

(44) CHAPTER 4 cont.

WE HURRIED DOWN to shore and hoisted a signal at the only usable landing place. Spyglasses showed us a nine-member crew, soon recognizable: English, they came from the two divisions that had preceded us to Paris. The general surmise was that our compatriots there, concerned by our extended delay on the opposite side of the Channel, must have sent a party of inquiry: nine fit rowers. What else could have prompted them to brave this return through waves that remained so perilous?

But our joyous greetings received a puzzling welcome, our outstretched hands but cold and limited returns. Our visitors seemed disinclined to even speak to us. They looked angry and resentful; and though we guessed ourselves at fault, they were plainly much more displeased with each other. In loud, contending voices they demanded an escort to Dover Castle for an immediate audience with the Lord Protector of England.

“I’m here with you already, my good friends.” As Adrian stepped forward he added, “Yet Lord Protector no longer.” He’d long since discarded that empty title, before it became too bitter a mockery of itself. “I am, however, honored to be the

position to welcome all of you at Dover Castle to every hospitality we can offer. You must be exhausted. Please, come!”

And he proceeded to lead everyone from the beach via the cliff path to the Castle Road, where the procession spread out and continued uphill. The nine from the boat were tight-lipped; their plans had been upended but their grievances remained, and they mostly frowned at Adrian’s attempts at conversation. Though he was all gentility, from time to time he looked at them with the same interest and wonder the rest of us felt; he marveled with us at the strangeness of seeing these human beings the sea had delivered, these unexpected specimens of inestimable rarity, so full of towering passion and furiously discordant spirits.

Adrian opened the castle’s large council chamber to the curious, who sat in suspense until the guests, suitably refreshed, took the floor. Eager to discover the secret meaning of this strange visitation, we were confused and dismayed to hear nothing but angry demands to speak first. By degrees, from one’s bellowed assertions, another’s fierce interruptions, and a slew of bitter scoffs, we ascertained that all nine were deputies from our colony at Paris, one trio from each of three antagonistic factions into which the English emigrants had split. With almost the sole point of agreement among them being my old friend’s unique fitness to act as arbiter, these nine had been selected and dispatched from Paris to Calais and across the storm-rocked Channel—all the while, even when they shared an oar with an opponent, indulging the most violent hatred

against each other. Now they stood below Adrian's chair, voices raised to plead their rival causes with unmitigated party spirit. A few random words such as *Tuilleries* and *Hellfire* emerged from the hubbub, but no clarity. Adrian overcame his reluctance to reach for the big wooden gavel and brought it down with a crash.

A firm, careful examination of each deputy in turn showed us the true state of things at Paris. Two separate embarkations, some days apart, had supplied the English population there. Normally loyal and submissive to the Earl of Windsor, they'd been without him for almost two months, time enough for a leadership vacuum to develop into violent schism. One party represented the emigrants of the division that sailed first, landed at Dunkirk, and found France a blank. Vacant towns, desolate countryside: on the way to Paris they encountered not one living person, a painful shock then as now. In England, where communication from one part of the island to the other had become extremely slow and rare, we'd gone years without letters or news from the Continent. Melancholy voyagers were no doubt swallowed by the greedy ocean on their way to us from France; plague must have caught and silenced the rest before they could tell of the desolation behind them. Our state of ignorance had helped us hold onto vague hopes that across the Channel we'd find survivors in substantial numbers—companions, society, human existence. But the fearsome disaster that had so diminished us had assumed even greater scope for mischief in our sister land.

In Paris were found a few, perhaps a hundred people, resigned to their approaching fate, who flitted about the beautiful but lifeless streets and gathered to converse of past times with the vivacity and even gaiety that seldom deserted the French. To our emigrants' reasons for being there, they listened with shrugs and incredulous looks; how bizarre they thought it, to have traded sea breezes and natural quarantine for their own ill-fated city. *Go back to your island*, they counseled; or else exchange any promise of health for certain calamity. Where the plague had claimed a hundred lives in England, a thousand had died thereabouts. *Regard how you outnumber us now!* For a long time the capital had offered no diversion from the spectacle of sick Parisians burying their dead; only this past year had been happier for those who were left. *The pang of struggle has passed away*, they said, *and the few to be found here wait patiently for the final blow. But you, who are not content to die—you should breathe no longer the air of France, or soon you will only be a part of her soil.*

This prescient warning went unheeded, and the emigrants' swift possession of Paris went uncontested by a native populace that saw itself outnumbered ten-to-one, once the second English embarkation arrived from Calais. Most conspicuously, the first arrivals had occupied the Louvre and appropriated many of its treasures to themselves. The Calais party also moved into the Louvre where they were made to feel like latecomers, given second-best; the upstairs rooms overlooking the Seine were all taken, which seemed most unfair; other

examples abounded, resentment grew, and so the second faction was born. A petition it originated against the party of the first arrivals, demanding a fresh apportionment of Louvre treasures, particularly oil paintings, led to angry scenes that ought to have had no place in an expiring world.

But it was the next crisis that had brought our nine guests to Dover—a crisis precipitated by the nature of the third faction. Mingling the first two, it contained the fewest people, but their purpose was more unified, their obedience to their leader more entire, their fortitude and courage more unyielding and active. They followed a self-proclaimed prophet who preached against materialism and condemned their fellow emigrants to flames eternal; while attributing all power to God's rule, this man had attained complete command over his own private strike force. Their violent midnight raid upon the first party's sumptuous apartments at the Louvre netted him dozens of treasures, Raphaels and Leonardos and the like, which according to the prophet were nothing but pernicious objects of temptation that belonged in a bonfire. He'd ordered a huge pile of old broken chairs to be raised on the Place Vendôme in readiness. Before a match was struck, hundreds of individuals from the other factions descended on the scene to threaten bloodshed. The Elect Body, as the prophet and his followers called themselves, met this development with every show of zeal. With both sides showing weapons, the plague might have been spared much work to come. One syllable would have done it; and there on the Place Vendôme the last humans would have burdened their

souls with the crime of murder, and dipped their hands in each other's blood.

Tragedy was averted. A sense of shame entered the breasts of more than one person present who recalled that not only priceless artworks but the existence of the whole human race was at stake. If these ranks were thinned, no fresh recruits could fill them up; each man and woman was like a priceless gem of which the deepest mine on earth could yield no other to compare. Repenting their own part in the day, feeling that all the blood about to be spilled would be on their own heads, these individuals were moved by a common impulse to step between the contending sides and demand a truce. So far they'd been successful. The great majority of emigrants acknowledged the Lord Protector as their head, and agreed that he should be given a chance to rule on the controversy before further possibly mutinous or treasonous actions were taken. Officially, the Elect Body refused to admit Adrian's authority to arbitrate, since their obedience was only to God and to his delegate on earth, their chief. At Dover, his three fanatical ambassadors proclaimed his cause: purification. The treasures of the Louvre must burn in order to redeem some part of the human race from hellfire. The Elect Body must be allowed to act without interference from idolaters and unbelievers.

All this we were hearing on January 28th—and the truce in Paris was fixed to expire on January 31st. It was of the utmost consequence that Adrian should arrive in Paris by then. Failing his intervention, on the first of February all three parties would

meet again on the Place Vendôme to observe or contest the promised bonfire of masterpieces; the art could well be saved, but only at the cost of a massacre.

So that very night, Adrian and I packed our bicycles in the delegation's long boat, and along with twelve other people put off from shore. The same furious storms that had delayed their mission at Calais, had beaten to pieces and destroyed every vessel moored near Dover. We all took our turn at the oars. Beneath a serene, starlit sky, the outline of the English coast was continually lifted into view as we rode the broad-backed waves. I looked with sad affection on this last glimpse of my native land and strained my eyes for more, long after losing sight of it. *Tomb of Idris, farewell! Grave, in which my heart lies sepulchered, farewell forever!* When a solitary seagull winged its way above our heads, flying to its nest among the cliffs we'd left behind, I thought, *Yes, you can revisit the land of your birth—but we in this boat never shall.*

The heavy swells obliged us to row with all our strength for the full twelve hours we were at sea. The stars faded with morning's approach, and through a dim gray veil the French coast appeared. Broad and red, the sun had just risen as we walked, exhausted, over the sands into Calais. Our twelve boat mates included all three Elect Body delegates, who had refused to prolong a separation from their head that was already intolerable; they could take no more Godlessness. Without another word, they went to retrieve their bicycles and left for Paris, sixteen hours away. The rest of us sat down and took

some refreshment, then made our way to the harbor. Adrian intended for those companions who remained, nine skilled volunteers, to pilot the most seaworthy crafts we could find back to Dover; and so would commence the last emigration. Soon, any uninhabited, unnamed, unmapped rock in the wide Pacific would be of equal account in the world's future history, as desert England.

Adrian and I set off while there was still plenty of daylight. Our recent snowstorms hadn't reached these shores: on clear roads in surprisingly good repair, we crossed the blue-green plain round Calais with impetuous speed. Thereafter, obstacles were frequent, and even with lanterns to guide us, our progress after dark felt too slow for Adrian. My friend had crossed paths with the Elect Body's leader enough times to suspect that the truce in Paris was doomed to a premature end.

In the years after the pandemic reached our shores, England's religious leaders enjoyed great power—a power of good, if rightly directed, or of incalculable mischief, when guided by fanaticism or intolerance. But this one, despite the trappings he employed, never acted from religious motives. He was an impostor in the most determined sense of the term. His father had risen from small parish ministry to become a bishop of the Southern Cone; whatever the moral influence of the bishop's notably harsh doctrines of purity and so-called election, the fact was that his son lacked a conscience. Educated in England and raised in wealth, by early life the future false prophet had done so much to indulge his own

vicious propensities that he'd lost all sense of rectitude or self-esteem. Then ambition woke in him; unbridled by any scruple, he gave himself up to indulging his ambitions. He'd pursued various schemes to acquire adherents and power in plague-stricken London, where Adrian had foiled him every time; but in Adrian's absence, the wolf tried on the shepherd's cloak, and the flock allowed the deception. A few weeks in Paris had been enough for this villain to form a party whose members believed that safety and salvation were only possible for those who put their trust in him. True fanatics, eager to show their adherence to the anti-materialistic creed of his divine mission, they'd burn the Louvre's treasures gladly—and Adrian didn't expect their leader would deny himself this awful tribute, even if it had to come sooner than planned.

Our journey featured one gruesome delay. Near Abbeville we happened on a fallen rider, one of the Elect Body delegates, who must have been stricken by plague in the hours since leaving Calais. The other two had left their companion to die alone on the cold earth. We arrived in time to offer some small comfort to the sufferer, whose symptoms were the most extremely virulent we'd ever observed. An hour later we buried her corpse beneath a pile of stones. Was this unfamiliar form of plague already stalking our loved ones in Dover? Our long ride stretched on, burdened by new worries.

Around noon on January 30th, we entered Paris. A first for me; but Adrian knew the city well and our pace across its empty arrondissements was rapid. It soon became apparent that we

were right to have hurried, as we rode directly towards a rising, roaring sound, a vocal clamor interspersed with what we feared might be the clash of weapons. A knot of French people stood looking off in that direction with murmurs of dismay and disbelief; here we paused and Adrian, identifying himself, pledged to do his best to mitigate the madness of their invaders. Pedaling hard again, we raced round a few more curves before Adrian shouted: "There!" With its tall green bronze column, a fantastical relic of empire in sight, the Place Vendôme lay just ahead.

And there, in a flood of sunshine, we found a direful scene completely out of place in those days of depopulation. The crowd of hundreds looked huge, oceanic. No less incongruous were the weapons being brandished—the drawn swords and fixed bayonets, the pikestaves, pole-axes and spears—which must have been looted from antiquities collections; so too the pieces of plate armor that dozens of people had on. Ornamental breastplates flashed in the sun for the first time in centuries. Other gilding caught the eye, a disturbance of golden stripes popping up amidst the central commotion: these were picture frames. The whole screaming mob seemed close to insanity, ready for bloodshed.

Standing apart was a group of women who'd gathered there to protest the use of violence; mercifully, they recognized Adrian and raised a cry. Some moments of confusion later, we heard cheers for England and the Lord Protector as the throng parted to let us through.

We'd soon learn that Adrian hadn't been alone in his suspicions about the charlatan from London. Close watch had been kept on the Hôtel Ritz where he'd made his headquarters; and when the transport of artworks started up two mornings early, the first and second factions descended on the Place Vendôme in time to overpower the Elect Body and reclaim the Louvre treasures, without loss of life on either side. The bonfire had never even been lit. But when the controversy over right of possession flared up again almost immediately, the victors turned on each other. To many there, Adrian appeared like an angel of peace descended among them. Others took a more practical view. In response to the delegation's appeal, the Lord Protector must have come as an arbitrator. Their voices rising, emigrants of both factions demanded his ruling on the spot: Who should have these treasures now?

Years earlier, watching Lord Raymond among his troops, I'd seen his majestic attitude win their respect and obedience. How different was Adrian, with his slight figure, his obliging gestures; yet multitudes saw him, saw his fervent expression, and recognized a fearless love that won their hearts. They knew he never flinched from danger, nor let himself be actuated by other motives than care for the general welfare. The Earl of Windsor was the one person all were ready to obey. Mildly, now, but with the utmost firmness, he said that the treasures of the Louvre were the property of the French people and must be restored that very day to the gallery walls from which they'd been taken—arms and armor too, every shield, halberd, and

battle axe; this was his decree. And so it would be done, without argument.

One faction however remained, its people cut off from the rest, standing apart to wait until they could counter-attack with best advantage, after their foes from the Louvre had mutually weakened each other. The Elect Body neither sympathized in the joy evoked by Adrian's arrival, nor imbibed the spirit of peace which fell like dew upon the softened hearts of their fellow emigrants. Behind them, near Napoleon's column, rose an immense pile of broken chairs on which they'd labored for nothing. At their head stood a ponderous man, black and brown—hair, skin, clerical garb, boots—alternating head to toe in an overall show of great care and costliness. The malign look he'd fixed on us flashed into gloating delight when his stern-faced followers decided to make threatening gestures and advance; he stepped forward with them.

Seeing this, the two factions at peace just moments before were warlike again; truly, their mutual anger had been a fire of straw compared to the slow-burning hatred they both entertained for these fanatics, these castaways who'd colonized the world to come, and whose delight it would have been to listen to their leader shout denunciations against the mere common art-loving children of worldliness, while humankind's immortal legacy was being reduced to ash before their eyes. The Elect Body's forward advance of its little army reawakened all the larger, heavily armed body's animosity; antique weapons grasped, hundreds waited only for Adrian's signal to charge.

Instead they heard the clear tones of his voice commanding everyone to fall back. With a confused, clamorous murmur not unlike surf retreating from sand, our side obeyed. The other stood its ground.

Adrian wheeled his bicycle onto the open paving stones; halfway between the hostile lines he stopped. Rather than joining him there in parlay, the other chief advanced with his whole troop. The many women among them seemed more eager and resolute than their male companions; the most devoted, praying aloud, pressed round their leader as if to shield him. When Adrian met them half way again, they halted.

“What,” he said, “are you after now? Are you really prepared to risk death for the sake of a bonfire of vanities?” Here the whole Elect Body started shouting about sin and salvation. Adrian looked straight at their scowling leader. “Can you not silence your followers? Mine, you perceive, obey me.”

The other took a moment to raise his hand for quiet. “I will make answer to this creature.”

Adrian smiled. “What, I again ask, are you after now?”

“Repentance!” thundered the charlatan. “Your repentance from sinful materialism. Your obedience to the will of the Most High, which has been made manifest to these his Elected People. Do we not all die through your sins, O generation of unbelief—and of you, the man whose presumption was to lead us, my Most High Lord of Sin, have we not a right to demand acts of repentance and obedience?”

“And if we refuse them, what then?” his opponent inquired

mildly.

“Beware, Sin Lord!” The words rang off the sides of the Place Vendôme. “Beware, and repent. God hears you, and will smite your stony heart in his wrath; his poisoned arrows fly, his dogs of death are unleashed! We will not perish unrevenged—and mighty will our Avenger be, when he descends in visible majesty, and scatters destruction among you.”

“My good fellow,” said Adrian, with quiet scorn. “You don’t believe a single word of that—you and I both know it. Threats to public property and order have ever been your stock in trade. Your poor ignorant followers deserve pity: the time will come for them to gain in understanding. As for today, it’s enough for me to know that you seek nothing of us; and let heaven be our witness, we seek nothing of you. I’d be sorry to embitter by strife the few days that we, any of us, may have left. In the grave, we won’t be able to fight; up here we don’t have to. Go back to your hotel, or stay and burn your chairs; pray to your God in your own fashion, and let everyone else do the same. My prayers consist in peace and good will, in resignation and hope.” He leapt nimbly onto his machine before his angry opponent could reply. “Farewell!”

Calling his friends to follow him, Adrian pedaled off towards the Louvre, where he and I oversaw the return of every treasure to its place. After that, to prevent any fresh outbreaks of theft or violence, he issued orders that everyone willing to follow him should leave the city at once and rendezvous at the Palace of Versailles, our new headquarters.

About two weeks later, the last parties of emigrants began arriving from Dover. Escorts brought them straight from Calais to Versailles, avoiding Paris where the fanatics had remained. All who remained of the Lord Protector's family found ourselves reunited in the apartments prepared for us in the Grand Trianon. There, after the ordeals of the previous weeks, we had a time of repose amidst the luxuries of the long-departed Bourbons.

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