

Paris by Night

Tonight, Paris is hushed by the thaw. Deep snow lies on roofs and in gutters. A washed out yellow moon slides through passing cloud.

In the Place de Grève, a freshly hanged man bobs in the moon's honeyed light. The bells of the Hôtel de Ville sound the hours, and in his shop, the pork-butcher of the Place de Grève is saying his prayers along with his wife and children, in front of a little statue of the Holy Virgin tucked between two ham joints.

Rats gnaw in the walls or run nimbly across muddy streets, between the legs of late-night passers-by who cry out, waving their swords.

Peony-Jean offers to light the way for the bourgeois couple, frightened by the darkness, who emerge from the theatre of the Hotel de Bourgogne. He will earn a few *sols* by guiding them to their house on the Place Royale. Unless they happen to meet one of the ruffians from his gang on the way. Then these good folk will be quickly and without injury divested of their coats and their purses, and off the beggars will go, arm in arm, to the cemetery of the Holy Innocents, to where they have been summoned by the Great Coesre, the King of the Beggars.

In his lair in the Faubourg St Martin, the Great Coesre, Squat Rolin, is preparing to meet his vassals. His idiot, Bavottant,, who follows him everywhere, has spread his wheelbarrow with thick gentlemen's coats brought back by his footpads. His chief henchman, Jean the Greybeard, who advises him, has alerted him that there is a delicate matter to settle between two beggar-chiefs: Calembredaine, who holes up in the old fortress of Nesle, and Rodogone the Egyptian who rules the Faubourg St Denis. Calembredaine is the stronger, for he controls all of Paris' bridges, the University district and the banks of the Seine, yet Rodogone is powerful because he rules all the Gypsies and the fortune-tellers.

The fearful Rotten Jean is back from his travels through the streets, a baby in his arms. He has paid twenty *sous* for it to a nurse at La Couche, the home for foundling children behind Notre Dame. The child is barely six or seven months old. It will still be possible to twist its limbs and cripple it before sending it out begging with one of the *marquises*. Unless he sells it to the magician Lesage or his accomplice La Voisin. They need children to sacrifice in their black masses. He'll have to think about it... Business is going better these days. Now that that accursed Vincent de Paul is no longer going about rescuing abandoned children from doorsteps before he can get to them, causing a great deal of difficulty to Rotten Jean's lucrative and flourishing trade. He hurries on. There is a full gathering of the beggars tonight at the cemetery of the Holy Innocents. He'll have to pay up... If only times weren't so hard! But Squat Rolin is a great prince and it is only right that he receives his tribute.

A little further on, the Bastille fortress sleeps in the quiet of night like a great whale deep in the oceans. Soldiers cough on the battlements as the moonlight glints off the bronze of the cannons. In the dungeons, forgotten prisoners are visited by red eyed rats. In his cell, the scandalmonger Bussy-Rabutin writes a letter to the King, begging his mercy, while just a few roofs and streets away, his cousin, the witty Mme de Sévigné, writes to him from her hôtel du Temple. "My dearest, here you are in prison.... I saw your daughter yesterday. She jokes as though she sees you every day, and behaves as if she never does..."

In the rue de la Tourelle, Ninon de Lenclos is writing to Mme de Sévigné to recommend one of her friends to her. She is Mme Scarron, born Françoise d'Aubigné, recent widow of a well-known satirical poet, who has left her penniless.

"She is an unassuming woman whom you could use in your household to give orders to the chambermaids and the footmen. Unfortunately, she is as beautiful as an angel and witty enough to silence anyone. Therefore no woman wants her anywhere near in case all the men desire her."

Having sealed her missive with red wax, the courtesan stretches and yawns. Has the lover she is awaiting, the fearsome Marquis de Saucourt, finally fallen into her trap? He has promised to visit her this evening. But it is getting late and he is not here...

She goes into her dressing room where she has a bowl filled with water perfumed with orange blossom. On her marble table, the maid has placed Cyprus powder, pomades from Florence and Rome, Spanish wax, oils from Nice and Genoa, fresh milk, water scented with many flowers, perfume burners...

But someone is knocking at the little garden door. God be praised! It's him...

In the quiet of the Temple cloister where she has found refuge from her creditors, Mme Scarron sleeps in her narrow bed. She turns over and moans slightly. She wakes with a start because, in the shadows, she heard the sneer of the cripple Scarron. Why does she so hate to remember him, now that he is dead? She fears that society will never forgive her for having been the wife – due to poverty – of the amusing invalid with the acerbic pen.

How can one erase the past and build a new life when one has so little means and so few real friends?

Tomorrow she will go and hear early mass, and then she will go to the Louvre palace to present a petition to the King, asking him, if it is possible, for a small appointment or a little pension.

King Louis XIV is on the roof of the Louvre. Who would have thought it? But in the dark, all cats are grey, and it's the tomcat's hour... The young king is on the hunt. It's no longer enough that the Infanta, his wife, looks up at him with infatuated blue eyes, that Mme de Soissons winks at him ostentatiously, or that Mme d'Orléans, exquisite Henriette, sometimes smiles at him provokingly. The King has set his heart on Mlle de Lamoignon-Houdancourt, one of the Queen's ladies of honour. But this evening, when he hoped to be

able to join that beauty in the ladies' apartments, His Majesty had found it severely guarded by Mme de Navailles, the one responsible for the charming and frivolous troop.

King he might be, but Louis XIV had had to beat a pitiful retreat, and had judged it imperative to immediately summon his Grand Council of amorous adventure, his three best friends in revelry: Péguilin, the Marquis de Guiche and the Marquis de Vardes, as well as Bontemps his valet.

Péguilin the Sly knew his way around very well. He declared that the only access to the beauties' apartments was first over the rooftops and then down the chimney.

"These paths of love will break my neck!" sighed the King, embarrassed.

But Péguilin encouraged him. And finally the Grand Council emerge onto the roof by way of an attic window. The path that they now have to follow is neither wide nor sure...

"Be careful not to slip, Sire."

"It's all right! It's all right," the sovereign replies. "I'm going to go barefoot for extra caution."

Bontemps groans. "Your Majesty will catch cold from these wet gutters!"

"When we get back we will take a nip of hot wine in my chambers."

"Now we have to go up the slate roof, to the base of the chimney," announces de Guiche, who is in the vanguard.

"Devil take it!" moans the King, hanging on tightly.

"And the worst is yet to come," de Vardes notes ironically, as he lets a rope ladder fall slowly down the chimney.

They will have to climb down.

"Come on Sire," whispers Péguilin, quivering with impatience. "It's time to launch the attack. I will go ahead. I want to be the first one in!"

"Very well, Péguilin, but no being the first one in completely!"

"Don't worry Sire, I will wait until you have made your arrangements."

"As for me, I will stay on the roof," the Marquis de Vardes declares, "Bontemps and I will need to hold onto the ladder."

Péguilin de Lauzun, who had begun to climb down into the chimney, put his Gascon nose back out. "Oh yes, ever since de Vardes conquered La Soissons, he hasn't gone anywhere else!"

"Yet she is open to all comers," the King said mockingly.

The Marquis de Vardes waits until his august master has disappeared into the darkness of the chimney before he shrugs his shoulders in response to that unkind remark.

Helped by Bontemps, he keeps a firm grip on the bucking ladder. The moon passed behind a cloud and suddenly it is very dark. De Vardes grinds his teeth and curls his lip like a dog about to bite. "As if that Soissons matters, that royal whore!" But why does the memory of a certain young woman with green eyes ceaselessly haunt him? It is a stupid tale that he would prefer to forget....

To tell the truth, Mlle de Lamothe is not expecting His Majesty any more than the other lady of honour who shares her tiny room is expecting Péguilin. But there is nothing sweeter or more accommodating than a lady of honour.

Mlle de Lamothe barely manages to cover her mouth and stifle a cry when she sees her royal lover appear before her, black as a sweep. There must be no noise, not the slightest exclamation. Do not forget that behind the left hand door can be heard the snores of Mme de Navailles, while the right hand door leads to the Queen's own chamber.

The Queen is alone in her great bed. She is fighting against sleep without success, waiting for the King her husband. She knows, alas, that the King works far too hard. But he always comes to join her eventually...

And it seems to Maria Theresa of Spain that she is always waiting for him. But she cannot reproach him. He is an attentive husband, and handsome as a dream.

Maria Theresa of Spain sits up in bed, and at her movement two squat shadows in the dark of the room move in their turn. It is her two dwarfs, male and female. They are still there, faithful and heavy, by turn sorrowful and clownish. They sleep with the dog, in a dark corner.

The Queen asks the she-dwarf to make her some thick chocolate, with a beaten egg and cinnamon. She drinks it in small sips, thinking of Spain.

The King is in the arms of Mlle de Lamothe-Houdancourt, smearing her beautiful face with black as he kisses her.

Beside him, Péguilin is a little concerned. The huge frightened bright eyes of his conquest, and his difficulty in holding onto her, intrigue him and make him unsure of his charm and his skill, however reputed. Will he be the first to teach the secrets of love to this delicious little china doll with the slender limbs, who is slipping from his embrace?

"Tell me, my love," he whispers, "are you a virgin?"

Suddenly, the innocent giggles. So! it is like that. She is simply mocking him, that's all, without realising that above de Vardes and Bontemps are yawning and shivering as they hold onto the rope ladder, and that time is precious. They must use every minute, blast it! Oh! now that is better. Truly delicious, this little girl. Odd that he has not noticed her before. And yet he has the impression that he has known her for a long time, and there is something in her laugh that seems familiar.

"Tell me your name, my sweet," he begs before leaving her. She wears an impish smile.

"Tell me yours."

"I am Péguilin, don't y'know! Didn't you recognise me?" She laughs out loud.

"Péguilin the Chimney Sweep."

But she condescends to introduce herself, with a childlike gravity.

"My name is Marie-Agnès de Sancé."

In his apartments in the Louvre, M. de Mazarin smells death approaching.

Today he had had himself carried to the palace in the rue Neuve-des-Petits-Champs, and had inspected the superb library he had commissioned, wherein Gabriel Nausé had collected 35,000 volumes brought at great cost from Holland, Flanders, England or Italy. Then he had wanted to visit his great stables that foreigners admired as if they were the eighth wonder of the world. And he had smiled while looking at his magnificently embroidered slippers, so dearly begged for by the Théatin Fathers, in order to embellish their church.

All the same, when he returned from this outing, the Cardinal felt faint. His death was not far off, he knew. He would have to leave behind all these precious and fine things, acquired through so much work, diplomacy and humiliation.

Beside the chimney, his first secretary M. Colbert writes, sat at a little table. His goose quill scratches as he does so.

The Cardinal's last will and testament.

The candles are guttering, and the last of Mme de Soissons' gentlemen callers have left the Tuileries.

Drunkenly, they stagger off down the rue du Faubourg St Honoré. They are shouting, banging on the shop canopies and, for amusement, snuffing out the few hanging lanterns.

Her mind fuddled with much drink, Olympe de Soissons leaves the salon and heads for her bedroom. The favour that she retains as Cardinal Mazarin's niece allows her to live here in this far wing of the Louvre. Thanks to her, this sombre palace is finally awoken with luxury and merriment. Dances and fêtes by day. By night, the pleasures of love. The bed of Olympe Mancini, Duchesse de Soissons, is never empty - or rarely so! Despite her successes, a small worry nags at the beautiful Italian. Is de Vardes, her official lover, about to leave her? For some time now, he has been distracted, distant. She senses that he is less vulnerable to her sharp remarks and her contempt.

It would be absolutely mortifying for her!

After having to abandon the King, whom she coveted, to the charms of her insupportable younger sister Marie, whom he was foolish enough to prefer, Olympe had been so proud to have conquered and mastered de Vardes, that wildcat with his cruel smile. She could not bear it if he too were to turn away from her.

She will have to go and consult the famous Mauvoisin, the woman called La Voisin. The soothsayer will show her the name of her rival. For if there is one, she will die.... But after all, is Vardes worth the effort of so much worry? It is the King that she wants! Without any doubt, he must be tired of his little wife, the Infanta who still cannot speak a word of French and who blindly follows the strict guidance of her Jesuit confessor. By all accounts, she will never have any role at Court.

At the Court of Louis XIV, it is the official mistress who will reign. But who will be that favourite?

The Duchesse de Soissons stretches her beautiful pale gold body over the emblazoned sheets of her bed. It's decided, she will go and see La Voisin.

And it is not really to discover the name of a rival for de Vardes' favours that she needs the services of a magician. The woman knows the secrets of every drug, and surely she will be able to give her something to cure this extremely concerning "lateness" that she has had for two months. Certainly, it is most bothersome to have to recourse to such methods to re-establish a natural cycle, but it would be much more tedious and even dangerous to have to carry an infant for nine months, especially when one has a jealous husband and that the mere appearance of that child – *its colour* – would risk the realisation of the infidelity of his spouse.

A plague on these worries! Even if La Voisin cannot get her out of this embarrassment, there are many ways of getting rid of this fruit of such scandal once it is born. Her serving maids and footmen are devoted, and, for a few coins, will act with diligence and discretion. All these people have one foot in the '*matterie*', the underworld of Paris.

What point is there in being a woman, beautiful, influential, and rich, if one cannot enjoy all the pleasures of this earth in all their variation and surprise? She has enjoyed them so much that she has begun to be bored, even with de Vardes. Men are all the same, in the end.

There was only one, really, who offered her something new. But can one really call him a man? He was a creature of darkness, wordless, frenzied like a bull, soft like the wind, blind and candid as an element of Nature. His embrace awoke who could say what mythological remembrance, at once terrifying and exultant.

The Duchesse de Soissons shudders slowly. All at once, her mouth is parched, and she stands up to listen closely, then falls back down. No, her black slave will be coming no more. He has been sent to the galleys.

The dark corridors of the Louvre will no longer see the silent Moor, noiseless giant who opened doors and advanced, conquering, scornful, towards the offered white princess.

The King, followed by Péguilin, emerges from the chimney. They are both satisfied. The Marquis de Vardes and Bontemps the valet sneeze and are less happy.

King Louis XIV is on the roof of the Louvre.

The Great Coesre, the King of the Beggars, is going to pass judgement at the cemetery of the Holy Innocents.

The night is made for the amusement of princes, and for the labour of rogues and bandits.

The entire Court of Miracles pours out into the streets of Paris, and all the different members of the *gueuserie* are out and about.

The *'drilles'* and the *'narquois'*, deserters or students, rapiers at their sides, the cripples and the ailing on their crutches, the *'convertis'* with their long boxwood rosaries, the *'coquillards'* who pretend to be either going to or returning from Santiago de Compostela, the *'polissons'*, urchins who pull their rags over their frozen blue skin to stir compassion in sensitive hearts, the *'francs-mitoux'*, the scrofulous, the misshapen, the afflicted. Ruffians all, crooks and swindlers, men and women, they come out of their ratholes while the *'ruffés'* and the *'millards'*, whose task is to beg in the country as a family, come back into town, avoiding the men of the Watch.

But the men of the Watch, especially the sergeants of the military police, have no taste for risking themselves outside tonight. They shut themselves up in the guardhouse, smoking and playing at cards, and the fat captain of the Châtelet goes to bed early along with a *'dainty'* chosen from among the lost girls picked up under various pretexts.

Along the Seine beaches, the boatmen and sailors gathered around their fires watch the shadows pass and are silent. Occasionally a silhouette glides between the barges. These are the beggars who have chosen to live amongst the warmth of the hay barges. They have just woken up, having heard the decorated clock of the Palace of Justice or the Hotel-de-Ville bells strike midnight. It is time to gather at the Holy Innocents. Regretfully, they leave their fetid cribs.

All through the winter, there are mountains of hay stored in warehouses on the banks of the Seine. All this hay is needed to feed the city's horses. There are many more horses than people in this city, and the snorts and warm shuffles of the stable are heard everywhere.

And it is between a horse's legs that the pamphleteer Claude Le Petit, also known as the Gutter Poet, is stretched out trying to sleep. To be precise, between the legs of the bronze horse of the statue of Good King Henri IV, on the Pont Neuf. It is not that it is particularly warm, but if it rains, the belly of the royal charger offers sufficient protection.

On the point of falling asleep, Claude Le Petit is disturbed by the unusual activity on the Pont Neuf tonight.

From his vantage point, he watches the thieves' migration. They know him well, and they leave him alone.

He murmurs:

"The Pont Neuf, ordinary playhouse
Of sellers of ointments and cure-all sauce
The home of those who pull teeth with hooks
Of hanged men, fripperies, and books
Capering singers of new songs....."

But it is night now, and the singers and balladeers of daytime have ceded the bridge to the folk of the underworld, answering the call of their prince, Squat Rolin.

Here is Calembredaine, ragged and terrible in his frightful disguise of a wild wig, a black eye patch, and the hideous excrescence which he is in the habit of gluing to his cheek. The Chief of the Tower of Nesle is followed by his lieutenants and his henchmen, by his 'marquises' and by his trollops. Beware, any who risk going outside tonight in Paris!

Oh, Paris by night, home of merry rascals who steal coats, cut purses, beat and kill passers-by, home of gay libertines who leave taverns and brothels arm in arm, singing to each other.

Claude Le Petit, the Poet of the Pont Neuf, listens and recognises the beloved noises of his night-time city. The whistle of thieves, the rattle of swords, the bellows of drunks, the gasps of the unfortunates with slit throats, the cries for help, and he smiles at the mournful mix, sometimes split by the piercing chant of a sweetmeats vendor, the sound an uncaring witness and perhaps even accomplice to these crimes.

Most certainly, it is not at all warm. A bitter wind is coming from the Seine. The shabby pamphleteer slides out from under the statue and, hugging his worn tunic to him, crosses the Pont Neuf in his turn. He is going to do the rounds of the taverns, breathe in the aroma of the spit-roasts, and, who knows, perhaps manage to win a warmer spot before a well-filled bowl.

The rue de la Vale de la Misère is the street of the roast meat sellers. At this late hour it is still filled with life, all its fires are burning and the spits of roasting chicken are turning, sizzling under the canopies of huge, welcoming hearths.

Only the last cook shop, the *Brazen Cock* at the end of the street, is dark and empty of customers. Mistress Bourgeaud, the landlady, died this evening from a terrible attack of measles, and Maître Bourjus is weeping in his bed in the great room upstairs, while his nephew, David Chaillou, a vacant adolescent who has just arrived from Toulouse to work as a kitchen boy, watches him without knowing what to do. He stands next to the white-draped stool where two candles are burning, next to a saucer of holy water and a box twig.

Let us leave this place of mourning and, like the notorious poet, let us go on to where it is warm and happy.

The taverns and cook shops are the stars of Paris by night, for they are innumerable. There is the *Pine Cone* on the rue de la Licorne and the *Lions' Den* on the rue de la Coiffure. There is the *Merry Men* on the rue Bons-Enfants and the *Wealthy Ploughman* on the rue des Mauvais-Garçons. There is the *Three Mallets* and the *Black Truffle*, and many others, and there is the *Green Trellis* on rue Hyacinthe, where ecclesiastical types like to gather, Capuchins, Celestines and Jacobins, and where Bécher the monk has just slid in, his face haggard, as he tries, with wine, to forget the flames of the stake.