



THE MIRACLE OF MADAME VILLARD





The Miracle of Madame Villard

Paris, 1793

The hands of the faith healer probed the lump on Jean-Luc's mother's neck. Stone hard it was and fixed like a burl on a log.

“She will need strained carrot and turnip broth fortified with smushed, dried eucalyptus root,” the faith healer said to the father staring at her rigid with concern.

The mother's eyes burned with owl intensity, brimming with much fear but little hope. The father's eyes were glazed and opaque, hiding the memories of this dear wife, Charlotte, mother of his two sons, core of the family, whose once lovely hands were now calloused from her work as a seamstress, and her once warm heart had turned cold as winter with age.

The boy, Jean-Luc, was sixteen and man sized. The faith healer had seen him grow clever, learning his father's ironmonger's trade quickly and creating strong, pleasing designs; how his eyes burned with love for his mother.

The faith healer stood and motioned to Jean-Luc and his father to step outside into the alley. The chilled night breeze swirled among the single room dwellings as low clouds moved swiftly overhead to cover and uncover the

bright half-moon in the black sky. To the east, the glow of fires from the riots near the Bastille outlined the rooftops of the city.

“She needs a miracle,” the faith healer whispered. She had seen many sick with these throat lumps before. They were hard to feed and often choked to death. “The good Saint Marcouf. He is the Saint of neck swellings,” she said to the boy and his father.

“How do we pray?” the father asked.

“In the Cathedral near Dieppe,” the faith healer said, unable to instruct in a man's contact with his Lord, “where the Saint cured a girl well after the time of Charlemagne. The bones of his hand lie in a glass case, on a velvet pillow the color of ruby. The faithful who have touched have been cured. I have heard it from two pilgrims. I have no doubt of the power of his healings.”

“She cannot walk to the north coast,” Jean-Luc said.

“There is a public coach still running once a week. It takes three days.”

“We have no money for coach fare,” Jean-Luc's father said. “No one buys my iron work now with the revolution.”

“Sell at the executions. The rich and poor attend. And vendors make a fortune.”

“I can sell my candleholder lamps, Father,” Jean-Luc said.

“And I will find work outside the shop,” the father said. “I will ask my cousin for work.”

Jean-Luc ran back inside and knelt next to his mother. “We will take you to the Saint, Mother.”

“Jules?” the mother asked.

“I’m Jean-Luc, Mama. Jules has been gone for a year. Remember?”

Jean-Luc’s father went to find work the next morning. Jean-Luc fed his Mama gruel with a spoon and left for the Place de la Concorde, where an execution was scheduled for the day. He carried one lamp and tied two to the sash of his tunic.

Already the crowds murmured with excitement. Vendor business was brisk. Workers placed benches for peripheral seating for the wealthy as spectators mingled near the guillotine to secure best views.

Jean-Luc went near the northwest corner. An aristocratic girl his age paraded stately along the path followed by two boys and a girl, all fashionably dressed. The girl’s full-length, white silk dress floated around her and the points of pink slippers peeked out from under the hem with each step. How delicate she was. Her high cheekbones spoke class and privilege. Her brown eyes brooded in the frame of her light, straw-colored hair. Her slender hands were as if fashioned in porcelain.

Jean-Luc approached with his candleholder lamp held out in front of him.

She was afraid. At first, her heart stopped, but an instant later, it raced with fear and excitement. She stopped and held out arm to stop her companions. This huge boy-peasant was capable of breaking her in half, but his confident, healthy smile erased her fear. His black hair danced with joyous

curls. His warm, blue eyes seemed cut from a sun-soaked morning sky. Suddenly, she wanted to surrender. She stepped forward, away from her friends, so they would not see her confusion.

“What have we here?” She smiled tentatively at Jean-Luc, then glanced toward her friends before looking back to Jean-Luc. “You. The giant. What in the world are you holding?”

Jean-Luc stared into the chestnut brown of the girl’s angelic eyes; he had almost forgotten his purpose and his arm had fallen limp to his side, his hand still holding the lamp. He held up the sample again.

“It is for tapers. Very useful. See how the flame is protected by the curve . . .”

“It’s iron,” she said. How his eyes sparkled like gems.

“But sturdy,” said Jean-Luc.

“But not brass. And not hand-blown glass either. Are you giving them away?”

“No. It is for sale. Reasonable too. My mother is very sick . . .”

“Let me touch it!”

He handed it to her. She took it both hands and held it up.

“Where would you use this?” the girl asked of the friend to her right.

“In the stable,” her friend giggled.

“Exactly,” the girl said. She had angered as she realized the folly of her emotions. This boy had robbed her, against her will, of her required disdain for peasants. And he had flustered her thinking and tarnished the respect of her friends too. “And when do you light a taper among the wild beasts in a stable?”

she asked.

“Never. Never a taper in a stable,” the girl’s friend replied. There was laughter among them all now.

“I made it for a lady’s bedroom,” Jean-Luc said. The girl’s eyes--full of possession as she regained control of her superiority--were quick to engage Jean-Luc’s.

“The flame holds steady when you walk from room to room,” Jean-Luc said.

“An iron tool for a lady’s bedroom,” the girl said. “You will die even poorer than you are now.”

She smiled to her entourage one by one, holding the lamp away from her as if it might soil her dress.

“It is very reasonable at two deniers,” Jean-Luc said. “I’m sure you could find it useful. Give it to a friend.”

“A friend! My God.” She rolled both eyes to the heavens. “Francis. Give him a sous for the damn thing. He needs the charity.”

Francis, so hopelessly in love with the girl even a slug couldn't fail to notice it, stepped up and put his fingers in his waistcoat pocket. He pull out a coin and held it so Jean-Luc could not reach it.

“Thank you, sir,” Jean-Luc said. The girl, still carrying his lamp, had turned her back.

“You are a fool,” Francis retorted. He pocketed the coin.

“My lamp. You owe me,” Jean-Luc said.

“Nothing.” Francis said. “It is worthless.”

The girl threw the lamp under the wheels of a passing wagon, and she and Francis left with her friends. Jean-Luc retrieved his lamp that was bent and needed much repair.

Jean-Luc circled the crowded Place without a sale. Late in the afternoon, he headed home past burning government buildings. Acrid smoke trickled into the air above the city and was quickly dissipated by the wind. Sporadic fights erupted throughout the district, and he took side streets to be safe from the violent bands of revolutionaries. The alley of his parent’s house was already dark with early evening when he arrived.

The faith healer stood outside the door to his house. Her arms were crossed, her gaze locked on him.

“Your father’s been burned. They’re bringing him home.”

“What happened?”

“Revolutionaries went to the shop. Your father had just returned. They wanted weapons to kill. They found none. They set to burning and left him half conscious inside.”

“Will he be all right?”

“He will not last the night.” She looked up the alley.

Two men carried his father on a plank, his arms and legs dangling.

Jean-Luc ran to him and peered down into his face. “Father?” he whispered.

His father’s eyes were closed, his face on the left side swollen purple

and bleeding. His father said nothing.

The men left his father on his pallet in the house. The faith healer rubbed oils on parts of his charred skin and covered oozing flesh with scraps of grey cloth. Jean-Luc sat crossed-legged by his father's damaged body. His father opened his one good eye.

"Jean-Luc," he said. "Tomorrow. I found work with my distant cousin. The executioner at the Place de Greve. In the morning. You go. Remember. They call him Aiguisé."

"I will go, Father."

"Take care of your mother, son." He closed his eye. "She is a good woman."

Jean-Luc went to his mother, who sat on her stool in the corner facing the wall.

"Papa's dying," Jean-Luc said.

For many seconds she remained motionless and said nothing.

"Something smells," she finally said. "Bring me a wet cloth."

Jean-Luc dipped a cloth in a pan of rainwater and brought it to his mother. She held it to her nose.

Jean-Luc sat by his father for the rest of the night. There was no motion when the soul left the body, and Jean-Luc did not know the moment his father died.

The next day, Jean-Luc arrived at the Place de Greve as he had promised. His

father's cousin, the executioner called Aiguisé, wore black. He was bald like many in the family. Aiguisé worked alone on a square platform passing a river whetstone over the guillotine blade that had been lowered three-quarters for the sharpening. He gave no sign that he recognized Jean-Luc.

"Get off!" Aiguisé said. "Stay in the crowd."

"I'm am Auguste Villard's son."

Aiguisé's head turned to stare. "You've grown! Where is your father?"

"He is dead from a fire."

"And you take his place?"

"My mother is very sick. She needs a miracle."

Aiguisé returned to his sharpening. "Your father should never have married a woman not from around here."

"She was very beautiful," Jean-Luc said.

"Mean, boy. Basque, she was. And mad-dog mean."

"She loves God."

"Stop your nonsense."

Aiguisé laid down his whetstone on the neck collar of the guillotine. He showed Jean-Luc the mop, the wooden pail with iron trim, the straw broom with the thick wooden handle, and the gunnysack: "Hold it wide open to catch the head. Then take it to the family, who must wait near the stairs," Aiguisé said.

Jean-Luc practiced holding the sac.

"Wider! And round, not like a slit."

The crowd had grown fifty gawkers deep in a few minutes. Aiguisé

gave Jean-Luc the broom.

“My money?” Jean-Luc asked. With four executions in three days he would have enough for coach fare.

“When we finish,” replied Aiguisé. “Half what was for your father. You are a child.”

“I am family.”

“Far removed,” said Aiguisé.

Near the guillotine Jean-Luc swept away leaves, twigs, acorns, ground dust and the dirt that fell from Aiguisé’s boots.

“Sweep the stairs,” Aiguisé said, sharpening the blade again. His reputation for a clean cut brought rich purses from the accused.

Two men led a frail woman in a white linen-dress. Countess Christine Roquefort. She walked in bitty steps, her ankles shackled, her dress-hem dragging over the bloodstained platform planks. The men forced her to kneel in a corner opposite the guillotine. The crowd heckled. She stared defiantly.

A priest approached. From his hand she swatted a Bible that fell face down. The priest turned and left, and the crowd chanted for action. But Aiguisé was not ready, hammering a dowel into one of the triangular supports for more strength.

“Get her offering,” Aiguisé said to Jean-Luc over the crowd noise. Jean-Luc propped the broom near the guillotine and walked across the platform to the woman. He went down on one knee. She stared at him with light-blue, wet eyes rimmed with red.

“Let me go,” she said.

“God Bless. I take my father’s place,” he said.

“I married a man of title. Is that a crime?” she sobbed.

“It is God’s will,” Jean-Luc said echoing the litany of the Cathedral.

“God’s will is to save me.” Her intense stare held fear and determination. “This is your destiny!”

“I am the sweeper,” he said.

“You are more than that, boy. It is your judgment! Did you think of that?” The desperate woman glared to convince.

Jean-Luc shuddered with the chill she had given him. She pleaded again, but he could not respond. He rose, astonished at her words.

She reached with fingers into the slit in her dress over her bosom to pull out a velvet purse died indigo. It had a gold-braided drawstring. She held it to her chest just below the neck.

“My God, boy. Help me,” she said.

Jean-Luc did not move, speechless.

“Take the money for yourself. Let me go,” she said.

Jean-Luc looked away as temptation gripped him. He had no doubt the purse held more money than he had ever seen, and more than enough to take his mother to the miracle.

“If you will not act,” she said to Jean-Luc, her voice cracking with stress “tell the murderer to be swift.” She held out the purse.

Jean-Luc took the purse to Aiguisé.

“Barely enough,” Aiguisé said. “She could afford more.”

“She said to be swift.”

“What is swift? They are fools. The blade always falls the same speed. I have no control. It is the sharpness that makes me special.”

Aiguisé positioned Jean-Luc near the front of the guillotine, then anchored the woman in the neck collar, securing it with a metal bolt. “Why me?” the woman cried. “You devil!”

Aiguisé stood back to the side. He raised his arm, his other hand on the blade release. The crowd roared. The wind in the trees fragmented the sun’s glare and the angled blade shimmered with an almost human excitement.

Aiguisé pulled down. The plunge began. Jean-Luc gasped.

He grabbed the broom, stepped forward and shoved the handle between the plunging blade and the Countess’s neck. The blade cracked the handle in two and rebounded slightly slicing into the victim’s neck only by an inch. She moaned. Her legs kicked back—her body thrashed. “Finish! Finish!” she yelled.

Aiguisé pummeled Jean-Luc’s head twice with his axe handle and Jean-Luc fell to the planks. Aiguisé raised the guillotine blade high enough to clear the wound, and with one stroke of his axe completed the severing of the woman’s head.

In the silence, the head lay on its right side. One eyelid twitched. Aiguisé clutched the hair and held up the Countess Roquefort for the crowd to see, shielding the ragged axe-cut at the neck with his arm; the crowd cheered.

As he struggled to put the head into the sack, the Countess's nose hung up on the edge. "*Merde*," he said. Finally it slipped in.

Aiguisé moved quickly to Jean-Luc and delivered a powerful kick to his stomach. "I'll kill you," he said. He walked to the stairs to lower the sacked head to the family.

Jean-Luc bled from his nose and mouth and his stomach churned, but he crawled to the edge of the platform and fell over the edge before Aiguisé reached him. Hands from the crowd broke his fall and stood him up. "Run," a voice said. The crowd parted. Jean-Luc ran until he was home, Aiguisé's threats still ringing in his ears.

To escape Aiguisé, Jean-Luc left home within an hour and carried his mother on his back as he hurried on the road that led to the Saint Marcouf's miracle. Hours later when the moon set, he found hay bales in a field to keep them warm. The next morning he collected walnuts to eat, and then they were back on the north road again. The burning sun was unshielded by clouds, and soon Jean-Luc's tunic was damp. His mother rode with her arms around his neck, her legs held steady by his arms, her head nodding on the back of his shoulder as she dozed. He stopped often to let her rest.

By mid-afternoon they had crossed two rivers.

"I'm hungry," his mother said, her first words in many hours.

He made her comfortable by the side of the road and went over fields of sunflowers to find wild red raspberries tucked near the cracked and pitted stones of a segment of Roman wall. He filled his sash.

He returned to the road. His mother stood next to a short man who held the lead of a white goat harnessed to a two-wheeled cart. He spread the fingers of his free hand and combed through wild curly grey hair to no effect. Jean-Luc ran to his mother and to give her the berries. But she ate goat cheese.

“Who are you,” Jean-Luc said to the man called Emile.

“Are you Jules?” Emile asked.

“I am Jean-Luc. And this is my mother, Madame Villard.”

“Ah, this woman said Jules would pay for whatever I gave her.”

“Jules is my brother. A revolutionary. He is gone more than a year.”

Jean-Luc looked to his mother who gazed at him. She had a faint smile, and her eyes sparkled with conspiracy.

“We have no money,” Jean-Luc said.

Emile poured milk for Charlotte back into a pail.

“I must insist, my friend. This is my only income. It cannot be free.”

Charlotte finished eating cheese, and Jean-Luc moved to give her berries.

“I do not lie, Mister. My father is dead. My mother is sick. See her neck lump? We are on our way to the Cathedral near Dieppe for a saint miracle. Do you know the Saint Marcouf?”

Emile turned to Charlotte. “Eat no more,” he said. But she had finished.

Jean-Luc looked into the man's cart. Lying in a box protected by a Persian carpet was a lute, the body pierced by two ragged edged holes, the surface partially burned—strings missing, two pegs bent. In the midst of pots and pans and other containers lay a hurdy gurdy with the crank twisted and useless.

“What do you do, boy?” Emile asked.

“I am an iron monger. I have learned from my father.” He closed his eyes for a few seconds at the thought of his dead father.

“Do you make weapons for revolutionaries?”

“That is not God's will.”

Charlotte ate berries. “Good,” she said.

“You do not look like thieves,” Emile said.

Jean-Luc pointed to the hurdy gurdy. “If you are going our way, walk with us. At night, when we rest, I can fix the crank as compensation.”

“You repair instruments?”

“That one is easy for me.”

“Could you do the lute too? I must have a fine instrument to regain my career.”

“I do not do woodwork. Only the iron.”

“It is the finest of hurdy-gurdies. I saved it from my patron's drawing room before he was beheaded.”

“It will be like new.”

Emile thought for a moment. “I have no choice,” he mumbled.

They walked. Jean-Luc still carried his mother on his back. Emile beside him barely to shoulder height, dipping with each step from a leg injured by horse kick in his youth; the goat and the cart following behind.

“Put the woman in the cart. We’ll make better time,” Emile said after a few miles.

They put down the back gate of the cart. Jean-Luc’s mother now faced where they had been; her legs hung down, she steadied herself gripping the sides, and she could lean back against Emile’s collection of pots and pans for support.

The road entered a large forest where cool shadows refreshed the travelers. Emile broke out in song in a clear tenor voice. He used the rhythm of their steps as accompaniment. Birds in the forest broke their wary silence and sang full-throated.

“I am good, no?” Emile said.

“Sing more,” Charlotte said.

That night Emile searched for a patch of pine needles in a copse of trees. He tied the goat near grass for grazing. He lit a fire and they ate cheese and drank wine from Emile’s bottle. “Not too much,” he said, “we’ll need some for tomorrow.”

Emile took his lute from the goat cart and sang. Charlotte rocked to the melodies. Jean-Luc repaired the hurdy-gurdy without tools and Emile saw

immediate economic potential in the strong, sure hands of the boy. Emile needed money for costumes to establish himself as a court musician again.

The fire had died down to glowing ash when John-Luc stretched out near his mother. Sleep did not come and he stared at the sky believing his father was waiting for them among the glittering stars.

The predawn chill brought shivers to Charlotte and Jean-Luc carried her until after dawn to warm her. When the sun was well above the trees, Emile handed the goat lead to Jean-Luc and without stopping, he took a brass gong from his sac in the cart and picked up a dry stick. He showed Charlotte how to hit the gong. Then he picked up his lute and sang as he walked. Charlotte banged away with little sense of the rhythm.

“Great,” said Emile. “Now we’ll practice a little more.”

And after many repeats, it did sound better.

Just before noon they came to a village. In the center near the well was the day-market of three produce vendors and one hawker of firewood. Emile stopped his group, anchored the goat, and told Charlotte to stand up and hold her gong. He brought the hurdy-gurdy to the back of the goat cart and told Jean-Luc how to turn the handle and press two keys. Emile instructed him to play without letting up when he nodded, and to stop when he nodded again. He stepped from the cart, placed a tin cup at an arm’s length from his feet, and clapped, holding his lute under his arm.

Five adults, three children and two dogs turned to stare.

Emile nodded and the hurdy-gurdy droned. “Charlotte,” he called.

Nothing.

“Hit the gong!”

Charlotte responded and gave some rhythm close to what they’d practiced.

Emile played the lute and sang. He swayed. His head bobbed. Then he nodded and stopped singing. The drone stopped.

Bang, bang, bang, went the gong.

“Charlotte.”

Bang, bang, bang.

“Charlotte!”

Emile ran to her and took the stick from her hand. The audience stood stark still. He applauded as an example. No one responded. He picked up his cup and held it out. Everyone of the crowd turned their backs, and the dogs sank into the dust.

Emile came back to the cart.

“You’ve got to stop when I stop,” he said to Charlotte.

“I thought she did well,” said Jean-Luc.

“Well, she did fine. It was excellent. She just has to stop when I stop. We lose the effect if she doesn’t.”

“I’ll stop,” Charlotte said earnestly.

“Let’s do it again,” Jean-Luc said.

Emile put the cup down. Nodded and started. Same song. And they all stopped together. Emile bowed.

A girl of seven in a brown flax dress stepped over and dropped a single, thin, copper denier into the cup.

“Thank you little darling,” Emile said.

When he returned to the cart, he looked warmly at Charlotte and Jean-Luc.

“That was better. We are professionals.”

But his eyes said he knew their survival depended on Jean-Luc’s repairs.

“We are many days from the Saint,” Jean-Luc said. His mother was smiling.

“Unhitch the goat,” Emile said.

The next afternoon they came to a town near a crossroads with a square and a small church.

“This is ideal for a show,” Emile said.

“We have no time for more shows,” Jean-Luc said intently. “Already my mother is tiring earlier every day,” Jean-Luc said.

“We will need the money, boy. It will not take long.”

Emile stood, with Charlotte and Jean-Luc behind, near a well. A crowd of seventeen people formed a semi circle two to three deep. A few listeners dropped coins in the cup. The group was more polished now. Charlotte obviously enjoyed herself, a distinct change from the beginning of her trip. She was also more attentive and lucid, and although the lump in her neck was bigger, she spoke more often, straining to be heard.

A slender girl stood at the crowd edge in an ankle-length, brown dress of good

quality but streaked with stain and impregnated with dust. Her slippers were scuffed and worn, and the left one had a hole near the toe. Her long and curly blond hair partly hid her high cheekbones, deep-set blue eyes, and oval face. Her small but expressive mouth was set in a determined line, her thin lips chapped.

When the group stopped playing, she ran forward and scooped up the money cup.

Emile reached for her. She dodged around him. “Get her,” Emile yelled.

Jean-Luc laid down the hurdy-gurdy and ran. Within fifty yards, he grabbed her dress but she twisted away and ran faster. He tripped and fell. She held the cup with one hand, and with the other hand she picked up the coins and swallowed them one by one as she ran. The effort slowed her and Jean-Luc caught up. This time he tackled her around the waist and brought her to the ground; she kicked and pounded his chest with her hands. He grabbed her wrists and pinned her down, his face inches away from hers. He stared into her angry eyes. She spit at him but he did not let go of her arms.

Emile caught up.

“She swallowed our money,” Jean-Luc said.

“Clever. But I have seen it many times in Paris.”

“It is lost. We will have nothing to honor the Saint.”

“It does not vomit well.” Emile thought for a few seconds. “But we will take her with us until it passes.”

“I hate you,” the girl said.

“You are a thief. You should be locked in prison . . . and be branded.”

“Shall I let her up?” Jean-Luc asked.

“Careful. Hold her tight. We will tie her.”

At the cart, as Jean-Luc restrained her again as Emile tied her hands behind her back. With leather strips he strapped her arms to her chest, and then placed a spare goat collar with a rope around her neck.

“Lay her down. Sit on her legs,” Emile said.

Emile reached into a sac for a bottle half filled with light, amber-colored oil. He steadied the girl’s head with his knees, pinched her nose, and forced her mouth open with a stick.

“Pour it in,” Emile said to Jean-Luc.

Jean-Luc, still straddling the girl, poured oil into her mouth. She wrenched her lips so the oil seeped out. On the next try, Emile covered her mouth with his hand and pinched her nostrils so she could not breathe. She swallowed.

“Damn it. She wasted half of it.” Emile said. “Do it again.”

When all the oil was used, Jean-Luc lifted the girl to her feet.

“I hate you,” the girl sputtered again.

As they prepare to travel again, Charlotte walked to the girl and spoke kindly.

“What shall we call you?” she said.

The girl turned her head away.

They started moving. Emile led the goat. Jean-Luc led the girl on the leash; she kept the rope taut with resistance, even though it hurt her neck. Charlotte rode in the back of the cart, gazing left and right at the birds and trees. After more than an hour the girl slackened the rope between her and Jean-Luc.

“Is that pig your father?” she whispered to Jean-Luc.

Jean-Luc looked at her for a moment. “That is Emile.”

“Is that your mother?” She looked to Charlotte.

“My father is dead,” Jean-Luc said.

“How old are you?” the girl asked.

“I am older than you.”

“You look young.”

“I’m almost seventeen,” Jean-Luc said.

“I’m fifteen. Almost sixteen.”

They walked for a while.

“Where is your family?” Jean-Luc asked.

“Dead. The carriage went over a cliff into the river. The revolutionaries.”

Emile hummed to himself contentedly.

“He is your uncle?” the girl asked.

“I do not know him well,” Jean-Luc said.

Emile laughed. “I am our leader.”

Charlotte called from the back of the cart, her voice strained from the lump. “Tell us your name, child.”

“Yes, ma’m. I’m called Sapphire.”

“Sapphire is a gem,” Charlotte said.

Sapphire shut her eyes for a moment. “My mama said that,” she said. “That I was a gem.”

Emile laughed, but not unkindly. “And now you are a thief.”

“Only for food. I am hungry.”

“That gives you no reason to eat our coins.”

“Let the child be!” Charlotte said.

Jean-Luc looked briefly in surprise at his mother; how she had changed since Paris.

“You are too big for a boy,” Sapphire whispered to Jean-Luc.

“And you talk too much,” he said.

The fire was embers. The food had been sparse this evening. Charlotte slept on a blanket on her side in the fetal position. Emile lay on his back with his hands behind his head, his eyes closed but not asleep.

Jean-Luc slept soundly on his back near Sapphire, who faced away from him on her side. Her hands were tied behind her with the end line knotted around Jean-Luc’s wrist. A second rope bound Sapphire’s leg to Jean-Luc’s ankle. Sapphire could not move without waking Jean-Luc.

It was well after midnight when Sapphire suddenly tried to sit up, falling back on her side. “I gotta go! I’m going to explode,” she yelled.

Emile rose. Jean-Luc sat up. Charlotte moaned in her sleep.

Emile poked Charlotte. “Get up! Go with her!” He helped Jean-Luc untie Sapphire.

Charlotte led Sapphire among tree trunks away from view toward a stream.

They heard moans. From the dark Sapphire yelled. “I’m dirty.”

“Finish, child. Get it all out,” Charlotte said. “I’ll wash your dress in the stream.”

Jean-Luc and Emile took torches to the site. Charlotte tended Sapphire away from their view. Emile and Jean-Luc sorted out the coins and cleaned them in the stream

water.

“I hate shit,” Emile said.

The next morning at dawn, Emile, Jean-Luc and Charlotte prepared for their journey to the Saint. Sapphire stood apart in still-damp clothes, her hair tousled, exhausted from her ordeal and little sleep.

Jean-Luc looked sternly at her. “Do not follow. We must travel fast for my mother.”

“I would never follow you,” Sapphire said.

Charlotte smiled. “Go back to your kin.”

“I have no kin.”

“Find an orphanage,” Emile said. “There are many near the sea.”

“I do not want to be an orphan.”

Emile laughed. “You cannot change what you are.”

“She is not a thief,” Jean-Luc said.

“That is not what I meant,” Emile said. “Orphans are orphans.”

“She is only a child,” Charlotte said.

Emile led the goat cart forward. From the back, Charlotte watched as Sapphire stood still. At a quarter of a mile, Charlotte waved. Sapphire still stood motionless. Charlotte waved again. This time Sapphire raised her hand head-high, and then lowered it slowly. Sapphire had not moved when she vanished from Charlotte’s sight.

On the road, Jean-Luc, Charlotte and Emile passed recruits going toward Paris to join

army regiments. They passed revolutionaries eager to attack aristocrats. They saw displaced families wandering with no place to receive them. Just before noon, Emile stopped a farmer's widow with her possessions in a wagon with a horse. He had seen tools—an anvil, sturdy tongs, bellows. He spoke to Jean-Luc. "See those tools? You can make repairs."

"We do not have time for repairs," Jean-Luc said.

"We are poor," Emile said. "An extra hour here and there. We will have money for your Saint and my lute. We can start earlier in the morning to make up the time. "

"You have given us no money," Jean-Luc said.

Emile paused. "I am the treasurer," he said.

Jean-Luc scoffed but saw the tools as useful. Emile bargained a good price. In the next village they sang and played, Jean-Luc spotted a wagon wheel in need of repair, then a broken bucket handle. Emile approached the owners and set prices.

Two days later on market day in a midsized town, they set up before a lively crowd of twenty or more. Emile started a dance tune. Feet tapped. Hands clapped. The crowd grew as villagers came from all directions. As Emile grinned with their success, Sapphire emerged from a clump of trees at the edge of the square.

She skirted the crowd staying far way from Jean-Luc, Charlotte and Emile. She danced, her arms wide, her skirts rippling back and forth, the whites of her legs bright in the sun, her worn slippers stirring clouds of dust. Most of the crowd watched her, not the musicians, and began to sway to her rhythm. In one wild leap, she stepped on her dress hem and ripped a fair hole, but she danced on.

The crowd cheered. She skipped and jumped, twirling in the now tight space between the players and the crowd. Jean-Luc glanced at Emile. Emile's brow creased with concern. Sapphire kicked high. Charlotte banged away at her gong, fascinated by Sapphire, and let out a cry of delight. Emile gave Charlotte a stern look. Sapphire kicked again. Leapt. Kicked again. The crowd laughed with pleasure at her skill and enthusiasm.

Emile signaled the group to stop. Sapphire faced the crowd, feet together, and bowed. Then she ran among the spectators using her skirts held loose in her hands to form a pouch—as a collector. The crowd gave coins. "Bravo! Bravo!" Then she paused before a youth dressed as a country gentleman. He eyed her and then dropped a shiny copper among her coins, more money than the musicians would earn in two or three performances. Sapphire held the shiny coin high so Jean-Luc, Charlotte, and especially Emile could see its color glinting in the sun.

"We can't allow that," Emile said.

Charlotte put down her gong and ran to Sapphire to hug her.

"It is our money," Emile said.

Jean-Luc turned to him. "That's true, but she did do the dance."

"We can't afford competition," Emile said.

Charlotte brought Sapphire back to the goat cart.

"I dance good?" Sapphire asked Jean-Luc.

Emile smiled. Jean-Luc put the hurdy-gurdy in the wagon.

"We are a singing group. We do not need dancing during our performance,"

Emile said.

Charlotte pointed to Sapphire's coins. "See how much money she collected?"

"On our talent," Emile said.

"She danced good," Jean-Luc said.

"Do you think she'd be a good addition to our troupe? Is that what you mean?"

Emile countered with sarcasm.

Jean-Luc hesitated. "I did not mean that. Another traveler will slow us down."

Charlotte raised her hand. "A traveler will not slow us. Anyone can walk faster than a goat with a cart."

"But we cannot share what we earn, Mother," Jean-Luc said.

"That is very true," Emile said. "We have not made nearly enough money to buy even a second-hand lute."

Jean-Luc flushed with anger. "We need money for the Saint."

"My point exactly." Emile touched his arm and said to Sapphire. "Give me the money, child."

Sapphire shook her head "no."

"I'll take it," Emile said.

Sapphire did not budge.

"It is hers," Charlotte said.

"It can't be all hers," Emile said. "We made the music."

"She pleased the crowd," Jean-Luc said.

Emile frowned and after a thoughtful silence he said, "All right! Keep it." He looked to Jean-Luc. "You think we ought to let her come along? Washed up, she might bring in more generous customers. The men will like her." He turned to Charlotte.

“What do you think?”

“She won’t eat much,” Charlotte said.

“Then it’s done,” Emile said.

Sapphire did a little hop-step. Charlotte took her hand.

“We must reach the Saint soon,” Jean-Luc said, but no one was listening.

The next night the troupe made camp in a clearing of woods. A cooking fire still burned with fresh logs. Emile mouthed the line of a new song and picked a melody on two of the few remaining strings on his lute. Charlotte and Jean-Luc rested. Sapphire, wrapped in a shawl, worked to repair the tear in her dress. She had tied the fabric into a crude knot to conceal the hole.

Charlotte stood, turning so she faced away from the others. She shamelessly pulled up her dress exposing her loose-skinned, wrinkled buttocks. From her waist, she untied a string that held a small cloth sack. She let her skirts down and opened the sack, removing a piece of fine linen, folded over twice, and four inches long. She knelt next to Sapphire and unfolded the linen. Five needles gleamed with reflections from the fire.

“They are beautiful,” Sapphire said.

“Mama sewed for Marie Antoinette,” Jean-Luc said.

Charlotte put on a modest face. “Not for her exactly!” she said proudly.

“Her court,” Jean-Luc said.

“Lace on undergarments. And only for two.”

“Still, you were famous.”

“Pooh,” Charlotte said. Still, she was pleased.

Charlotte tried to show Sapphire how to repair her dress, but her stiff fingers with swollen knuckles could not pick up a needle.

Emile turned to Charlotte. “I can help,” he said. He went to the goat cart and returned with candle stubs in a pot that he placed on a few embers from the fire. The wax melted. He carried the pot to Charlotte, testing the wax temperature with his finger.

“Excellent for the rheumatism,” he said. “Hold out your hand.”

Emile guided Charlotte’s hand, dipping her knuckles into the wax.

“Oouuee,” Charlotte said happily. Charlotte extended and flexed her fingers. She picked up a needle, and with improved facility stitched around the hole in Sapphire’s dress to show her the technique.

Sapphire stared intently, and then took the needle and tried her skill.

The next morning, as Charlotte and Sapphire walked toward the men who were hitching the goat to the cart, Charlotte handed Sapphire the linen pouch that contained her needles. “You are very good at your sewing, Sapphire,” she said.

“I will gladly carry these for you, Madame,” she said, holding out the needles.

“No. They are yours to keep.”

Sapphire looked away to hide her tears. She could not speak.

Late afternoon the next day, they crested a hill. Jean-Luc pointed to the West. “The Cathedral!” They hurried to the arched doors of the entrance, gazing at stone statues of

the disciples. Inside, they went to the stairs to the stone lined crypt, descending one by one with Emile leading into the dank and the cold. Jean-Luc carried Charlotte in his arms. Her eyes were closed and she was breathing with difficulty. She had weakened over the last two days of travel.

The walls were scarred with scratches and marks of pilgrims' testimonials. A stack of broken crutches, bandages, splints, clothing, canes and walking sticks rose almost to the ceiling.

A novice in a white frock on a three-legged stool guarded the low arched door to a small room of the Saint. Light flickered from candles on iron sconces around a case of glass and forged brass. In the case, bones of a human hand lay on a red velvet pillow trimmed with threads of gold. They stood before the youthful novice.

"Let us pass," said Jean-Luc. "We must touch the Saint for a miracle."

"Two sous. Many give more," said the novice in a high, prepubescent voice.

"God does not sell miracles," said Sapphire.

The novice shrugged. "Many pray here. Where you can see the Saint. It can be sufficient."

"But we are poor," Sapphire said.

"Find your miracle elsewhere," the novice said, shrugging with indifference.

"Give us our earnings, Emile," Sapphire said.

Emile hesitated.

"It is for Mother," she said emphatically. She counted their combined worth.

"Nineteen denier."

"Any offering will please God," the novice said. "But bishop allows no

exceptions.” He sighed. “I will join you in your prayers.”

“We must go in,” Sapphire said. “She is dying.”

The novice began the litany of a tired, brief prayer. Charlotte’s raspy breathing filled the silent, tomb-stale air when he finished.

Emile reached into his coat. ”I have the money for my lute.”

Emile added coins to those Sapphire had in her hand.

Sapphire gave the exact amount to the novice. “May you rot in hell,” she said.

“Bless,” the novice said.

Minutes later, in the cove of the Saint Marcouf, Jean-Luc held his mother up to the Saint. The novice raised the case and held it to one side. Sapphire took Charlotte’s hand.

“Be quick,” the novice said.

Emile glared at him.

The hand of Charlotte touched a bone of the Saint. Sapphire whispered a prayer. “Praise God,” Jean-Luc said. The novice put the case back in place.

An hour later, Jean-Luc sat on a boulder, one of many that lined each side of the path to the cathedral, and held his mother. Emile and Sapphire stood before them. Charlotte opened her eyes and, with effort, reached out to take Sapphire's hand. "You are my child now," she said. When the soul passed from Charlotte, she shivered from foot to head as if the life was stripped from her like skin from a rabbit.

They buried Charlotte in a field within hours. Emile insisted on going to town to sell what he could for the trip back. “I’ll meet you tomorrow at the shed where we spent

the night," he said.

Sapphire and Jean-Luc found a place near a stream to rest for the night. In the morning, an early mist turned into a drizzle as they walked to where Charlotte was buried. Their steps were tired and listless. Jean-Luc and Sapphire prayed at the unmarked grave until noon.

"There was no miracle," Sapphire said.

"She was close to God," he said, "near the end." He smiled at her. "And she liked you."

Sapphire cried. "I have no one."

"Emile and I will take care of you. Mother would have wanted that."

"Is that what you want?" she asked.

He shrugged, his cheeks and ears tinged with blush.

Then they walked the two miles to the shed without speaking. The door was open.

"I do not smell the goat," Jean-Luc said.

"It is like Emile not to come. He must not be here," Sapphire said.

"He will come. He said so."

Sapphire walked into the shed. Jean-Luc had to bend almost half over to follow.

In the center of the dirt floor were the tools for metalwork, carefully stacked, and the gong Charlotte had played.

"He's been here," said Jean-Luc.

"Why has he left all this?" Sapphire said.

"I think they are for us."

"But why?" She paused. Someone was approaching.

A frail boy of six came through the door with a leather purse in his right hand.

"Who are you?" Jean-Luc said.

The boy hesitated. "The man with the stick-out hair said I give you this or he make me disappear." The boy held out the purse.

Sapphire opened the purse. "More than fifty denier," she said. "From the treasury."

Jean-Luc began to pack the tools in a sack. He looked at the boy. "What did the man say?"

"He said tell you my father gone . . ." The boy struggled to get it right. ". . . my little sister born dead and my mother died too."

The boy shifted his weight nervously from one foot to the other.

Sapphire looked at Jean-Luc. "He's an orphan!"

The boy shook his head from side to side. "I don't want to be an orphan," he said.

Sapphire took the boy's hand. "He can be our family, can't he?" she said to Jean-Luc.

Jean-Luc laughed warmly.