

LUTETIA
Darkness Under the City of Light
By Alexander Galant

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Cover illustration by Alexander Galant

Author's Note

In his youth, Victor Hugo was a devoted Catholic and a Royalist, loyal to the Monarchy, heartily writing Odes praising King Charles X and his family. Suddenly, in 1827, Victor Hugo changed drastically. He became a 'free thinker' and started writing plays and poems that spoke against the king and the royal family. There is no record as to what caused this turnaround in Victor Hugo. Even in his own memoirs, there is no mention of anything of importance in 1827, except for box office receipts from one of his plays.

But something did happen in 1827. Victor Hugo was inspired somehow to write an anonymous short story against capital punishment in 1828, and a stage play that caused a riot in the streets of Paris in 1830. In the same year he started writing 'Les Misérables', which would take another three decades to complete.

It led me to wonder - - what might have transpired that would have altered his perspective so drastically?

"History has its truth, and so has legend. Legendary truth is of another nature than historical truth. Legendary truth is invention whose result is reality. Furthermore, history and legend have the same goal; to depict eternal man beneath momentary man." – Victor Hugo

Prologue

Paris, January 1827.

The headless corpse pendulated on the elephant tusk like a tattered flag. The grisly sight was silhouetted against the crescent moon, which hung in the sky like a scimitar.

In all his years of policing the streets of Paris, Inspector Vidocq had never seen anything like this before. The Bastille Elephant was a structure that stood over seventy feet tall. The tusks were about halfway up the trunk, a good thirty-five feet off the ground. How did this unfortunate man manage to tangle his coat upon one of them?

“Maybe he climbed to the top and fell off,” suggested a young gendarme. Vidocq shook his head. The gendarmes were part of Paris’ local police prefecture and were not known for their investigative skills. They were a branch of the military, originally established after the French Revolution as enforcers of the law. Their ineptness was one of the reasons why Vidocq had started the Sûreté Nationale, France’s police force.

“That tusk is made of plaster,” replied Vidocq. “If he had fallen from the head, he would have broken the tusk and we would be scraping him off the ground with a shovel.”

Still, Vidocq could not offer any other explanation. The Bastille Elephant was one of Napoleon Bonaparte’s unfulfilled dreams. It was built on the spot where the Bastille prison had once stood. After it was destroyed during the French Revolution, Napoleon had commissioned this elephant to be a triumphant monument dedicated to his military prowess. Construction ceased over ten years ago, when Napoleon was defeated in Waterloo. Since then it, like the Arc de Triomphe, had fallen into decay.

“Have we located the head?” asked Vidocq as he took his notebook and began to sketch every gruesome detail. “How did he get up there without his head?”

“Without his head?” asked the gendarme.

“If his head came off here, there would be some blood,” said Vidocq as he pointed to the snow covered cobblestones beneath the body. “There isn’t, so that means his head was taken off elsewhere before he was brought here.”

“Why would anyone do such a thing?”

“Either to prevent him from being identified, or...” Vidocq stopped as he unconsciously looked north to where the Paris Temple Castle had once stood. It was there that his brother was murdered almost twenty years ago and his body moved to a more public site to be found...

“Or?” inquired the gendarme with earnest.

“Or it’s a warning... like a declaration of war.”

“I don’t understand.”

Snapping back to the present, Vidocq brushed his memories aside and barked, “That doesn’t matter. Look around. Make sure there isn’t a head lurking about behind one of the elephant’s legs. In a few hours this square will be teeming with merchant wagons. We don’t need some child finding it while climbing the pedestal.”

The gendarme nodded and took his oil lantern to inspect beneath the mammoth statue. Vidocq continued sketching as quickly as he could, even though his fingers were freezing from the cold.

“Inspector? I think I found something!”

“The head?” Vidocq asked with hope, as he ventured under the elephant.

“No, something written in blood!”

He found the gendarme with his arm extended, holding the lantern to illuminate the back of one of the front legs. Vidocq followed his gaze to see a single word, still glistening moistly in the lamplight:

VAUTRIN

Vidocq felt his blood turn as cold as the night air. It was a name he had hoped to never see again.

“What does it mean?”

“Find some other men and get that body down,” snapped Vidocq with urgency. “Don’t take it to the Morgue.”

“But...”

Vidocq held his hand up to silence him as he looked about. His eyes fell upon the familiar form of *L’hospice des Quinze-Vingt*. It was once the barracks of the famed Musketeers. *Perfect!*

“Take the body there and find that head. We can’t identify it without it.”

He turned and started to walk away from that infernal name.

“Where are you going?”

The gendarme had some nerve asking him that. Vidocq didn’t answer. He needed to get away. Clear his thoughts. He wanted to quickly figure out what was going on. Putting his notebook away, he felt around for his watchfob.

“What time is it?” he barked over his shoulder.

In the distance, the reply came on the cold wind.

Chapter 1

A low, ominous tone quavered from the Notre Dame Cathedral and echoed along the Seine River. Before the lonely chime faded away into the Parisian night, it was soon followed by another peal in the same sombre pitch. It was the solitary bell in the south tower, calling to its sister bells to join it in song. But they had been taken down and melted into cannons only a few decades earlier, sacrifices for the French Revolution. The bell known as Emmanuel rang out a third time. Its echo lingered in the air, waiting for a response that would never come.

Adeline lay quietly in the darkness of her room, counting the chimes from the Notre Dame. Three o'clock in the morning. Hopefully, the baby was sleeping by now. At three months old, the boy had a habit of awakening several times in the night, but presently seemed to be quiet. Adeline strained to listen for any sounds but could only hear her own breath as she gathered her nerve.

Out of habit, her hand reached for the candlestick, but thought better of it. She was uncomfortable with those temperamental new matches that once burned a hole in her apron, leaving her now with the options of sneaking into another bedroom for a flame, or traversing the apartment to the main fireplace. She knew that there would be just enough light spilling from the other bedrooms, so she decided to go without her candle at all. With her luck the flickering light would catch someone's attention, anyway.

Her bare feet recoiled for a moment as they touched the cold, wooden floor. Unlike the rest of the family's rooms, the Maid's Chambers did not have a fireplace of its own. There was only a stove pipe which was supposed to carry heat from the next room as it passed through to the outside wall. If the embers were low, there would be little heat for her, as it was tonight.

She put on her robe and, as carefully as she could, she slowly turned the door handle. The hinges screeched like attacking gargoyles in the night. She froze, fully expecting the baby's wail to join with the grinding door. Nothing. Just the faint sound of snoring that emanated from the daughter's room.

Adeline took a deep breath and held it as she snuck out of her chamber and moved as quietly as she could through the apartment. It was not an easy task as the floor creaked loudly on these cold January nights. In the dark, she didn't see the ornate carved foot of the hall table sticking out. She struck it so hard that the porcelain figurines upon it rattled, and one fell.

Adeline's hand flew out and caught it moments before it shattered on the wooden floor. She loathed the stupid figurines. So fragile. Madam insisted that they be dusted on a daily basis. The family's three-year-old daughter was forbidden from being near them, let alone play with them. They served no useful purpose, yet they had more value than she did in her employer's eyes. Some days, while Adeline dusted the picture frames in the hall, she would happen to glance over to see the porcelain clown staring at her. It was silly, but there were times its eyes seemed to be following her as she worked. Many times she fought the urge to pick it up and smash it against the wall. She could have feigned it was an accident but she knew all too well that the Madam would cut her wages to replace it. Adeline only made 30 *sous* a week. Undoubtedly, the lazy clown would cost her a month's wage. As quietly as she could, she placed the figurine back onto the table, her eyes straining in the darkness to make sure it was in its 'proper' place. If someone had awoken from the noise, she would have used the excuse of needing to use the water closet.

Relieved that no one stirred, she slowly made her way to the sitting room, past the Master's Empire bureau writing desk to the cabinet where the silver was kept. Ever so carefully

she opened the drawer. A small salt spoon. That was all she was going to take. A soup spoon or a serving spoon would fetch a higher price but it would surely be missed. A salt spoon, being only two inches long could easily be misplaced and would likely never be missed from the 100-piece silver set. There were two others just like it. She had never seen them placed on the table at the same time. She looked at it for a moment and she slipped it into the pocket of her robe.

"How many pieces of silver is a soul worth?" asked a voice in the dark.

It broke the silence of the night and startled a gasp from Adeline, who didn't quite hear the question over the sound of her heart pounding violently against her chest. She spun around to see the Master's silhouette against the window behind the desk.

"I'm sorry, sir. I didn't hear you come in."

"How many pieces of silver is a soul worth?" he asked again as he nonchalantly pulled out a small bit of sandpaper and struck a match. The sputtering ball of light from it blinded Adeline momentarily.

"Pardon me," she stammered. Her eyes adjusted and soon she could see the familiar boyish face of the Master as he lit the oil lamp on his desk. His straw-like hair was a messy contrast to his impeccable cut of clothes. He was still dressed in his evening attire, and had obviously not gone to bed. Had he been there all this time? He couldn't have possibly known she was going to attempt anything this evening.

Then she recalled how he would often go out for walks at night. He claimed that it helped him with his writing. Adeline knew her employer was a writer but couldn't understand how he could afford such a place as a mere wordsmith. She had taught herself to read but couldn't decipher any of his work. It was messy and he was too lazy to use capital letters, so she couldn't even make out when he started a new sentence.

"Do I need to ask a third time?" He glared at her with his cold, grey eyes, the nostrils of his thin nose flaring in anger.

"I don't understand the question."

"Would you care to empty your pocket?"

She dared not move. He couldn't have seen her actions in the darkness. For a moment she considered pretending to faint and appeal for pity. But it would leave her in a vulnerable position, should he search her pocket anyway while she was feigning unconsciousness.

"Either you empty your pocket of your own accord or I'll rip the robe from your back."

Typical male. He would like to do that, wouldn't he? She knew how he would steal a look at her while she worked. Admittedly, she used her femininity to her advantage. When she had applied for the job, she wore her golden hair in a style that she knew was pleasing to a man and batted her blue eyes in hopes that he wouldn't check her references, since they were all faked. It had worked.

"I'm not going to ask again," he said, almost grinding each word with his teeth. She still couldn't bring herself to surrender the evidence of her crime.

He suddenly moved forward. Fearing that he would tear her robe, she reached into her pocket and her hand nervously jerked so quickly that the utensil flew out and landed on the flip top leaf of the desk. The spoon looked so small and dainty but it now had the weight to send her back to prison.

"I'll ask again," he said as he picked up the evidence, "is it worth breaking God's eighth commandment? For what? Money? I pay you a fair wage, lodgings for free and this is how you repay me?"

Adeline said nothing. He could never understand. Looking at his soft, lily-white hand that

now held the spoon, Adeline could plainly see that those hands had never known the experience of menial labor. Never had worked an honest day in his life. Everything he had was handed to him. Now, sitting high on his throne, he spoke of God. What God? The God that never answered any of her prayers. If there was a God, she now hoped that He would strike this man with a plague. Let him taste the bitterness of poverty. Understand the fear of not knowing where the next meal will come from and the desperation born from that fear.

"Where is the other one?" he suddenly asked.

"What other one?"

"The silver baby feeding spoon."

"The what?" Then she remembered the other spoon that she had taken the other day. It looked like a small salt spoon but the handle was bent around into a loop. She thought it had been mangled and wasn't important. She was going to pawn it...

"Where is it?" he demanded again.

"I don't know."

"Shall I search you and your belongings?"

"You won't find anything," she said matter-of-factly.

"Sold it already, have you?" he sighed. "That spoon had been used by me and my brothers when we were babes. My daughter had her first real food with it and I hoped my son would have it."

"So now he'll have to use his fingers like a common child," sneered Adeline. She knew she was out of line, but since she was going to prison anyway, she couldn't be bothered feigning pity for an infant who won't be using real silver to taste his first mush.

"This silver was my mother's, God rest her soul, and you have defiled it."

"At least you had a mother."

"Don't play the martyr with me," he snapped. "It won't work. Go, get dressed and gather your belongings."

She was out of the room before he could say another word. If she was merely being sacked, rather than being arrested, it was the best outcome of this disastrous situation. She was still young and had her looks. She could survive.

Before leaving her chamber, she took one last look around and grabbed the sack with her precious few possessions. She purposely didn't fasten it tightly as she assumed the Master would search through it to make sure she wasn't taking anything else. As she walked down the hallway, she 'accidentally' knocked the porcelain clown off the hall table. The shattering sound warmed her slightly, and was mildly surprised that the baby didn't wake. As she neared the sitting room, she could hear another male voice talking to the Master.

"There is no magistrate awake at this hour," the other voice said.

Her luck had run out. The Master had somehow summoned the police. Likely sent the landlord's son on the errand.

Adeline unfastened the top buttons of her blouse. Hopefully she could use it to distract the young policeman on this cold winter's night. Just a moment would be all she would need.

She entered the sitting room and felt her heart sink into her stomach. *Merde!* She recognized the familiar bear-like face of Inspector Vidocq. His barrel-chested frame made the Master look as small as a broom. Why was *he* here? A simple *gendarme* would normally be sent out to bring in a petty thief. What was the director of the *Sûreté* doing here? There would be no running from him. No criminal could escape his pursuit. The Master must have higher connections than she could have ever imagined.

Vidocq looked at her and frowned, "Mademoiselle d'Escars, I am truly disappointed."

"You know her?" asked the Master.

"Most certainly. Adeline d'Escars. A long history of petty crimes. It should have been noted in her labor booklet."

The Master retrieved the bound documents from his desk and handed the bundle to Vidocq. The inspector opened it, his steel-blue eyes studying everything carefully. "Forged."

Vidocq looked up at Adeline, "We'll add that to your list of crimes. This will send you back to prison for a long time if your Master makes a full report."

Adeline said nothing. She silently cursed both of them, but it was hopeless. There was no God. At least none for the poor.

Vidocq turned back to the Master, "Will you be filing formal charges, Monsieur?"

"Most certainly. She needs to be taught a lesson."

"I'm afraid there are no lessons in prison," added Vidocq. "Not the kind you're thinking of, Monsieur."

"Well, for the sake of justice."

"As you wish, Monsieur..." The inspector paused as he awaited a name.

"Hugo," offered the young Master, identifying himself. "Victor Hugo."

Chapter 2

The tall, menacing figure of Édouard disembarked from the uncomfortable, large stagecoach known as *La Diligence*. The four-day journey on this creaking contraption pulled by a half-dozen horses, shared with seven other passengers, was worse than any torture he had endured from those religious fanatics in Spain.

Édouard glanced around the *cour des Messageries*, the terminus for stagecoaches that converged from all over France and Europe. It had been over five years since he had last been in Paris. Since then there was a new tyrant on the throne of France, but very little else had likely changed.

"You look well, for a dead person," said a voice in Italian, behind him.

"Why are you speaking to me in Italian?" asked Édouard. "We are in France now."

"My French pronunciation is not that good," replied the short, Italian man.

Édouard rolled his eyes. Why send someone to France who didn't speak the language? Then he remembered. He had been involved with the incident five years ago. If he didn't find the stolen treasure, it would be up to Édouard to kill him.

"Do we know what now occupies my old friend, Monsieur Hugo?"

"Still writing poetry," replied the Italian man as he handed Édouard a newspaper: The Globe.

Édouard skimmed over the review of Paris' most brilliant poet's work. He couldn't stomach the flowery praise. *Fantastic*, he thought sarcastically. *This will make Hugo's head bigger than it already is.*

Then he read the last paragraph and turned to his Italian comrade, "Well done! We know where he's going to be tonight!"

"I thought you'd..."

Édouard shushed him as he recognized a face, and suddenly turned around to avoid being noticed. The last thing he needed was to be seen still alive, especially by the infamous Inspector Vidocq. He whispered to the Italian, "I have to disappear until tonight. At least the Louvre Palace is not far from here. Is that new arch still there?"

"It's not that new anymore..."

"I'll meet you there just after the sun sets."

Before the Italian could ask another question, Édouard had disappeared into the crowd of porters, pedestrians and pickpockets.

It had been a long night for Victor Hugo. After the unpleasantries surrounding the dismissal of mademoiselle d'Escars, Hugo did not get much sleep. When he told his wife, Adèle, what had happened later that morning, she was not happy with the circumstances.

"Why today of all days?" she exclaimed as she tried to calm their crying son, Charles, for his morning nap.

"She was caught *in flagrante delictom*," replied Hugo lightly. He was untangling the string of a Bilboquette toy for his daughter, Léopoldine, as she watched. To get better leverage with the string, he set himself in his sitting room chair and continued, "Or what's that term Walter used in his *Ivanhoe* book? Ah, 'red-handed'."

"But I needed her to help me prepare for tonight."

"What's special about tonight?"

Adèle glared at him with her dark eyes that seemed to drain the warmth from his body.

"How is it you can remember every name you hear, every word you read, but can't

remember an important occasion?"

"That's tonight?" Hugo asked honestly, squirming in his chair. Freeing the last knot, he tested the cup-and-ball toy, and deftly caught it. Léopoldine clapped with delight, gave him a big smile and wrapped her little arms around his neck.

"Thank you, Papa!"

Hugo gave her a tight hug and handed the toy to his little girl with a kiss. She bounded out of the room, swinging the Bilboquette's ball wildly.

"Be careful around the figurines, *ma petite!*" called Hugo.

"How could you forget?" asked Adèle, speaking urgently but softly now that the baby was starting to close his eyes.

"I didn't forget," he smiled, "I was merely mixing up the dates. Easy to do when you go days without sleeping."

The truth was, it had slipped Hugo's mind, which was unusual. He did have an incredible memory for details. Every sound, every smell would instantly transport him back to the time when his senses first experienced them. It drove him to the brink of madness at times. But today, it was more likely that he fooled himself into thinking it was another day. There was nothing he loathed more than dressing up in pomp and being on his best behaviour at a dreadful Salon. He had no wish to waste his time at these gala events for the elite of Paris.

"I needed her to help me alter the dress," stressed Adèle. "I don't fit into anything since the baby was born. How could you sack her without consulting me first?"

"She was stealing our sliver. I would have been distracted tonight at this soirée..."

"Salon!" corrected his wife as she carried the now quiet baby back to his room.

"Whatever," Hugo waved his hand in the air. Both were the same as far as he was concerned. "I would have spent the evening wondering if we would have any belongings left when we returned."

"What happened to my little porcelain clown?" asked Adèle from the hallway.

"I believe she broke it on her way out," replied Hugo.

There was a moment of silence. Then she stormed back into the room, "I hope she's condemned to hard labour."

Hugo stifled a laugh, "I'll help you alter your dress, my angel."

"Since when do you know how to sew?"

"Since my mother insisted that idle hands are the devil's playground. If I wasn't busy reading the Bible or literature, I had to learn to sew, basic carpentry, paper my room..." He paused and looked at his wife saucily. "I have talented hands."

She squinted at him, "Better banish those thoughts immediately. There will be no such dallying."

"I was referring to my writing," he said with mock innocence. "I need my hands to put quill to paper."

"Of course you were."

The omnibus carriage rocked on the cobblestone road after crossing the Pont Neuf. Hugo and his wife were huddled close to each other for warmth. Hugo could not remember a January that was as cold as this one. It had finally stopped snowing but the wind was bitterly cold and seemed to search out and invade every possible crack in the carriage.

In an attempt to avoid the slow-moving caravan of carriages along the busy riverbank, Hugo had ordered the driver to take the side streets to Place de l'Oratoire outside the Palais du

Louvre. As the carriage meandered, Hugo shifted impatiently. It would have been faster if he could have walked. Their apartment at 90 rue de Vaugirard was only a half-of-an-hour walk to the Louvre, but it was not proper to show up at a Salon on foot. Furthermore, Adèle did not share his fondness for walking about the streets of Paris. She was already fighting fits of nerves as it was her first evening away from the baby, even though she knew the children were in the capable hands of their landlord's wife.

Hugo sighed as they turned the corner and saw a train of carriages in queue near to the steps of the Louvre.

"Do you find it odd?" asked his wife with chattering teeth, interrupting his thoughts.

"What, dear?"

"Do you find it odd that King Charles the Tenth still allows the Louvre Palace to be a museum? It was, after all, Napoleon who made it so. I would have thought that after the Bourbon family was restored to the throne, they would have overturned everything Napoleon had started."

"Well, the Bastille Elephant and the Arc de Triomphe remain unfinished and decaying to dust. I'm more surprised that he chose to reside at the Tuileries Palace, which was Napoleon's residence, instead of his childhood home of the Palace of Versailles."

"That's my point," his wife continued. "The Tuileries Palace is connected to the Louvre Palace, which is open to the public. Isn't that an unnecessary risk for the Royal family?"

"It's been a fortress for centuries. I'm sure it's perfectly safe for the King, and I think it best to keep such questions to ourselves. It's not wise to question the wisdom of the King."

Hugo wiped the frost away from the crown glass window to see that they had not moved. There was a certain order in which the carriages were allowed to disembark, according to the number of horses pulling them. Eight horses indicated royalty. Six for blood relations. Four for nobility. This was but one of the reasons why Hugo despised these gala events. He didn't need care about the upturned noses because of their single-horse, hired carriage.

"Let's walk the rest of the way," he suggested.

"What?" his wife exclaimed in shock. "It's too cold."

"It's only a few yards. I can see the entrance from here."

"But what will the others say?"

"They're too busy not tripping over their obscenely long veils."

"It's called a train."

"Right."

Hugo opened the door and stepped out. Wrapping his wine-coloured frock cloak coat tighter about himself, he quickly glanced around, then extended his hand back to assist his wife. She whispered urgently to him, "Vagabonds!"

Without taking his eyes off his wife, Hugo replied, "Pretend you don't see them. Don't make eye contact with them."

The two walked as swiftly as they could in their formal wear past the filthy peasants holding their hands out, expecting free coins. *They'd make better use of their time trying to find honest work*, Hugo thought.

As they ascended the front steps, Hugo instinctively put his hand on his purse to ensure it was still on his person. He glanced over to see that Adèle had done the same with her jewels. He was about to say something when an odd sensation came over him. He had felt a sudden shiver and the feeling that he was being watched. Without thinking, he glanced about to see who it was. Every person that he could see was preoccupied with their own affairs, trying to walk regally over hidden ice. Servants were scrambling to keep the trains of the elaborate dresses from

dragging in the snow. No one seemed to take notice of him. Yet, Hugo couldn't shake that feeling. He had experienced this sensation as a child when his family traveled across country to Spain. It served him well. And the last time... Hugo sighed. The last time was that horrible night seven years ago. It was a cold night, much like this one. He dismissed the thought and turned his attention back to his shivering wife.

"Let's go inside where it's warm."

In the courtyard, behind one of the pillars, two figures loomed in the shadows.

"That's him!" The Italian pointed to the man in the wine-coloured cloak who was escorting a woman into the Louvre Palace.

"Don't point," Édouard whispered harshly. "Are you certain? He looks different."

"Yes, without a doubt. The one with no hat.

"His head is even bigger than I remember."

Édouard suddenly saw another face from his past. Long past. He couldn't believe his eyes. How ironic that he would be here at the same gathering as Hugo!

"I can't go in," said Édouard quietly. "The General will recognize me."

"Who?"

"See that man? The one dressed in black, with the sword." Édouard didn't wait for an answer and continued, "I can't be seen by him. Not until we have the treasure. You will have to sneak in there and give this message to Hugo."

He pressed a small piece of paper into the Italian's hand and looked at him urgently, "Whatever you do, don't let anyone see you do it!"

"But..."

Édouard put his dagger up to the Italian's throat. "Don't mess up... again."

Chapter 3

"Monsieur et Madame Hugo, welcome!" exclaimed the wife of the maître d'hôtel as she greeted Hugo at the entrance to the Salon Carrée of the Louvre Palace. "His Royal Highness will be most pleased to see you, Monsieur Hugo. We don't often have the pleasure of your company."

Hugo smiled as he bowed and kissed the back of his hostess' hand, "You will, I trust, forgive me."

"Of course," she smiled and then turned her attention to the next guest.

Hugo realized he was standing on the wrong side of his wife as they entered the Salon Carrée. There was, of course, etiquette of order for such things. Hugo's thoughts had been momentarily interrupted by the familiar scent of chestnut and fig trees.

Suddenly his memory was transported back in time to when he was barely ten years old, residing at 2, rue des Vieillers Tuileries, adjacent to the Luxembourg Garden. There were fig trees lining the walkway and a large chestnut tree which held a swing made of rope and a weathered plank behind his house. He could still remember the first pang of love: the little girl from across the street. Hugo recalled showing off how high he could swing, higher than any other boy, and he could push her on the swing for hours when she could stay so long. He loved her laugh, her smiling dark eyes, her porcelain skin, her abundant locks of dark, chocolate hair.

Hugo looked over at his wife on his arm, as she was gazing up at the incredible number of gold-framed paintings that were hung on every available wall space, right up to the high gilded ceilings of the Salon Carrée. She was still as beautiful today as she was then on the swing. Her manner and grace were like firelight, which warmed his melancholy soul. Never did he feel so empty as the time when their families had separated them. At this moment, he cared not what side she was on, as long as she was with him.

"Did you tell your father you were coming here?" whispered Hugo to Adèle.

"Don't start," hissed Adèle through a smile. Then, as they passed by the fig and chestnut trees that were set out in ornamental tubs, she squeezed his arm and added slyly, "Yes, I did."

Hugo smiled. He did not ask for her hand in marriage until after his mother, who was the most opposed to their relationship, had died. For their first two years of marriage they had lived with her family. During that time Hugo had overheard Pierre Fouché, Adèle's father, ask his daughter when her husband was going to stop with the ridiculous poetry writing and find proper employment. Fortunately for Hugo, his 'ridiculous poems' had attracted the attention of King Louis XVIII, who was flattered by some of Hugo's verses. The King had subsequently sent Hugo five hundred francs for a personal ode, and not long after that, settled upon him a pension of a thousand francs. Hugo had continued as the Royal Poet even when King Louis' brother, Charles, succeeded him to the throne three years ago. For this, Hugo felt eternally grateful to the King and his entire Bourbon family.

"Who is that man?" asked Adèle.

Hugo looked over to see a stout man wearing a dark Perukes wig, waving at them. He was next to an elderly aristocrat who was supporting himself on the red rail along the wall and looked like he could die at any moment.

"That's Sainte-Beuve who looks like a waving, well-fed rodent," said Hugo lightly, "but I don't know the identity of the ancient man."

"Sainte-Beuve," repeated his wife as she tried to recall where she had seen the name before. "The one who wrote that glowing review of your *Odes et Ballades* in last week's edition of the *Globe* newspaper?"

"Well done, my love. And another in yesterday's issue," Hugo happily added.

"If that's the case," said Adèle as she put on her best smile, "I think he looks dashing in that wig."

"I love how you always see the best in people, my angel," laughed Hugo. His wife gave his arm another squeeze to stop his talking as they neared the two gentlemen. They could hear the very old man speaking to Sainte-Beuve, and stopped at a polite distance, awaiting their turn.

"So," the old man said, "the first thing Emperor Napoleon says after reading *Mécanique Céleste* was, 'How can this be? You made the system of the world, you explain the laws of all creation, but in all your book you speak not once of the existence of God!'"

"Gracious! How did you respond?" asked Sainte-Beuve.

"Well, I knew I could not share my scientific thoughts with Napoleon," replied the old man, "so I merely stated: 'I had no need of that hypothesis.'"

"Cleverly said!" boomed Sainte-Beuve as he moved to include the Hugos in the conversation. "Likely saved you from a firing squad. Allow me to introduce you to my friend, Victor Hugo and this must be his lovely wife."

"*Mécanique Céleste*?" Hugo said as he shook the old man's hand. "May I assume you are Pierre-Simon Laplace?"

"Indeed," said Laplace. "Have you read it?"

"Yes, I have," replied Hugo. "As well as your paper about black holes in space. It was fascinating."

"But yet to be proven."

Hugo turned to Adèle who was having some trouble keeping politely quiet. "This is my wife, Adèle. Dearest, this is Monsieur Laplace, a brilliant mathematician, and Director of the French Academy of Sciences."

"Not for long, I fear," said the old man as he took Adèle's hand and kissed the back of it.

"Are you stepping down as Director?" asked Hugo.

"To be more precise, being forced to resign... such unpleasantness. We need not ruin the evening for it. If you'll excuse me, I am reminded by the meeting of your lovely wife that I seem to have misplaced mine!" He turned and smiled a big, toothy grin, bowed and walked away.

"I hope it wasn't anything I said," remarked Hugo.

"Politics," sniffed Sainte-Beuve. "You'll be reading all about it in the papers soon enough."

Hugo nodded. Politics were precisely the reason he hated these sorts of gatherings. He was a writer and an artist. He cared not for affairs of state, though he was glad to see Sainte-Beuve in attendance tonight. The jolly man always took the edge off the pomp, and Hugo liked him. Turning once again to his wife he continued the proper introductions, "And this is Monsieur Sainte-Beuve of the *Globe*."

Adèle held out her hand and said, "Might I take this opportunity to thank you for your sparkling reviews of my husband's work?"

Sainte-Beuve clumsily took her hand, nearly spilling his plate of hors d'oeuvres on himself, and managed to finally say, "I am delighted to accept a compliment at any time, Madame!"

Adèle chuckled in amusement. Hugo squeezed her arm.

"Did either of you notice that Monsieur Laplace had a very odd smile?" observed Adèle.

"I think he's showing off his new teeth," said Sainte-Beuve.

"New teeth?"

"Well, unless he grew some in at the ripe old age of seventy-seven," laughed Sainte-Beuve.

"New teeth," said Hugo, who then looked at Sainte-Beuve's wig. "New hair. Soon you will be able to replace yourself."

Adèle glared at Hugo for saying such a thing. Sainte-Beuve, however, simply adjusted his wig and said, "You noticed! Yes, I find it keeps my head warm in the winter. You could get one too, Hugo."

"I tried once," Hugo replied. "I couldn't find... the right one."

"His head's too big," Adèle added quickly.

"Sainte-Beuve laughed, "Why doesn't that surprise me?"

"Yes, my head's too big," Hugo said with a twinkle. "I can't even get a hat to fit my giant cranium. I maintain that it's so that it may house my incredibly large brain!"

"Well, if you're in need of a hat," Sainte-Beuve began, "you should see Boucicaut on rue..."

"I've tried him," interrupted Hugo with a wave of his hand. "Had nothing in his shop that would fit, except perhaps a hatbox. Boucicaut said I had the largest head in..."

Hugo's words were cut short by the sensation of being watched again. His eyes darted about the room but no one seemed to be looking his way.

"What is it?" asked Adèle.

"I thought for a moment..." Hugo began, then he paused as he noticed a dark-haired, roguish gentleman dressed all in black with gold embroidery on his tunic and sleeves. A scabbard with an ornate sword handle hung from the sash around his waist. Hugo turned to Sainte-Beuve as he pointed his chin towards the roguish swordsman. "Do you know who that gentleman is?"

Sainte-Beuve squinted as he turned to look, "I can't say that I have ever seen him before."

"He's very handsome," added Adèle. Both Hugo and Sainte-Beuve glanced at her as she added, "for an older man."

"He looks like an actor," remarked Hugo. "I hope he's an actor. He would be terrific as Cromwell."

"Cromwell?" asked Sainte-Beuve.

"It's a play he's been writing for the past year," Adèle said. She then turned to her husband, "I thought you wanted Talma for the role."

"Talma! François-Joseph Talma?" exclaimed Sainte-Beuve. "Good luck getting him. Didn't he just recently die?"

"That's why I think that roguish gentleman would make a perfect Oliver Cromwell," replied Hugo.

"Oliver Cromwell," Sainte-Beuve repeated. "I can't believe my ears. Devout Frenchman Victor Hugo writing about an Englishman! What is the world coming to?"

"I think Cromwell symbolizes the French Romantic Movement. A ruthless yet dynamic romantic hero."

"Forever the poet," remarked Sainte-Beuve.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," a voice called for attention. Everyone, including Hugo, turned to see who was speaking. It was the Royal Canon with his ornate staff held aloft for all to see. Once all eyes were on the Royal Canon, he continued to speak, "May I present Charles the Tenth, whom God has given us for King!"

Hugo looked over at Sainte-Beuve, who extended his right foot and bowed at the waist.

Hugo followed suit, as did all the other men in the room. The women, including his wife, crossed their legs to dip into a very low curtsey. All in the room held themselves low until the King sat down in his chair, and then touched the arms of the chair as if to rise but merely nodded his head. Once placed just so, the guests could rise.

As dignitaries approached King Charles X, the Hostess came up to Hugo, gestured to the King and remarked, "Never was a creature more in the image of God."

Before Hugo could say a word, she fluttered away to some other guests. With amusement, Sainte-Beuve turned to Hugo and whispered, "Careful, Duchesse d'Escars might be competing for your job as Royal Poet."

Suddenly Hugo's mind was filled with Inspector Vidocq's voice from the night before, *Most certainly. Adeline d'Escars. A long history of petty crimes.*

Hugo turned to Sainte-Beuve and asked, "What did you say the Duchesse's name was?"

"The maître d'hôtel's wife? That's la Duchesse d'Escars."

Hugo looked at the Duchesse to see if there was any resemblance to the woman who had stolen from him. He suddenly had the sensation that he was being watched yet again. He glanced around annoyingly. No one. Not even a sign of the mysterious gentleman in black. The rogue was nowhere to be seen.

A dark, hooded figure waited in the shadows, watching the servants' entrance to the Louvre Palace, trying to keep warm against the bitter wind. Suddenly, the door opened and three servants emerged, pitching scraps of food into the garbage. Ragpickers appeared out of the night and descended upon the servants even before they had finished their task. One of them grabbed for the remains of an apple core.

"Get back, you dogs!" shrieked a servant as he used a stick to beat the peasant away.

"We're not dogs!" cried another vagabond as he attacked the servant with his own stick.

This was the moment the hooded figure was waiting for. As the other servants tried to rescue their fallen comrade amongst the angry rabble, no one saw the Italian slip through the servants' entrance door.

Now, to find the large-headed poet.

Chapter 4

"Ladies and Gentlemen, I present to you: le musée Charles le dixième!" announced Jean-François Champollion, the curator of the Louvre's new Department of Egyptian Antiquities. There was a unified applause with a hint of reserved enthusiasm. They all had been ushered into this new room on the first floor of the Louvre's Cour Carrée south wing, giving tonight's guests a sneak preview of the new exhibit. Champollion continued, "Above you will note the fresco style painted ceiling by France's own Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres."

Another polite applause echoed through the ornate high ceiling. Normally, Hugo would have plainly admired the image of the topless woman looking down from above, but he was distracted by Duchesse d'Escars. Was it just a coincidence that she had the same family name as the woman who tried to rob him? They both had blonde hair, blue eyes... but the Duchesse was older, more mature... perhaps her mother? Hugo scoffed at himself for the very idea. That the Duchesse, wife of the maître d'hôtel and Lord Steward of the Bourbon family, would have a thieving daughter who hired herself out as a maid for 30 sous a week was preposterous. Yet, there was something nagging at the back of Victor Hugo's mind and he couldn't quite place it. Like trying to remember a dream as it dissipates like a fog in the morning sun.

Hugo glanced about and saw a young man standing behind a box which was balanced on a three-legged stool. The young man was covering, then uncovering a hole on the front of the box, then pulling out a sort of frame and replacing it with another. Hugo briefly wondered what kind of experiment this box contained, but was distracted as his lovely Adèle sauntered into his line of vision. She was talking with a woman of nobility, and her beautiful smile radiated across the room. Hugo hoped she was having a good time. He was about to approach her when he noticed the rogue stranger, still dressed in black, examining one of the nearby towering red display cabinets which held some Egyptian daggers. Taking this opportunity, Hugo sauntered over to the adjacent display next to the window. While trying to determine the best choice of words to start a conversation, he looked through the cabinet's glass doors at some vases and sculptures which were labeled: *Artifacts from the ruins of Pompeii*. His eyebrows went up, and he quickly spun around to scan the other cabinets. They contained much more than Egyptian antiquities, but this one which contained pieces from Pompeii was particularly interesting for Hugo. He had been fascinated by the infamous Roman city for years because of its astonishing accomplishments. In the early days of Christianity, it was a thriving city with markets, a large coliseum, forums and plumbing a thousand years before Europeans thought of it. Then Mount Vesuvius erupted and utterly buried it, leaving it lost and forgotten for almost two thousand years.

When the rogue started to move away, Hugo made a mental note to return to this particular cabinet later, and quickly intercepted him by extending his hand.

"Pardon me," he said nonchalantly. "Forgive my intrusion but I can't help but think that you look familiar. Usually my memory never fails me but I can't seem to place where we've met before."

"I don't believe we have met, monsieur," replied the stranger, impolitely ignoring Hugo's extended hand. Now that they were in close proximity, Hugo took this opportunity to examine his face. For a moment there was a flash of an image: the red velvet curtain of a theatre, then the man turned to walk away.

"Were you in the theatre, per chance?" asked Hugo with hope that this might be an actor after all. The man seemed to twitch as he stopped and looked back.

"I do not have time for the theatre," he said.

"Where are my manners?" added Hugo. "My name is Victor Hugo. And you are...?"

"An admirer of your work, Monsieur Hugo," carefully replied the stranger, who then began to recite: "*The pontiff warriors demand Charles Ten. Because you're bigger than the size of men! We praise you.*"

Hugo had never heard his own words so terribly massacred. The stranger not only delivered it badly, but had omitted a stanza, thereby attributing '*you're bigger than the size of men*' to King Charles rather than to God's greatness, as it was intended. Rather than argue the point, Hugo thought it wise not to challenge a man who wore a sword in the presence of the King.

While thinking of how to politely respond, Hugo's eyes drifted to his wife and saw she wore an expression of discomfort. He turned back to the stranger but he was gone. There was a forest of over a hundred people milling about, and Hugo lost him in the crowd. Who was that man and why was he so evasive about giving a name? He had developed an odd expression when the theatre was mentioned, but a lowly actor, unless he had the social status of Talma, wouldn't have been invited to such a gathering. Nor would he have been allowed to wear a sword. Strange.

Hugo was suddenly startled by a hand grabbing his arm. It was his wife.

"We must go," Adèle said with an urgent tone in her voice.

"Is something wrong?" Hugo asked with concern.

"There is nourishment that must be delivered," she whispered.

Hugo looked at her blankly, not understanding. Then, from the quick darting of her eyes to her bosom, he understood. A nursing mother was not in control of her own body and biology dictated when it was time. It was a sensitive subject for the Hugos, as Adèle had been unable to nurse their first son, Leopold, who died at three months old due to lack of nourishment.

"Of course," replied Hugo tenderly. He spotted Duchesse d'Escars. "Let me say good-bye to our hostess."

As Hugo approached the Duchesse, he was intercepted by Sainte-Beuve, "Victor, I heard that His Excellency wishes to speak with you."

"I have to take Adèle home now," stammered Hugo.

"You cannot refuse an invitation from the King," whispered Sainte-Beuve. "He has the power to behead at the slightest provocation."

Hugo pondered. Offending his King and risk losing his head, or incur the wrath of his wife. He wasn't sure which would be worse. "She needs to get home to tend to our son."

"I can escort her back to your home safely," offered Sainte-Beuve.

"I cannot ask for such an imposition."

"It is not an imposition from a friend," replied Sainte-Beuve.

"I am in your debt," Hugo rejoiced.

"Remember, if the King asks you to play billiards or chess..."

"Let him win," finished Hugo. "I know. And thank you!"

With a smile and a quick pat on the back, Hugo started to walk swiftly towards his waiting wife when the voice of King Charles stopped him in mid-step, "There is my poet."

Hugo stole a quick glance at his wife, then turned to his King. Hugo couldn't help but notice that even though he still looked distinguished, the King was starting to look his age of nearly 70, though he tried to disguise it by wearing high collars to hide his neck. Hugo respectfully bowed to kiss the ring on his hand, "Your Highness."

"You will join us at Tuileries," said King Charles. It was not a question. "I wish you to

write a new ode to inspire the people of France about Faith in King and God."

"My service is at the King's leisure," said Hugo humbly, "but first may I bid adieu to my wife and see her off?"

"She is welcome to join us."

Hugo chose his words carefully, "She would be honoured by such generosity but alas, we have a three-month-old son that needs ... his mother's care."

"Ah yes, your son Charles, is it not?" asked the King.

"How good of you to remember," replied Hugo, trying to hide his genuine surprise.

"Named after me, of course," pressed King Charles X.

"But of course," Hugo lied. His son's namesake was Charles Nodier, a good friend and mentor of Hugo's, but the King need not know that.

"Very good." The King dismissed him with a wave of his hand, but then added, "You know which passage to take?"

"Yes, Your Highness, through the North Wing," replied Hugo as he bowed again.

Adèle did not share Hugo's enthusiasm for the travel arrangements when she was told that Sainte-Beuve would be escorting her home in his place.

"I cannot offend my King," Hugo tried to reason.

"I know," replied Adèle, "but is it going to be like last time, when he insisted that all the men join him at that hunting lodge in Bois du Boulogne?"

"The Château de Bagatelle is more than a hunting lodge..."

Her expressions silenced him, "You were gone for several days. Now we have two children and no maid to help. I can't manage on my own."

"I will respectfully decline any such invitation should it arise, but for now he is my King and pays my annual stipend."

"I know," Adèle sighed. "Promise me you won't stay out too late."

He kissed her tenderly, "I promise."

Hugo started to walk toward the north wing passage that connected the Louvre with the King's residence in the Tuileries Palace. Hoping to speed up the evening, Hugo began to think up some verses that quoted the scriptures about faith and toyed with how he could apply them to King Charles. He was so lost in thought that he did not see the hooded figure walking toward him until he bumped directly into him.

"Forgive me, I didn't see you..." Hugo began, but the hooded figure continued walking without acknowledging him at all. By habit, Hugo checked his pockets to see that his purse was still in his possession. It was still there. But there was something else in the pocket of his jacket. It felt like a folded piece of paper. It hadn't been there before.

Hugo withdrew his hand and unfolded the piece of paper and saw:

$$u(x, t) = \sum_{n=1}^{\infty} \left(\frac{2}{L} \int_0^L f(x) \sin \frac{n\pi x}{L} dx \right) \left(\sin \frac{n\pi x}{L} \right) e^{-\frac{n^2 \pi^2 \alpha t}{L^2}}$$

It was some sort of bizarre mathematical equation. As a student, Hugo excelled at every

subject - except mathematics. He had no patience for it.

Hugo looked up at the hooded figure walking briskly away. "Pardon me! Does this belong to you?"

To Hugo's surprise, the hooded figure suddenly began to run. Without thinking, Hugo followed in pursuit, calling for the man to stop.

As soon as he realized that Hugo was following him, the man started to run faster, desperately trying to find a way out of the palace. Now the chase held more questions, and Hugo was curious. Who was this hooded man and what did the paper represent? Hugo was surprised that none of the other people strolling about made any attempt to assist, despite his cries as he ran, "Stop! Monsieur! I insist you explain!"

The hooded figure finally found a set of doors and darted toward it. Hugo, now annoyed, followed close behind. Fortunately for Hugo, he was in fairly good physical condition from his nightly walks about the city, and was only steps away from the door when it closed in his face.

The cold wind blasted Hugo, chilling him straight to his bones as he lurched through the door. It was biting enough to momentarily stop him dead in his path. He had lost sight of the man for a few precious seconds, then in the dim light of the gas lamps saw him running toward the Quai du Louvre, the walkway between the Palace and the Seine River. Hugo swiftly darted after him. The hooded figure looked back and didn't see the patch of ice in his path. He slipped and stumbled. Hugo easily caught up to him and grabbed hold of his tangled robe.

"Who are you?" Hugo demanded. "Why did you run? What did you give me?"

The hood fell back, revealing the man's dark complexion and a thick, black beard. He started speaking quickly and Hugo recognized that the man was speaking in Italian.

When Hugo was five years old he had lived in Italy for a year, but since then had also resided in France and spent a short time in Spain as well. Needless to say, his Italian was extremely shaky, though he could make out some words the man was saying such as 'devil' and 'fire'.

Hugo struggled to remember the Italian phrase for 'I don't understand'. As the man continued to babble, it came to him, and was about to say *non capisco* when the man suddenly stopped speaking with a squeak. Both men looked down and were shocked to see a knife handle protruding from the hooded man's chest.

The man looked up at Hugo in utter surprise and stumbled toward him. Hugo caught him and without thinking, pulled the intrusive knife out of the man's chest. The man cried out in pain and collapsed on the snowy, blood-splattered ground.

A woman screamed, "Murder!"

The crowd gathered quickly to witness Victor Hugo standing over the man's dead body, holding a bloody knife.