L M SHAKESPEARE

Monsieur Law

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CHAPTER ONE

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I AM alone, sitting in my carriage at midnight on the outskirts of Paris. This small clutch of trees and scrub are now reduced to restless skeletons, and the air itself has the texture of water just before it turns to ice. I am neither a thief nor a beggar. I am a witness. A rise in the ground here – not too steep for the horses – seemed to be familiar to my coachman; and there are remnants of what may once have been a paved way, which was enough for the carriage wheels. They dug in to hard core. They crushed the earth, spat out small stones, lurched over boulders. There may once have been a house here, but it is a forgotten place now.

From this deserted vantage point, I can see across part of the city of Paris to the Pont Neuf, which is the object of my vigil. I am here to witness a funeral cortege which will cross that bridge on its way to the royal mausoleum of Saint-Denis on the other side of the river Seine. It will be lit with flares when it arrives, but very little ceremony and only the attendance of servants. If there is any truth at all in the legends of the immortality of the human soul, the spirit of the former Duchess of Orléans will know that I, the most devoted of her court, am here to watch over her last journey.

I have kept one torch alight; enough to write by, although hardly enough to see the paper or the marks I make on it. The night is thin and bitter. Now that the horses have

been taken out of the traces and the carriage is still, it seems exceptionally quiet as well as cold. A moment ago I stopped moving, and with my hand arrested, suspended every sign of my own presence, even my breath. I listened for the counterpoint of nature, briefly smothered by the disturbance of my arrival, to reassert itself, like an invisible body stealthily settling. I heard the tap of a dried leaf still hanging to a tree; a silence, a hesitation, but then a muffled creak of wood from a branch strained against the wind.

I have a long time to wait, and I decided to pass the time and distract my mind from the infernal cold of Winter by inscribing an account of the dangerous last years in France. These scraps of paper may outlive Madame's ample form, her kind and greedy heart, and the indomitable progress of her great life in a foreign court, but will not be enough to contain more than a fragment to remember her by.

Madame, as she was called at Court, was the second wife of the brother of Louis XIV, the Duke of Orléans, and mother of the present Duke of Orléans, now Regent. Her life, despite the efforts of her enemies, was not cut short. She has outlived the Chevalier de Lorraine, who would have poisoned her if he could. He was very handsome once. There was a harshness to his features which made the occasional softness of his glance peculiarly telling, and a manner as witty and cutting as his tongue. Most men envied him, but I did not. I knew that one day the poison in his soul would leech into his body and become visible. So it did. He was not beautiful any more after he had suffered twice from the French disease, as Madame called it. His love of depravity was still not assuaged, but in the end the exchange between the poison of his spirit and that of his body became evident because when he was old and sick enough, he became a better man, but an ugly one. And Madame, in spite of his evil past, was reconciled to him.

She also outlived Lorraine's friend, d'Effiat, who was

responsible for murdering her youngest baby son in his cradle; but she never knew about it. No one knew but myself and the enemies who had killed him. Had she known about it – had I not hidden it from her – she would have died of grief or rage long ago. If I must, I will relate that story again, but I have already given it, and the memory disturbs me too much.

There, in the distance, I can make out some flares already lit on the bridge. My own solitude throws into relief the extraordinary loneliness of the city at night. The buildings seem to hold their breath as do cows that stand stock still in freezing weather, in order not to disturb the warm air rising from their own bodies. At some point during the hours of darkness the light of more distant torches from far away below the south bank, like sparks blown from a fire, will be the first sign of the approach of the funeral cortege.

I have lived long enough myself, if Madame, with all her life's vigour and strong heart, has left this world behind. Of all the people I have met in my lifetime, she has been the most precious to me. Despite her age, and the occasional remark to the contrary, she had not finished with living. She recently devoted more time to her religious duties and said that she looked forward to the call of almighty God putting aside the complications and vanities of court life, but I did not believe her. In the next breath, she would ask one of her ladies to repeat every detail of one of the scandalous evening entertainments given by her son, now the Prince Regent, and an entire account of the food and wines served, with close attention to the ladies and especially his wife, her daughter-in-law, the present Duchess of Orléans, and what was said, and done. She simply did not have the mentality of a lady who was tired of life.

When Madame herself was young, and first arrived at court from her native Palatine, I was still a child. Even before she showed me such extraordinary kindness I

thought her pretty. Monsieur, the Duke of Orléans, who was the brother of the King, did not think his wife attractive because she was plump and would not paint her face. But to me, even before the event which precipitated such a change in my whole life, she appeared, in her manner and her movements, extremely pretty. And despite the elaborations of court dress and the jealous snares of strangers, she radiated an appetite for enjoyment and happiness. It showed in the brightness of her eyes, but was sometimes held in check by her dignity and her awareness of the necessary formality of the role she now occupied as the sister-in-law of the King of France and first lady in the land after the Queen.

At the age of nineteen, I remember she had a clear complexion, naturally very red lips, and was tall. De Largillieres did not do justice to Madame when he painted her, and certainly not Rigaud. Both depicted a silk ribbon or the intricate beauty of lace to perfection, but to treat the face – the eyes, the mouth of a living soul – to the same scrupulously tactile observation is, in my opinion, barren, and in the case of a person like Madame, whose presence was so much more the matter of her spirit – her character, the rolling tides of her robust humour and intimidating dignity, her simplicity and innocence, her appetite for life and rich food, which made her company so animated – was a travesty.

I possess one portrait of her which is the work of one of her ladies at court and is a far more true representation. Madame gave it to me years ago when I returned from Italy, having found proof of the Chevalier de Lorraine's guilt in the matter of the murder of Monsieur's first wife, and I treasure it more than anything else I have. She made me promise never to show it to anyone else, and to fix her intention and make sure I kept my word she looked away

from me as she put it in my hand and then turned her head back and frowned at me.

I had it set in gold. On Madame's birthday, I wore it hung on a chain inside my coat, and I am wearing it now. I see her in my mind's eye at this moment, as she was in those early days, her great skirts of silk weighed down at the hem with the sleeping body of Charmille or another of her pet dogs. How she would settle herself with a shuffle of cushions and animals and papers when she was pleased with something she had written in the letters which, often for as long as five hours a day, she would write to her extended family in all the courts of Europe. She would even occasionally read something out to me, and I will never forget her laughter and the accent of her voice, which retained its distinctive but small inflexions of German.

A moment ago I thought that someone here approached my carriage window; maybe a beggar unable to sleep because of the cold, or one of those women who wander through the country. If so, they withdrew quickly enough to merge with the scrub. There is nothing out there now but the familiar elements of cold wind, fitful moonlight, and shadows which shift with surreptitious zeal between the bushes and the rocks. But what if such a wanderer had indeed been there and actually tapped on my window, and I had opened it to allow them to speak to me? They might have taken me for something like themselves, being here at the dead of night. I am not an impressive figure of a man. I am unusual. My name is Berthon Collet de la Tour de Brisse, and I was brought up in Court, where my father was a courtier among many hundreds of others; but I was exceptionally ugly from birth, and I am still.

I am small. But I must make it clear – I am not a dwarf. Those dwarfs who were always at our court when the Queen was alive – the dwarfs she brought with her from Spain – they were of a particular make, and I do not share

it. Madame herself called me her goblin, and that was a different matter. When I was old enough to be a man and took advantage of the court tailors who knew so well how to disguise the physical defects of those of us who were born crooked or made crooked by various plagues (and there were many at Court), Madame abandoned this pet name for me, but I still treasure the memory of it.

I put these thoughts aside a moment ago, lowered my carriage window, and let in the night air and as clear a view as I could get of the scene below. The breeze on this small rise is restless as well as very cold, and it immediately replaced the thin draughts which squeeze through cracks in the glass and wood of a carriage, with an annihilating chill. I made out no movement on the distant bridge. Nothing yet stirs. Between those banks it could be the river Styx that flows, so neatly does the Seine at this point separate life from death. On the south bank vitality and light are epitomized by Madame's palace at St. Cloud, where she loved to be happy whenever she could, surrounded by her ladies and with good food and wine and gossip. On the opposite side of the river is the territory of death: the regal mausoleum of St. Denis, with its hidden population of the dead royal families of France. It has been waiting for Madame in silence all these years.