

## Approaching Night

*1652 Bordeaux, France*

The one-horse chaise rode easily through the cool November night. A general feeling of relief, if not exuberance, pervaded Bordeaux at the end of the long war. The man and woman in the chaise had every reason to anticipate the days ahead. Young, wealthy, and filled with an overarching joy at the imminent birth of their child. A son they hoped. They sat hand in hand, content. Having just seen Monteverdi's opera "L'Orfeo" they debated its Baroque style as they were driven back to their château. Invulnerability surrounded them. As if the power of their joy and contentment would hold all the darkness and every threat at bay.

The driver smiled at the couple's youth, his love for them apparent.

The chaise approached the Cailhau gate when the hypnotic rhythm of hooves on cobblestone was shattered by the chaotic thunder of horses at a dead run. The driver glanced to his right. A four-wheel carriage pulled by two horses bore down on them. Within the narrowing passageway that led to the gate, there was no room to turn aside. Dirty gray buildings loomed on each side as the roadway constricted.

Recently back from the war, the driver's reactions were swift. He grabbed the whip and snapped it out over the horse's back.

"Ho, La Nuit," he called to the midnight black horse. The animal responded. The safety of the wide road beyond the gate approached with increasing speed. So too, did the larger carriage behind them. The oncoming horses pulled alongside the chaise. The sound of their hooves sent deafening echoes through the narrow granite-enshrouded lane.

In the space of a breath, La Nuit panicked and jerked to the right. The chaise crashed into the larger carriage and then swung left and careened into the stone walls of the buildings that lined the road. The chaise screeched along as its iron undercarriage scraped against the granite walls. The left wheel had been torn from the framework, and the remaining chassis continued a short distance before careening into a low basement window where it was caught fast. The driver catapulted over La Nuit into the left wall of the gateway as the carriage upended and spilled its occupants onto the unforgiving cobblestones.

For a brief moment, only the squeaking revolutions of the remaining wheel broke the silent night.

The young man's elegant clothes were torn and bloody. He managed to crawl over to his wife who struggled to sit up. Her gown was rent and stained with the mud from the recent rains. "Marguerite, are you hurt?" He clasped her shoulders from behind and then lifted her to a seated position.

She glanced around in a daze, shook her head, and then spoke. "I don't think so."

Blood seeped from beneath her long black hair onto the lace shoulder of her coat and gave lie to her statement. She searched for the driver. "Armand, is Henri..."

"Here, lean against this wheel while I get help." The man struggled to rise but the slippery cobblestones defeated him. Finally, he managed to stand. The rig was smashed, La Nuit dead and Henri—Henri lay crumpled against the wall, motionless, unconscious or worse. The young man hobbled toward the driver.

A high pitched female screech shattered the air. "You ass! You stupid lout! Have you no ears!"

In the confusion, he had forgotten the other carriage. It too had failed to reach the gate, and was canted hard against the business fronts on the right. Larger and sturdier, it had not been demolished, only scraped and dented. One of its horses had been injured and was being cut from its traces. The driver and a footman had righted the coach. A florid-faced woman leaned from the window cursing him. Spittle flew from her mouth.

Anger and loathing roiled within him. It was too much. “You, *madame*, are the only ass at the end of this street.”

Her gasp echoed in the silent alleyway. That someone dared speak to her in that manner swept away her ability to produce coherent speech. Only deep guttural sounds escaped her lips. She was pulled back into the carriage and for a moment all was quiet. Even the driver and footman ceased their work and stared at the carriage door. A large man appeared and then stepped down. Everything about him was dark, from his black hair and eyes to his evening clothes and the black cloak he swept from his shoulders and tossed to the lady in the carriage.

“You sir, have insulted my wife,” the man said with a smile so filled with arrogance that it more resembled a sneer.

“And you have injured mine.” The words slipped through clinched teeth, for his injuries were just now registering.

“I am the *Compte* de Gaspard, and I demand satisfaction.” He stepped forward and then drew his sword. “If you are capable of speech, I would have your name.”

“Armand Gilbert at your service, *monsieur*.” The injustice and anger of the situation disabled any rational thought Armand might have employed. He drew his

sword. There were no seconds, no traditionally bound structures of the duel, only two men, each bent on murder.

Gilbert was a trained swordsman and had served in the war. He was familiar with sudden violence. He was also within that temporary emotional space that often follows a life-threatening accident.

*Ring.*

The two swords struck each other in a high block rasping apart only to ring that deadly sound of steel again and again. Gaspard was also a trained swordsman, and the fight settled into a chess match of strike and feint, well known to those who practice the deadly art.

No word was spoken as each man focused on the waving blades. Gilbert grew weaker, the bloom of emotional energy dissipated quickly as his injuries demanded more of his body's resources.

A tearing noise as his coat parted and razor-sharp steel slid across the flesh of his chest. A warm flood filled the bottom of his shirt. The weakness spread and he disengaged. Death stood before him, and he apologized silently to his wife and unborn child.

That Gaspard enjoyed inflicting pain was self-evident, and as he re-engaged he delivered small cuts, none of which were intended to degrade Armand's ability to stand. Having derived enough satisfaction from the engagement, Gaspard spoke. "I am afraid I must be going. Allow me to relieve you of the need to hold that heavy blade. You have not used it all that well anyway." With those words Gaspard feinted to the right and then sliced through Armand's right arm above the elbow, parting the tendons and muscles.

The sword dropped from Armand's hand. He glanced toward his wife who had lapsed into unconsciousness. He was glad that she would not see this. Swaying on his feet, he turned back toward Gaspard. "Finish it."

"With pleasure." Gaspard thrust toward his chest. Armand's increasing weakness saved his life as he swayed to the left redirecting the sword tip from his heart into his side. He dropped to the ground. Gaspard never gave him a second glance. "Are we ready to continue?" he asked the driver.

*"Oui, monsieur."*

"Drive on." Francois Gaspard climbed into the carriage.