lavoisiers. Fortunately they can't get together to agree on their story; if it

matches, it's probably true.'

'You would doubt either of them?' said Pluvinet, somewhat offended.

'Jeanne would doubt the Archangel Gabriel,' said René.

'Not if I could hold him for questioning.'

Pluvinet was still not satisfied. 'I don't think we should ask Madame Lavoisier,' he said. 'Though I suppose we must ask Monsieur.'

René nodded. 'Yes, I'd prefer to shelter her if possible.'

'What?' I cried. 'Why should she be sheltered?'

'Because – well, she has been protected all her life, and now she is in danger of losing her husband, her father and her fortune,' said Pluvinet.

'You probably don't understand chivalry,' added René. 'You're so strong, Jeanne; you won't know why men want to protect women.'

I wanted to hit him – to hit both of them. Instead I pulled off my tricoleur cockade and thrust it under René's nose. 'We're in the middle of a bloody revolution!' I shouted into his face. 'You think these are the times to protect aristo women from learning what's going on in the world? That's not chivalry, that's stupidity! If you want to protect women, go and protect the market women of Les Halles when they work fourteen hours a day nine days out of ten! Or the women of the Vendée, on both sides, who've been raped and slaughtered and seen their children bayoneted! Or the women in prison right now in conditions where you'd be ashamed to keep your dog!'

I turned my fury onto Pluvinet. 'You're just as bad. If Marie-Anne Lavoisier loses her husband, her father and her fortune, then she's got to learn to look after herself, like ninety-nine out of a hundred women already do. She has the strength and intelligence to take anything she needs to know. You want to shelter her from knowing about the letter? What the hell do you propose to do when the blade falls on the tax farmers? You think you can keep that news from her forever?'

Pluvinet was stunned; he'd not seen me in full flow before. René had; he patted the other man's hand. 'Cheer up, Pluvinet, she's on our side. Just think what it'd be like if she was against us.'

*

While I waited for Marie-Anne, I looked again at that portrait of her and her husband. Now I knew them both better, I understood it better; she rested for support on him, and although she was interrupting him at his work he didn't mind because he loved her.

She joined me and made a fuss of Jacques, who was in a happy mood and gurgled at her. I gave her the letter from Monsieur, then studied the portrait again as she read it. 'Clever man, this painter,' I said when she finished.

'Jacques-Louis David is the greatest painter in France.'

I recognised the name; his painting of Marat after the assassination had been much admired in the faubourg-Antoine. In the picture here David had shown the same loving clear-sighted skill with Marie-Anne Lavoisier as he'd done with the martyred revolutionary; but I guessed that he hadn't much liked Monsieur. He'd shown the love, the wealth and the work, but the man in the portrait had a slightly pompous complacency surrounded by the tokens of his success. In my eye – and in David's too – his possessions made him look smaller than what he owned; they walled him in far more than did the walls of his prison.

'We thought it was worth every livre we paid him.'

'How many livres was that?'

'Seven thousand.'

I tried to imagine seven thousand livres, and failed until I thought of the horse Papa had bought at about the time this was painted: five hundred livres. So, fourteen horses: yes, I could imagine those.

'You look disapproving, Jeanne. But it's a very good picture.'

It was a very good horse.

'We were friends then,' she continued. 'I even studied under him. Now he's another who's turned against us.'

‘You think friends should stay loyal through thick and thin?’

‘I think they should. I know they don’t.’

‘You would, then? You’d not report a friend, no matter what they’d done?’

She spoke to Jacques as she bounced him up and down on her knee. ‘Your maman wants to ask me something, doesn’t she?’

‘Well, Jacques, ask your auntie Marie-Anne if she had a friend about eighteen months ago who was staying near the Spanish border.’

Her knee stopped bouncing. ‘Why does your maman want to know?’

‘Jacques, will you pull your auntie Marie-Anne’s hair until she answers my question?’

‘Would your maman report me if I said that I had a friend who was an émigrée?’

‘Tell your auntie Marie-Anne that those who have fled France have been conspiring against *la patrie* ever since the start of the Revolution, and they will suffer for it. But tell her also that I don’t condemn their friends who have stayed.’

‘So your maman wouldn’t report me just for that?’

‘No, I wouldn’t, Marie-Anne. Not even if she was writing treasonous letters to you.’

She looked up from Jacques and stared me straight in the eye. ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about.’

I looked back at her steadily. I just couldn’t tell whether she was lying or not; there were certainly none of the evasions, blushes and twitches of deceit that I’d have shown. ‘Marie-Anne, if you’re telling the truth, I’m delighted; long may you stay in ignorance. If you’re not, you’re making a huge mistake not to trust me.’

‘Truly, Jeanne, I do not understand you. I shan’t press you to explain, because I don’t want to know.’ With only my son pulling her hair rather than my father pulling her arms and legs off, I couldn’t take it any further.

As I worked my way happily through another of her magnificent déjeuners, and Jacques had his first taste of chocolate (he approved, though I knew Maman would not) we talked woman-talk; we knew each other well enough by now. I even got her to giggle over René’s first reaction to me.

‘Eleuthère Irénée du Pont,’ she said affectionately. ‘I’ve known him since he was a boy. I’ve been almost a mother to him since his own died. He’s grown up very like his father.’

‘He wants me to be his mistress.’

She wasn’t shocked. ‘Are you going to?’

‘No. I like him, but—’

‘You don’t find him attractive?’

‘I don’t find him single!’

‘It is known for men to have mistresses and women to have lovers.’

‘I’m not saying that I’d never commit adultery – who knows until they’re tempted? – but I’d have to love the man a lot more than I love René du Pont.’

She looked at me inquiringly. ‘Can I ask you something? Did you love Jacques’s father? You hardly ever mention him.’

‘I’m sorry he went to the guillotine, but that’s for his sake, not mine; I don’t miss him much. I had an arranged marriage with a man twice my age; it was as good as I could have expected.’

‘I too,’ she said quietly. ‘I had an arranged marriage with a man twice my age. And if he goes to the guillotine, I shall miss him very much indeed. I fell in love with him on our wedding day; I’ve been in love with him ever since.’ She said nothing for a moment, while I tried to do the arithmetic in my head. (He’s fifty now, so that means....) Then she laughed and interrupted my calculations. ‘Mind you, I’d have fallen in love with a clockwork automaton if it had done what he did for me.’

‘What happened?’ (I need one more number.)

‘I was just turning fourteen.’ (Easy, twenty-two years ago – when I wasn’t much older than Jacques.) ‘I was the daughter of a tax farmer, so I was a prize for some noble with more rank than money – that sort of thing happened in the Old Regime. I always knew I’d have an arranged marriage, but I wished that they’d arrange a marriage with someone other than the Compte d’Amerval. He was fifty, and ugly, and debauched and – oh, an ogre!’ she said, the memory obviously still fresh. ‘But he had powerful connections; my father was threatened with ruin if he

didn't consent.'

'It sounds like something from a play!'

'It was nearly a tragedy. My father decided to put it all out of the question by finding me someone else quickly. Antoine was young and single, with an honourable reputation; he had just joined the tax farm. He agreed, I agreed, everybody agreed, and we were married; and it was accepted as a *fait accompli*.'

'A happy ending, then.'

'A happy beginning. The ending – is that going to be happy?'

'This may not be much consolation to you, but even if it's unhappy it won't be painful for him. It wasn't for my husband.'

'At least your husband left you with Jacques. I envy you.'

'Well, I envy you, so we're even.'

'Don't. It's nothing, all this – the house, the seven thousand livre portrait, the berline, all the rest of it. When I watch you feed Jacques I envy you so much that my breasts ache.'

'I don't envy you your wealth; you're right, that's nothing. But when I watch your husband read your letters to him a dozen times before he has to burn them, I envy you so much that my toes curl.'

'Does he really?' She smiled, as he smiled when he thought of her. Then she laughed and asked teasingly, 'Would you exchange your baby for my husband?'

'Hmm. That's a tough question. On balance – no, I don't think so. Throw in the berline and I might think about it.'

*

I'd learned my lesson with Marie-Anne, and so I left Jacques with Maman when I faced Monsieur with the same question – no baby to provide a convenient distraction this time. And I took the place by the window before he could, so the light shone on his face rather than mine. 'Do you or your wife know anybody who lived about eighteen months ago near the Spanish border?' I asked bluntly. 'Don't fool about asking me why I want to know; just tell me the truth.'

'Very well. A friend of ours – and I shall certainly not tell you the name – fled France to Spain at much that time.'

'Did she write to you or your wife?'

'Not to me, nor to Marie-Anne to my knowledge.'

'I told you that I wouldn't do anything *inciviste*, and concealing correspondence with an émigrée is certainly *inciviste*; but I'll make an exception here. Do you know of any letters that might exist between this person and either you or your wife?'

'No.' I believed him. Indeed, in his presence I found it impossible not to believe him; I would sooner have doubted the Archangel Gabriel. 'What is the evidence that such correspondence exists?' he asked.

In a low voice I told him the story, omitting the details of how we'd scared it out of Fourcroy. He saw at once the implications that had taken René, Pluvinet and me days to work out. 'The seal of the Revolutionary Committee – that's easy to come by,' he said. 'It's an office where people leave things lying around in a most disorganised fashion,' he said in a manner that showed his contempt. 'But my seal?' He showed it to me. 'I keep it secure; I see no point in sealing something if the seal can be taken.'

'Tell me about the time when the packet was sealed.'

His story matched Fourcroy's almost exactly, except that he didn't describe how he'd been courteous.

'Did you look at every letter, one by one, as it was put in the packet?'

'Much to my regret, the answer is no. I recognised the pile, and thought my seal was sufficient security. This I now see to be an error. A grave error.' Because it allowed the possibility – in his mind as well as mine – that his wife had done something that at best could be called stupid, and at worst could be called treason.

'But on the other hand,' he continued, 'what you've told me has corrected another error in a

way that gives me great pleasure. I've held Fourcroy guilty of ingratitude if not outright betrayal. I am happy to learn that I was wrong.' He took paper and pen. 'Will you act as my messenger once more? I'd like to send this to him.'

As I stood by the window while he wrote, I felt the tax farmers' kitten against my ankle, so I picked her up. She snuggled into my cleavage as if seeking maternal comfort; her fur was soft and warm against my skin.

He finished his letter and brought it to me at the window so I could check that he'd written nothing *inciviste* or incriminating – it was only his letters to his wife that I didn't want to see before I carried them. 'This is most kind of you, Citoyenne.'

'Not kind. I'm not a kind person, Monsieur.'

He smiled as he looked at the kitten purring as I stroked her, and his regard brought a flush into my face. 'I think you could be,' he said in a tone I'd never heard from him before, soft and warm as the kitten I caressed.

Then he frowned and turned away abruptly, with his hand covering his face as if he'd had some thought or feeling that he didn't want. Neither of us spoke; I wanted to ask what the matter was, but he was obviously not going to tell me. He stepped away from me, and sat down with the air of a man who has just made a decision. He sealed the letter, and it was as if he was sealing off something else.

'How did you persuade Fourcroy to reveal what he'd done?' he asked in his usual cool and inquiring manner, very different from his previous voice. 'He is trusting his life to you.'

'There are some things that you don't want to know.'

'There is nothing that I don't want to know.' Knowledge was for him a passion greater than almost any other. 'Much as I value your efforts, if there is anything which you can't tell me about, then I don't want you to do it.'

'We – er, René du Pont and I – we borrowed a tumbrel from Papa, and then we took Citoyen Fourcroy for a ride along the route of the guillotine, and I told him what had been done to Damiens the assassin. My father was in charge of the torture – I'm sure you know the story. It made him vomit, and then it made him talk.'

'Ah.' There was a pause as he thought about it. Well, I'd told him I was not a kind person, hadn't I? 'I wonder what you count as breaking the law, Citoyenne, if you consider that kidnapping a Conventionnel and threatening to tear his limbs off is legal.'

'I did no such thing! I just – stimulated his imagination. I know you have a poor opinion of the imagination, but it is very powerful.'

'On the contrary, I have a high opinion of the imagination precisely because I know its power. I wrote the report of the investigation into Animal Magnetism; I've seen people faint and fall into convulsions, the result of nothing more than their imagination. And my own is strong.' I put the kitten down on one of the beds, where she went to sleep, then sat down. 'Very strong.' I wondered what he was imagining at that moment. 'But I also know that the imagination is seductive. It must be controlled by reason – something that lesser minds cannot do.'

'You must be the only person in the world who would consider that Citoyen Fourcroy has a lesser mind.' Perhaps he was entitled to, but all the same— 'Excessive humility is not one of your faults, is it?'

'Excessive civility is not one of yours. But if Fourcroy let his imagination work on him so powerfully that he vomited, then indeed I do consider that his mind was not as strong as I would have expected of him.'

'Don't despise a man merely because his body has its own demands. Does yours always do what you want?'

'I consider that my body is under the control of my reason, yes.'

His self-conceit goaded me too far. 'I've seen strong men vomit, piss themselves and go into convulsions – when they're in the tumbrel. Don't be sure you'll do any better,' I said, and then blushed with shame. 'My apologies. That was a dreadful thing to say even by my standards.'

'My apologies to you,' he said formally. 'It was my excessive lack of humility that provoked your excessive lack of civility.'

There was a stiff silence for a moment. Then he stood and picked up the bundle of mending

that was on the floor. ‘You are inconveniently efficient, Citoyenne; this is the last collection for you. I’ll have to creep round in the middle of the night cutting holes in everyone’s breeches.’

It was so ludicrous a picture that I couldn’t help giggling; the stiffness was over. I would never have thought that he could have come up with such an idea. This was a side of the cool and arrogant academician that few people knew, and it was as endearing as it was surprising.

‘I don’t need a reason to visit. None of the guards ever asks what I’m doing here; I come and go as I please. They’re a slack crew – I ought to report them. They never take any notice of me; I’m the same as the cleaners and cooks who work here. Nobody takes any notice of any of us.’ I looked at him for a moment. ‘What do you know about the person who keeps this room clean?’

‘She’s forty-five; she’s much shorter than you are; she’s lost her husband and most of her teeth; she was born in Dijon; she lives in the faubourg-Montmartre with her daughter-in-law while her son is fighting the Austrians; she’s worried about her daughter who’s in love with a married man— Is there anything else you’d like to know about her?’

‘Oh.’ I smiled at him. ‘I tell you, Monsieur, you’re a lot better than most of your fellow-pillagers. They wouldn’t notice if I grew another head.’

‘They’d notice that; we’re all rather conscious of heads at the moment. Another arm – perhaps not.’ He smiled back. ‘I’m glad you can continue to visit me easily; the breeches of my fellow-pillagers may stay intact.’ He sat down again to talk. ‘Citoyenne, to continue our conversation, what is the difference between the people who collapse with terror in the tumbrel and the ones who die bravely?’

He appeared remarkably comfortable, given that he had every chance of finding out the answer to that question himself. He was much more at ease than in his portrait, where he’d been sitting in a slightly contrived pose with one leg out. Now both legs were stretched out naturally, and I felt a very un-Republican pleasure that the fashion for the loose trousers of the sans-culottes hadn’t reached here; there’s a lot to be said for well-fitting breeches when a man has a good pair of legs.

‘You have no personal concern in the matter, of course,’ I said.

‘I just wonder,’ he said, and it really did appear as if he was just wondering. ‘I’d have thought that everyone would prefer to appear brave, and yet not everyone manages to. Is it weakness of will?’

‘No. I’ve known men of iron will who scream with terror in the tumbrel. It’s reasonable to fear death. A rational mind, a strong imagination, and a life that is worth continuing – it’s hard for someone with those qualities to be courageous on the scaffold.’ I paused; he could pick up my warning if he wanted to.

‘You do not believe that a strong mind will always control the body?’

‘No, I don’t. You think that yours would, don’t you?’

‘Yes, I do. I defer to your greater knowledge of executions, but grant me greater knowledge of myself.’

‘I hope we never discover which of us is right.’

‘Yes, that’s one discovery that I don’t want to make,’ he admitted. ‘But if it’s not strength of mind or will, what do you believe it is that allows some people to die bravely but not others?’ He stopped himself. ‘Citoyenne, if I am detaining you, I ask your pardon; please don’t feel obliged to stay. But I am fascinated by what you are telling me – and not only for my personal concern in the matter.’

I should go, I thought. I’ve left Jacques long enough. But his company was the most stimulating I’d ever experienced, and I didn’t want to leave it. ‘I’ll stay – I’m enjoying myself. You might think it odd to enjoy such a grim topic of conversation, but I’m far more used to it than I am to being treated as an equal by a genius.’

‘If you ever hear someone described as a genius who isn’t fascinated by new knowledge, then you may be sure that he’s been described wrongly. And if I ever fail to treat you as an equal, then you may rebuke me, not only for failing in good manners and republican egalitarianism, but for my lack of perception of your obvious qualities. Pride I certainly have, but it’s not the sort that can’t acknowledge other people’s abilities; and in this matter, as in many more, you are clearly my superior.’

I had been told how his disapproval could wither the spirit; nobody had mentioned how his

approval could make it bloom. Now I understood why Fourcroy, who disagreed with him on everything in politics and had found evidence that he was a traitor, had concealed it at the risk of his own head and in defiance of his principles. I suddenly realised that I might have done the same.

'I'll tell you what I can, but some of it is only relating what the men of my family have told me; I don't go to the scaffold myself.'

'Your father's the expert, of course, and I'd like to meet him one day, but in the mean time you are a very acceptable substitute.' No other man facing trial in the Reign of Terror could have expressed a desire to meet my father without thinking of what it could mean; he was indeed interested in the knowledge for its own sake.

'In one way I may be more expert than Papa. When he prepares people – and when I used to prepare people for my husband – it's to save trouble for the executioner. But when I was in prison myself, and people were coming in and out almost daily to be killed by the Royalists, I learned how to help them for their own sakes. From the point of view of the executioner there's not much difference between someone who walks quietly to the scaffold out of numb obedience and someone who does it out of dignified courage. But there's a world of difference from their own. I think that someone's last hour should be a good one.'

'Are you sure that you're not a kind person? That seems like great kindness to me.'

'Oh, no. It was my way of carrying on the fight. Every time I sent someone out to die bravely, I counted it as a victory. I had only one defeat, in my first week. After that I knew what it was that let people face death, and I knew how to help them to find it.'

'Very well, then; what is it?'

'It's not the same for everyone; it varies. We all have something, somewhere inside us that helps us to die – after all, we're all going to do it one day. Some people discover it, and other people don't.'

'Such as?'

'Well, a lot of people console themselves if they have a future in some sense.' I counted things off on my fingers. 'Their children, for example. My husband did; his last words were, "Courage, Jeanne, for the sake of our baby." The belief that one is dying in a good cause to bring a better future – that helped many of the revolutionaries in prison with me. The afterlife: priests and nuns often die bravely, helping the others in the tumbrel with them. Or the reputation that will live on: Papa is sure that some people are thinking of their last words so they go down to posterity. Madame Roland didn't come up with a line like, "Oh, Liberty, what crimes are committed in your name!" on the spur of the moment.'

'And if they cannot console themselves with the future? Does the past suffice?'

Was there a personal concern in the question? He had no children, he'd die in a very unworthy cause, and I hadn't the slightest idea of his views on the afterlife. But surely he knew that his reputation would live on. 'Not usually, except in old age. If the past life was good, people don't want to leave it prematurely; if it was bad, they feel cheated. Papa finds it strange that those whose life is most tedious and plodding often seem to regret losing it more than others who have most reason for caring for theirs.'

'What about the present?'

'Yes, that works sometimes: wine, women and song.'

'Indeed? You surprise me.'

'Papa's assistants often have to carry people up the steps because they're too drunk to walk, and men can usually forget death in a woman's arms. As for song; did you hear how the Girondins died? They sang the Marseillaise while waiting their turn at the scaffold, and it became quieter and quieter as one voice was stilled after another until there was only one voice left.' That had been another bad day for Papa.

'I can understand wine and song, but women? To be blunt, I find it hard to believe that a man could be capable in the circumstances.'

'Oh, yes. The brothels are always full on the eve of a battle. In my prison, men and women were not separated, and many of them became even less separated in their last hours; sometimes married couples, sometimes complete strangers. And I've heard that even in the Conciergerie men and women seek consolation together.'

‘I’ll have to take your word for it; I can’t imagine myself seeking such consolation.’

‘The body has its own truths, Monsieur; it knows to try to create life in the face of death, even when the mind knows that there is no chance of success.’

He was clearly struck by this. ‘I can understand that. It is untrue to think that the mind and the body are completely separate. There is no sharp division between them, and they work together. But the mind must be the one that makes the decisions. Can the body be right where the mind is wrong?’

‘Yes, it can; I know it from my own experience. I gave birth while I was hiding in the middle of a battle between the Royalists and the Republicans, and we knew that if the Royalists heard us they would come and kill us: me, the woman who was helping me, and my baby. When Jacques was born, he did what babies always do: cry. I couldn’t keep him quiet. From the purely rational point of view, I should have stifled him: he’d die anyway, and I and the other woman would die too. But I didn’t even think of it. My body told me to protect my baby at all costs, and it was right. The Republicans won, and all three of us lived.’

He might have expressed sympathy or horror; he didn’t. He was as dispassionate about my personal concerns as he was about his own. ‘You’re right. Mother love is an exception – and just as well; few of us would be here if our mothers had been purely rational about it, when you consider what pains we give them. I grant you that.’

‘And I grant you that it’s often better if the mind does control the body, even in mother love. You talked about the pains; believe me, the pains of childbirth are very great. I knew in my mind when I was in labour that if I screamed it would bring the Royalists in to kill us, and yet my body had to scream. It was very hard to control it.’

‘How did you do it?’

I had an idea – I’d show him that his mind couldn’t control his body all the time. ‘Do you promise not to laugh if I tell you?’

‘Of course.’

‘If you laugh, you will break your promise; your mind is fully aware of that?’

‘Certainly. Tell me, then: how did you control your screams?’

‘I breathed deeply and recited the *Table of Simple Substances*.’

His hand shot up to cover his face, and his body gave one mighty convulsion – but silently. Then he breathed deeply several times, shook himself, and took his hand away. ‘You see, Citoyenne,’ he said, his lips quivering only slightly. ‘The mind can control the body.’

‘Deep breathing helps, doesn’t it?’

‘I shall bear it in mind,’ he said solemnly.

‘So does the *Table of Simple Substances*.’

He shook slightly, but he didn’t even snort. ‘Oh, that’s not fair! I passed the test first time; don’t try me again.’ He glanced at me, and I caught what in any other person I’d have described as a mischievous expression; he was planning to retaliate, and I wondered what he’d do. The idea of Antoine-Laurent Lavoisier being mischievous seemed as unlikely as God playing skittles, but there it was. I was learning a great deal about him in this visit.

He was looking at me speculatively with a slight smile, and now I discovered something else about him: fifty years old though he might be, he was still an attractive man. Not in the handsome way of René du Pont, but I could imagine what he was like at twenty-eight when he’d rescued Marie-Anne from an ogre; she would have been overwhelmed by him. But I’d better not tell him so; his opinion of himself was high enough already.

He said nothing, just continued to look at me and smile. Very attractive, I thought, and felt myself blushing.

I saw his smile change to one of triumph. ‘Oh, now you’re being unfair!’ I cried indignantly. ‘And it’s beneath you. Making me blush is no great achievement.’

‘To do it without saying a word is no small one,’ he said with an intolerable air of self-congratulation.

I had to fight back. ‘It’s easier for you. When you want to conceal your feelings, all you do is cover your face with your hand.’

‘I don’t!’ he protested.

‘Yes, you do. Like this.’ I copied the gesture I’d seen him make.

He copied my copy, then put his hand down again. ‘So I do! I’ve never noticed. I’ll stop doing it.’

I’m going to make you do it again in the next ten minutes, I vowed. He’d beaten me easily in the game of intellectual shuttlecock we’d played before, because he knew more chemistry than I did, but this one I’d win. He believed that the mind ought to control the body; I knew that it rarely could. I had the advantage this time. ‘It’s as revealing as my blushes,’ I said, making my opening play. ‘You might as well wave a flag saying “I’m concealing something”.’

‘I wonder what it was that you were trying to conceal,’ he mused.

‘I’d prefer to keep it concealed.’

The expression on his face told me that he was determined to find out. No, you won’t, you arrogant self-congratulatory bastard, I thought. I wouldn’t reveal it to you if I’d been thinking about the time of day, let alone that I found you attractive.

‘So it seems that you were right, Citoyenne, when you said that the body has its own truths,’ he said in his usual cool manner. ‘Our bodies – yours and mine, at least – take strong objection to our telling lies.’ If that was an attempt at getting me to reveal what I didn’t want to, then it was a feeble one.

I would take a slower approach, and choose my moment carefully. ‘Do you envy people who can lie successfully?’

‘Not at all. It means that they have no love for the truth. That’s not something to envy.’

‘Nevertheless, it would be very convenient to be able to lie sometimes.’

‘I grant that, but in order to be able to do so successfully, one needs practice; one needs to lie all the time.’ He looked at me, and I was forewarned that another attack was coming. ‘Mind you, there’s something to be said for not advertising the fact that one is trying to conceal something, as you and I do. And not only a lie; sometimes it is emotions that one wants to conceal.’

Pitiful, pitiful, I thought. ‘Indeed.’ He was fishing; he wouldn’t catch anything.

‘Or the recollection of embarrassing errors.’

No luck there, Monsieur. ‘You mean the ones that make you wake up in the middle of the night hot and sweating with shame?’ I suggested, but I missed too. No success either side so far. I recalled that something had struck him early on in this visit, and had made him cover his face; what had it been?

‘Thoughts that one might not want to have,’ he tried.

He’d been writing a letter to Fourcroy, and then sealing it. Oh, no! I thought in dismay: he couldn’t have been lying all the time about that sealed package, could he? I picked up the letter that he’d written and played with it idly. ‘Or secrets, perhaps.’

He made no reaction, which relieved me considerably; I wouldn’t have wanted to win the game at that cost. So what else had it been? I’d been stroking that kitten.

‘Opinions of another person that one doesn’t want that person to know about,’ he said as I stood up to pick her up from the bed. This was unfortunate – the fact that I’d turned away made him think he was getting close, which he was.

We both waited until I turned back to face him holding her; no cheating either side. ‘Unfavourable ones, you mean?’ I asked. Like the opinion that someone is an arrogant self-congratulatory bastard, I thought as I stroked her as I’d done before.

‘Or perhaps too favourable?’ he suggested quietly as he watched me.

And I began to blush. I cursed myself, and I cursed him, but I couldn’t help it.

He noticed; he understood. He put his hand to his face. He realised what he was doing, looked at his hand, then at my blush, then back at his hand.

We both burst out laughing together, and carried on laughing, and every time we looked at each other we laughed again. It was an even game.

He managed to control himself first, of course. ‘Oh, what a happy sound that is within these walls!’ he said. ‘If I brought you comfort in your imprisonment, you have more than repaid me in mine.’

‘I’d never have imagined that one could get such amusement from the *Table of Simple Substances*.’

He burst out laughing again. I had him!

‘You broke your promise!’ I crowed in triumph. ‘You lost!’

‘Oh, I did, I did!’ he cried, throwing his head back and laughing louder. ‘And I’d never have imagined that one could get such amusement from admitting defeat.’

I put the kitten back on the bed; she’d served her purpose. I could go home victorious. But I suddenly had a very unpleasant thought.

‘What’s the matter?’ he asked, still laughing.

There was no point in trying to conceal it. ‘I’ve just realised how my neighbours in the faubourg-Antoine would act if I revealed that I had too favourable an opinion of a tax farmer.’

He stopped laughing instantly. ‘You must not visit me any more.’ I could see from his dismay that he would feel the loss; was it for me or the letters I bore?

‘Since the opinion will continue whether I come or not, I might as well get some pleasure out of it in your company.’

He put his hand to his face, and did not take it away. ‘I don’t want you to come. I’ll find another way to exchange letters with my wife.’

‘Very well, I shall not come. If, that is, you will tell me that you want me to stay away because you don’t get pleasure in my company, rather than because you’re concerned for my safety.’

‘I—’

‘Uncover your face and tell me the truth. Tell me that you have no need of me, and I’ll stay away.’

He dropped his hand. ‘You were right. It would be convenient to lie at this moment, and for your safety I very much wish that I could. But I can’t. You know how much I love my wife, so you know that this is no disloyalty to her; but if your visits ceased I would miss your company even more than I would miss her letters.’

‘That’s a high value indeed. I shall continue.’

‘But – Citoyenne, I must have your promise that you will come only for your pleasure, not for my need. I insist on this.’

‘Very well, Monsieur.’ It was an easy promise to make – knowing that I was needed by him was a pleasure in itself.

The pleasure stayed with me all the rest of the day, and had my family and my neighbours commenting how cheerful I looked, and sent me to bed with a smile. But as I fell asleep, I seemed to hear his voice say, ‘There must be an equality.’

I sat up in bed, dismayed with what I’d let myself drift into: his need for me had created in me a need for him. In Paris in the spring of the Reign of Terror, the Republic did not need tax farmers – and neither should I.

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Part 2: Oxygen

The atmospheric air is composed of two gases,... one of which is capable, by respiration, of contributing to animal life, and in which metals are calcinable and combustible bodies may burn; the other, on the contrary, is endowed with directly opposite qualities.... We have given to the base of the former, or respirable portion of the air, the name of oxygen.

A-L Lavoisier

The Elements of Chemistry

Eleuthère Irénée du Pont de Nemours? I thought as I looked at the name on the letter Monsieur had given me. Nobody's called Eleuthère Irénée du Pont de Nemours. I didn't feel capable of meeting someone with such an imposing name. Besides, I'd had an idea about how to approach Pierre Rose about my courtyard.

I went back home and waited for him to return from his work at the Arsenal until I heard his jaunty whistle. 'Pierre,' I said as I waylaid him. 'Will you spare a moment? I want your advice.'

'Of course.'

'You've been here longer than I have, so you know the place better than I do.' Flattery to male pride; that's the way. 'You know you said that I was to over-charge the tax farmers? Well, look what they've given me, just for one bundle of mending!' I showed him.

'That's generous!' he exclaimed, then remembered his sans-culotte sympathies. 'I mean, well done for screwing the rich *bougres*.'

'I'll have plenty more work from them; I could make quite a lot of money.'

'Good for you! What are you going to do with it?'

'With the way that prices are going up all the time, I want to invest the money in improving this property. I'll charge more when a new tenant comes in, but for an old one like you it'll stay the same.'

'Very good. How can I help?'

'What's your advice on what improvement I should make first?'

He looked up at the rotting window frames and the peeling plaster, but it had been another hot day, and I had manoeuvred us close to the crack in the cess pit; it wasn't a difficult choice. He pointed downwards. 'Get this fixed. It shouldn't stink like this, and it's dangerous. One day it will collapse and someone will fall in; I can think of no worse way to die than in a cess pit.'

'Hmm. I could do that, though I'd have to have it cleaned out first. But is there much point if the rest of the yard is left filthy?'

'Well, get that cleaned too.'

'I don't know. There are the other landlords and owners to think about.'

'Ask 'em. And if they say no, we'll get the rest of the tenants on them.'

'Would the tenants themselves stop throwing rubbish around? It would have to be something that everyone agrees to.'

'I think people will agree – if that woman Evrard doesn't raise any stupid objections.'

'Thank you, Pierre,' I said, smiling at him. 'I knew I could rely on you.'

So this was diplomacy! No need to lie, no need to threaten. Just a spoonful of suggestion, a pinch of flattery, and a bucket of understanding of what people wanted.

The café was unusually quiet after last evening's fury; I thought it was just exhaustion until I overheard someone explaining to the Lucky Sailor what had happened that day. Some revolutionaries whom we'd always thought on our side, almost as much as Danton and Robespierre themselves, had been arrested; they would face trial and possible execution as enemies of the people. Many of Constance's customers had been their friends and supporters, and there was unease and confusion all around.

'But if such men as these can face trial, then who can avoid it?' asked the Lucky Sailor. Nobody answered him.

Time for my new-found diplomatic skill. In the belief that it was a good opportunity to give

everyone something else to talk about, I raised the issue of the courtyard.

'Of course we should get it cleaned up,' said Constance. 'We'll raise it at the next Section meeting.'

'We should consult the other landlords first,' said Pierre.

'What need to ask a bunch of property-owners?'

Everyone joined in with relief; it would get nobody into trouble to argue about whether to consult the landlords before or after the Section meeting.

'But shall I go ahead with getting the cess pit cleaned?' I asked in a moment when not everybody was shouting at once.

'Of course, Jeanne,' said Constance, then turned to Pierre, pointing her knitting needles at him viciously. 'Make the bastard landlords pay!'

'Naturally,' said Pierre at the same time, then shook his spoon in her face. 'You can't call a good sans-culotte like Jeanne a bastard!'

The debate raged on; diplomacy in the faubourg-Antoine could sometimes get very noisy.

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Next morning, Jacques was fretful for some reason, so I took him to Maman's for her advice. 'He's teething,' she said promptly. 'You'll have to wean him.' I didn't want to; it was cutting a link between us that I loved. Maman saw my expression. 'He'll bite your nipples to shreds otherwise.'

'I won't mind.'

'Say that the first time he does it! I know it's not easy. Take your time, so he gets used to it.' She was much more concerned with him than me. She had brought me and my brothers up strictly, suppressing our feelings and hers; now in the role of grandmother she could indulge herself.

'How long will it take?'

'A week, a month; whatever suits you both. Start right now.' She wanted to take Jacques for a few hours each morning, and it would be convenient. There might be times in my mission to save Monsieur that a small baby would not be a great help.

I felt slightly desolate as I left my son with his grandmother, and my breasts were already uncomfortably full. I chided myself; this was all part of being a mother.

I decided to tackle Eleuthère Irénée du Pont de Nemours. There were two addresses on the envelope. The first was the printing house which he managed; I didn't want to conduct a conspiracy in the din of a printery, so I went straight round to the second.

He lived in an apartment on the first floor of a building in a moderately good area, and he opened his own door when I knocked. Tall, about my age, his hair was unpowdered, and he wore the tightly-fitting pantalons and boots of a fashionable young man, rather than the breeches of the rich or the loose baggy trousers of the working man. He was also, I noticed, rather handsome.

I took a deep breath. 'Citoyen Eleuthère Irénée du Pont de Nemours?'

'Well, yes. But I prefer to be called René du Pont.' That was a relief.

He was flustered, and I wondered why until I saw where he was looking. Well, they were enormously full, and I had just taken a deep breath. 'When you can tear your eyes away from my tits, perhaps you'll read this.' I handed him Monsieur's letter.

He blushed as he opened it. So much for a careful inspection of the seal, I thought. It didn't take him long to read, and then he looked at me in perplexity. 'You are Citoyenne Jeanne Berger?' he asked incredulously.

'I am, and I don't want to hang around your front door any longer.'

'Oh, I am forgetting my manners. Please come in, Citoyenne; let me get you something to eat or drink.' The place bore the marks of a man whose wife was away: china ornaments left undusted, a bunch of flowers so dried up the petals crackled, and a comfortable clutter of boots, papers and empty plates. But the coffee he brought me was good, and the brioches were fresh and buttery.

'Have you read what's in this letter?'

'Yes. I don't carry sealed letters unless I know what's in them,' I said, then amended it in the grip of truth. 'Not usually, anyway.'

'He says you will be useful in our project.' He looked at me doubtfully. 'Are we talking about

the same project?'

'I am talking about saving Monsieur Antoine-Laurent Lavoisier from the guillotine. What are you talking about?'

'Exactly the same, Citoyenne, but— Well, you'll pardon me, but you seem an unlikely ally of a tax farmer.'

'That's why I'll be a good one. Even a sans-culotte can think that *la patrie* will be better served if his head stays on his shoulders.'

He jumped up and began to pace the room, waving his hands enthusiastically. 'Oh, yes! He has a superb mind: the finest that France has produced. Better than Descartes, better than Voltaire ...' I was content to eat his brioches as he told me all the other famous Frenchmen that Monsieur was better than. 'And a great man! Consider his achievements: his contribution in creating the metric system, his work in agriculture, economics, education ...' While he spouted on, I hunted for the last crumbs; starting to wean Jacques hadn't stopped my voracious appetite. 'And when the history of chemistry comes to be written, everything before his work will be so much rubbish!' He finally ran out of praise and I ran out of brioche.

'He's also very kind.'

'Kind?' He looked confounded.

'He was kind to me when I was a young girl.'

'Kind?' he said again, turning the word over like an interesting new mineral. 'It's not a word that's usually associated with him. Inspiring, even generous; but not kind.'

'All I know is what he did for me, and that's why I'm repaying it.'

'I too, Citoyenne; he gave me my love of chemistry and found me my first position in the Gunpowder Commission. My father is his best friend.'

'Your father?'

'Pierre du Pont de Nemours; he owes Monsieur Lavoisier a lot.' I should have recognised the name earlier; the young man was from a far more aristocratic origin than he appeared (not unusual in the Revolution, of course).

'Is he doing anything for our project?'

'He can't afford to; as a former noble he must stay out of Paris or his own head's in danger. My wife's with him,' he said, making his marital status clear to a young widow.

'Who else is involved? Though I'll tell you what I told Monsieur: if you're planning to help him escape from prison or something like that, I don't want to know.'

'I shan't tell you any names without the person's consent, Citoyenne; you'll understand my caution.'

'Well, what have your efforts been so far?'

'For one thing, we're trying to find exactly what the charges against the tax farmers are, but they are apparently a state secret – we've had no success. But we have persuaded representatives from the many committees Lavoisier used to be on to write letters on his behalf: the Committee on Weights and Measures, the one on the currency, Arts and Crafts, Gunpowder, and so on. All to no effect.'

'How many of them are good Jacobins? They're the people with power; their support is far more important.'

He sat down. 'There's one very good Jacobin; he used to be like that—' he twisted two fingers together '—with him: Fourcroy.'

'I've heard of him.' It was his public lecture that my brothers and their tutor had attended, the one that had sparked off my interest in oxygen theory; now he was a member of the Convention.

'He could really do something; he's one of the most influential people in the Committee of General Instruction. There are plenty of others who owe Lavoisier gratitude and haven't repaid it, either from cowardice or politics, but he's the worst ingrate.'

'Do you know why?'

'He's turned Maratist.'

'Citoyen du Pont, I may have missed events recently, having been in a Royalist prison, but I think I'd have heard if Marat had risen from the grave.' Marat – the Friend of the People – had been stabbed to death in his bath the year before. Constance was a relation of his wife. Papa had

final dealings with his assassin.

'He might as well have done. Long before the Revolution, Marat was rejected for membership of the Academy of Sciences; he never forgave them, nor Lavoisier, who represented all the humiliation he'd suffered in the Old Regime. Marat claimed grand theories and great experiments on the nature of fire to prove that a candle flame in a closed container goes out because hot air pressed on it.' He paused for a moment and smiled patronisingly at me. 'I ask your pardon, Citoyenne: I talk matters of science that are beyond you.'

I gave a silent expression of gratitude to Monsieur for my ability to reply in my sweetest tones, 'No need to ask pardon, Citoyen du Pont, I understand. You mean that Marat was trying to put the old phlogiston theory into a new guise, and took no account of the properties of oxygen?'

I have said few things in my life that have given me greater satisfaction. The expression on his face was comical: here I was, a female sans-culotte with big tits, who'd given a better summary of the position than he had. I could almost see the wheels in his mind change direction as he re-evaluated me.

'Well – er – yes – that's – I see that I don't need to – to—'

'I imagine that Monsieur disagreed with Marat's position.'

'Yes – er – he—'

'And no doubt expressed his view forcefully.'

'Ah, now I know why you call him kind: you have never received one of his rebukes,' he said, recovering himself. 'He expresses his views precisely, logically and courteously, as if it's not worth his while to get annoyed with lesser mortals.'

'Oh, dear.' Yes, I could picture Monsieur doing it – it would be deadly. 'I imagine that Marat took it badly.'

'Indeed he did: Lavoisier could hardly move without being denounced. Of course, when the tax farmers built the wall round Paris, Marat led the attack.'

'Now you talk nonsense. Parisians didn't need Marat to tell them to hate the wall. What was Monsieur thinking of when he had it built?'

'He was trying to regulate the finances of— Citoyenne, we'll be here all day on the subject of the tax farmers' wall. It's not something we'll ever agree on.'

'True. Tell me more about Marat.'

'Not much to tell. He attacked Lavoisier and the Academy of Sciences till the day he died. The Academy was closed last year, and Lavoisier won no friends in his last-ditch defence of it. The attacks were continued by Marat's successors, and Fourcroy is one of them; he took over Marat's seat in the Convention after he was assassinated. What I can't understand is why a man of Fourcroy's excellence in science can't see that Marat wrote nonsense.'

'In science, perhaps, but not in politics. I can understand it very well. People such as me and Conventionnel Fourcroy – we put Monsieur's science in one pan of the balance, and his tax farming in the other. For me, the weight comes down one side, but I'm not going to blame a man if in his scales it's the other. I have Monsieur's kindness to me to add to my balance.'

'So does Fourcroy. The Lavoisiers gave him a lot of help when he was a young and struggling chemist; he's from a poor background, and he needed all the help he could get in the Old Regime.'

'Hmm. I wonder if it's worth trying him again, the two of us. You talk the science and I'll talk the politics.'

'It might be. I'll see if I can get an appointment with him – he's a busy man.'

'And there's a chance that the developments in the Convention may help us.'

'What do you mean?'

Now it was my turn to be patronising, and I blessed Constance's customers for my political education. 'If Danton and his allies win the battle that's going on, they'll end the Reign of Terror.'

'Yes, that's true,' he said, brightening up.

'On the other hand, if they don't, then it'll get worse under Robespierre, so we'd better not count on it. What else are you doing?'

'We're investigating the investigators. The commission in charge of looking at the tax farmers' accounts is led by a man called Antoine Dupin; we're finding out about him and the other commissioners to see if there's any way to influence them.'

‘You mean, to bribe or blackmail them?’

He shrugged. ‘It’s a possibility – but you probably don’t want to know about it.’

I wondered how far I would go for Monsieur. Bribery and blackmail? Well— perhaps. If all else failed – if somebody else did it – if it wasn’t thrust under my nose. ‘Anything else I can know about?’

‘No, Citoyenne, that’s all.’

I told him how to get a message to me, and prepared to go. He didn’t stand up as I rose, but sat there surveying me, his feet outstretched lazily. ‘I wonder if Monsieur Lavoisier is losing his eyesight,’ he said with a smile.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Very clever, very republican, very rude. He missed something: very attractive.’

‘Monsieur Lavoisier loves his wife,’ I said coldly.

‘I love mine, but I have eyes – and other things.’

‘He has one thing you don’t have: honour.’ I went to stand between his outstretched legs, glowering down at him. ‘See here, Citoyen Eleuthère Irénée du Pont de Nemours. If I find out you’re breaking the law, I’ll denounce you. If you try to make me your mistress, I’ll kick you in the balls. Can we work together or not?’

Still smiling, he held up his hands in submission. ‘Yes, Citoyenne Jeanne Berger, I think we can.’

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The cleaning of the cess pit had a symbolism to my neighbours that escaped me. I thought of it as just shovelling shit, but to them it was the beginning of a new pride in the street. All the other landlords and property owners had agreed to pay their share; those inclined not to had received a hint about their *incivisme* from Constance and had changed their minds.

‘I’ll take the day off work,’ said Pierre the evening before it was due to be cleaned. ‘You’ll fill in for me, won’t you?’ he asked the Lucky Sailor, who nodded.

‘How can you do that?’ exclaimed Constance. ‘You, a gunpowder maker, neglecting your duty to work for our soldiers!’

‘I reckon I’m due one extra day off a month.’

‘If you were a good patriot, you wouldn’t take the ones you’re given.’

‘Listen to her! That’s a boss talking!’ (Constance’s status as an employer rested on the thin shoulders of a fifteen-year-old kitchen maid.) ‘It’s the bosses who benefit from the new Revolutionary calendar, I reckon.’ Here he got nods of approval from all the journeymen. ‘In the old days, we got Sundays off, right? One day off in seven. With the new thirty-day month, we only get one day off in ten. So if I take an extra day every month, that evens things up, eh?’ Constance found it hard to argue with such arithmetic, and she was wavering, until he handed her some more ammunition by saying, ‘Besides, you’ll need a man around the place to help.’

In the morning, the courtyard was full of people; even my mother, who had volunteered to look after Jacques while I took charge of the cleaning, decided to stay to watch the proceedings. The two cess pit cleaners arrived with their cart and bins to a welcome which surprised them; the odour of their trade hung around them and tended to put off such demonstrations. ‘Everybody wants the job done,’ said the bigger of the two men. ‘But nobody wants to have anything to do with the men who do it.’ Maman and I exchanged glances – that was much what people thought about executioners.

Even the bigger of the two wasn’t much of a size, and the smaller was tiny; he looked as if he’d never had a decent meal in his life. More than likely, I reflected: no-one one would do his job unless they were starved into it – executioners are at least paid better than cess pit cleaners. They were surprised that the cess pit was half empty; cleaning them caused such a disgusting smell that most people waited until they were full – or overflowing.

I’d thought the reek was bad already, but it was nothing compared to the gut-turning stench once the cover was taken off; everyone drew back as if they’d been pushed. The men put their ladder down into the hole and lowered a bin on the end of a rope; the small man climbed down with

a spade. How can he do that? I wondered.

For a few moments nothing seemed to happen. Then we heard the bigger man shout to his companion down the hole, ‘Are you all right?’ Then he called his name, with increasing desperation. ‘Come up! Come up now!’

‘What’s the matter?’ I called.

‘He’s passed out! There must be some sort of poisonous fumes down there, and he’s passed out!’ Poisonous fumes! The courtyard emptied suddenly. Maman grabbed Jacques from me and carried him away as fast as her sixty-year-old legs could run.

But I had to stay; this was my responsibility. Pierre brushed past me and ran to the hole; with unbelievable courage he started down the ladder. ‘No, Pierre!’ I shouted, and Constance beside me called even louder to stop him. But we couldn’t. The other cess pit cleaner had stayed by his post outside the hole; he too tried to stop Pierre, but he was no match for Pierre’s size.

Constance and I stood in the reek of the courtyard chewing our nails, while the cess pit cleaner leaned over the hole to try to help Pierre up with his mate. Then he shouted in dismay. ‘He’s passed out too.’ He ran over to us, tears streaking his filthy face. ‘We must cover it up!’ he cried, agony in every word. ‘If we don’t cover it, the fumes will escape and kill us all.’

‘But you can’t leave them down there!’ Constance cried, horrified.

‘What else can we do? He’s my brother – you think I want to leave him to die?’

Suddenly I knew what to do. I could see in my mind the letter from Monsieur, all those years ago, explaining the principles on which I now acted. ‘We don’t have to cover it,’ I said. ‘The fumes won’t escape – indeed, there are no poisonous fumes.’

‘What’s killing my brother then, you stupid cow?’

‘He’s being suffocated, not poisoned. There’s no oxygen down there.’

Constance and the cleaner stared at me blankly; they had no idea what oxygen was, and this wasn’t the time for a lecture on the behaviour of gases in enclosed spaces. With a lurching feeling in my stomach, I knew that I had to be a heroine.

‘Get me a length of pipe,’ I said to them, hoping that they’d find something useful in all the junk that was lying around. ‘Quick as you can – every second counts.’ I went to the open hole; the stench was so foul that I felt I was swimming against it.

There wasn’t much light into the pit, just enough to show me the top of Pierre’s body slumped against the ladder. He must have known what was happening to him and tried to climb out – but too late. This is only what I clean from Jacques several times a day, I told myself to control my nausea. Just a lot more of it.

I started to climb down the ladder as Constance came running with the pipe, the cleaner following her. ‘Jeanne! No! Don’t make it three!’ she cried.

‘I know what I’m doing, Constance,’ I said, hoping that I did. ‘I’ll be perfectly safe, just as long as you hold the pipe steady; one end up above the surface, the other end down to me so I can breathe through it.’

‘But the poisonous fumes—’

‘There are no poisonous fumes. Trust me, Constance; I’m trusting you with my life here. You’ve got to hold this pipe or there will be three of us.’

I took a deep breath of that horrible – but oxygen-ful – air and descended into the noisome pit. I couldn’t get far down the ladder because Pierre’s body was in the way. I’d have to jump. Monsieur, I hope your theories are right or I swear I’ll never speak to you again, I thought as I stepped off the ladder. I landed waist-deep in the noxious ooze, and almost vomited as mephitic bubbles rose to the surface and filth splashed my face.

Constance, brave and trusting Constance, let down the pipe that meant life to me and the two men. I tried to get Pierre’s mouth to the end of the pipe, but of course that didn’t work; he’d still be breathing the oxygen-less air down here. I’d better breathe myself. I put my mouth to the end of the pipe using my hands to form a crude seal; I breathed in through my mouth, and out through my nose. The air was so foul, especially the first breath, that I gagged, but I kept on breathing. I couldn’t tell whether I was breathing oxygen in with the air; I had to trust the theory. Fine time to conduct an experiment.

The bursting in my lungs seemed to clear, and I wasn’t feeling dizzy. There was enough light

for me to untie the rope round the handle of the bin that had been let down there. I took a breath, then wrapped it round Pierre's body. Another breath, and I could tie a knot. Another breath, and I checked that it was firm. 'Pull him up!' I shouted to the man at the top of the hole.

But Pierre was a big man, and the cleaner was small. I tried to support the weight, but I couldn't do it, and the pipe was in the way. 'Constance, you'll have to put the pipe down and give a hand pulling on the rope.' Then, at her obvious reluctance: 'Do it, Constance!' The rope tightened as they pulled, and I reached down into the ooze and pushed from below, and I tried to remember everything I'd ever learned about diffusion of oxygen. I was feeling tightness in my lungs and there was a roaring in my ears that seemed to send a hammer in my brain. 'Send down the pipe, Constance!' I yelled. She had to drop the rope to do so, and I could breathe the disgusting, life-giving air from the world above the cess pit. I don't know how long it took – for ever, it seemed. But eventually I could see that Pierre's head was above the top of the hole. 'Take the rope off and let him breathe!' I shouted as he was pulled over the edge.

The rope snaked down again. Now for the cleaner. I could see him, his head barely above the level of the foulness where he'd slipped against the wall of the pit; at least he hadn't drowned in the filth. This time it was easier; he was lighter, and we'd had the practice. At last I could begin my own climb up the ladder.

The air at the top, foul though I'd thought it before, was sweet in my lungs as I collapsed reeking. For a long time I lay flat on my back, staring at the rectangle of blue sky above the high, narrow houses around the courtyard, singing in my head the praises of oxygen. Beautiful oxygen, I can't see you, I can't smell you, I can't taste you, but I know you're here, and I love you.

Eventually I could take note of my surroundings. People were cautiously coming back into the courtyard, and I heard shouts of acclaim, though from a prudent distance. On one side of me, the bigger cleaner was bent over the body of his brother, patting his hand – but it was futile. The little man had had too many minutes without oxygen, and too many years without food.

Then I became aware of Pierre and Constance. Ignoring the stink in the air, the gobbets on the courtyard around them, the tragedy beside them, me, the people gathering about us, and the filth that covered them both, they were falling in love. He was on all fours breathing heavily, but he lifted his hand to her face as she knelt beside him and gently stroked her cheek; and she took his hand and kissed it. They stood up together, still holding hands, still staring at each other. 'Pierre,' she said wonderingly. 'I thought you were dead.'

'I would have been, but for you.'

With a little help, I thought. But I didn't begrudge them what they'd found. They'd both been braver than I, because I'd known what I was doing and they hadn't, and they'd still done it.

'Jeanne, get clean this minute,' said my mother. 'What a filthy mess this is!' She sniffed. But she would never intimidate me again with that sniff, because I saw in her face her relief that she hadn't lost me as she'd lost Gabriel; I'd come out of the pit alive.

We were heroes in the café that evening. 'How did you know what to do?' I was asked. Now did seem the right time for a lecture on oxygen theory and the behaviour of gases in enclosed spaces, and Constance's glasses and bowls were put to use demonstrating.

'Why doesn't that always happen?' someone asked me. 'You'd have thought that cess pit cleaners were aware of the risk.'

'I don't know.' But I knew who would. Seizing my chance to win him friends among the sans-culottes, I said, 'This was one of Lavoisier's discoveries, by the way.'

'See, I told you that France has better use for him than chopping his head off,' said Pierre.

'After the way he imprisoned Paris with his wall? I'd shove him in the cess pit and close the cover!' cried Constance.

The argument was on again. But somehow it lacked conviction when she was sitting on his lap and he was nibbling her ear.

*

The tax farmers were gathered round a table as I'd first seen them, but this time they weren't looking at accounts. When my cousin and I joined them out of curiosity, we saw on the table a

small black scrap of fur: a tiny, motionless kitten.

'It's dead,' said one tax farmer.

'It's alive,' said another.

'Impossible to tell,' said a third.

Monsieur picked it up gently and held it for a moment. 'It's alive.' As if in response to his decision, it quivered and opened its eyes.

The tax farmers were delighted. These ruthless financiers, who had ground the faces of the poor and would be tried as enemies of the people, fussed around the little cat, discussing what to call it, sending out for milk, and preparing a box for it to sleep in. Monsieur put the scrap of life carefully into the box, then ushered me into his cell.

He smiled as he closed the door. 'You may think that foolish sentimentality, Citoyenne. But there is something to be said for cherishing life when you face death.'

'I don't think it foolish at all; I've known prisoners make pets of the rats in their cells.' I gave him Marie-Anne's letter, then sat feeding Jacques while he read it.

When I had his attention again, I told him briefly about the cess pit. 'Why doesn't that happen every time that a cess pit is cleaned?' I finished.

'I presume that the pit wasn't completely full?'

I nodded; I hadn't told him. 'How did you know?'

'If the pit is full, the oxygenated air is drawn in as the excremental matter is removed; there is no problem other than the foetid odour. But with a half-empty pit the oxygen was consumed in the process of putrefaction. There would have been a layer of carbon gas, formed by the combination of carbon and oxygen. It's heavier than air so it stayed in the pit; it's harmless but it does not support life. You were lucky – there could have been something more noxious, such as sulphurated hydrogen gas.'

'I learn this now! But it was only Pierre and me who were lucky; the cess pit cleaner wasn't.' Jacques finished one breast, so I moved him to the other. I looked up to find Monsieur looking at me with a puzzled frown. 'What's the matter? Haven't you ever seen a woman feed her baby before?'

'Yes, I have – and with that tricoleur scarf round your hair you could have every artist in Paris begging you to sit as a model of Republican Motherhood. But at the same time I have been listening to someone discussing the implications of oxygen theory for cess pit cleaning in a manner that would do credit to any of my scientific colleagues. And I have had to work out for myself – because you didn't tell me – that this young woman presented to my eyes and my ears is also immensely courageous. It's a little disconcerting to find all that in one person.'

I was a little disconcerted myself at his words, and at the weight of the esteem that he was showing for me. I needed time to compose myself, so I asked for a drink of water – in any case, I was thirsty. He went to the wash stand in the corner (a crude table with expensive and elegant china ware) and brought me a glass. I drank, then looked at it thoughtfully as I held it up: superb fine-cut crystal.

'You are about to tell me that the price of that glass could feed a family of four for a month, aren't you, Citoyenne?' he asked. That's exactly what I was about to say. 'You may drink out of a prison-issue tin cup if you prefer.'

'No, this will do. Water is just hydrogen and oxygen.'

'So I believe,' he said – the man who'd proved that fact as well as giving those gases their names. 'Some more?'

'No, thanks.'

'Is that a symbolic gesture?'

'No, I'm just not thirsty any more.'

He took the glass from my hand and put it away. 'Your story has reassured me. I have reproached myself that I have allowed you to endanger yourself by helping me. But I cannot believe that anything you will do for me could be one tenth so heroic as what you did for your friend Pierre and an unknown cess pit cleaner.'

'It wasn't that heroic. It was the only thing to do. When my friends are in the shit, I try to get them out. I don't have enough friends to lose any.'

He bowed his head. ‘I’m honoured to be in such select company.’

‘That isn’t what I— Yes, I suppose it was.’ I frowned. ‘It’s not easy for a good sans-culotte to admit a regard for a bloody extortionist left over from the Old Regime, you know.’

‘Whereas I am happy to acknowledge that my regard for a pitiless and insulting daughter of an executioner is very high indeed.’

Such unflattering words – and such a good feeling from them. ‘Why should I pity you? You made your own decision. You didn’t have to become a tax farmer.’

‘Did your father have to become an executioner?’

‘Oh yes, he was brought up to it. His father was an executioner, and so was his, and so was his. Sansons have been Executioners of Paris for well over a hundred years.’

‘There’s a touch of family pride in your voice.’

‘There’s something to be proud of. Papa does his duty, hard though it is for him.’

‘I hope you’ll forgive my selfishness if I reflect that I’ll come worse out of our encounter than he will.’

‘France – under the King or under the Republic – wants the job done. He does it, even though it’s often repugnant.’

‘Like a cess pit cleaner?’

‘That comparison has occurred to me. The point is to be a good cess pit cleaner or executioner, and my father’s the best. You’ll find out when you— sorry, *if* you meet him. He or his assistants will have you prepared in good time, with dignity and efficiency, but no cruelty. If the crowd around the tumbrels jeer at you, he won’t let any of his men join in. When your tumbrel gets to the scaffold, he’ll place you with your back to the guillotine so you won’t be forced to watch your friends die. He won’t be rough with you; unless you struggle he’ll just put you into place on the bascule and hold you down, then he’ll turn the bascule into position, and your neck will be held securely but not painfully in the lunettes. It will be very quick. You’ll feel nothing.’

‘Are you sure of that?’

‘Nobody’s ever protested.’

‘I may be in a position to find out. You make me almost look forward to an interesting experience.’

‘You wouldn’t have had the chance of the experience if you hadn’t entered the tax farm. Why did you do it? You must have known it was there to exploit the poor.’

‘It had other functions, like raising revenue to pay for armies to defend our country.’ I gave a sniff – not so contemptuous as my mother could make it, but I was catching her up. ‘Very well, I shan’t argue. Would you believe me if I said I was aiming to reform France’s financial system?’

‘Did you succeed?’

‘Not significantly.’

‘Then I won’t believe you. If you’d set your mind to it you would have done it. Try another excuse.’

‘It did fund my scientific research; I had one of the best laboratories in the world.’

‘Nonsense. You had plenty of money already. If anything, it took you away from science. You spent the time oppressing the poor which you should have spent discovering the truth about the way the world works.’

‘Citoyenne, will you accept any other reason from me than that it was an easy way to make a lot of money?’

‘Probably not,’ I acknowledged. ‘Do you regret it?’

‘No. I’ve had a reasonably long life, and a very happy one. I’d prefer to continue it, but if it must end soon I believe I’ll be remembered with regret by some, and perhaps with honour. What more can a man want? After all, dying in one’s prime has the advantage that one is spared the troubles of old age. The Terror is a pestilence ravaging our land, Citoyenne; it strikes at random. There’s no sense in wishing one had done something else to avoid it.’

I didn’t know whether to admire his courage or abuse his complacency. But I never undermined whatever consolation anyone found in the face of death, so I let it pass and stood up to take my leave.

‘Before you go, Citoyenne, there is one thing I’d like to ask you. I’ve been trying to find a way

to put it delicately, and I can't, so I shall have to copy your own refreshing candour. May I give you some money?'

'No, thanks. I have all I need with what I'm getting for this mending. Why should you give me any?'

'Because you might want some more, and I have plenty.'

'Then you shouldn't have. The tax farmers' assets were all supposed to be seized. How do you and so many of the other blood-suckers still have so much?'

'Citoyenne, what would you think of a wheat farmer who kept all his seed corn in a place where one disaster could wipe it out?'

'I take your point. But I shan't take your money.'

'It's a pity. I'd like to give you something to show how grateful I am. Even if you did no more than visit me and give me the benefit of your most original opinions it would be more than has been done by many people I thought were my friends. When I think of what I gave you, and what I gave them— It seems disproportionate, what you're doing for me.'

'You gave them money, of which you had a great deal. You gave me time, of which you had very little. It isn't disproportionate at all.'

'Most original,' he said with a smile.

'Give me your friendship; I'll give you mine.'

'I am reluctant to make such a profit on the exchange.'

'Profit, exchange? Don't talk to me like a financier.'

'I'll talk to you like a chemist, then; there must be an equality.'

'And I'll talk to you like a Republican; there is.'

'So, let there be fraternity.' Another would have shaken hands at that point, but he was not a man who much used his body to express himself. Instead, for the first time, the smile that he gave me showed more than cool benevolence; I could see that there was warmth in him, and he would share it with me.

Neither of us mentioned the rest of the Republican slogan: liberty – or death.

*

Fourcroy agreed to see René du Pont and me. I left Jacques with Maman, telling her that I was going to buy myself a new dress – I deserved and needed one after the ruin of the one I'd worn into the cess pit.

As I stood in the shop looking at myself in the mirror I felt suddenly pretty. The effects of prison had disappeared, my figure was coming back after Jacques's birth, and my new dress showed it all to best advantage. 'Very attractive,' René du Pont had called me. Nobody had called me that for years; who finds an executioner's daughter or wife attractive? (Well, there are some men who do, but no woman wants dealings with that sort.) Even my husband had seen other qualities in me: hard work, loyalty and support – and the fact that I was the daughter of France's greatest professional.

When I met du Pont and his admiration showed, I didn't mind a bit. I didn't want things to go beyond admiration, but few women much object to inspiring lust in handsome young men.

We planned our strategy as we walked to Fourcroy's office, and to give du Pont his due he didn't try to browbeat me with his male superiority. 'Have you ever met Fourcroy?' I asked.

'Oh, yes, at the Lavoisiers in the old days. I was only a boy, and I was inclined to hero-worship him; that's why it hurts that he's shown himself an ingrate.'

We had to wait as Fourcroy was very busy, but eventually we got into his office. Fourcroy recognised my companion. 'Eleuthère Irénée!' he said with pleasure. 'It's been a long time since we used to meet at— since we met. What can I do for you both?'

'Citoyen Fourcroy,' I began – I'd talk the politics before du Pont talked the science. 'We've come to ask your opinion on the issue of *vandalisme*.' It was a new word to describe the practice of destroying works of art of the Old Regime if they were unduly royalist or religious. I'd started a debate on the subject in the café the evening before, so I was well primed with the arguments.

He was against it, as I'd guessed; educated men usually were. 'To knock the heads off the

statues of Notre Dame – it's a sad day for France when the work of centuries of sans-culotte craftsmen is destroyed like that.'

'Would you support us, if we tried to preserve the greatness of Frenchmen for the benefit of our heirs?'

'Of course.'

'Even if they were perhaps not in tune with current Revolutionary thinking?'

'Yes, so long as we preserve only what is good about them, and they don't become a resource for royalism and superstition.'

'I have one example in mind, Citoyen Fourcroy, a head which some think is the greatest that France has ever produced. What's your opinion about destroying it just because of what it represented in the past, if it could still be valuable in future?'

'I'd oppose its destruction, so long as it poses no threat to *la patrie*. What do you refer to? Where is it?'

'In the Ferme. It's on Antoine-Laurent Lavoisier's shoulders.'

He jumped up. 'Get out!'

We stayed seated. 'What's the difference between the head of a statue in Notre Dame and the head of Lavoisier?'

'The statue in Notre Dame is not a traitor!'

'Traitor?' du Pont asked in surprise. 'I've heard many charges against him, but never that!'

'I didn't mean traitor, I meant tax farmer,' Fourcroy said hastily, worry replacing anger.

'That's an odd slip of the tongue, if I may say.'

'You may not say. Get out before I have you charged with wasting my time.'

This time we took the hint and left. Both of us were bursting to speak, but we dared not do so until we'd returned to the privacy of du Pont's apartment. But as soon as he'd shut the door, we both cried out at once: 'Traitor?'

'I don't believe it!' du Pont said.

'Neither do I. But Fourcroy does.'

'Why?'

'Don't know. And why did he retreat so rapidly when we pressed him?'

'I haven't the slightest idea. What's he hiding?'

'Haven't a notion. How do we get it out of him?'

And that was the real puzzle.

'You could get him drunk,' I suggested.

'I wouldn't know where to start. Besides, as I remember, he has a better capacity than I do. What about you seducing him?'

'Seductive wiles are not my way, as you should be well aware.'

'A pity we can't use torture. Thumbscrews and the rack would do it.'

I stopped speaking, and waved him silent when he asked why. 'Shut up. I'm thinking. Get me some coffee and more of those good brioches.'

He obeyed – he was good that way. When he came back, I asked him, 'Do you think that Fourcroy has a vivid imagination?'

'Why?'

'Just answer the question. You know him; what do you think?'

'He's a brilliant teacher; perhaps you need a good imagination to teach well.'

'What about physical courage? Do you think he's brave?'

'I have no idea. Can I ask where this is leading to?'

'One more question. Do you think you can look menacing, without actually threatening violence?'

'How's this?' he said, demonstrating.

'You look constipated, but you're a big *bougre*; we can work on it.'

'Now, for the love of God, the Supreme Being, or any other of your favourite deities, tell me what this is about!'

So I did.

*

The next evening René du Pont collected me from the faubourg-Antoine. He insisted; he was to meet my parents, and he would hardly make a good impression by letting me walk alone after dark with a small baby. He arrived punctually, looking smart rather than menacing. We were just leaving when Pierre Rose appeared.

'Pierre! It's good to see you!' du Pont cried, obviously pleased to meet an old friend. 'How are things going?'

'Pretty well, René. What about you? What brings you here?'

I gathered that they knew each other from the Gunpowder Commission. René du Pont had been a very young aristo made Pierre's superior in the way that happened before the Revolution, but even in those days there could be equality and fraternity between men who respected each other's character and skills.

Constance came out of her room and we exchanged weary womanly glances as the two men reminisced about their time together, which from their conversation seemed to consist entirely of narrow escapes from death.

'Remember the explosion at Essonne, René?'

'I wasn't there – I had a fever that day; it saved my life.'

'No, you would have been safe. You've got sense enough to do what I did while we were trying the experimental mix: obey Lavoisier's orders to stay behind the bloody great wall of beams he'd had put up in the mill.'

'If only everyone else had!'

'That's one wall he put up that I approve of. The last thing I remember before everything went up was that stupid *bougre* of a director showing off to his lady visitor by poking his cane in the crusher and saying it was perfectly safe. And the next thing I was standing with the mill in rubble around me and both of them blown to pieces.'

'Those were the days,' du Pont sighed. 'I wish I hadn't had to leave.'

'A sad day for *la patrie* when you did; you made good gunpowder.' That was Pierre's highest term of praise.

'I had to look after my father's printery; he's – er – in the country.'

Pierre didn't ask why. Instead he looked at me, looked at du Pont, and jumped to the obvious conclusion. 'And how's your *wife*?'

'She's very well, thanks. She's staying with my father.'

'Is she indeed?' Then, standing beside me and doing a magnificent job of looking menacing without actually threatening violence, he said, 'I owe Jeanne my life. Remember that, René.'

We left, and du Pont breathed out heavily. 'That's what you meant, was it?'

'A perfect example.'

'I'll do my best to copy it.' He offered to carry Jacques, but I declined. 'By the way, I'm intrigued to learn how you approached your father on this. "Please, Papa, may I borrow the tumbrel?" was it?'

'More or less.'

'Fascinating. I'm probably the only person in France who is actually looking forward to meeting Charlot Sanson.'

I stopped walking. 'No jokes.'

'Your father doesn't have much of a sense of humour, eh?'

'He has a very good sense of humour, but you can't possibly come up with anything that he hasn't heard a hundred times before.'

We walked in silence for a while, and then he said, 'I apologise.'

'Accepted.'

'Do your parents know the truth about why we want the tumbrel?'

'No. They jumped to the same conclusion as Pierre. I denied it but they still think that you're trying to understand my background before making me your mistress.'

'What did your father say to that?'

'He muttered something about not letting his daughter become a rich man's whore.'

‘Hmm. Perhaps I’m not looking forward so much to meeting him as I thought.’

‘Maman has a different view, and she’s the boss. She knows it’s not easy for a widow with a baby to find a husband these days. So if you can contrive to give the impression that you want to set me up in a good apartment and pamper me, she’ll be happy.’

‘No contrivance needed, Jeanne. That’s exactly what I want to do.’

‘Be glad I’m holding Jacques, Citoyen du Pont. He stops me from kicking you where you’d remember.’

‘I’ll remember. But can we add some plausibility by becoming Jeanne and René?’

‘Oh, all right. I’ll even contrive to give the impression that I like you.’

But there too no contrivance was needed. René was wonderful with my parents. With Maman he appealed to her repressed longing for the old days by delicately hinting at his father’s nobility, and to her current republicanism by indicating that he’d abandoned it. With Papa he confined himself to showing that he could be trusted with the horse and tumbrel for a few hours, and that it wasn’t a youthful jest or drunken wager. And he didn’t once rub the back of his neck.

Jacques was to stay with Maman while we went out; she was very happy, and offered to look after him any time my young man wanted to take me out again. ‘I like him,’ she whispered unduly loudly.

‘You take care of my horse, young man,’ said Papa as we left. Everybody understood that he meant: Take care of my daughter.

‘I will, Citoyen Sanson. You can rely on me.’

‘Well, you can put on the charm,’ I said as he drove us away. ‘How are you with menace?’

‘What’s the matter, Jeanne? You’ve just said something pleasant to me.’

By means of the usual investigative methods (bribing servants), René had discovered that Fourcroy was in the habit of walking home after a long day’s work; he wasn’t important enough to fear assassination. René had spend the day finding a suitable spot to waylay him; not perfect, as there was nowhere near at hand to lurk discreetly with the instantly recognisable tumbrel, but good enough.

We checked that a lamp was still burning in Fourcroy’s office; we hadn’t missed him. René set me down and drove off to the nearest convenient lurking place, and I was on my own. I waited until I saw my quarry walking wearily homeward.

I stepped forward. ‘Citoyen Fourcroy.’

He stepped backward. ‘I have nothing to talk to you about.’

I exulted; I was experienced in recognising fear, and he reeked of it. ‘Yes, Citoyen Fourcroy, but I have. Something very important.’ I moved towards him, and he kept backing away. ‘What are you afraid of? I can’t hurt you. I’m only a defenceless woman. In fact, you should offer me your protection.’ I slipped my arm through his. ‘There, Citoyen. Now we can take a friendly walk together.’ He tried to pull away, but I gripped his hand. ‘Let’s have a nice talk, shall we? It would be a good idea if you came along with me.’ Well, it’d be a good idea for me, though perhaps not for him.

He wouldn’t move, and I was beginning to wonder how to get him to co-operate, when René suddenly loomed ahead of us. ‘Good evening, Citoyen Fourcroy. What a pleasant surprise.’ He was good; he seemed several inches taller than usual as he towered over Fourcroy, and he was cleaning his nails with a small but very shiny pen-knife. All the same, the stupid man had left my father’s horse and tumbrel unattended – we’d look idiots if the horse wandered off. But it was very good at staying where it was through all distractions, and it was waiting peacefully for us.

Fourcroy knew a tumbrel when he saw one, and he turned and would have run; but René anticipated him, and blocked his way without saying a word. ‘Can I offer you a ride home?’ A tumbrel is designed to get people in and out of when they don’t want to; my hand on his arm was quite enough. I sat beside him on the wooden bench where so many had sat on their last ride, and René drove off.

For a moment Fourcroy rallied. ‘I’ll have you before the Revolutionary Tribunal for this, you know.’

‘What for, Citoyen? For taking you on a pleasant drive on a warm evening? Nobody forced you to get in, remember?’

‘For stealing this!’ he cried, indicating the tumbrel and the horse.

‘Oh, no, Citoyen. We have permission to use it.’

‘Who from?’ he sneered. ‘Sanson?’

‘Of course. He’s my father.’ All those years of appalled expressions when I revealed my parentage suddenly seemed worthwhile, as I watched him turn into clay in my hand. ‘Yes, Citoyen Fourcroy, I’m Charlot’s daughter. If he lends me his vehicle to go for a drive on a spring evening with a young man, and the young man meets an old friend and offers him a lift home, what’s the crime in that? Don’t you think the Revolutionary Tribunal has better things to investigate? Like treason, for example?’

‘Nobody mentioned treason.’

‘Yes, you did, Citoyen. And then you tried to hide it. Hiding treason is a very serious offence. Oh look, here we are at the Conciergerie!’ René was taking us along the route from the final prison to the Place de la Révolution. There may have been men in the Convention who hadn’t imagined themselves in a tumbrel along that deadly way if politics went badly for them, but Fourcroy wasn’t one of them. It was dark and nearly deserted, unlike the journey during the day, but it was still the way to the guillotine.

‘I’m surprised you didn’t guess he’s my father; people say we’re very much alike. But you won’t remember him when he was my age; he’s been Executioner of Paris these forty years. That was in the bad old days, before the Revolution, before the quick, painless guillotine. My father had to torture people then; it was all part of his job. He had to break people on the wheel, of course. Did you ever see anyone broken on the wheel?’

I paused to let Fourcroy answer, but he sat staring at me, his eyes wide open with horror, so I continued in a cheerful conversational tone.

‘Perhaps you never saw it, so I’ll tell you. It was the most common sentence for crimes like robbery, even more common than hanging in the Old Regime. The condemned man was stretched out, arms and legs apart, and then each of his limbs were smashed in turn with an iron bar. It wasn’t very nice for Papa, and he’d give the death blow to the chest as soon as he could. Papa was happy when the Revolution put an end to torture.’

I paused again; Fourcroy still showed no sign of wanting to say anything.

‘Papa has had some very famous criminals in his hands. He did Damiens; you know, the man who tried to assassinate the old king?’

He did know; he recoiled in revulsion.

‘Papa was younger than I am now at the time, so he probably found it more difficult than I would. After the sentence of being tortured to death was given, Damiens was brought in; he was covered in a large leather bag, only his head sticking out. Then Papa was responsible for questioning him about his accomplices. His legs were put in leather boots reaching to the knees, and the cords were tightened and tightened until he screamed with pain and fainted. When he was revived, he had the *estrapade*; you know that? His wrists were tied behind him, and then he was hoisted from the ground so his shoulder blades were dislocated. But it was all a waste of time from Papa’s point of view; Damiens didn’t say anything. So they gave up after a couple of hours and carried him to the tumbrel – much like this one, probably. In those days, execution was carried out at the Place de Grève – yes, just over there, Citoyen Fourcroy. Papa wasn’t as efficient then as he is now; things weren’t ready, and Damiens had to sit on the scaffold and wait, which was all rather embarrassing for Papa, because there was a big crowd. But eventually the coals were hot enough, so Damiens was lifted onto the platform – he couldn’t walk, of course.’

René began to whistle that jolly tune *Ça ira*; Fourcroy would know the words, all about hanging aristocrats from lamp posts. Good boy, I thought; it was a touch that we hadn’t planned, but it was perfect.

I carried on speaking. ‘Damiens’s right arm was tied to an iron bar to hold his wrist out, and then my great-uncle Nicholas brought the flames to his skin – they say I’m rather like great-uncle Nicholas, too, by the way. He could only manage to do it for three minutes or so, because Damiens’s screams were too much even for an experienced torturer like he was. So they went onto the next stage, the red hot pincers. His chest and limbs were torn open, and they poured molten lead into the wounds. Then it was time to finish him off. They carried him off the scaffold into the

square, and laid him on the ground. They tied his ankles and wrists with ropes, then harnessed each one to a horse, and whipped them in different directions. But the horses were young and untrained – not like this one – and things went wrong. It was taking too long, and the crowd was getting impatient; Damiens's arms and legs just wouldn't come off. So Papa had to get a knife and cut the sinews in his groin and armpits, and then everything was all right; he was pulled apart fairly quickly. He didn't live for much longer after that – well, not very much longer.'

I looked around; René's driving and my story-telling had worked together with perfect timing. 'Ah, here we are in the Place de la Révolution. Oh, look! There's Papa's scaffold!' I pointed to it as if indicating an old friend. 'There's so much work these days that he leaves it up during the night, though he takes the blade home, of course – he doesn't want anyone to get hurt. It looks so elegant in the moonlight! Though we can't see the colour now, which is a shame. It's painted rather a pretty shade of red. Are you all right, Citoyen Fourcroy? You don't seem at all well.'

He couldn't hold back any longer; he leaned forward and vomited over the floor.

I leaned forward where he was bent over retching, and spoke into his ear. 'Citoyen Fourcroy, listen to the wheels on the stones. They're loud enough that nobody will be able to hear you. Now tell me: why did you accuse Lavoisier of treason?' He said nothing, just wiped his mouth on his sleeve. 'The guillotine is quick and painless. But I'm my father's daughter.'

'Because he's guilty,' he whispered, his head in his hands.

'Lavoisier a traitor? You're a man of science, Citoyen; you need evidence for that sort of statement.'

'I've seen it.' René looked round; I made a discreet signal of victory to him, and he stopped driving.

'What?'

'A letter.' The dam had broken and he would talk freely. 'Listen, daughter of Sanson; for some reason you want to keep Lavoisier alive. If a word of this gets out, I'll bring you and du Pont down with me, and Lavoisier and his wife will be on that scaffold and looking through the lunettes long before the rest of the tax farmers get charged. Do you understand?'

'Yes.' René climbed down and got closer so he could listen; Fourcroy made no objection.

'Last autumn,' Fourcroy began, 'Lavoisier was already in trouble, but he hadn't been charged. They were going to seal his place up, but he was on the Weights and Measures Committee designing the new metric system, and we didn't want all his work on that to be sealed up too, so I was told to go round to his house with representatives of the local Revolutionary Committee to check everything. We had to sort out his papers: what was private, what was scientific, what was to do with the tax farm and so on. It's not my favourite memory, having to do that to him, but it was better that I did it than a set of guards who wouldn't know one end of a gas pump from the other.'

'How did he behave?' asked René.

'He was – courteous.' Fourcroy shuddered at the recollection, and René winced as he pictured it. I began to understand what Monsieur's courtesy could do to a man – it seemed to have an effect as least as bad as my story. 'Among his papers was a bundle of letters from abroad, mostly written in English from what I could see; I didn't have time to look at them properly. We couldn't ignore them when we're at war with the British. So we wrapped them up, sealed them, and I took them away for further inspection. When the tax farmers were eventually charged, I opened the packet and read them. Most of them were harmless – one from Benjamin Franklin written before the Revolution, one from the man who translated the *Elements* into English, that sort of thing. There were also translations of the letters into French – Marie-Anne did them; he can read only French, so she's always done that for him.' He paused for a moment, reluctant to go on.

'Continue, Citoyen; you've told us nothing significant yet.'

'I'm just about to. Among all the others was one written in French. It didn't have a signature, but it seemed to come from a woman close to the Spanish border, and it was addressed to Marie-Anne. It was dated September 11 1792.' He paused. 'You understand the significance of that date?'

Who couldn't? That was the most brutal, the most glorious, the most crucial month in the Revolution. The enemy was at the gates; the Prussian army had already crossed the border, and its leader had vowed to destroy Paris if the royal family was molested. But the enemy was inside the gates too; French generals had already deserted to the other side, and there were still plenty of

counter-revolutionaries around, some arrested and some still at large. The citizens of Paris, fearing an escape and an attack from within, had broken open the gates of the prisons and slaughtered more than a thousand prisoners, not caring much whether they were thieves or Royalists. Danton, then Minister of Justice, had stood back and let it happen, believing that unity was more important than pity. *De l'audace, encore de l'audace, et toujours de l'audace*, he had called for – 'Audacity, again audacity, and always audacity.' He inspired the French Republican Army to march out singing the Marseillaise; and on 20 September, they won the Battle of Valmy. The Revolution was saved.

'This woman,' Fourcroy continued, 'writing when France was threatened with destruction, makes no attempt at concealing her hopes for the end of the Revolution; she goes on at length about how barbarous everything is. But she takes comfort from the fact that, by the time the letter arrives, the Prussians might already be in Paris.'

René and I exchanged glances; this was bad news. 'You can't blame Marie-Anne Lavoisier for receiving someone else's opinions,' René said gamely.

'I can blame her for not reporting the sender. I can blame her for at least not destroying it instantly. The Lavoisiers aren't fools; what could they have meant by keeping it? If you can think of any other purpose but treason, I'd be glad to hear it.'

'It's a fake,' I said. 'It stinks of planted evidence – the significant date, the missing signature, the obvious piece of treachery, carefully placed where you would read it. Surely you see that?'

'Of course I do. Except that it can't have been. In front of my eyes, that packet was sealed in Lavoisier's presence, with the seal of the Revolutionary Tribunal – and with his own. And both seals were intact when I opened it later.'

Monsieur a traitor? I couldn't believe it. But Fourcroy did, and he was obviously as reluctant as I was. 'I don't understand,' I said. 'This letter – if it's real – would send both of them to the guillotine. Why is everyone fooling about with figures on the tax farm when this could be produced?'

He looked around to check that we couldn't be overheard. 'I know that you and the rest of his friends call me "that ingrate Fourcroy" because I won't help him. But I've put my neck into the lunettes for him. Don't you understand, you two? Would either of you do as much as I've done for him? That letter can't be produced because I hid it.'

*

René barely said a word after we left Fourcroy at his home, but drove in silence. 'Why so down-hearted?' I asked. 'I thought we had a very successful expedition.'

'I'm glad you're happy. Me, I think I've a reason to be down-hearted, discovering that a man I've always thought of as little less than a god is little more than a traitor.'

'Remember what Monsieur has written?' I quoted from his preface to *The Elements of Chemistry*: '"Proceed from known facts to what is unknown". What do we know?'

'That he kept a treasonous letter.'

'Nonsense. We don't know that at all. What we know is that Fourcroy says that he found a treasonous letter.'

'You think he's lying? I don't. I wish I did.'

'Fourcroy might believe everything he told us, but that doesn't mean we must. You and him, you're men of science. You're used to people telling you things because they believe them; people don't set out to deceive you. But they do set out to deceive executioners; that's why I've got a suspicious mind.'

He started to look more cheerful. 'You think the letter is a fraud?'

'Don't proceed so fast. Do we know that Fourcroy wasn't trying to deceive us about the letter?'

'Close enough to certainty – he looked as if he was telling the truth, and there's absolutely no reason why he should make such a story up.'

'Right. So there was a letter, and Fourcroy found it when he opened the packet. What else do we know?'

'It must be one of two things. *Either* it was a genuine letter which was kept among his papers

and so included in the packet when it was sealed, *or* someone forged it to incriminate him, got hold of the packet, opened it up, put the letter inside, and then sealed it – with two seals – in such a way as to fool Fourcroy. I'd like to believe the second, but the first is more likely.'

'You're still proceeding too fast to the unknown. I can think of at least one other possibility right now, and I might come up with half a dozen more.'

'What's your possibility?'

'This is just my imagination – "which is ever wandering beyond the bounds of truth",' I quoted again from the *Elements*. 'But imagine if Marie-Anne got the letter from her friend. Now, she should have reported the friend, but we won't blame her if she didn't. She threw the letter away rather than burning it, which is incautious but understandable. A servant picked it up, kept it as a weapon against the Lavoisiers, and then when it was time to seal the packet, slipped it in with the rest when Fourcroy and the Revolutionary Committee weren't looking.'

He sat upright. 'Oh, I like that! It fits!'

'Could be complete nonsense. But it's worth looking at. Is there anyone else involved in our project that I can meet? Perhaps they could find something useful.'

'Yes, an apothecary, Jean-Baptiste Pluvinet. Very bourgeois, very cautious, and he's no more prepared to break the law than you are. But he says that he'd be happy to work with you to keep a great head on its shoulders, so long as he doesn't endanger his own. I'll arrange a meeting one evening at my apartment.'

'It's probably not a good idea to tell him who my father is – indeed, keep it to yourself as much as you can.'

He was quiet for a moment, looking straight ahead, then said, 'Yes, I shall.'

I had a suspicion about the reason for his silence, but I ignored it. 'In the meantime, I'll ask Monsieur about it; he won't admit to treason, of course, but at least we'll know his side of the story.'

'Jeanne, doesn't it occur to you that his wife might be a traitor? Is it kind to tell him about the letter and give him that sort of worry in what may be his last month of life?'

'Forget kindness! Truth is more important – as he would be the first to say. Of course I'm going to tell him.'

'Kindness doesn't run in your blood, does it?' There was something close to a sneer in his voice; my suspicion was confirmed.

'You hypocrite! You want a dirty job done, but you won't have anything to do with the person who does it.'

'Jeanne—'

'Thinking twice about that offer of a good apartment and pampering, eh?'

'Jeanne—'

'Oh, you're just the same as everyone else.'

'Jeanne, listen to me. You've had your lifetime to get used to it; let me have a day or two, please?'

'What is there to get used to?'

'When you told me about your father, I wasn't shocked, was I? I was intrigued, I admit. So I met him; and instead of the ogre that everyone in Paris believes him to be, I found a civil, well-informed bourgeois, concerned about his property and his daughter, indistinguishable from a thousand other men. I liked him. Then I heard you tell that story about Damiens, and I thought of the hand that had done those dreadful things – and it was the same hand that had shortly before given me a glass of fairly good burgundy. Well, the burgundy nearly came straight out again. That's why I started whistling, so I couldn't hear you any more. I didn't think I'd look menacing if I vomited before Fourcroy did.'

'I'm glad you said that, René.'

'You understand me, do you?'

'No, it's not that. You just reminded me that we must clean the vomit up before we return this to Papa. If we take it back in this state he'll kill us.'

He looked at me for a stunned moment, then burst out laughing.

'What's so funny? Do let me share the joke.'

‘Don’t you see, Jeanne, that is the joke? You saying he’ll kill us, when you think of how many he has killed? Of course people make all those jokes that you’ve heard so often – that’s the only way we can deal with it.’

*

‘How can you say that, Constance?’ Pierre asked as he helped carry provisions into the café for her. Jacques was asleep in his cradle, and I was doing the mending. ‘How can you believe that men who were on our side only a month ago deserve to be sent to the guillotine?’

‘They were traitors, charged and convicted by the Revolutionary Tribunal.’

‘Trouble-makers perhaps, but not traitors. Is this the place for the cheese?’

‘No, put it over there. Are you saying that the Revolutionary Tribunal was wrong to condemn them?’

‘Why not? They’re only human beings – they can make mistakes.’

‘Don’t say that, Pierre. They’re the ones who are ridding the Republic of its enemies: the traitors, the trouble-makers who sow dissension among the people, the predators of the Old Regime – all of them must be eliminated before we can achieve our goals.’

‘And what are your goals?’

‘The same as Robespierre’s: the Republic of Virtue.’

‘Go on, Constance. Tell me about the Republic of Virtue.’ The café was closed, but people started to come in from the street; this promised to be an interesting fight.

‘Of course, Pierre. Our aim – and I’m sure it’s yours as well as mine – must be the peaceful and fraternal enjoyment of liberty and equality. The reign of eternal justice, whose laws are engraved in the heart of every man and woman: that’s virtue.’

‘Every man and woman? Including the hearts of trouble-makers and predators? Oh, look; these beans have got weevils in them.’

‘That’s the best I could get at the price. Of course I mean only the true patriot. We, the French people. We, who have fought tyranny at home and abroad, and must continue to fight it at home and abroad by destroying our enemies.’

‘That’s the point, Constance. Who are our enemies? Who is to decide?’

‘The patriots, of course. You know what I’m talking about, Pierre, of course you do. You know that traitors are enemies of the people, that Royalists and trouble-makers and tax farmers are enemies of the people. Don’t lose sight of the fact that *la patrie* is under threat, and we have no time to waste on pointless arguments or scruples about mercy and justice. We must be on our guard against the traitors and destroy them wherever they appear. Don’t put that barrel there; it’ll leak all over the floor.’

‘But the guillotine makes enemies; knock one man’s head off and his friends become your enemies.’

‘Then their heads must be knocked off too.’

‘And when Charlot Sanson is the only man left in France, is he to knock his own head off? Where does this basket go?’

‘On the shelf. Liberty and equality can’t be secured unless criminals die.’

‘But whatever happened to fraternity?’

‘Pierre, can’t you and the other Dantonists see? We need the Terror; without it we shall have no virtue.’

‘Must people be terrified into virtue?’

Suddenly they became aware of their audience. ‘We’re closed,’ said Constance, shooing everyone out. ‘Come back in an hour.’

As she shut the door, Pierre crept up behind her and suddenly picked her up. ‘Excuse us, won’t you, Jeanne? We just have time for me to show her my biggest virtue.’ She giggled as he carried her off into her room.

*

Jean-Baptiste Pluvinet, the apothecary who was happy to work with me and René, was about forty. He was a civil, well-informed bourgeois – as was Papa. I wondered how I'd feel if I heard that he'd had somebody's arms and legs pulled off, and I began to see René's point of view.

He'd supplied Monsieur's laboratory with chemicals in the old days, and done well out of it; Monsieur was not one to stint himself on scientific material. But he was doing well out of the Revolution too. 'In the old days, poor people had to die without help from an apothecary. Now, they can afford to die with our help.'

The three of us first drank a toast to our project: 'The nobility, the bourgeoisie, and the sans-culotterie; united, we shall succeed.' Then we exchanged information and ideas.

Pluvinet was having success with Antoine Dupin, the Conventionnel in charge of the investigation into the tax farmers' affairs. 'I don't think he would take a bribe,' Pluvinet said, and there was a definite tone of regret in his voice for someone who had vowed to stay within the law. 'But I think he is susceptible to – how shall I say? – not flattery, but recognition of his position. There are many like him in the Convention, alas; men who are tasting power for the first time in their lives, and finding it sweet. He has principles, certainly, but they will sway in a strong wind.'

René knew Pluvinet well enough to trust him with Fourcroy's secret, and he said he'd find out as much as he could about former servants of the Lavoisiers who might have a grudge against one or the other. 'Not just servants,' I said. 'Could anyone else have a grudge against Monsieur?'

They exchanged glances. 'I'm afraid so,' said René. 'You may be the only person in France who has seen nothing but kindness from him. He has been kind to me, but I've felt his scorn when I failed to live up to his high standards, and it's not pleasant.'

'He has a way of saying, "That was not satisfactory," that makes one want to hide in a dark corner,' Pluvinet agreed. 'And I regret to say that he has not always been as generous as he could have been about giving credit to others for their discoveries.'

'He has many, many talents,' added René, 'and a talent for making enemies is one of them.'

'How easy would it be to get at that packet?' I asked. 'How many people could have got hold of it in the offices of the Committee of General Instruction?'

Pluvinet spread his hands wide. 'Many, Citoyenne. It is not kept secure. What secrets does it have? Plans for a universal system of education or reports on the progress of the metric system are not of much interest to English spies.'

'This isn't looking good. We'd better find out whether the letter is a fake or not.'

'How?'

'I'll ask the Lavoisiers. Fortunately they can't get together to agree on their story; if it matches, it's probably true.'

'You would doubt either of them?' said Pluvinet, somewhat offended.

'Jeanne would doubt the Archangel Gabriel,' said René.

'Not if I could hold him for questioning.'

Pluvinet was still not satisfied. 'I don't think we should ask Madame Lavoisier,' he said. 'Though I suppose we must ask Monsieur.'

René nodded. 'Yes, I'd prefer to shelter her if possible.'

'What?' I cried. 'Why should she be sheltered?'

'Because – well, she has been protected all her life, and now she is in danger of losing her husband, her father and her fortune,' said Pluvinet.

'You probably don't understand chivalry,' added René. 'You're so strong, Jeanne; you won't know why men want to protect women.'

I wanted to hit him – to hit both of them. Instead I pulled off my tricoleur cockade and thrust it under René's nose. 'We're in the middle of a bloody revolution!' I shouted into his face. 'You think these are the times to protect aristo women from learning what's going on in the world? That's not chivalry, that's stupidity! If you want to protect women, go and protect the market women of Les Halles when they work fourteen hours a day nine days out of ten! Or the women of the Vendée, on both sides, who've been raped and slaughtered and seen their children bayoneted! Or the women in prison right now in conditions where you'd be ashamed to keep your dog!'

I turned my fury onto Pluvinet. 'You're just as bad. If Marie-Anne Lavoisier loses her husband, her father and her fortune, then she's got to learn to look after herself, like ninety-nine out

of a hundred women already do. She has the strength and intelligence to take anything she needs to know. You want to shelter her from knowing about the letter? What the hell do you propose to do when the blade falls on the tax farmers? You think you can keep that news from her forever?'

Pluvinet was stunned; he'd not seen me in full flow before. René had; he patted the other man's hand. 'Cheer up, Pluvinet, she's on our side. Just think what it'd be like if she was against us.'

*

While I waited for Marie-Anne, I looked again at that portrait of her and her husband. Now I knew them both better, I understood it better; she rested for support on him, and although she was interrupting him at his work he didn't mind because he loved her.

She joined me and made a fuss of Jacques, who was in a happy mood and gurgled at her. I gave her the letter from Monsieur, then studied the portrait again as she read it. 'Clever man, this painter,' I said when she finished.

'Jacques-Louis David is the greatest painter in France.'

I recognised the name; his painting of Marat after the assassination had been much admired in the faubourg-Antoine. In the picture here David had shown the same loving clear-sighted skill with Marie-Anne Lavoisier as he'd done with the martyred revolutionary; but I guessed that he hadn't much liked Monsieur. He'd shown the love, the wealth and the work, but the man in the portrait had a slightly pompous complacency surrounded by the tokens of his success. In my eye – and in David's too – his possessions made him look smaller than what he owned; they walled him in far more than did the walls of his prison.

'We thought it was worth every livre we paid him.'

'How many livres was that?'

'Seven thousand.'

I tried to imagine seven thousand livres, and failed until I thought of the horse Papa had bought at about the time this was painted: five hundred livres. So, fourteen horses: yes, I could imagine those.

'You look disapproving, Jeanne. But it's a very good picture.'

It was a very good horse.

'We were friends then,' she continued. 'I even studied under him. Now he's another who's turned against us.'

'You think friends should stay loyal through thick and thin?'

'I think they should. I know they don't.'

'You would, then? You'd not report a friend, no matter what they'd done?'

She spoke to Jacques as she bounced him up and down on her knee. 'Your maman wants to ask me something, doesn't she?'

'Well, Jacques, ask your auntie Marie-Anne if she had a friend about eighteen months ago who was staying near the Spanish border.'

Her knee stopped bouncing. 'Why does your maman want to know?'

'Jacques, will you pull your auntie Marie-Anne's hair until she answers my question?'

'Would your maman report me if I said that I had a friend who was an émigrée?'

'Tell your auntie Marie-Anne that those who have fled France have been conspiring against *la patrie* ever since the start of the Revolution, and they will suffer for it. But tell her also that I don't condemn their friends who have stayed.'

'So your maman wouldn't report me just for that?'

'No, I wouldn't, Marie-Anne. Not even if she was writing treasonous letters to you.'

She looked up from Jacques and stared me straight in the eye. 'I don't know what you're talking about.'

I looked back at her steadily. I just couldn't tell whether she was lying or not; there were certainly none of the evasions, blushes and twitches of deceit that I'd have shown. 'Marie-Anne, if you're telling the truth, I'm delighted; long may you stay in ignorance. If you're not, you're making a huge mistake not to trust me.'

‘Truly, Jeanne, I do not understand you. I shan’t press you to explain, because I don’t want to know.’ With only my son pulling her hair rather than my father pulling her arms and legs off, I couldn’t take it any further.

As I worked my way happily through another of her magnificent déjeuners, and Jacques had his first taste of chocolate (he approved, though I knew Maman would not) we talked woman-talk; we knew each other well enough by now. I even got her to giggle over René’s first reaction to me.

‘Eleuthère Irénée du Pont,’ she said affectionately. ‘I’ve known him since he was a boy. I’ve been almost a mother to him since his own died. He’s grown up very like his father.’

‘He wants me to be his mistress.’

She wasn’t shocked. ‘Are you going to?’

‘No. I like him, but—’

‘You don’t find him attractive?’

‘I don’t find him single!’

‘It is known for men to have mistresses and women to have lovers.’

‘I’m not saying that I’d never commit adultery – who knows until they’re tempted? – but I’d have to love the man a lot more than I love René du Pont.’

She looked at me inquiringly. ‘Can I ask you something? Did you love Jacques’s father? You hardly ever mention him.’

‘I’m sorry he went to the guillotine, but that’s for his sake, not mine; I don’t miss him much. I had an arranged marriage with a man twice my age; it was as good as I could have expected.’

‘I too,’ she said quietly. ‘I had an arranged marriage with a man twice my age. And if he goes to the guillotine, I shall miss him very much indeed. I fell in love with him on our wedding day; I’ve been in love with him ever since.’ She said nothing for a moment, while I tried to do the arithmetic in my head. (He’s fifty now, so that means....) Then she laughed and interrupted my calculations. ‘Mind you, I’d have fallen in love with a clockwork automaton if it had done what he did for me.’

‘What happened?’ (I need one more number.)

‘I was just turning fourteen.’ (Easy, twenty-two years ago – when I wasn’t much older than Jacques.) ‘I was the daughter of a tax farmer, so I was a prize for some noble with more rank than money – that sort of thing happened in the Old Regime. I always knew I’d have an arranged marriage, but I wished that they’d arrange a marriage with someone other than the Compte d’Amerval. He was fifty, and ugly, and debauched and – oh, an ogre!’ she said, the memory obviously still fresh. ‘But he had powerful connections; my father was threatened with ruin if he didn’t consent.’

‘It sounds like something from a play!’

‘It was nearly a tragedy. My father decided to put it all out of the question by finding me someone else quickly. Antoine was young and single, with an honourable reputation; he had just joined the tax farm. He agreed, I agreed, everybody agreed, and we were married; and it was accepted as a *fait accompli*.’

‘A happy ending, then.’

‘A happy beginning. The ending – is that going to be happy?’

‘This may not be much consolation to you, but even if it’s unhappy it won’t be painful for him. It wasn’t for my husband.’

‘At least your husband left you with Jacques. I envy you.’

‘Well, I envy you, so we’re even.’

‘Don’t. It’s nothing, all this – the house, the seven thousand livre portrait, the berline, all the rest of it. When I watch you feed Jacques I envy you so much that my breasts ache.’

‘I don’t envy you your wealth; you’re right, that’s nothing. But when I watch your husband read your letters to him a dozen times before he has to burn them, I envy you so much that my toes curl.’

‘Does he really?’ She smiled, as he smiled when he thought of her. Then she laughed and asked teasingly, ‘Would you exchange your baby for my husband?’

‘Hmm. That’s a tough question. On balance – no, I don’t think so. Throw in the berline and I might think about it.’

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I'd learned my lesson with Marie-Anne, and so I left Jacques with Maman when I faced Monsieur with the same question – no baby to provide a convenient distraction this time. And I took the place by the window before he could, so the light shone on his face rather than mine. 'Do you or your wife know anybody who lived about eighteen months ago near the Spanish border?' I asked bluntly. 'Don't fool about asking me why I want to know; just tell me the truth.'

'Very well. A friend of ours – and I shall certainly not tell you the name – fled France to Spain at much that time.'

'Did she write to you or your wife?'

'Not to me, nor to Marie-Anne to my knowledge.'

'I told you that I wouldn't do anything *inciviste*, and concealing correspondence with an émigrée is certainly *inciviste*; but I'll make an exception here. Do you know of any letters that might exist between this person and either you or your wife?'

'No.' I believed him. Indeed, in his presence I found it impossible not to believe him; I would sooner have doubted the Archangel Gabriel. 'What is the evidence that such correspondence exists?' he asked.

In a low voice I told him the story, omitting the details of how we'd scared it out of Fourcroy. He saw at once the implications that had taken René, Pluvinet and me days to work out. 'The seal of the Revolutionary Committee – that's easy to come by,' he said. 'It's an office where people leave things lying around in a most disorganised fashion,' he said in a manner that showed his contempt. 'But my seal?' He showed it to me. 'I keep it secure; I see no point in sealing something if the seal can be taken.'

'Tell me about the time when the packet was sealed.'

His story matched Fourcroy's almost exactly, except that he didn't describe how he'd been courteous.

'Did you look at every letter, one by one, as it was put in the packet?'

'Much to my regret, the answer is no. I recognised the pile, and thought my seal was sufficient security. This I now see to be an error. A grave error.' Because it allowed the possibility – in his mind as well as mine – that his wife had done something that at best could be called stupid, and at worst could be called treason.

'But on the other hand,' he continued, 'what you've told me has corrected another error in a way that gives me great pleasure. I've held Fourcroy guilty of ingratitude if not outright betrayal. I am happy to learn that I was wrong.' He took paper and pen. 'Will you act as my messenger once more? I'd like to send this to him.'

As I stood by the window while he wrote, I felt the tax farmers' kitten against my ankle, so I picked her up. She snuggled into my cleavage as if seeking maternal comfort; her fur was soft and warm against my skin.

He finished his letter and brought it to me at the window so I could check that he'd written nothing *inciviste* or incriminating – it was only his letters to his wife that I didn't want to see before I carried them. 'This is most kind of you, Citoyenne.'

'Not kind. I'm not a kind person, Monsieur.'

He smiled as he looked at the kitten purring as I stroked her, and his regard brought a flush into my face. 'I think you could be,' he said in a tone I'd never heard from him before, soft and warm as the kitten I caressed.

Then he frowned and turned away abruptly, with his hand covering his face as if he'd had some thought or feeling that he didn't want. Neither of us spoke; I wanted to ask what the matter was, but he was obviously not going to tell me. He stepped away from me, and sat down with the air of a man who has just made a decision. He sealed the letter, and it was as if he was sealing off something else.

'How did you persuade Fourcroy to reveal what he'd done?' he asked in his usual cool and inquiring manner, very different from his previous voice. 'He is trusting his life to you.'

'There are some things that you don't want to know.'

‘There is nothing that I don’t want to know.’ Knowledge was for him a passion greater than almost any other. ‘Much as I value your efforts, if there is anything which you can’t tell me about, then I don’t want you to do it.’

‘We – er, René du Pont and I – we borrowed a tumbrel from Papa, and then we took Citoyen Fourcroy for a ride along the route of the guillotine, and I told him what had been done to Damiens the assassin. My father was in charge of the torture – I’m sure you know the story. It made him vomit, and then it made him talk.’

‘Ah.’ There was a pause as he thought about it. Well, I’d told him I was not a kind person, hadn’t I? ‘I wonder what you count as breaking the law, Citoyenne, if you consider that kidnapping a Conventionnel and threatening to tear his limbs off is legal.’

‘I did no such thing! I just – stimulated his imagination. I know you have a poor opinion of the imagination, but it is very powerful.’

‘On the contrary, I have a high opinion of the imagination precisely because I know its power. I wrote the report of the investigation into Animal Magnetism; I’ve seen people faint and fall into convulsions, the result of nothing more than their imagination. And my own is strong.’ I put the kitten down on one of the beds, where she went to sleep, then sat down. ‘Very strong.’ I wondered what he was imagining at that moment. ‘But I also know that the imagination is seductive. It must be controlled by reason – something that lesser minds cannot do.’

‘You must be the only person in the world who would consider that Citoyen Fourcroy has a lesser mind.’ Perhaps he was entitled to, but all the same— ‘Excessive humility is not one of your faults, is it?’

‘Excessive civility is not one of yours. But if Fourcroy let his imagination work on him so powerfully that he vomited, then indeed I do consider that his mind was not as strong as I would have expected of him.’

‘Don’t despise a man merely because his body has its own demands. Does yours always do what you want?’

‘I consider that my body is under the control of my reason, yes.’

His self-conceit goaded me too far. ‘I’ve seen strong men vomit, piss themselves and go into convulsions – when they’re in the tumbrel. Don’t be sure you’ll do any better,’ I said, and then blushed with shame. ‘My apologies. That was a dreadful thing to say even by my standards.’

‘My apologies to you,’ he said formally. ‘It was my excessive lack of humility that provoked your excessive lack of civility.’

There was a stiff silence for a moment. Then he stood and picked up the bundle of mending that was on the floor. ‘You are inconveniently efficient, Citoyenne; this is the last collection for you. I’ll have to creep round in the middle of the night cutting holes in everyone’s breeches.’

It was so ludicrous a picture that I couldn’t help giggling; the stiffness was over. I would never have thought that he could have come up with such an idea. This was a side of the cool and arrogant academician that few people knew, and it was as endearing as it was surprising.

‘I don’t need a reason to visit. None of the guards ever asks what I’m doing here; I come and go as I please. They’re a slack crew – I ought to report them. They never take any notice of me; I’m the same as the cleaners and cooks who work here. Nobody takes any notice of any of us.’ I looked at him for a moment. ‘What do you know about the person who keeps this room clean?’

‘She’s forty-five; she’s much shorter than you are; she’s lost her husband and most of her teeth; she was born in Dijon; she lives in the faubourg-Montmartre with her daughter-in-law while her son is fighting the Austrians; she’s worried about her daughter who’s in love with a married man— Is there anything else you’d like to know about her?’

‘Oh.’ I smiled at him. ‘I tell you, Monsieur, you’re a lot better than most of your fellow-pillagers. They wouldn’t notice if I grew another head.’

‘They’d notice that; we’re all rather conscious of heads at the moment. Another arm – perhaps not.’ He smiled back. ‘I’m glad you can continue to visit me easily; the breeches of my fellow-pillagers may stay intact.’ He sat down again to talk. ‘Citoyenne, to continue our conversation, what is the difference between the people who collapse with terror in the tumbrel and the ones who die bravely?’

He appeared remarkably comfortable, given that he had every chance of finding out the answer

to that question himself. He was much more at ease than in his portrait, where he'd been sitting in a slightly contrived pose with one leg out. Now both legs were stretched out naturally, and I felt a very un-Republican pleasure that the fashion for the loose trousers of the sans-culottes hadn't reached here; there's a lot to be said for well-fitting breeches when a man has a good pair of legs.

'You have no personal concern in the matter, of course,' I said.

'I just wonder,' he said, and it really did appear as if he was just wondering. 'I'd have thought that everyone would prefer to appear brave, and yet not everyone manages to. Is it weakness of will?'

'No. I've known men of iron will who scream with terror in the tumbrel. It's reasonable to fear death. A rational mind, a strong imagination, and a life that is worth continuing – it's hard for someone with those qualities to be courageous on the scaffold.' I paused; he could pick up my warning if he wanted to.

'You do not believe that a strong mind will always control the body?'

'No, I don't. You think that yours would, don't you?'

'Yes, I do. I defer to your greater knowledge of executions, but grant me greater knowledge of myself.'

'I hope we never discover which of us is right.'

'Yes, that's one discovery that I don't want to make,' he admitted. 'But if it's not strength of mind or will, what do you believe it is that allows some people to die bravely but not others?' He stopped himself. 'Citoyenne, if I am detaining you, I ask your pardon; please don't feel obliged to stay. But I am fascinated by what you are telling me – and not only for my personal concern in the matter.'

I should go, I thought. I've left Jacques long enough. But his company was the most stimulating I'd ever experienced, and I didn't want to leave it. 'I'll stay – I'm enjoying myself. You might think it odd to enjoy such a grim topic of conversation, but I'm far more used to it than I am to being treated as an equal by a genius.'

'If you ever hear someone described as a genius who isn't fascinated by new knowledge, then you may be sure that he's been described wrongly. And if I ever fail to treat you as an equal, then you may rebuke me, not only for failing in good manners and republican egalitarianism, but for my lack of perception of your obvious qualities. Pride I certainly have, but it's not the sort that can't acknowledge other people's abilities; and in this matter, as in many more, you are clearly my superior.'

I had been told how his disapproval could wither the spirit; nobody had mentioned how his approval could make it bloom. Now I understood why Fourcroy, who disagreed with him on everything in politics and had found evidence that he was a traitor, had concealed it at the risk of his own head and in defiance of his principles. I suddenly realised that I might have done the same.

'I'll tell you what I can, but some of it is only relating what the men of my family have told me; I don't go to the scaffold myself.'

'Your father's the expert, of course, and I'd like to meet him one day, but in the mean time you are a very acceptable substitute.' No other man facing trial in the Reign of Terror could have expressed a desire to meet my father without thinking of what it could mean; he was indeed interested in the knowledge for its own sake.

'In one way I may be more expert than Papa. When he prepares people – and when I used to prepare people for my husband – it's to save trouble for the executioner. But when I was in prison myself, and people were coming in and out almost daily to be killed by the Royalists, I learned how to help them for their own sakes. From the point of view of the executioner there's not much difference between someone who walks quietly to the scaffold out of numb obedience and someone who does it out of dignified courage. But there's a world of difference from their own. I think that someone's last hour should be a good one.'

'Are you sure that you're not a kind person? That seems like great kindness to me.'

'Oh, no. It was my way of carrying on the fight. Every time I sent someone out to die bravely, I counted it as a victory. I had only one defeat, in my first week. After that I knew what it was that let people face death, and I knew how to help them to find it.'

'Very well, then; what is it?'

‘It’s not the same for everyone; it varies. We all have something, somewhere inside us that helps us to die – after all, we’re all going to do it one day. Some people discover it, and other people don’t.’

‘Such as?’

‘Well, a lot of people console themselves if they have a future in some sense.’ I counted things off on my fingers. ‘Their children, for example. My husband did; his last words were, “Courage, Jeanne, for the sake of our baby.” The belief that one is dying in a good cause to bring a better future – that helped many of the revolutionaries in prison with me. The afterlife: priests and nuns often die bravely, helping the others in the tumbrel with them. Or the reputation that will live on: Papa is sure that some people are thinking of their last words so they go down to posterity. Madame Roland didn’t come up with a line like, “Oh, Liberty, what crimes are committed in your name!” on the spur of the moment.’

‘And if they cannot console themselves with the future? Does the past suffice?’

Was there a personal concern in the question? He had no children, he’d die in a very unworthy cause, and I hadn’t the slightest idea of his views on the afterlife. But surely he knew that his reputation would live on. ‘Not usually, except in old age. If the past life was good, people don’t want to leave it prematurely; if it was bad, they feel cheated. Papa finds it strange that those whose life is most tedious and plodding often seem to regret losing it more than others who have most reason for caring for theirs.’

‘What about the present?’

‘Yes, that works sometimes: wine, women and song.’

‘Indeed? You surprise me.’

‘Papa’s assistants often have to carry people up the steps because they’re too drunk to walk, and men can usually forget death in a woman’s arms. As for song; did you hear how the Girondins died? They sang the Marseillaise while waiting their turn at the scaffold, and it became quieter and quieter as one voice was stilled after another until there was only one voice left.’ That had been another bad day for Papa.

‘I can understand wine and song, but women? To be blunt, I find it hard to believe that a man could be capable in the circumstances.’

‘Oh, yes. The brothels are always full on the eve of a battle. In my prison, men and women were not separated, and many of them became even less separated in their last hours; sometimes married couples, sometimes complete strangers. And I’ve heard that even in the Conciergerie men and women seek consolation together.’

‘I’ll have to take your word for it; I can’t imagine myself seeking such consolation.’

‘The body has its own truths, Monsieur; it knows to try to create life in the face of death, even when the mind knows that there is no chance of success.’

He was clearly struck by this. ‘I can understand that. It is untrue to think that the mind and the body are completely separate. There is no sharp division between them, and they work together. But the mind must be the one that makes the decisions. Can the body be right where the mind is wrong?’

‘Yes, it can; I know it from my own experience. I gave birth while I was hiding in the middle of a battle between the Royalists and the Republicans, and we knew that if the Royalists heard us they would come and kill us: me, the woman who was helping me, and my baby. When Jacques was born, he did what babies always do: cry. I couldn’t keep him quiet. From the purely rational point of view, I should have stifled him: he’d die anyway, and I and the other woman would die too. But I didn’t even think of it. My body told me to protect my baby at all costs, and it was right. The Republicans won, and all three of us lived.’

He might have expressed sympathy or horror; he didn’t. He was as dispassionate about my personal concerns as he was about his own. ‘You’re right. Mother love is an exception – and just as well; few of us would be here if our mothers had been purely rational about it, when you consider what pains we give them. I grant you that.’

‘And I grant you that it’s often better if the mind does control the body, even in mother love. You talked about the pains; believe me, the pains of childbirth are very great. I knew in my mind when I was in labour that if I screamed it would bring the Royalists in to kill us, and yet my body

had to scream. It was very hard to control it.'

'How did you do it?'

I had an idea – I'd show him that his mind couldn't control his body all the time. 'Do you promise not to laugh if I tell you?'

'Of course.'

'If you laugh, you will break your promise; your mind is fully aware of that?'

'Certainly. Tell me, then: how did you control your screams?'

'I breathed deeply and recited the *Table of Simple Substances*.'

His hand shot up to cover his face, and his body gave one mighty convulsion – but silently. Then he breathed deeply several times, shook himself, and took his hand away. 'You see, Citoyenne,' he said, his lips quivering only slightly. 'The mind can control the body.'

'Deep breathing helps, doesn't it?'

'I shall bear it in mind,' he said solemnly.

'So does the *Table of Simple Substances*.'

He shook slightly, but he didn't even snort. 'Oh, that's not fair! I passed the test first time; don't try me again.' He glanced at me, and I caught what in any other person I'd have described as a mischievous expression; he was planning to retaliate, and I wondered what he'd do. The idea of Antoine-Laurent Lavoisier being mischievous seemed as unlikely as God playing skittles, but there it was. I was learning a great deal about him in this visit.

He was looking at me speculatively with a slight smile, and now I discovered something else about him: fifty years old though he might be, he was still an attractive man. Not in the handsome way of René du Pont, but I could imagine what he was like at twenty-eight when he'd rescued Marie-Anne from an ogre; she would have been overwhelmed by him. But I'd better not tell him so; his opinion of himself was high enough already.

He said nothing, just continued to look at me and smile. Very attractive, I thought, and felt myself blushing.

I saw his smile change to one of triumph. 'Oh, now you're being unfair!' I cried indignantly. 'And it's beneath you. Making me blush is no great achievement.'

'To do it without saying a word is no small one,' he said with an intolerable air of self-congratulation.

I had to fight back. 'It's easier for you. When you want to conceal your feelings, all you do is cover your face with your hand.'

'I don't!' he protested.

'Yes, you do. Like this.' I copied the gesture I'd seen him make.

He copied my copy, then put his hand down again. 'So I do! I've never noticed. I'll stop doing it.'

I'm going to make you do it again in the next ten minutes, I vowed. He'd beaten me easily in the game of intellectual shuttlecock we'd played before, because he knew more chemistry than I did, but this one I'd win. He believed that the mind ought to control the body; I knew that it rarely could. I had the advantage this time. 'It's as revealing as my blushes,' I said, making my opening play. 'You might as well wave a flag saying "I'm concealing something".'

'I wonder what it was that you were trying to conceal,' he mused.

'I'd prefer to keep it concealed.'

The expression on his face told me that he was determined to find out. No, you won't, you arrogant self-congratulatory bastard, I thought. I wouldn't reveal it to you if I'd been thinking about the time of day, let alone that I found you attractive.

'So it seems that you were right, Citoyenne, when you said that the body has its own truths,' he said in his usual cool manner. 'Our bodies – yours and mine, at least – take strong objection to our telling lies.' If that was an attempt at getting me to reveal what I didn't want to, then it was a feeble one.

I would take a slower approach, and choose my moment carefully. 'Do you envy people who can lie successfully?'

'Not at all. It means that they have no love for the truth. That's not something to envy.'

'Nevertheless, it would be very convenient to be able to lie sometimes.'

‘I grant that, but in order to be able to do so successfully, one needs practice; one needs to lie all the time.’ He looked at me, and I was forewarned that another attack was coming. ‘Mind you, there’s something to be said for not advertising the fact that one is trying to conceal something, as you and I do. And not only a lie; sometimes it is emotions that one wants to conceal.’

Pitiful, pitiful, I thought. ‘Indeed.’ He was fishing; he wouldn’t catch anything.

‘Or the recollection of embarrassing errors.’

No luck there, Monsieur. ‘You mean the ones that make you wake up in the middle of the night hot and sweating with shame?’ I suggested, but I missed too. No success either side so far. I recalled that something had struck him early on in this visit, and had made him cover his face; what had it been?

‘Thoughts that one might not want to have,’ he tried.

He’d been writing a letter to Fourcroy, and then sealing it. Oh, no! I thought in dismay: he couldn’t have been lying all the time about that sealed package, could he? I picked up the letter that he’d written and played with it idly. ‘Or secrets, perhaps.’

He made no reaction, which relieved me considerably; I wouldn’t have wanted to win the game at that cost. So what else had it been? I’d been stroking that kitten.

‘Opinions of another person that one doesn’t want that person to know about,’ he said as I stood up to pick her up from the bed. This was unfortunate – the fact that I’d turned away made him think he was getting close, which he was.

We both waited until I turned back to face him holding her; no cheating either side. ‘Unfavourable ones, you mean?’ I asked. Like the opinion that someone is an arrogant self-congratulatory bastard, I thought as I stroked her as I’d done before.

‘Or perhaps too favourable?’ he suggested quietly as he watched me.

And I began to blush. I cursed myself, and I cursed him, but I couldn’t help it.

He noticed; he understood. He put his hand to his face. He realised what he was doing, looked at his hand, then at my blush, then back at his hand.

We both burst out laughing together, and carried on laughing, and every time we looked at each other we laughed again. It was an even game.

He managed to control himself first, of course. ‘Oh, what a happy sound that is within these walls!’ he said. ‘If I brought you comfort in your imprisonment, you have more than repaid me in mine.’

‘I’d never have imagined that one could get such amusement from the *Table of Simple Substances*.’

He burst out laughing again. I had him!

‘You broke your promise!’ I crowed in triumph. ‘You lost!’

‘Oh, I did, I did!’ he cried, throwing his head back and laughing louder. ‘And I’d never have imagined that one could get such amusement from admitting defeat.’

I put the kitten back on the bed; she’d served her purpose. I could go home victorious. But I suddenly had a very unpleasant thought.

‘What’s the matter?’ he asked, still laughing.

There was no point in trying to conceal it. ‘I’ve just realised how my neighbours in the faubourg-Antoine would act if I revealed that I had too favourable an opinion of a tax farmer.’

He stopped laughing instantly. ‘You must not visit me any more.’ I could see from his dismay that he would feel the loss; was it for me or the letters I bore?

‘Since the opinion will continue whether I come or not, I might as well get some pleasure out of it in your company.’

He put his hand to his face, and did not take it away. ‘I don’t want you to come. I’ll find another way to exchange letters with my wife.’

‘Very well, I shall not come. If, that is, you will tell me that you want me to stay away because you don’t get pleasure in my company, rather than because you’re concerned for my safety.’

‘I—’

‘Uncover your face and tell me the truth. Tell me that you have no need of me, and I’ll stay away.’

He dropped his hand. ‘You were right. It would be convenient to lie at this moment, and for

your safety I very much wish that I could. But I can't. You know how much I love my wife, so you know that this is no disloyalty to her; but if your visits ceased I would miss your company even more than I would miss her letters.'

'That's a high value indeed. I shall continue.'

'But – Citoyenne, I must have your promise that you will come only for your pleasure, not for my need. I insist on this.'

'Very well, Monsieur.' It was an easy promise to make – knowing that I was needed by him was a pleasure in itself.

The pleasure stayed with me all the rest of the day, and had my family and my neighbours commenting how cheerful I looked, and sent me to bed with a smile. But as I fell asleep, I seemed to hear his voice say, 'There must be an equality.'

I sat up in bed, dismayed with what I'd let myself drift into: his need for me had created in me a need for him. In Paris in the spring of the Reign of Terror, the Republic did not need tax farmers – and neither should I.

End of Section 2

Go to the author's web page for subsequent sections