Daughter of the Guillotine

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Section 1

Prologue: The Elements
Part 1: The Table of Simple Substances

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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Prologue: The Elements

I am the daughter of the Executioner of Paris, and this is the story of what happened when I set out to save Antoine-Laurent Lavoisier, a man I had never met, from dying on my father's guillotine on the orders of the Republic that I loved.

I chose to make the attempt, not because he was a great man (although he was), nor because the Republic needed him (although it did), but because he had once been kind to me, and kindness is not something that an executioner's daughter is much used to.

Jeanne Berger
Citizen of the French Republic

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Part 1: The Table of Simple Substances

These things we at present suppose simple may soon be found quite otherwise.
A-L Lavoisier
The Elements of Chemistry

I lay on a stone prison floor giving birth in the middle of a battle. Beside me, a woman I'd never seen before was saying, 'You're doing well. Everything's fine,' as I gripped her hand and howled in agony. It didn't feel fine at all.

One pain eased off; I knew the next would come soon, but relief was sweet while it lasted. Now I could be aware of what was going on in the world that my baby was entering: the sounds of gunfire, yells and crashes as the fight raged outside the prison; the reek of gunpowder mixed with the stench of the filthy prison in which too many people had been crammed for too long; the other prisoners crowded round the single window, desperate to know what was happening and powerless to do anything about it.

If the Republican Army won, we were safe; if the Royalist Army fought them off, we would die.

Another pain, then another brief moment of bliss when it stopped.

A voice from just outside; a Royalist guard shouting, 'Kill all the prisoners!' I saw the other prisoners rushing to the door, piling our pitiful stock of furniture against it to stop the Royalists coming in and killing us.

'It won't be long now,' said the woman beside me as I screamed again. I didn't know whether she was talking about death or birth, and I didn't much care so long as the pain stopped.

A crash so loud that I heard it even in my agony. And then there was almost silence. Through the dust I saw that there was a hole in the prison wall, a hole that the prisoners could squeeze through to find life.

My baby squeezed more on another journey to life, and I couldn't think of anything else. In the moments between the throes of birth, I saw the other prisoners clambering through the hole in the wall. But the woman didn't join them; she kept kneeling beside me, holding my hand, telling me that everything was going well.

'Come on!' I heard a man shouting to us. 'Run!'

There are many things that you can't do when you're in labour, and running is one of them. I let go the woman's hand; there was no need for us both to die.

But she held it again. 'This woman needs me,' I heard her say to the man as he climbed out of the hole. 'No bloody Royalist scum drives me away!'

Only she and I were left. 'Thank you,' I said; it seemed inadequate for what she was doing for me and what she was risking. I looked up at her and managed to smile. 'That's one way to get some privacy.'

She knelt up and held my face to tell me something important. 'You must keep quiet,' she whispered urgently. 'I know it hurts, but you mustn't scream, or the Royalists will know we're still here, and come and kill us. They'll kill me, they'll kill you, and they'll kill your baby. You must keep quiet. Can you do it?'

I nodded. And then pain took over, and a scream began to force a way out. I felt a hand clapped over my mouth, and I struggled against it. 'Shh,' I heard her whisper as it eased and I stopped struggling.

When I noticed the world again, I heard gunfire from just outside, and shouts of pain and terror. A man tried to climb back through the hole; there was a shot, and he was dead. I thought vaguely that I ought to feel horrified. 'Just as well we didn't run, isn't it?'

'It won't be any use unless you keep quiet. I can't keep my hand over your mouth all the time; I've got to pay attention to what's happening at the other end of you.' As the pain started again, she whispered, 'You can do it. Sing the Marseillaise quietly to yourself like a good Republican.'

She whispered with me: '*Allons, enfants de la patrie – Le jour de gloire est arrivé!*' But it

wasn't working; as I started to cry out *arrivé!* she slapped her hand over my mouth, and kept it there until the agony eased.

Think, I urged myself through the haze that fuddled my mind. Something to keep that life-threatening scream behind my teeth. Not the Marseillaise – that was what the Republican soldiers were singing as they fought. If they won, I'd sing it with them; if they lost, I'd never sing anything again. I had to find something that had nothing to do with the battle, or my baby, or the pain. The Marseillaise was inspiring, but I didn't want to be inspired. I wanted to be numbed.

I thought of the book that was the only thing I'd had to read and to occupy my mind in prison; I'd used it to numb my fear and to dull my misery: a copy of *The Elements of Chemistry*. It had worked for months; perhaps it would work now. In the bliss of the moment without agony, I spoke silently to the man who'd written it. Thank you, Monsieur Lavoisier, for all you've done for me. Help me to stop my mouth now.

As a wave of pain washed over me I started to breathe slowly and to recite the *Table of Simple Substances*. If that didn't numb me, nothing would.

Breathe in – *Light* – breathe out – *Caloric* – breathe in – *Oxygen* – breathe out – *Azote* – breathe in – *Hydrogen* – breathe out. The wave of pain eased, then washed back. *Sulphur* – breathe in – *Phosphorus* – breathe out – *Carbon* – breathe in – *Muriatic radical* – breathe out – *Fluoric radical* – breathe in – *Boracic radical*.

Another break in the pain, and the woman understood that I could manage. 'Good. Whisper if you want to – the guns are loud enough to drown that. But don't cry out.' She let go my hand and knelt between my legs. 'I can see the head; your baby's coming soon.'

Then the waves washed through me, getting stronger and impossibly stronger. I kept on breathing and reciting, and when I finished the list of elements I started it over again, as the battle went on and my baby finished the short journey that seemed all too long to me.

Breathe in – *Antimony* – breathe out – *Arsenic* – breathe in – *Bismuth* – breathe out – *Cobalt* – breathe in – *Copper* – breathe out – *Gold* – breathe in – *Iron* – breathe out – *Lead* – breathe in – *Manganese* – breathe out – *Mercury* – breathe in – *Molybdenum*.

The pain eased for a moment, and I wondered hazily and irrelevantly whether I'd live long enough to find out what molybdenum was. It started again. Breathe in – *Nickel* – breathe out – *Platinum* – breathe in – *Silver* – breathe out – *Tin* – breathe in – *Tungsten* – breathe out – *Zinc*.

'Nearly there now,' the woman whispered. 'Just a few more pushes will do it.'

Breathe in – *Lime* – breathe out – *Magnesia* – breathe in – *Barytes* – breathe out – *Argill* – breathe in. I panted for air as the pain lessened for just a few seconds. Then my body was bursting as my baby's head came into the world. Breathe in – *Silex* – breathe out – *Start over again* – breathe in – *Light* – breathe out – *Caloric* – breathe in – *Oxygen*!

And my baby was born.

I felt nothing but relief for a moment, as great as the pain had been before. Then I looked at my baby – my son, bloody and wet in the woman's hands.

He took his first breath and began to cry.

The noise of battle drowned his sounds for the moment, but it wouldn't for long. The woman looked at my baby, then at me, and we knew that his cries could kill all three of us. 'Quick, give him to me,' I whispered. I put him to my breast. Suckle, little boy, suckle, please suckle, I begged him. Just be quiet.

My beautiful baby found my nipple and stopped crying. Oh, I loved him so much! I had never felt love like I did then, flowing into him. At the other end of me, the woman and my body were doing all those things that need to be done after birth, but I took little notice. I didn't even care much whether I lived or died. Only my baby mattered to me at that moment.

The sounds of battle ceased; someone had won. There was no way to tell whether it was the Royalists or the Republicans, no way to know whether we would die or live. The woman finished what she was doing, then helped me to sit up; she gave a sudden smile as she looked at my baby.

Then my baby stopped suckling and began to cry again. His voice was loud in the silence after the guns. I held my arms round him, trying to quieten him, trying to protect him from the woman who had brought him into the world but who knew that she could die unless he was silent.

I looked up at her from the stone floor, and I saw in her face that he was in no danger from

her. ‘If the Royalist butchers want to kill him, I’ll not do their job for them.’

Over the sounds of his cries that we couldn’t stop, we heard soldiers’ footsteps coming towards us. Royalist or Republican? We couldn’t tell. We heard their shouts and their attempts to get in; we saw the door move slowly as they pushed it open against the furniture that had been piled up against it to stop the Royalists coming in; we saw weapons and uniforms. And we saw the blue, white and red tricoleur of the Republican Army.

And I sang, and she sang, and the victorious soldiers coming in through the door sang:

Allons, enfants de la patrie;

Le jour de gloire est arrivé!

The day of glory had arrived!

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We were installed in as much comfort as a hard-bitten, battle-weary army could provide. These men had seen a lot of death; they rejoiced in the life that had come into the world in their hour of victory.

The three of us – I, my son, and the woman who’d helped him to live – were alone together. I sat with my baby at my breast; I could hardly believe how beautiful he was, with his perfect little fingers opening and closing, and his skin so fine and soft I could almost see through it. He finished, then went to sleep. All three of us were now well-fed, warm, clean – and safe.

The woman handed me a glass of wine. ‘Here’s a toast,’ she said. ‘Long live the Republic, long live your baby, and long live us!’ We drank and smiled happily at each other.

In some ways her appearance was much like mine; we were both taller than average, and both in our twenties. We both had dark hair, though mine was more red, and I was more slightly built than she. Neither of us had much in the way of looks at that moment. I had just given birth after three months in a vile prison under sentence of death, but I had hopes of improvement; I still had good cheekbones and large eyes, and my colour would get better with good food and more fresh air. But she: well, I wouldn’t call her ugly, but that’s because I wouldn’t use such a word to describe someone so brave and strong and compassionate.

‘Now we have time to find out these unimportant details about each other, what’s your name?’ I asked. ‘Mine’s Jeanne Berger.’

‘Constance Evrard. I’m a cook.’

‘A cook? I thought you were a midwife!’

‘No. That’s the first time I’ve delivered a baby. I didn’t think you’d want to know that at the time.’

‘Thank you. And for staying with me when I needed you. Thank you for your kindness and your courage.’

‘I’d have been shot like the others if I’d run, so there’s no need to thank me.’ I looked down at my sleeping baby, loving him. ‘We both owe our lives to him, don’t we?’

‘And to the Republic,’ she reminded me.

‘I love them both.’

‘Me too.’ We sat in silence, lost in adoration of my baby and the Republic.

‘What were you in prison for?’ I asked after a while.

‘I denounced the bloody aristos who employed me; I knew how vicious they were. When the Royalists captured the town six months later, they would have had my head off for it – I had to go into hiding. They caught me yesterday, the bastards; I’d be dead by now if our glorious army hadn’t won. What about you?’

‘I was in prison for three months. As soon as the Royalists took over, they executed my husband, and they’d have sent me after him if a priest hadn’t stopped them. “Kill her if you want to, but spare the child inside her,” he said. I was due to die the hour after my baby was born.’

‘What did the scum have against your husband?’

‘He’d killed a lot of them.’

‘Good for him! How?’

I didn’t want to tell her, but I’d never been able to lie convincingly. ‘He was Jacques Berger,

the executioner.' I waited for the look of revulsion that always came when I said that.

'Your husband died for *la patrie*,' she said. 'Be proud of him.'

No-one had ever told me to be proud of my husband before; it gave me confidence to tell her the rest. 'I come from a long line of executioners. My father is Charles-Henri Sanson.'

'Charlot of Paris?' I nodded. 'Good. Helping to bring Charlot's grandson into the world is something for me to be proud of.'

No-one had said anything like that before either. 'You approve of him?'

'But of course! I'd happily spill all my blood if I could spill the blood of the enemies of *la patrie* – I'm glad that men like your father and your husband do it for me.' She put her hand on my shoulder. 'I watched your husband when he gave that aristo family what they deserved, and I thought, "There's a fine man." You were a lucky woman, being married to him.'

And certainly no-one had ever said that. I'd better not tell her that executioners are professionals; they obey whoever is in charge at the time. My husband would have chopped her head off as readily as those of an aristo if he'd been ordered to do it. Perhaps even more readily. 'What was the name of the family you denounced?'

She told me. But I didn't tell her in return how he'd come back that day shivering and white-faced, because a thirteen-year-old girl had been one of them. I didn't tell her that my baby was conceived on that day. I'd done what I usually did to help him forget death, and it had produced something more than just relief to his soul.

'Yes, Jacques Berger was a fine man,' I said instead. It had been an arranged marriage, and there'd never been much passion between us – perhaps that's why it was four years before I conceived – but he'd been a good husband to me and I'd been a faithful wife to him. He hadn't deserved to die just for doing his job. I looked at my baby in my arms. 'He didn't live long enough to see you, my little one, but at least he knew I was carrying you. You're going to be called after him – Jacques.'

She let me love my son and remember my husband for a few minutes in silence, then said, 'By the way, *Citoyenne* Berger—'

I interrupted her. 'After what we've been through together I don't think we need to be formal about it and call each other *Citizen*. After all, you've seen me from a very intimate angle.'

'Friends, then – Jeanne?'

'Friends, Constance.' I'd never had a friend before – executioners' children don't make them. 'But what were you going to ask?'

'Whatever was all that stuff you were muttering to stop yourself screaming? Sounded like gibberish to me, but it seemed to be working so I didn't inquire.'

I laughed. 'The *Table of Simple Substances*. It's from *The Elements of Chemistry* – that's the only thing I've read for the last three months. The Royalists wouldn't let me read any of my Republican books, and I wasn't going to read theirs.' I didn't know her well enough to tell her that the book was not merely something that I'd just happened to come across, but meant a great deal to me because of the man who'd written it.

'You've been reading *chemistry*?' she asked, amazed.

'For three months I woke up every morning thinking that I was one day nearer to my baby's birth and one day nearer to my own death. I needed something to take my mind off that.'

'I can imagine.' There was a pause. 'You're tough, you know.'

'So are you.' We looked at each other with approval.

'I survived what the aristos did to me before the Revolution,' she said. 'I can take anything the Royalist scum do to me now.' She didn't say what she'd survived, but I've always been good at reading other people's faces, and I knew that she'd had to be very tough indeed.

'I was brought up to be tough,' I said. 'It isn't kind to an executioner's child to let them indulge in sentiment. Just as well in the past few months.' I laughed with joy at life. 'Five things have saved me, Constance,' I said, holding my hand up and counting my fingers. 'My baby, the Republic, the toughness that my parents gave me, that book that kept me sane and stopped me screaming – and you. Thank you – all five of you!'

'Well, I'll thank you, your baby, my own toughness, and the Republic. You all saved me. But I won't thank a book about chemistry.'

‘I must write and tell him, the man who wrote it. I doubt if anyone’s used it for such a purpose before – it’ll make him laugh.’

‘Who is he?’

‘Antoine-Laurent Lavoisier, the scientist.’

‘What?’ she cried, suddenly horrified. ‘The tax farmer, you mean?’

‘Yes, that’s the man.’

‘That blood-sucker? That man who screwed from the poor the few *sous* they’d managed to earn before the Revolution? That aristo?’ She stopped abusing him and looked at me suspiciously. ‘You don’t know him, do you?’

‘I’ve never met him – I don’t even know what he looks like,’ I said hastily. This was the truth, but it was close enough to a lie that I felt myself blushing as I said it. I always blushed when I was hovering over the edge of falsehood; fortunately she didn’t know me well enough to realise. I wasn’t afraid of what she’d do or say if she knew, but I was distressed at the hatred she showed for him.

In the whole of my life, only two people outside my family had ever been kind to me. She was one of them; he was the other.

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Eleven years before, in the Old Regime before the Revolution, I was a lonely twelve-year-old girl, just coming to realise how different I was from other girls, how different my family was from other families, how different my life would be from other women’s lives. So when one of the greatest men in France spared time and thought for me, I valued it far more than other girls would have done.

Executioners’ children do not go to school; the other children would make their lives miserable. In any case, girls weren’t thought in need of much education in the days before the Revolution; I could read and write, but otherwise I was trained only in my destined duties as the wife of an executioner (much the same as the duties of a wife of a man in any other profession, except that I knew more than most girls about how to get bloodstains out of clothes). So I had listened to the tutor engaged for my brothers. He had taken Henri and Gabriel to a public lecture on the behaviour of gases according to the latest ideas of the famous French chemists, led by the greatest of them all, Antoine-Laurent Lavoisier.

Everyone knew we needed air to breathe and for flames to burn, but Lavoisier and the others presented a new theory to the public gaze. It wasn’t just a matter of ordinary air; there was a new gas – or rather, a gas that had been there all the time, newly investigated and named – that made things burn and that made iron rust. It was what we needed to breathe; if it wasn’t in the air, we would die. It was at the heart of a new way of understanding the world and the way it worked, the way things fitted together, the key to life itself. They called it *vital air* when I first heard of it, but within a few years Lavoisier named it *oxygen*.

The tutor reproduced some of the experiments; and, in despair at my brothers’ indifference, he was happy to explain everything to me. I was entranced – my interest had not been roused by anything else in my training. To the ruin of my mother’s glassware, I repeated the experiment and created my own. I set a candle resting on a stone in a bowl of water, then put a glass over it and watched how the water rose in the glass and the flame went out. I tried variations. Did it make a difference if I breathed into the glass first and quickly inverted it over the candle flame? Or if I boiled the water first? Or if I used a mouse on a raft rather than a candle?

Then, with a daring that astonishes me when I recall it, I wrote to Monsieur Lavoisier with my results.

He replied. He did not spurn me as one of the Sanson breed, nor as a girl who should not take an interest in such matters. Neither did he belittle my efforts, though I know now how mistaken they were. Instead he made suggestions about what I should read, and how I could improve my results with close observation and accurate measurement; he told me of equipment and chemicals that were within the reach of my pocket; he guided me in directions I’d never thought of; and above all he invited me to write to him again when I’d learned more.

My father had taught me to hate lies – he had seen too many innocent people sent by deceit into his hands – but Monsieur Lavoisier gave me the more positive love of truth. For five or six years, all the time I was turning into a woman, I would write to him two or three times a year, and he would reply, always taking my attempts seriously, always encouraging me to learn. I treasured his letters about oxygen theory and the language of chemistry as another girl would have treasured letters of passion from her beloved.

I found out more about him from the newspapers. I learned of his many achievements: how the Academy of Sciences regarded him as the finest *savant* of them all, and how *savants* from all over the world, including the celebrated Benjamin Franklin, visited him and looked up to him. He was a famous and busy public figure, and his was the mind behind dozens of reports on such matters as the new invention of ballooning, the scientific aims of La Pérouse's exploration of the Pacific Ocean, and the claims of Mesmerism and animal magnetism.

But I also learned that he was a tax farmer, one of those who wrung money out of the poor to finance the lavish expenses of the King and Queen and their court. They filled their own pockets in the process, because they had paid for the right to collect taxes, and they expected a very good return for their investment.

My family was not poor, but I saw what the poor suffered: how difficult it was for them to feed themselves even before they had to pay taxes – taxes that went to pay for the extravagances of the obscenely wealthy.

My family was not rich; I knew that there were many men like Papa who cursed the tax farmers for the duty on tobacco every time they lit up a pipe at the end of the day's work. But my father's work was different from other men's, and when he said he'd like to meet the tax farmers, he wasn't talking about a social occasion.

The tax farmers decided to build a wall around Paris to stop people smuggling goods in without paying the duties; *Le mur murant Paris rend Paris murmurant* was the line on everyone's lips – 'The wall around Paris makes Paris mutter.' The tax farmers were some of the most detested men in France.

And the man I admired most in all the world was one of them. It was my first lesson in divided loyalties. I dealt with it by telling myself and my family that Monsieur Lavoisier was not really responsible. He was devoting himself to science, I said. He was led astray by the others; he didn't know what was going on.

My family seemed to accept my defence of him, at least enough to stop my father cursing all tax farmers in my company. Papa and Maman, knowing how little joy there was in my life, did not discourage my research, and they paid for the more expensive equipment. They came to take a quiet pride in my correspondence with one of the greatest men in France.

There was much debate in the family about whether to invite him to my wedding; was it more of an insult to send or not to send an invitation to the great man? Eventually one was politely sent and politely declined, and I received, not the expensive present that Maman hoped for and I dreaded, but something far more valuable to me: beautifully bound in a single volume, a copy of the first edition of *The Elements of Chemistry*. There was an inscription in his hand hoping that I would be as happy in my marriage as he was in his. It was the only time that he wrote to me of anything other than science.

The scientific revolution that his book created was immediately overtaken by another, greater revolution; and I was occupied with wifely duties in the town where my husband was executioner. I stopped experimenting, I stopped writing to him, and *The Elements of Chemistry* stayed unread on my bookshelf for more than four years – until the day that my husband was sent to his own guillotine, and I was thrown into prison until I could be sent after him.

I was allowed to take a bundle of possessions in with me, and I found room for Monsieur Lavoisier's book to occupy my mind. I thought I had at least sixty days left of life when I went in, so I rationed myself to one-sixtieth of the book each day, making sure I understood and could remember everything. Sixty days later, my body was heavy with my baby and my mind was heavy with chemistry, and I started over again. The first reading taught me what was written; the second taught me about the mind of the man who'd written it. I found it as powerful, rigorous, efficient and keen as my father's blade. I'd been too young to appreciate it before, but in my filthy

overcrowded cell I was overwhelmed that such a man had found time to answer my youthful questions and guide a stranger on the path to truth. I had felt admiration and gratitude when I was a girl; as a woman carrying life and facing death I came to a deeper understanding.

I understood one thing especially: this was not a man who could be led astray by others, not a man who didn't know what was going on. Whatever the tax farmers had done before the Revolution, he'd been in the thick of it.

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Constance and I had to wait some time before the roads became safe to travel and the diligences started running again. In that time my baby grew, my body recovered, and we made our plans. We would return to Paris where I was born and where Constance had worked for three years. My husband had left me a small inheritance, and the Republican Army made sure that I got it. My money and her cookery would allow us to set up together; I'd buy a lodging house, and she'd run a café at the street level.

An overcrowded diligence is never comfortable at the best of times; now the early winter rains made the journey muddy and slow, the soldiers still guarded the roads and kept stopping us, and I had a small baby. I was very glad of Constance's company.

However, travelling with a baby has advantages. I would fix my eye squarely on the most impressionable-looking of the passengers occupying the window seats and say, 'I am the widow of a man who died for *la patrie*, and this is his orphan.' It worked every time.

Perhaps they weren't reluctant to give up their places and avoid looking out of the window at sights to turn an impressionable person's stomach. The Republicans were taking revenge on the Royalists for the revenge they had taken on us. It didn't matter to me, and it wouldn't have mattered even if I hadn't had my own reasons for revenge. I did not have an impressionable stomach – or soul, or heart, or mind.

I had grown up with death. I'd been taught not to feel other people's pain. My father couldn't afford to, when my brothers grew up and joined the profession they couldn't afford to, and when I fulfilled my destiny and married another executioner my husband couldn't afford to. My duty was to do what my mother did for my father: to help him live with death. I must be strong, not sentimental (my mother's worst term of condemnation). Courage, duty and efficiency: these were the virtues for Sansons. Not pity, tenderness, or love.

But now, on this journey through the corpse-strewn fields of France, I started to feel love. When I put Jacques to my breast, I was overwhelmed by it; love filled me as my milk filled my baby. Far too much to feel any embarrassment about feeding him in front of all the men in the diligence with us. There was no need for embarrassment anyway; if they made any comment it was of approval – I was a good natural Republican mother. Nobody had ever encouraged me to feel love before. Family loyalty and wifely duty were the closest that I'd ever come to it. It felt strangely self-indulgent to sit loving my baby, to gain pleasure from suckling him, and to know that everyone around me thought that I was virtuous.

Constance and I talked of many things on our journey – I was learning from her how to swear. 'Politeness? Hypocrisy!' she said scornfully. 'Terms of respect? Terms of our servility and oppression! Damn the lot of the *bougres*!' I enjoyed the rough language that I'd never been encouraged to use before – Sansons have been executioners for generations, but they've always fought hard for respectability.

And so, two days into our journey, I looked out of the window at what was happening to the Royalists, and I enjoyed saying, 'Die, you *bougres*, die!'

I happened to catch the expression on the face of one of our fellow passengers. I knew it well – it was exactly the same as the one that people gave me when they found out what my family did for a living. I'd had enough of that expression. 'See here, Citoyen,' I said to him. 'Let me tell you what they did to me; let me tell you why I rejoice that they're dying.'

'There's no need to, Citoyenne,' he said hurriedly.

'Yes, there is,' said Constance. 'There's a need to tell all of you who sit there disapproving of the way our boys are dealing with the vermin. Tell them, Jeanne.'

‘You see this baby?’ I said, pointing to him asleep in my lap. ‘I was six months pregnant with him when the Royalists captured our town. One of the first things they did was to execute my husband. And they didn’t do it the easy way.’ The easy way that he had done to them. ‘They tied me to a post in front of the guillotine, and they made me watch and have his blood spurt over me. Then they threw me into a disgusting hell-hole of a prison.’ The same one that I had spent four years trying to make bearable for the people who would meet my husband; nobody had tried to make it bearable for me. ‘And every day I had Royalist guards gloating that I’d go the same way as my husband as soon as my baby was born. Every day I heard them talking about what they’d do when France had a king again. You remember what the Old Regime was like? Well, what they were planning to do would be far worse. Now, out there, our soldiers are making sure that they never have a chance to do it. Do you object?’

None of them did. But they didn’t call me a good natural mother again either.

That night in the inn where we stayed to get some much-needed rest, I fed and cleaned Jacques, then set him down to sleep; Constance lit the fire and made our small but passably clean room even cleaner. ‘Thanks, Constance,’ I said when we’d both finished. ‘I don’t know how I’d manage this journey without you.’

‘I wouldn’t have been able to pay for a room to ourselves, so it’s a fair bargain.’

‘We can have a room each when we stay at my family’s house. What a relief that will be!’

She didn’t say anything. I had assumed without thinking that she would stay with my family while we looked for a place of our own; now I saw that I shouldn’t have assumed anything of the sort. ‘Oh, Constance,’ I sighed. ‘Even you don’t want to stay in the house of Sanson.’

‘No, no, it’s not that,’ she said quickly. ‘It’s— Well, I’ve never been a guest in the house of a bourgeois.’

‘We’re not very bourgeois!’

‘You paid for this room without thinking about it. You’re bourgeois. Look, Jeanne, you know how much I admire your father for what he does; will your family welcome me?’

‘My family will welcome you with open arms when they know what you did for me and Jacques. Help one Sanson and you help all – because very few people ever help Sansons.’ I thought of the only other person who’d helped me in my life, and it dawned on me that my family had never accepted my feeble adolescent defence of him. But he had been kind to a Sanson, and that made them forgive everything else. ‘Do you forgive me for being bourgeois?’

She laughed. ‘I have nothing against the bourgeoisie, so long as they are on our side. After all, Robespierre is bourgeois, isn’t he?’ she said, referring to her hero, the man who led the Committee of Public Safety and, through that, *la patrie*. ‘But aristos? No, I’ll never forgive them, no matter how much they claim these days to be good Republicans. I’d send every last one of them to meet your father.’

The next day, I was standing by the roadside with Jacques in my arms and Constance beside me while the men were trying to get the diligence out of the mud where it had stuck. To pass the time, we studied the corpses which lay in a field beside the road and tried to work out what had happened to them.

‘Aristos,’ said Constance. ‘Look at their hair and their underclothes.’ Their rich outer clothing had been stripped from them, but there were so many bodies in the Vendée at that time that it wasn’t worth anyone’s while to take underclothes off.

‘Dead about two and a half days. No, three in this cold weather.’

‘How do you know?’

‘Sansons are good at judging this sort of thing.’

‘They were raped,’ Constance said, pointing to the women lying with their legs apart and their petticoats round their waists. ‘Before or after they died, do you think?’

‘Can’t tell from this distance. Let’s have a closer look.’

We went towards them; and I saw a baby about Jacques’s age, dead of a bayonet wound. And I knew that it hadn’t mattered to the woman reaching out to him in death whether she had been raped before or afterwards, because the worst had already happened.

Constance bent down over her. ‘I can use this petticoat if nobody else wants it.’

‘No, Constance. Not her. Leave her.’

‘Why? It’s too good to waste; look at the lace on it!’

‘Because—’ Because, for the first time in my life, I could feel somebody else’s pain. Because it hurt, and because it should hurt, and because there was something missing in me that I didn’t feel it for all the other people lying there equally dead. And because I didn’t want Jacques to grow up as I’d done. ‘Because she had a baby like Jacques.’

‘Oh, all right,’ said Constance, stripping one of the other women instead. ‘Since you ask. But I still think you’re being sentimental.’

I knew that Constance and my mother would get along very well.

*

We arrived at my family’s house in time for— no, not Christmas. Christmas was part of the old superstition; it had no place in the modern Revolutionary calendar. But my family seized the excuse of Jacques’s birth and my safe return to celebrate. They welcomed Constance to the feast, especially when I told them what she had done for Jacques and me.

I was tired after the journey, so I went to bed earlier than everyone else – Constance had asked Papa and my uncles and my brother Henri to tell her how they’d chopped the heads off the King and Queen (the Tyrant and the Austrian Whore, as she put it) and she was listening avidly as I left them.

This was the room I’d always had; Constance was right about us being bourgeois, because no poor family could give their children a room each. As I suckled Jacques and then made him ready to sleep, I heard the sound of Papa’s violin; he often played it when he wanted to take his mind off his work.

There was a cradle in the corner of the room; Papa and Henri had started to make it as soon as they heard that I was safe and that Jacques was born. It was made of fine mahogany, excellently crafted. Maman had told me that I should always put Jacques to sleep in it and not take him into bed with me: ‘You could overlie him and suffocate him.’

But I didn’t want to. I wanted to sleep a long time, and Jacques would keep waking and wanting to be fed, and I would have to get out of bed each time on this cold winter night. I suddenly thought of the skills and the tools that had gone into making this cradle; they were the same as those used in making a guillotine. Feeling guilty, I took Jacques into my bed, telling myself that millions of babies all over the world were sleeping with their mothers this night and not being overlain. He liked it; he snuggled close to me and loved me. I wondered whether Maman had another reason to tell me to leave him in his cradle: lessons in not loving should begin as early as possible.

I slept well; not solidly, since Jacques kept waking me up to feed, but enough so that I felt refreshed and happy in the morning. He was still asleep, so I carefully got out of bed, lit a lamp (it wasn’t yet dawn), used the chamber pot, washed and dressed myself, and sat down in the chair that I’d always sat in, wrapped in the shawl that Maman had given me. There was no fire; we might be bourgeois, but we were not rich enough to afford coals for every room.

The cold midwinter dawn came through the window and shed more and more light; this room held a lot of memories. Here was where I’d sat on the night before my wedding while Maman explained to me my wifely duties. There was the bed where I’d cried when our dog died when I was a little girl – it was the last time I’d ever wept.

I thought: What sort of girlhood was it, that taught me not to weep? What happened to all those emotions that I’d been born with like any other girl? Did they die, or did they just go somewhere else where I could find them again?

Yes, I thought, they did go somewhere else. That’s why I blushed so easily; because I didn’t weep. That’s why I was good at reading other people’s faces; because I didn’t feel their pain. And that, I realised, was why I’d felt what I had for a stranger, a tax farmer, who wrote to me about oxygen theory and chemical systems; because I couldn’t love a man in the way that other girls did when they were growing up.

I stood up quietly and took out his letters from the drawer in which they’d stayed throughout my marriage, blushing as I saw the ribbon that I’d worshipfully tied them with. If there’d been a

fire, I would have burnt them. His letters about combustion would have combusted; they would have combined with the oxygen in the air to make water and carbon gas, leaving only their impurities in the ashes.

And then much of this story wouldn't have happened. Oh, much of it would; most of the same people would have lived, and most of the same people would have died. But there is one life that wouldn't be here now that makes me very glad that there was no fire in my room that winter morning.

I opened the packet and took the letters to the window to read them by the dawn light. Here was one: *We must trust to nothing but facts; these are presented to us by nature and cannot deceive.* Here was another: *In explaining matters to a beginner, I aim for clarity of expression so you may understand me readily, and I omit much. Science is difficult enough without importing obstacles that may get in your way.*

There was no need for me to blush about my adolescent emotions; there were worse places to direct them than towards this man. They might not be normal, but they weren't dishonourable. I could even be proud of them, and of my youthful ability to recognise genius.

All the same, I didn't mention Monsieur Lavoisier to anyone in my family, and so they didn't mention what had happened to him.

*

That night, my father and I found time to be alone together. When everyone else had gone to bed, and Jacques slept quietly in his cradle, we sat by the fire drinking the good burgundy that Papa kept for special occasions. When did Papa become an old man? I wondered. His hair showed no trace of its former sandy colour, and his wrinkled face seemed set in weariness.

We talked of Christmases past, before my marriage and before the Revolution. Many things had changed since then, even the smell and sound of Paris. Five years ago, the streets had been owned by carriages and horses, and people who couldn't afford them had to get out of their way or be run down. Now there were fewer horses dropping their dung where people had to walk; now the sound of carriage wheels took equal place with the wooden sabots of the footsteps of the poor.

But to achieve that, many had been killed: hanging from lamp posts, bleeding in battle, butchered in massacres, or quickly on the guillotine. Even a Sanson had died on the scaffold, though not in the usual way: my young brother. When the guillotine was first introduced, the year before last, Gabriel, only just a man, was assisting Papa and Henri. He held up a head in the approved manner, slipped in the blood, fell off the scaffold, and broke his skull. Everybody thought it was very amusing. Since then there are safety rails around the scaffold; everybody thinks that's amusing too.

Papa and I didn't talk about Gabriel. And we didn't talk about his work. Since last I'd seen him, Terror had been decreed to be the order of the day in the Republic, and he was the one who carried out that almost daily order. But Sansons are good at not talking about death. Instead I told him of the plans that Constance and I had made.

'You can come and live at home if you want to,' he said.

'Well—' I said, feeling guilty. How could I tell him that I hated the idea of moving back to the house that was home to him but would never again be to me? A few days, that was good. But not forever.

'You want to escape, is that it?' he said with an expression of gloomy understanding. We didn't have to talk about death, because it was always there.

'I hope so, Jacques and I. I respect you, and Maman, and Henri, but—'

'You won't escape. I know how much you want to, God knows I do. I tried, and my father tried, and his father before him. And Henri will try to escape too. But we are Sansons; this is our destiny.' He shared the last of the bottle between our two glasses; the wine glowed deep red in the firelight. 'I do it well, Jeanne; I'm fast and efficient, and I spare as much pain as I can. That's the best a Sanson can hope to do.'

'I'm no longer a Sanson, Papa; my husband left me his name and property as well as his son. Can I hope to do something more than merely spare pain?'

‘Now? In the Reign of Terror? Kindness is not a virtue in the Republic.’ He emptied his glass and stood up to go to bed. ‘Liberty, equality, fraternity – or death: these are Republican virtues. When the first three are missing, I deliver the last.’

*

As I’d expected, Constance and my family got on together well. I could tell that they found her zeal excessive, but they were grateful to her so they tolerated it. But Papa became increasingly uneasy when she asked him to talk about all those many, many enemies of the people that he had dealt with.

I spoke to her when we were alone. ‘We don’t like talking about it, Constance,’ I said. ‘My father and my brother – they try to leave their work out of the home; my mother’s always insisted on it. And I’d prefer you not to mention my family when we set up together. Don’t lie – but don’t tell anyone if you don’t have to.’

‘I’d have thought you and your family would rejoice, now they’re dealing with enemies of the people, and not the poor who used to be executed in the Old Regime because they’d stolen a loaf of bread.’

‘It’s just that— Well, there’s a lot more to be done than there used to be, even last year. You might approve of the Reign of Terror, but as far as Papa and Henri are concerned, it’s the Reign of Bloody Hard Work.’

*

Constance and I found a place: a run-down terraced house of five storeys in the poor district of the faubourg-Antoine. Prices had risen so much that I couldn’t afford anything better, and I wouldn’t have been able to afford that if it hadn’t been up for sale cheap as the property of a convicted enemy of the people who’d just had a meeting with my father.

The existing tenants welcomed me as the new owner; the only attention the old one had given the place was to send his men round to screw out the rent from people struggling to pay. The café on the ground floor had been popular until last year, when the old landlord had kicked out the original tenant and installed his mistress, a woman whose hospitality was as cold and unappetising as her meals.

I couldn’t afford to pay for any repairs, but at least I lived in the place, I didn’t throw a tenant out for being a few days late with the rent, and I cleaned the hallways and stairs myself. Constance was an even greater benefit to the neighbourhood; she was a good cook, she bought newspapers for customers to read who couldn’t afford their own, and she encouraged people to sit round discussing the events of the day after they’d finished eating (and sold them wine while they did so). Within ten days of our arrival everyone accepted us as though we’d lived there for years.

They were all sans-culottes: the workers – craftsmen, artisans and shopkeepers – who gave the Revolution its muscle, so called because the men couldn’t afford the expensive *culottes*, or breeches, of the middle and upper classes, but wore cheap and practical trousers.

Five years ago, before the Revolution, my bourgeois parents would have been shocked if I’d chosen to live here amid such poverty. But now the sans-culottes of the faubourgs were a force that nobody could ignore – they were the people who had stormed the Bastille and started the Revolution. There was still poverty, but there was also pride.

Five years ago, the daughter of Sanson would have shocked the sans-culottes. I had grown up as a member of the family that was hated and feared throughout Paris. But now, with the Revolution at its height, my father’s service in ridding the Republic of its enemies brought fear still, but it also brought honour. I sometimes saw people tapping the backs of their necks when they were talking about Papa, and I was sick of all the jokes, but I saw much less of the revulsion that I’d experienced as a girl when people found out about my parentage. I didn’t advertise it, but I didn’t need to conceal it. I was something more than the daughter of Sanson to my tenants and neighbours; I was a good Republican, the widow of a man who had died for *la patrie*, providing good value lodgings in order to live and to bring up his orphan. For the first time in my life, I had

regard and affection, not fear and hatred. For the first time in my life, I fitted in.

Constance was a good female sans-culotte already, and I rapidly became one. I wore wooden sabots instead of leather shoes, I tied a tricoleur republican scarf over my hair, I pinned a large cockade to my cheap cotton dress, and I picked up the ways the sans-culottes thought and talked.

And how they talked! This was their Revolution, and they debated every development eagerly and intelligently. There was always a debate in the café – it soon became as much an attraction as Constance's cooking. There was plenty to talk about. One day it would be whether the new metric system was a revolutionary advance on the ancient system of weights and measures, or an attempt to bamboozle the poor about the quantities of bread and wine they bought. The next day it would be what the Committee of Public Safety and Maximilien Robespierre should do to make sure that nobody charged more than the fixed maximum price for essentials, and how many profiteers should be sent to the guillotine to enforce low prices. The sides changed little; one faction – which Constance soon came to lead – called for Revolutionary purity above all, while the other thought that the most important thing was defeating the foreign enemies of *la patrie*.

This faction was led by a skilled gunpowder worker called Pierre Rose. His room, on the second floor of my lodging house, was filled with revolutionary trophies: a brick from the Bastille, the sharp pike he'd carried when he helped to storm it, and a tricoleur banner which he had received from the hand of the great revolutionary Danton himself. Pierre could have stood as a model of a sans-culotte, from his red cap through his bushy moustache and his short jacket to his striped trousers. He and Constance were soon engaged in a war of words; one of them could hardly comment about the weather without the other disagreeing.

What with my education from Constance's customers, running a lodging house, and looking after Jacques, I didn't have time to read newspapers. If it wasn't debated in the café, then I didn't know about it. And so it was a long time before I learned something that everyone else around me had known for months.

*

Spring came early to Paris, and for the first time there were flowers on the tables in the café. I took my usual place for the evening meal, only half listening to the talk around me; I was absorbed in wonder and love of my baby, now old enough to take an interest in the world and finding it fascinating and delightful. This is happiness, I thought as I looked around me at the people in the café, people who accepted me as one of their own.

Constance finished serving her customers and came over to us. For a few minutes she played peek-a-boo with Jacques to his immense amusement, then asked the company at large, 'Did anyone watch the executions today?'

'Ha!' snorted Pierre, not missing a chance to disagree with her. 'We workers don't have time to spare going to executions.'

'You missed a good one today,' said a one-legged pensioned-off soldier. 'Sanson was at his best: twelve heads in only thirteen minutes.' I could tell which of the company knew about my parentage – the ones who glanced at me before saying anything about my father's accomplishments.

'Did you go?' I was asked by the Lucky Sailor, so-called because he'd been with La Pérouse's expedition to the Great South Land and had the fortune to break his leg and develop a fever while they were moored in Botany Bay, which meant that he'd been left behind when La Pérouse and his doomed ships set off, never to be seen again. He'd spent years trying to get back to France from the other side of the world, and had returned only a few months before, to be astonished at the changes that had taken place since the expedition had left nine years before – he had to catch up his political education even faster than I did. He had vowed never to return to the sea, and Pierre Rose had got him work in the gunpowder factory.

'I've seen enough death to last a lifetime.'

'A good Republican should rejoice at the death of our enemies,' said a carpenter who'd just moved into the street.

Pierre put his spoon down. 'Are you suggesting that Jeanne is not a good Republican?' he

asked the newcomer quietly.

'Because if you are, you can leave my café at once,' added Constance. One of the few things she and Pierre agreed on was defending me and Jacques, and though I didn't need defending, nobody outside my family had ever wanted to before, so I enjoyed it.

The newcomer uttered his apologetic denial, and the evening's debate started. The topic this time was whether the enemies of the Republic should be sent to the guillotine or be set to work.

Pierre waved his bread in mid-air as he accused Constance of putting obstacles in the way of winning the war. 'We need their work more than their heads!'

'What? You'd set them free and let them get away with their crimes?' she cried.

'No, I would not! I'd make them work – harder than any of them have ever done in their lives. But I'd keep them alive for the benefit of *la patrie*.'

'What benefit can it be to *la patrie* to keep traitors alive?'

'They can make roads, they can work on the farms, they can make gunpowder.'

'Better that they make fertiliser!' This drew a laugh even from those on Pierre's side.

He wasn't daunted. 'There are better uses for a head like Lavoisier's than rotting in a graveyard.'

'Lavoisier?' I said, startled into my first contribution to the debate.

'You know that blood-sucker?' the newcomer asked me suspiciously.

I didn't know what to say as Constance glanced at me. I'd never mentioned him to her again, and I'd assumed that she had forgotten what I'd told her, or put it down to the extremity of my condition. 'She's read one of his books,' she said, and to the amusement of the company she related the story of how I'd been muttering from it while giving birth. The anecdote brought approval for both of us.

And also, from Pierre, for Lavoisier. 'That's what I mean,' he said. 'Who knows what uses we can make of the products of that man's head? Why chop it off?' He appealed to the soldier. 'Didn't you feel happier when you fought at Valmy knowing that you had better gunpowder than they did?' The soldier agreed. 'It was Lavoisier who gave it to you. France has the best gunpowder in the world, and it's thanks to what he did when he was in charge of the Gunpowder Commission. I know these things; I make the stuff. And I say that *la patrie* should get him out of prison and send him back to work.'

Prison? Since when? What for? I dared not ask, so I sat listening intently for what scraps of information I could pick up as the debate raged about what to do with him – I was thankful to the Lucky Sailor, whose nine-year absence was generally agreed to be an excuse for his incautious questions.

I learned what I could have learned months ago. Lavoisier and the other tax farmers had been rounded up and sent to prison at much the same time as I was freed from mine. Their accounts were being investigated to see whether they had cheated the people before the Revolution. Since they certainly had at least exploited the people, they would probably be charged with something. And this was the Reign of Terror, when bakers could face death for putting too high a price on a loaf of bread.

*

'What am I going to do, Jacques?' I asked as I rocked him to sleep that night; I had become used to talking things over with him. 'Should I do anything to try to help Monsieur Lavoisier? If I don't do anything, what then? He'll go to the guillotine, most likely. It'll take Papa little more than a minute to chop off his head, but I doubt if the world will find another like it in a hundred years.'

Jacques whimpered a little, so I carried on talking to him, my voice low so as not to disturb my neighbours through the thin walls as well as to soothe him the better. 'Pierre Rose is right, Jacques; the Republic does have better things to do with him than that. Maybe I should do nothing and let the Republic make its own decision. If Dantonists like Pierre have their way, they'll spare him because he makes good gunpowder. Mind you, if Robespierrists like Constance win, he has no chance, does he?'

I looked on my baby, my joy. 'I doubt if you or I would be alive if it weren't for Constance,

would we? Can I go against her? That would be a poor return for everything she did for us, wouldn't it? But it would be a poor return for Monsieur Lavoisier and all he did for me if I did nothing to help him.' I shrugged. 'This, Jacques, is what we call a dilemma.'

At last he seemed to be sleeping so I stopped rocking, but carried on speaking gently. 'What do you want me to do, Jacques? You're the most important person to me. You want me to stay with you and love you, don't you? Don't worry, I shan't take any risks that would mean I was taken from you. So I shan't try to organise a dramatic escape from prison. But I will go and visit him to find out if there is anything I can do for him. Why? Because he was kind to me. And, Jacques, let me tell you a secret,' I whispered as I bent over him and gently kissed him. 'I think that your grandpapa is wrong; kindness can be a virtue in the Republic.'

*

A woman with a child on her hip is rarely suspected of anything sinister, especially when the child is as happy as Jacques, who was at that delightful stage when he smiled at everybody.

It hadn't taken long to find out where Monsieur Lavoisier was imprisoned: the Ferme, the building which once contained the former offices of the tax farm and which now had bars on the windows and guards at the gates. Prison guards are among the few people with whom executioners and their families have much to do, so it would have been sheer bad luck if none of those at the Ferme was familiar to me.

As it was, I had the fortune to know a senior guard called Nécard, a relation of my husband whom it was not too fanciful to call Cousin. A big, cheerful, heavy man approaching retirement, he was happy in this comfortable position. He was much too honest and too good a Republican to take bribes from the tax farmers, but they were used to living well, and there were perquisites with this job that he wouldn't have had guarding the poor. He expressed his condolences at what had happened to big Jacques and his pleasure in little Jacques's healthy growth. 'How goes it with you, Jeanne? Did he leave you enough to live on?'

I shrugged. 'Not so much that I couldn't use some more. Is there any chance of doing some work for that lot?' I indicated inside the Ferme. 'All your rich prisoners – do they need their mending done?'

'Come with me; let's ask them.'

My cousin took me through the gates and into the courtyard. Like many buildings during the Revolution it was a mixture of former grandeur and current neglect: peeling plasterwork and chipped cherubim. No doubt this was a great decline from the prisoners' former disgusting wealth, but I'd spent months sleeping on straw among rats and it looked very comfortable to me. It was well-designed and spacious, and kept clean by someone other than prisoners or guards. It was also insecure, I saw with an executioner's eye that is trained to look for means to foil escape. The doors to the cells were left open so that the tax farmers could mingle freely, and the guards did not seem over-zealous; they were more interested in making Jacques gurgle at them than in searching me for weapons.

I had not planned beyond this point, merely hoping that once I had an excuse for visiting the tax farmers regularly I could find a way of speaking to Monsieur Lavoisier alone. My cousin led me to a large room where several men were working. Their clothes – aging silk and satin – showed that, like their building, they'd seen better times. They were gathered round one of their number at a desk, and we could hear a voice explaining patiently, 'You see, that figure is entered in the wrong column; that's the one that causes the imbalance.'

'Citizens,' my cousin said to attract their attention, neither rough nor deferential. The huddle round the man at the desk parted like a curtain, and I saw Antoine-Laurent Lavoisier for the first time.

I knew him at once, though I'd never seen a picture of him and he wasn't the god-like giant of my adolescent imagination. His features were tolerable rather than handsome, and he was not much taller than middle height. It was the difference between him and those around him: he was dressed in plain and elegant black in contrast to their shabby display, and his body was trim and energetic while many years of good living had made the others fat and flabby. Though he was fifty and his

brown hair was greying at the temples, he had the virility and vigour of a man twenty years younger; indeed, he had the virility and vigour of twenty men twenty years younger.

He stood up, the man that the other tax farmers looked to. I knew at that moment that he had not merely been in the thick of what they had done; he had led them into it. But I also knew that his was a life worth saving. There was his head, there was his body; they should stay together. He was no longer just a mind to me; he was a man.

My cousin recognised his leadership as he introduced me. 'Citoyen Lavoisier, this is Citoyenne Berger, the widow of a man who died for *la patrie*, and she is looking for work. Can you oblige her?'

'What can you do, Citoyenne?' he asked me.

It was time to try my luck. 'I can mend, and— Citoyen, is there anywhere quiet I can sit with the baby and talk about it with you? He's getting very heavy.'

He nodded and said, 'But of course. With your permission, Citoyen Nécard?' It was the tone of one being polite, not of a prisoner asking a favour from a guard. My cousin made no objection, and Monsieur Lavoisier guided me into a room off the main one.

It was a combination of cell, bed-chamber and office. The windows were large, to let in as much light as possible, and now had bars fixed on the outside. Two plain hard beds did extra duty as places to sit and put papers during the day; an expensive desk of beautifully functional design had only a rough chair beside it.

He put his hand to the door and looked at me, without a word spoken asking whether he should close it on us; I nodded. He did so, offered me the chair in a gentlemanlike way that had gone out of fashion, then stood by the window to survey me better. Though he was cordial and polite, there was an air of cool detachment about him that proclaimed that this was not a man who needed other people. 'You are not, I think, merely looking for work, Citoyenne?'

'You are right, Monsieur,' I replied, unthinkingly using the old forms of respect.

'Call me *tu* not *vous*, if you please, and not *Monsieur*.' He was right; the egalitarian *tu* for *you* was more in accord with revolutionary etiquette than the respectful *vous*, and we were all supposed to call each other *Citizen*. But it seemed strange, as though I was being given the privilege of intimacy rather than claiming the right of equality.

'Do you recall a correspondence in the years before the Revolution with a young girl called Jeanne Sanson?' I asked.

His eyes widened in some surprise. 'You are Mademoiselle Sanson?' I obviously wasn't what he'd imagined. I nodded, delighted that he remembered. 'I am very happy to meet you at last,' he said, clearly sincere. 'How are your studies of the behaviour of gases in enclosed spaces?'

'Alas, they have not progressed. My marriage – the Revolution – they have taken me away from science. But I shall never forget your kindness in writing to me. I know now what I didn't understand as a young girl, how little time you had to spare on something that may have seemed trivial to you, but was of great importance to me.'

'It was not trivial, Citoyenne Berger. Encouraging a keen young person to learn is never trivial. And I saw in your letters the evidence of a mind of considerable originality.'

Nobody had ever given me a compliment that pleased me more; I couldn't help blushing. 'I have come to see if there is anything I can do to repay my debt.'

'You just have,' he said with a wry smile. 'You have done something to save my faith in humanity. Many of my friends in the time of my prosperity have developed a very poor memory in the time of my downfall. It is good to learn that a fine young woman like you has not forgotten.'

'I would prefer to do something to save your head from my father.'

'Your father?' he asked, puzzled.

He didn't know! He'd never known! Was this man with the mighty brain the only person in Paris who didn't instantly recognise the name? 'Charles-Henri Sanson, the executioner,' I said, hoping that he wouldn't recoil from me or make one of those jokes that I'd heard a hundred times.

'Of course,' he said, doing neither. 'Is that why you come to be on such good terms with our guard?'

'Yes. I can go to places where your friends— your circle of acquaintance cannot.'

'Citoyenne, I thank you most sincerely, but I cannot ask a young woman with a baby to

endanger herself for me.'

'I would be in no danger; I am not the sort of person the Revolutionary Tribunal cares about. I have my certificate of *civisme* to show that I am a good Republican; I am the widow of a man who died for *la patrie*; I do not intend to break any law.'

'You do not need to break any law to be guilty of *incivisme*. I and my fellows have broken no law, and look at us.'

'Yes, but I am a good sans-culotte and you are a blood-sucking bastard.' My reserves of politeness had reached their limit; now it was time for the truth.

He was taken aback for a moment, and then he laughed. 'As I said: a mind of considerable originality.'

'I'm not going to do anything that a good Republican shouldn't do, and I can't tell a lie. But within those limits, I want to do what I can.'

'I should like—' He was obviously tempted, but then he stopped.

'Yes?'

'I should like very much to know that my wife is safe.' So there was one person in the world whom he needed.

'Is she in danger?'

'Of course. Not only as my wife, but her father is another tax farmer, Jacques Paulze. Marie-Anne visits less often than we should like, more often than is prudent. We meet in a room with a guard, talking only of matters that the guard may hear. We can neither write nor say anything private; it is hard for both of us.'

'Shall I carry letters between you, ones that other eyes will not read?'

'I should not accept your offer. I must not.'

'But you're going to, aren't you?'

He put his hand to his forehead in a gesture that covered his face. 'Yes,' he sighed. 'I fear that I shall give in to temptation. You have my word that there'll be nothing *inciviste* in them, only the words that a husband and wife want to say to each other in private. We love each other. You have been married, Citoyenne; you understand.'

Did I? Had I and my husband ever wanted to exchange such words of love? I felt a sudden pang of envy for Marie-Anne Lavoisier that had nothing to do with the years she'd lived in vast wealth and luxury. But to be loved by a man like this— 'Yes, I understand.'

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Constance was horrified when I brought home my bundle and told her that I had found work doing repairs on the clothes of the tax farmers. 'Those ruthless parasites! Those vampires! Those vermin who imprisoned Paris to fill their own pockets! Their money is filthy with their crimes. What do you think you're doing?'

But what Constance opposed was naturally supported by Pierre and his faction in the café. 'Nothing wrong with a good female sans-culotte getting some money out of the *bougres* before—' He made the familiar chopping sign at the back of his neck. 'They got enough money out of us. I hope you're over-charging them, Jeanne.'

The Lucky Sailor backed him up: 'Let me know if there's one named Laborde in the prison, will you? He had two sons with La Pérouse – good lads, but they were killed. I mean: good lads for filthy aristos,' he amended; he was learning.

Had I been rash to believe that I was in no danger in helping a tax farmer? I trusted his word that his letter, conveniently hidden in his torn shirt, contained nothing against the welfare of *la patrie*, but Constance and Pierre would for once unite in condemning me if they knew what I was doing.

The next day I went to see Marie-Anne Lavoisier. I couldn't leave Jacques with Constance when I was running an errand for a tax farmer, so I had to carry him with me; and it's a long way from the faubourg-Antoine to the wealthy Section des Piques on a warm morning with a baby growing heavier by the minute.

I was hot, thirsty and tired when I arrived at 243 boulevard de la Madeleine, with a hot, thirsty

and grizzling baby on my hip, and full of revolutionary fervour against the rich who still lived in such splendour. With a servant, too; he opened the front door to me with a sneer that expressed his lament for the days when such as I would have gone round to the back.

'I have come to see Citoyenne Lavoisier,' I said brusquely.

'I will see if Madame Lavoisier is at home to you.'

'Don't try that with me, boy,' I snarled with the full force of sans-culotterie in my voice. 'She'll be glad to see me when she knows what I bring her.'

'And what is that?'

'I don't confide in lackeys like you. Let me in and tell her I'm here.'

He backed down, and ushered me into the salon to wait. There was a half-empty atmosphere about the house, and several of the rooms had been sealed, with the tricoleur of the Republic proclaiming that they were not to be entered. A house like this had been built for many servants. Perhaps it was hard, I reflected, for someone used to staggering wealth to be reduced to the life of the merely very rich.

The salon was designed for people who valued books and had money to buy them. It wasn't the library – that had been sealed – but there were books everywhere. A great chandelier hung from the ceiling, showing that the owners could afford to read into the night; the furniture was expensive and comfortable.

What caught the eye most was a large painting, done just before the Revolution to judge by the clothes. A woman stood looking out at me, dressed in an expensive but deceptively casual gown called a *chemise de la Reine* (the style had gone out of fashion with the queen herself). Her hair was slightly powdered, with long golden locks hanging down her back. One hand rested on the rich red tablecloth, and the other was on the shoulder of the man I'd admired for years and met only yesterday. He sat at his work looking up at her, in the position that I'd first seen him, with one leg out and a pen in his hand. Here he was surrounded, not by decaying financiers in a prison, but by those wonderful instruments of his that had helped him to find the secret of the elements, in a room furnished with an elegant richness that I'd never experienced. Monsieur and Madame Lavoisier in their time of glory.

'Things have changed, haven't they?' came a voice from behind me. I turned, and received a shock. Her husband had barely altered since the portrait was painted, but she seemed so much older and more weary that I had to look twice to make sure it was the same person.

I held out the letter from her husband. 'I am Citoyenne Jeanne Berger. This will explain why I'm here.' She almost snatched it out of my hand and broke the seal; she didn't ask my permission to read it, so I didn't ask hers to sit down and suckle Jacques. Peace at last, I thought, and began to relax. My feet still hurt and I was very thirsty, but Jacques was happy and the aching fullness of my breasts was easing.

She finished her letter, and, wiping a small tear from her eye, said, 'Oh, I am sorry, but to get this—' she indicated the letter '—it drove everything else from my mind. I have been abominably rude, when you have been so kind.' She was less correct about revolutionary etiquette than her husband; she called me *vous*. The Revolution had brought improvements; five years ago she would have used the *tu* of disdain rather than equality.

'No, I am not kind, but your husband was to me, many years ago, and I am repaying the debt, Citoyenne.'

'Ah, do not call me by that hateful title. Call me Madame if you want to be formal, or Marie-Anne if you want to be my friend, but not Citoyenne.'

I was so alarmed at this that I sat up suddenly, to a wail of protest from Jacques. 'Your husband asked me to assure him that you were safe, *Citoyenne*. I can't do that if you express such sentiments to a stranger who is obviously a revolutionary. I shall not denounce you, but I must ask you to be more cautious.'

'You do not look like a revolutionary. You look like a madonna.' So I knew that he had done what I asked and not told her who my father was. It was important that she should trust me, and she was unlikely to trust the daughter of the man who would cut off her husband's head. Indeed, I reflected, there was something remarkable about her husband that he did trust me.

Now trust was established, I could satisfy a more physical need. 'Madonnas get thirsty;

something must go in to replace what goes out.'

'Ah! I am truly abominable.' She rang a bell and the lackey reappeared. 'Masselot, bring Citoyenne Berger a—?' She looked her enquiry at me.

'A beer, please; it's supposed to be good for my milk.'

The lackey was even more disapproving; she caught his expression. 'Citoyenne Berger has done a great favour for Monsieur and me. I regard her with gratitude, and with—' again she looked at me '—and with friendship?'

It was irresistible to someone who had never had many friends. 'With friendship, Marie-Anne,' I said. Marie-Anne Lavoisier and Constance Evrard; what a contrast between my only friends!

'And you will stay for *déjeuner*, Jeanne? I believe that nursing mothers get hungry as well as thirsty.'

'You have never had the experience?'

'No, I— we have never been blessed with children.'

I could have kicked myself for my tactlessness when I saw her longing as she looked at Jacques at my breast. I couldn't even express the commonplace heartiness with which I'd tell Constance that there was plenty of time; for her and her husband there was not.

Even with some of them sealed, the house of the Lavoisiers seemed to have a vast number of rooms: one for reading, one for eating dinner, one for men, one for women – I was calculating how many people I could fit into them and what rent I'd charge as Marie-Anne took me into the one for eating déjeuner.

Jacques was fed, and slept solidly on a folded blanket and sheet that the flunkey had laid out for him, while Marie-Anne and I ate – or rather, I feasted and she nibbled. While people in the faubourgs were queuing for hours for plain black bread and were thankful to get it, it was disgraceful that she could afford such a palatial spread of meat, cheese, vegetables, cakes, sauces – but it was a disgrace I tucked into heartily.

It was hard to find common ground between us, and we tried subject after subject; there was an unbridgeable gulf between our politics, I was reticent about my family, and she could not interest me in the difficulty of finding good servants. Only when she asked me what kindness her husband had done for me did we find something to talk of. I told her of my early letters to him and the way he replied, and she lifted her hands in the air and cried, 'That's who you are! The girl who was interested in oxygen!'

'He told you about me?'

'Of course; he shares everything with me.' I learned how she helped him: illustrating his works, translating papers (he knew nothing but French), letting him talk over his ideas, assisting his experiments, and entertaining *savants*. Once more I felt that pang of envy; my marriage had taken me away from the world of discovery while hers had led her into it. But she shared her knowledge with me as generously as he had done, and I learned about the developments in chemistry in the five years since the publication of the *Elements*. My envy dissolved into gratitude.

We sat talking science while drinking the finest coffee I'd ever tasted. (Maman's was merely tolerable, and Constance's deserved the name only because it was hot, dark and bitter; she hadn't provided coffee in her café until the month before when the Republic abolished slavery, saying that it tasted of the blood of the African slaves who were forced to grow it, and even now she made it as if she bore a grudge against it.)

'Your husband thinks of abandoning the idea in the *Elements*, that heat is a material substance? What else could it be?'

'The result of motion, as suggested by Rumford; he has performed some interesting experiments in friction.'

'So Rumford may replace Lavoisier?'

'Call it a marriage rather than a replacement.' She put down her cup and smiled. 'Ah, this is good!' she exclaimed. 'To talk with another woman about such things, and know that you at least will not pat me on the head and tell me how clever I am for remembering it all.'

'He doesn't do that to you, surely?'

'Of course not, but too many of our visitors do. A woman who knows what a logarithm is

seems like a two-headed calf to them; a prodigy!'

'You're lucky; other than your husband, I don't know any men who know what a logarithm is.'

'You must come again, Jeanne.'

'Of course I shall. I am your messenger girl, after all.'

'You will take a letter to him from me? You truly are kind, though you deny it.'

'Don't ever think that, Marie-Anne. You'll be in trouble if you depend on my kindness. I'll come to you because it suits me to drink your good coffee and listen to your good conversation, and I'll go to your husband because—' I wasn't at all certain why I wanted to see that tax farmer again.

'Because?'

'Because I think his is a head that France needs to keep on his shoulders. I'll do what I can to keep it there, and at least I can help cheer him. Go and write your letter while I finish this excellent *foie gras*.' She put her hand on mine and squeezed it gratefully, then stood up.

'By the way,' I said as she was leaving the room. 'Don't seal it; I want to read it.'

Gratitude vanished. 'How dare you!'

'I dare carry it for you. I dare not carry a letter that might lose me my head.'

'Did you demand to see his to me?'

'No, but he didn't express counter-revolutionary sentiments to a complete stranger. I don't believe you'll deliberately write anything against *la patrie*, but I don't trust you not to express the hope that Robespierre gets assassinated.'

'You accuse me of *incivisme*?'

'If I repeated some of the things you've said to anyone outside this room you'd join your husband in prison before the day was out. I suggest, Marie-Anne, just between these four walls, that you don't even understand what *civisme* is.'

She paced the room, wringing her hands. 'You're right, Jeanne. I don't understand why the guillotine is working every day to execute men and women who were hailed as heroes only last year, or why I have to call peasants my brothers and sisters, or why the mob cheered when the Queen was murdered. Above all, I don't understand why a man who has worked all his life for the good of the country faces death as a criminal! If that is what *civisme* means, then yes, I am *inciviste*.'

'Please learn caution even if you won't learn *civisme*. It will be difficult enough to save him without you getting arrested.'

'Yes,' she said slowly. 'I see that. Do you think there is a chance of saving him?'

'Not if most of the people in the faubourg-Antoine have anything to do with it.'

'But why? What has he ever done to them?'

'Must I tell you why your husband is one of the most hated men in France? You won't want to hear it.'

'I do want to hear it. If I am to lose him, and my father too, I must understand why. Perhaps you can teach me some of your famous *civisme*.'

'Lesson one,' I said, holding up bread in one hand and cake in the other.

She looked at me in surprise and puzzlement for a moment, then grasped my meaning; she was no fool, this one. '"Let them eat cake." That's what Marie-Antoinette is supposed to have said when they told her that the poor of Paris had no bread.'

'Do you know why it was so outrageous?'

'Of course. She was the Queen; she should have understood her people well enough to know that cake is not a possibility when you can't afford bread. Are you saying that I'm like her?'

'You've just shown that you aren't as bad as she was, which is something. Do you know how much they cost?'

'I do, now, but I see your point; I didn't until he was arrested and his assets seized.'

I looked around the richly furnished room with my eyebrows raised.

'I have my own dowry,' she said. 'If he is let free but stripped of his wealth it's enough for him to start up a business as an apothecary. We'd be very happy if that's the worst that happens.'

'I wish he'd done it all those years ago instead of joining the tax farm.'

'You still haven't explained why it's so bad. Somebody had to collect taxes to pay for the costs

of government.'

'Several things; I wonder if I have enough fingers to count them all. The costs of government wasn't just roads, and armies to defend France, and other things that people don't like paying for but want to have. It included that monstrosity of the Palace of Versailles, and necklaces worth ninety thousand livres, and mistresses of kings.'

'He was as much against that as you are, and he did his best to stop any abuses that he found.'

'He was a good tax farmer?'

'Yes, he was.'

'That makes it worse. He was good at getting money out of the poor.'

'And out of the rich.'

'But the rich have more money – they're noted for it! One livre out of a thousand is nothing; one livre out of ten is huge. And it was even worse back then, when the nobility and the clergy had all those privileges, and a marquis could pay less tax than a market-woman.'

'It was a corrupt system, but my husband didn't create it.'

'He didn't have to join it. He must have had plenty of money to start with, or he wouldn't have been allowed in. The tax farm paid the king for the right to collect taxes, so they could turn a big pile of money into an enormous one, at the expense of the poor, who had to pay tax on their food, their salt, their tobacco— Your husband would have taxed the air they breathed if he could have got away with it.'

'That's not true! He is a kind man – you said that yourself.'

'To me, to you; but was he kind when he had that wall built round Paris? In a sense he did tax the air – that's what they thought in the faubourgs. Thirty million livres it cost, to shut Parisians off from the fresh air.'

'It wasn't for that. It was to stop people smuggling goods into Paris without paying the tariffs.'

'Why shouldn't they try to get away with not giving money to rich men like your husband and your father? They didn't deserve to be imprisoned for it, and shut in with the poisonous Paris air.'

'Jeanne, you know that the air isn't poisonous. That's part of the old theory of gases that my husband disproved.'

'I know that, you know that, he knows that. But they don't know it in the faubourg-Antoine. All they saw was a monstrous construction that made them pay taxes on goods which they could barely afford before, and stifled them into the bargain. They hated the wall more than they hated the Bastille – at least that had always been there. That's why they stormed the gates of the wall even before they stormed the Bastille. Marie-Anne, I admired your husband so much when I was a girl that my family used to tease me about "Jeanne's Monsieur Lavoisier". But when people talked about the wall I was embarrassed for him.' I laughed. 'Imagine it! A sixteen-year-old girl thinking she needed to defend one of the greatest men in France!'

She grimaced, but at least she didn't express her opinion in words. Perhaps she was learning some *civisme*.

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'If I arrive in the faubourg-Antoine in your splendid carriage it might cause one or two comments.'

'But I can't bear to think of you walking all that distance carrying Jacques. Let the berline take you part of the way, at least.'

It was too tempting. 'Very well; I thank you. I'll get dropped off in the Marais and walk the rest.'

We waited for the berline to be made ready and arranged our next meeting, then she accompanied me outside to bid me farewell. As soon as the front door was opened I caught the reek. 'Phew! How can you bear it?' It was strange that such an expensive house would be so near the stink.

'That smell? It must be the drains. This warm weather makes it worse.'

It wasn't the drains. I'd grown up with that smell; my mother taught me early to wash it out of clothes – a mixture of turned earth, lime, blood, and rotting bodies, with the smoke of thyme, sage and juniper futilely trying to disguise the stench. The Lavoisiers' house was close – much too close

– to the Cemetery of the Madeleine.

'I don't want to move,' she said. 'This is my husband's home; I want him to return to it.'

Her husband was more likely to find his final home just down the road in two pieces. I didn't say it; if she was learning *civisme*, I was learning tact.

I caught a familiar sound that told me that my father was preparing to work in the Place de la Révolution as the tumbrels drew slowly towards it – but perhaps all too quickly for the men and women carried in them. So I asked the coachman to go the long way round to the Marais, as I didn't want to see Papa and his assistants, and I didn't want one of them to see me in this grand and distinctive berline with its blue paintwork and bright red wheels. The same caution had me asking the coachman to set me down a street away from my parents' house.

Maman was happy to see me – or rather, she was happy to see Jacques; she always gave me the impression that if I worked very hard I might become a fit person to look after her grandson.

'Papa's working, I hear.'

'Yes.'

Maman rarely showed emotion, but I saw she was worried. 'What's the matter?'

It took little urging; she needed someone to talk to, and who better than a grown daughter who had married into the same profession? 'It's your father. This life isn't good for him. Nine days out of ten he's working; it's too much for a man of his age.'

'He can't retire and let Henri take over?'

She shook her head. 'It's his superior, that dreadful man Fouquier-Tinville. He said that your father was a tool of the Old Regime, and he must now prove himself to be a tool of the new Republic or he'll go to his own guillotine.' I understood that threat. 'Then he comes home and he has to talk things out with me, and I do my best to support him; but I'm getting old too. We're both getting too old to do the usual.'

'The usual?'

She rolled her eyes at my naivety. 'The usual thing women do to stop men thinking about death.' She looked at Jacques on her lap. 'You must have done it, Jeanne, at least once.' She smiled at my embarrassment at the thought of my own parents engaged in such activity. 'We've done it too, you know, your Papa and I. At least three times.'

Once for me, once for Henri, and once for young, dead Gabriel.

She became sad again. 'He got suddenly older when Gabriel died – and in such a grotesque way. And he gets older every time he has a bad day, and now he has so many bad days. First the King, then the Queen, then— Oh, hundreds of them. For the most part they're guilty of nothing more than not moving fast enough to catch up what the Convention thinks this month, or of owning property that the Republic wants. "Minting coins in the Place de la Révolution," they call it.'

This was a threat that should have occurred to me earlier. There were sans-culottes in the faubourgs like Pierre who would have just grabbed a tax farmer's wealth because *la patrie* needed it and let him live. But the bourgeois, law-abiding, property-regarding men of the Convention couldn't bring themselves to do that; they had to prove a man guilty of a crime – any crime – to justify seizing his assets.

'The worst—' Maman paused for a moment, then continued. 'He wouldn't tell me until I forced it out of him, so don't repeat this.'

'Of course, Maman.' And I wouldn't repeat her very *inciviste* views, either.

'It was that wretched woman Madame du Barry. He didn't want to tell me that he'd been in love with her when she was a girl, long before she became the mistress of the old king. She got away to England and she should have stayed there. But she came back, and so she was tried – I don't know what for, except sleeping with a king, which is hardly a crime. When your Papa came to put her on the tumbrel she recognised him. She pleaded with him to spare her, to let her go; she kept crying that she was innocent, she struggled until the last moment, and your Papa had to hold her down, the woman he loved all those years ago. He wouldn't admit it to me, of course, but I think he still loved her in his heart.' She shook her head, as if to shake away the feelings that she had so unusually revealed. 'And now, Jeanne, what of your future? It's not good for a young woman to live alone.'

'I'm not alone. I have Jacques.'

‘You know what I mean. You need a man. Do you want me and your father to find one for you?’

‘Another arranged marriage with another executioner?’

‘What else?’

‘No, Maman. I have no complaints about your choice for me last time, but I want something more now.’

‘What?’

‘I don’t know. Passion? Tenderness? Someone I admire, who admires me. Someone I can share my mind with as I share my body. Someone who offers me happiness that stands a chance of lasting. I managed to read one or two of those novels you used to burn, and I read of women feeling a *frisson* at a man’s touch. It would be – how shall I say? – it would be interesting to feel something when a man touches me other than noticing whether he’s washed his hands. And I have a strange ambition, Maman. Just once in my life I’d like to do it with a man, not to help him forget death, but because he desires me and I desire him.’

She sniffed. I wondered if I’d be able to intimidate my child so much in twenty-three years’ time with just one sniff. ‘You are being sentimental.’

‘May I not feel sentiment towards a man? Other women do. And men feel sentiment towards women.’ I thought of one man and his love for his wife.

She sniffed again. ‘You are being impractical.’ This almost as bad in her eyes as being sentimental. ‘In your circumstances, with so many men away at the war, do you think you can find true love with a husband who will give you all that?’

I didn’t say anything for a moment; she was right. ‘If there is no such man for me, then I’ll stay single. I love Jacques far more than I loved his father. Unless I meet a man I can love as much as I’d love his child, Jacques is enough for me.’

‘Well, I shall be practical. This may shock you, since I brought you up to be respectable, but you may be fortunate and find such a man. If he can’t or won’t marry you, so long as he provides well for you and Jacques – and any of his children too, of course – I shan’t hold my hands up in horror if you decide to live under his protection.’

‘It does shock me a little, coming from my mother.’ This was a day of revelations.

‘There are worse ways to live than being a rich man’s mistress, so long as you both remember that these things are an affair of the head as well as the heart.’

‘Now you are being impractical, Maman. These days, a rich man is more likely to lose his head to Papa than his heart to me.’

Just then we heard the sounds of his return from the day’s work. Before he and my brother could come in, there were tumbrels to be cleaned, horses to be watered and fed, the blade to be cleaned and sharpened, clothes to be changed, and blood to be washed off.

We heard their footsteps, but they didn’t enter immediately. Instead we heard my father’s voice saying, ‘I don’t know how I’m going to explain this to your mother.’ Maman and I looked at each other in alarm; then Papa, but not Henri, came in. He greeted me with a preoccupied air, stroked Jacques’s head, and started to pace round the room.

Maman said, ‘Yes?’ In that one word, she compressed the meanings that she knew something was on his mind, that she would support him no matter what, and that if he didn’t explain everything at once she’d give him hell.

‘You’d better come in, Henri,’ my father called. My brother entered; in his arms was a small and scruffy dog, which would be white if it had a good wash. Blood was oozing from a wound in its side, and it was clearly undernourished. ‘You know we said we’d never have a dog again?’ Papa muttered in embarrassment. ‘Well, we’ve got one.’ Apart from its appealing brown eyes, there was nothing in the creature’s appearance to indicate what had made him change his mind. Henri set it down on the floor, where it sat looking as miserable as only a dog can.

‘She’s been hanging around the Conciergerie for days, trying to get to her master, and living on scraps,’ Papa said. ‘He went to trial this morning, and she tried to follow him into the Tribunal room; she kept scratching on the door until the guards tied her up. When it was time to prepare him she kept getting on his lap, and she followed him in the tumbrel all the way to the Place de la Révolution. While he was waiting his turn, she kept jumping up at him. One of the guards stuck her

with his bayonet – you should have heard the crowd roar with disapproval! They were happy to see her master lose his head, but they wouldn't allow the dog to be harmed. She scampered up the steps of the scaffold after her master; we tried to catch her, but it was slippery with blood – no place to run after a small dog. We tied him on the bascule, then flipped him horizontal into place, and she kept licking his face; then Henri caught her.'

'It's stupid of me,' said my brother, as embarrassed as Papa, 'but I turned her head away so she wouldn't see the blade fall.'

Maman looked at the dog, then at Papa, then at Henri. 'You'd better get her wound dressed, then give her a wash and a good feed.' She sighed. 'You're getting sentimental, Charlot.'

The Reign of Terror was no time for the executioner to get sentimental.

*

I have the tastes of a bourgeois and the habits of a sans-culotte, I thought next afternoon as I picked my way through the filth outside my back door. Perhaps it was the luxury that I'd seen at Marie-Anne Lavoisier's, or perhaps it was just a warmer day than we'd seen all year, but the stench of the courtyard offended my nose even more than the stench of the Cemetery of the Madeleine.

It was partly my property; I shared it with the other landlords and house-owners around the place. The sun never reached it, but too many other things did, thrown out of windows or left by workers: lengths of pipe, broken tiles, shards of glass, contents of chamber pots, and at least one dead cat. The ground level of the courtyard formed the roof of the cess pit, and a foetid stench leaked through the crack where it was damaged. I couldn't do anything about the cemetery; I could do something about the courtyard.

I knew that even such an activity as cleaning a courtyard would be debated furiously to decide whether it was a piece of civic pride and virtue or a counter-revolutionary plot to prevent honest sans-culottes dumping their rubbish where they wanted to. I would have to contrive it so that both Pierre and Constance were committed in its favour before I raised the matter publicly.

I was going to have to be diplomatic – this went much against my natural grain. But it was time for me to learn. If I were to save a tax farmer without either lying or breaking the law, some skills in diplomacy would be useful. I would practise them on my neighbours.

Constance first. I knocked on her door; this was her time free of the work of the café. 'Can I join you while I do this mending?'

'You should be knitting stockings for soldiers, not mending clothes for aristos.'

'I shan't pollute your patriotic knitting.'

'Oh, come in, you tax farmers' flunkey,' she said – fortunately she didn't know how accurate her jibe was.

We sat and worked companionably, talking about men, clothes and the Revolution, while Jacques played with his new rattle; he had just learned that he could make a sound when he shook it, and he was delighted with his discovery.

'It's hot in here,' I said after a while. 'I'm dripping all over these breeches.'

'First time they've had any honest sweat on them,' she muttered as she got up and opened the door. The stench from the courtyard gusted in. 'Phew!' she said in distaste. 'I wish someone would clean that up.'

That went even better than I expected. But I couldn't think of a way to approach Pierre. And there was news that evening that made cleaning the courtyard trivial.

I'd never heard the café so loud; men and women were shouting and waving their fists. 'What's happened?' I yelled to the nearest person. She tried to explain, then someone contradicted her, and someone else contradicted him, and my question just added one more strand to the confusion.

At last, the Lucky Sailor and I found out that there had been a vicious argument that day in the Convention – not unusual, since polite restraint was not a virtue in the Republic. But this quarrel was between the representatives of our two heroes, Danton and Robespierre. Danton, large-minded, virile, unscrupulous, whose great voice could inspire thousands and who spoke to our hearts; Robespierre, neat, precise, virtuous, whose icy will controlled the Committee of Public Safety and

who spoke to our heads. Danton and his allies argued that the Revolution had been won and it was time to end the Reign of Terror. Robespierre and his pointed to ever more enemies of the Republic and wanted the guillotine to work harder.

Everyone in the café had their preferences: Constance had long been a devout Robespierrist, while Pierre worshipped Danton. And our debate could get as furious as anything the Convention could produce. But before, each side had recognised the heroic qualities of the other side's leader. Now, with Danton and Robespierre calling each other enemies of the Republic, the argument had gained a deadly edge.

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I made my way to the Ferme, Jacques on one side and a bundle of mended clothes on the other. My cousin was on duty and showed me in, with little attention to the possibility of anyone trying to escape.

I was shown into the same cell as before. Jacques Paulze, Marie-Anne's father, was stretched out on one of the beds. Monsieur Lavoisier was at the desk – he was setting his scientific affairs in order by collecting and correcting his papers. Both men stood as I entered; they exchanged glances, and after a brief word of greeting to me Paulze left the cell. It had clearly been arranged that we would have some privacy.

He closed the door, gave me the chair, and handed me a startlingly large sum in payment for my mending. I took it. This wasn't tax farmers' dirty money; I'd earned it honestly, performing a useful task – their clothes were wearing very thin. 'Thank you, Monsieur.'

'Please, not Monsieur.'

'I'm not letting an aristo like you tell me what's *civiste* and what's not,' I said. I tucked the money into my purse, and took the next bundle of torn clothes that he gave me. 'I've always called you Monsieur, and I shall carry on doing so. It's more comfortable in my mind.' I smiled conspiratorially at him. 'But only in private.' I handed him the letter from his wife.

'Would you mind if I—?' he asked, more polite than she. While he read it, I put Jacques down to sleep on Paulze's bed, then I sat quietly until Monsieur finished his letter. She'd told him she loved him in different ways; that was all I'd let her get away with as I'd made her cross out *inciviste* phrase after phrase. He smiled as he read it, then looked up and prepared to put it away.

'Burn it.'

'What—? Oh, of course.' He saw instantly what had taken time to explain to his wife: that if the letters were found there was only one person who could have carried them. 'You'll forgive me if I read it again?' As he did – perhaps a dozen times – I reflected on the difference between him and her. She was clever; she didn't know much about *civisme* but she'd taught me a lot about chemistry. But he was more than that. To a clever person, you need to explain things only once. To a genius, you don't need to explain things at all.

Now I looked at him again he seemed younger than in his portrait done five years ago. It was partly his hair; it was his own rather than the grey powdered wig of the fashion before the Revolution. He wore it in a loose queue tied at the back with a black ribbon, as if he was willing to allow it freedom to hang naturally and outside his control. But there was more. In the portrait he was comfortably surrounded by his possessions; here he was alone with a self-controlled energy that owed nothing to anyone or anything – except the woman he loved.

He held the letter to the lamp flame and watched it burn; once again I envied her as I saw his expression of loss. 'Thank you, Citoyenne Berger.'

I produced a book: *The Elements of Chemistry*. 'You gave it to me as a wedding present.'

'Would you like a new copy?' he asked when he saw its dirty and battered state.

'No. It got that way because it was in prison with me for three months; it was the only thing I had to read. When the Royalist guards abused me as a stupid Republican cow, I knew that I could understand it and they couldn't. Monsieur, if I can bring you comfort in your imprisonment, I only repay what you brought me in mine.'

He smiled. 'That's the finest thing anyone has ever said about my book. I'm glad it has performed such service.' He opened it and read the inscription he'd written five years ago, wishing

me as happy a marriage as his own. ‘Was it?’ he asked.

‘It was not unhappy; but do you know of any marriages as happy as yours?’

‘No.’ He smiled again, this time with love for a woman who wasn’t present.

‘My husband was a good man – though you may doubt it, since he was an executioner like my father. I’m sorry that he was killed, but I shed no tears for him.’

‘I’m sorry that you did not have enough between you to shed tears for him.’

‘Don’t be. I shed no tears for anyone. I’ve never wept since I was nine years old and our little dog died. My father taught me not to.’

He was concerned. ‘Your father punished you for weeping over your pet?’

‘No, don’t think that. Papa never beat any of us – he doesn’t cause pain if he doesn’t have to. When our dog died and I was crying, he laid her out on a table and he dissected her, showing me how she was made. And I was so fascinated that I stopped weeping. Does that shock you, Monsieur?’

‘Not at all. The passion for knowledge can be as powerful as any other.’

‘It wasn’t only anatomy I learned that day. But that’s not the only reason I didn’t weep for my husband. I was too angry for tears. It was the way the Royalists did it: it was so – so brutal, so clumsy. They punched him and kicked him, and the blade didn’t fall cleanly, so it smashed his jaw when it took his head off. It was an insult to him.’

‘Do you think it mattered to him?’

‘Yes. He was a professional; he should have died professionally. And I know how he died, because they forced me to watch it. Monsieur, I’ll do my best to stop you meeting my father, but if the worst happens, he won’t put you or your wife through that.’

He said nothing for a moment; I could tell that he was imagining Marie-Anne in my position. ‘And you shed no tears even then?’ He studied me thoughtfully. ‘You are a strong woman, Citoyenne Berger.’

‘Yes, Monsieur Lavoisier, I am.’

‘Then I shall ask you something which I didn’t think I would when I first met you. Are you sincere when you say you want to help me, or is it a polite fiction?’

The conversation had touched a part of me that I didn’t want to be touched; perhaps that’s why I answered him in the rough language of the sans-culottes. ‘You’ve met me only twice, but that must be enough for a clever *bougre* like you to work out that polite fictions are not my strong point.’

‘Far from it!’ he laughed. ‘That being the case, can I ask you to work with the others who are also trying to help?’

‘You are not completely deserted, then?’

‘No. Marie-Anne has done much to encourage people of influence to write letters on my behalf; that’s not *inciviste*, so long as all they do is confirm my record of public and scientific service, which is considerable.’ He said it as a statement of fact, not of boasting. ‘There are a few who are willing to do more. But I don’t know what you would regard as something that a good Republican should not do.’

‘Carrying letters between husband and wife: fine. Putting your case forward to people in a position to have you set free: fine. Helping you break out of this very insecure prison: get someone else and make sure I don’t know about it.’

He sat down and wrote a letter, then passed it over to me to read: *This is to introduce Citoyenne Jeanne Berger, good sans-culotte and widow of a man who died for* la patrie*. Trust her; she will be useful to our project. Take note that she is very clever, very republican, and very rude.*

I laughed. ‘A perfect description; I’ll have it put on my gravestone!’

‘I wonder what they’ll put on mine.’

‘Don’t waste your time thinking about it. Papa tells me that the Cemetery of the Madeleine is getting full now. There’s a patch of waste ground being opened up beside that wall you had built, and they’re already digging the trenches to throw the bodies into a common grave.’

‘Thank you, Citoyenne; you offer such consolation in my troubles.’

‘Why do you want a gravestone? They’re only for people who haven’t done anything to be remembered for in their lives.’

‘I know that that is not a polite fiction. You do offer consolation, after all.’ He went to the window again, and looked out for a moment as if reassuring himself that there was still a world outside. I recognised that look; I had spent months by the window of my own cell. He was far more comfortable than I’d been, but the yearning for freedom was just the same. ‘I built a wall around Paris; I laid the foundations of a new science,’ he mused, turning to me again. ‘Which will last longer, do you think?’

‘The foundations, of course. They always do.’

‘And they are built out of truth, which endures longer than bricks and mortar. But it would be interesting to see what arises from them, and to lay a few more bricks myself.’ He smiled, and continued the metaphor. ‘It’s a wonderful element, the truth. Often hard to find, but worth far more than gold.’

‘But sometimes more poisonous than arsenic,’ I replied, just to show that I could.

‘As important to life as oxygen,’ he returned as if we were playing shuttlecock.

‘And as explosive as hydrogen,’ I batted back.

‘Harder than iron.’

‘Sometimes it stinks like sulphur.’

‘As resistant to fire as molybdenum.’

I held up my hands, laughing. ‘I submit! I have no idea about the properties of molybdenum.’

‘It’s only recently been discovered; it’s a metal that doesn’t melt except at a very high temperature.’

‘This is a game where you have all the advantages. It was audacious of me to try.’ He left the window and I handed the letter back. ‘Won’t you sign it?’

‘It’s safer for you if I don’t. He’ll recognise my writing and my seal.’

‘It’s not hard to open a letter in such a way that you can seal it up again.’

‘It’s very hard to do it in such a way that careful eyes won’t detect it – and this young man is careful.’ He wrote a name and address on the outside, but he didn’t give it to me. ‘Why did you choose such unpleasant descriptions of the truth?’ he asked. ‘Poisonous, explosive, stinking – I thought you valued the truth as I do.’

‘I couldn’t think of any elements that are simply inconvenient, which is what the truth so often is.’

‘You won’t lie, will you?’

‘I can’t lie. When there is something I wish to conceal, my whole body rises in revolt against any deception and I blush furiously.’

‘You are forced to tell the truth? What an attractive quality! I wish there were more like you in the world.’

‘It can be a problem if there’s something I want to conceal from my neighbours.’

‘Such as helping a tax farmer?’ he asked, concerned again.

‘Don’t worry. I told you – I shan’t break the law for you.’ He seemed as if he was about to tear the letter up, so I stood and took it from his hand before he could do so. ‘I survived the Royalists; I have no fear of the Republicans.’

‘At least give me your promise that you’ll do nothing that risks your own head.’

‘I shan’t give you that promise. It’s my head; I make my own decisions. But remember that I have my own reasons for being careful. For one thing, it would upset Papa.’

For the first time he was lost for words. ‘Do you mean— if you— he would—?’

I thought of Madame du Barry. ‘Of course.’

‘Good God!’

‘Neither he nor I would trust anyone else with the job. I give you my assurance that if you do meet him, you will be in the best possible hands.’

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End of Part 1. Go to the author’s web page for subsequent sections
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