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Danton

David Lawday

DANTON

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Napoleon’s Master: A Life of Prince Talleyrand

DANTON

The Gentle Giant of Terror

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Maps by Reginald Piggott

To Andrew and Amy

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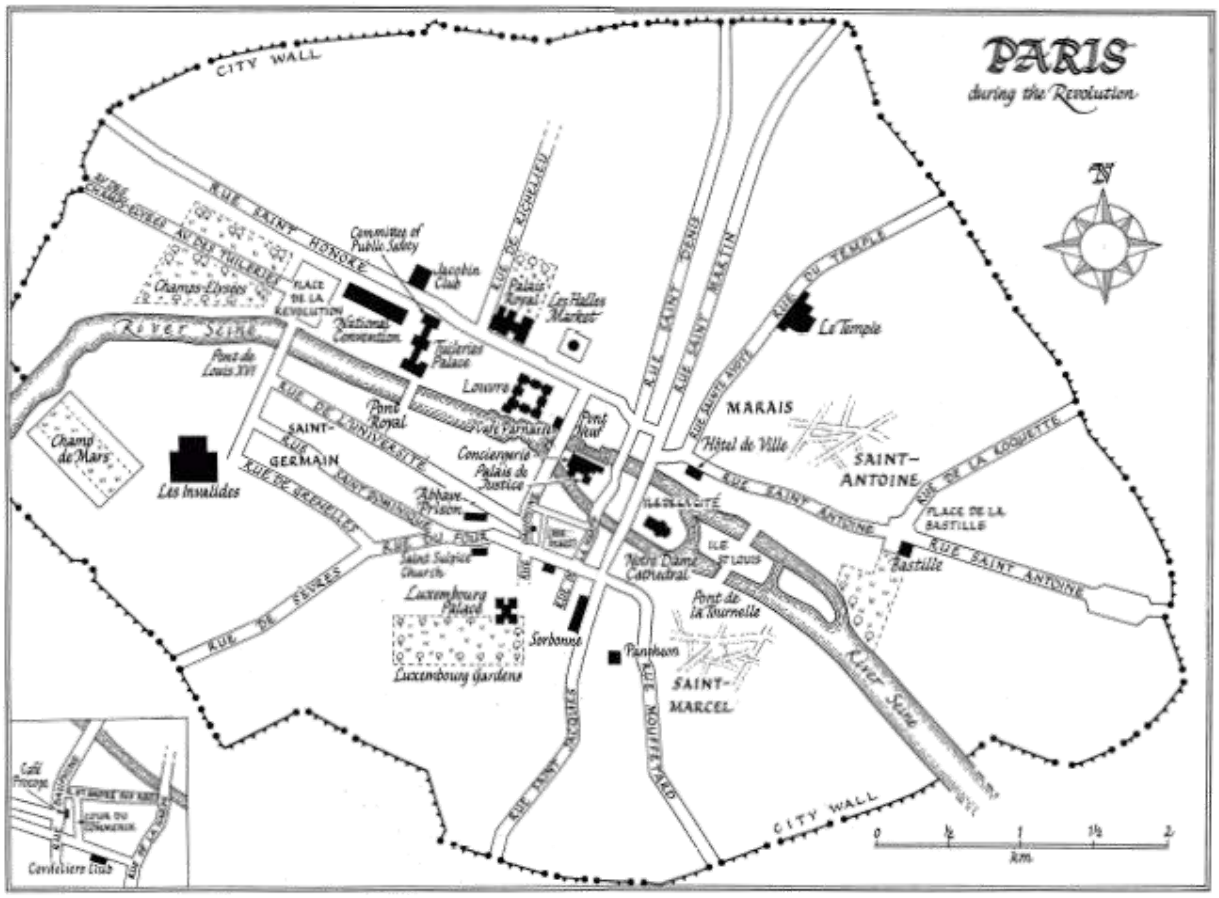

No beast so fierce but knows some touch of pity

Shakespeare; *Richard III*, Act 1, Scene 2

PROLOGUE

Paris: 15 July 1789

Yesterday the Bastille fell. Today, an hour past sundown, a giant of a man with a wrestler's chest bursting from a blue military tunic stands at the entrance to the smouldering prison, banging at its breached gate with a sword. From the gloss of the uniform it looks as though he is wearing it for the first time. Behind him stand a score of men armed with rifles and pikes, shouting for the officer in charge of the fallen fortress to give them entry. Cautiously the acting governor shows himself, waving written orders. He looks petrified: not twenty-four hours before he watched the severed head of his predecessor dancing through the streets of Paris on the end of a stonemason's pike.

The big man snatches the paper from his hand. 'What's this rag?' he roars. 'We'll see about this!' He takes the officer by the collar and marches him off in the direction of City Hall on the banks of the Seine, surrounded by his rowdy companions. As the spectacle progresses, people gather in the summer night to watch, spitting insults at the prisoner, flailing at him here and there with pikestaffs.

The miracle that only yesterday lifted Parisian hearts to the heavens seems to have left the street tonight.

Though the jeering onlookers have no idea who the prisoner is, some can put a name to his hulking captor. He is Georges-Jacques Danton, a man destined to bring a violent end to an absolute monarchy that has ruled for almost a thousand years. The comic-opera restorming of the Bastille has its crackpot side, and indeed there is much of the scallywag in Danton. It also suggests an impulsive lust for

action that will serve him and the insurrection well. He is twenty-nine years old, robust, high-living and impetuous, the kind of man who can and will overstep the mark. Such taste for action distinguishes him from the liberal theorists, tortured ideologues and genuine crackpots whom he joins in bringing about the most abrupt change in human society the world has known. His physique in particular sets him apart. He stands a good head above his companions, with a massive frame to match. And an alarming face. Gorgon! Gargoyle! Cyclops! Tartar chief! He knows what they call him and he employs his monstrous demeanour to full effect.

Danton is no military man. The uniform he wears in putting his own evening-after stamp on the fall of the Bastille is that of a captain in a new national guard created to keep a measure of order in the free-for-all of popular revolt. Each district of Paris has formed its own militia, loosely attached to the guard, so Danton feels entitled to style himself a guard captain. He leads a populous Left Bank district hard across the Seine from the Île de la Cité, the most radical ward in the capital, and his Bastille escapade is more than anything a letting-off of steam. Why does he do it? For the hell of it. Building a reputation as a champion of the violent Paris street crowds demands derring-do of the kind that the people will notice and remember.

The acting governor of the Bastille will emerge unharmed from his ordeal. Moderate souls at City Hall who have taken charge of the capital in these first days of popular revolt return the frightened stand-in to his post, with an apology. Danton protests, but lightly. He is satisfied with his show.

Like most people alive at the start of the twenty-first century I have come to regard terror as part of life, regrettable but present. For that reason I hesitated before deciding to give Danton his subtitle *Gentle Giant of Terror*. To be sure, it fits him and it about sums him up. Only there can be no associating him with the Bin Ladens of late or

with the frightening responses of their mighty targets. Nor with grandmasters of terror such as Stalin.

Danton is no killer by nature. All the same he throws himself into action in an age when people at all levels of society live in fear for their lives; they cannot know when danger will strike and they are uncomfortably aware that no authority is able to prevent it. This is the classic climate in which terrorism thrives. At the height of his career Danton operates within it and thus has his part in the barbarous bloodletting of the French Revolution aptly named the Terror.

His fate is to take charge of the Revolution at a critical moment, when it stumbles and risks collapsing, so that France, the largest nation in Europe by far, faces a return to the failed old order from which passionate reformers and an angry populace have torn it free. He is not the instigator of terror; he resigns himself to it. There is no force on earth, he tells himself, that can stop a revolution from having its dose of blood. Until such time as law and order reassert themselves, men of good will can do no more than stop the dose from becoming a torrent. Such is Danton's intent – and also his weakness: his pity for the guillotine's guiltless victims lays bare his own bull neck.

Throughout history exponents of terrorism have acted from a host of motives, united only by the urge to kill blindly. They range from frustrated nationalists, secessionists and pure avengers to those misled by faith or visited with an obsessive grudge against humanity itself. Leaders of the French Revolution are none of these. There *are* psychopaths among them, but very few. Mostly they let dogged principle and fear run away with their senses. Danton sees the danger of revolutionary terrorism, but is equally aware of the dangers of letting the Revolution run aground. Its failure is unthinkable. What awful vengeance would royalists then wreak? What could prevent all-out civil war? What hope would remain if liberty, once won, were abandoned? Behind his bluster Danton is a practical man

and his actions assume an overriding purpose: to save the new France from foreign invaders – Austria and Prussia, joined by England – who resolve to undo 1789.

1789 . . . what a year. The historian Jules Michelet, a great romancer of the French Revolution born in Paris a decade after the event, pictures the whole world watching its progress 'with uneasy sympathy, conscious that France at her own risk and peril is acting for the entire human race'. One scarcely has to share Michelet's full rapture, or even to be French, to feel the pulse quicken. At the same time it is hard even today not to feel something sharper than Michelet's unease – to feel dread, in fact. My own interest in Danton goes back to English classroom recollections of a gang of revolutionary fanatics who are outsmarted – hurrah! – by the ingenious Scarlet Pimpernel as he saves hapless French aristocrats from the guillotine. Baroness Orczy's 'damned, elusive' *Pimpernel* is a wonderful story, right down to the taunting notes her mysterious English hero spirits into the pockets of the masters of the Terror – signed with a little red English hedgerow flower – to inform them of his latest successful venture.

The Hungarian-born baroness rather misses the significance, though, of what her English hero is trying to stop. How to catch its full force? What occurred in France in 1789 and in the five extraordinary years that followed is rated by the historian Eric Hobsbawm, a connoisseur of revolution, as a phenomenon as awesome and irreversible as the first nuclear explosion, producing an energy that sweeps away a benighted old Europe in a mushroom cloud, while England's Industrial Revolution, under way at more or less the same time, intensifies the blast. Karl Marx is equally struck: for him, Danton and company stormed the heavens.

Nuclear imagery gives an idea of the enormous rough house that 1789 produced: harrowing events succeed each other in anarchic confusion, most often soaked in blood. Within two years of the Bastille's fall, suspicion and fear

rule: everyone involved is afraid for their skin, or ought to be. Hunger for liberty is in violent collision with the absolutism of France's Bourbon monarchy, yet the conflict has so many sides that the picture grows perilously blurred. Friends kill friends. They send each other to the guillotine no longer knowing why, for what belief, what doctrine, what logic. Blind violence takes over.

The American Revolution which precedes it by a dozen years or so – and likewise launches a republic – is, in terms of social change, a sideshow by comparison, a local happening that permits Americans to continue leading their lives virtually unchanged while the rest of the world also carries on very much as before. The reckless French ride from monarchy to republic, on the other hand, is a mass social revolution that upends Europe's largest state – a country populated by one in five of all Europeans at the time. The upheaval is so uniquely radical in spirit that English liberal firebrands who hurry across to France to demonstrate their support find themselves looking on a little disconsolately, too tame to make a mark. And then comes Lenin, whose Bolsheviks idolise the men of 1789 and like to borrow from them. Lenin stands back in awe at Danton's actions, singling him out as 'the greatest master of revolutionary tactics yet known'.

What manner of man makes such stupendous things happen? And what manner of man allows terror to achieve his ends?

Revolution's record for devouring its own children starts with Danton. He is the tragic hero incarnate. I write of him after first plunging into the French Revolution for another reason – and discovering that there is simply no avoiding Danton whichever way the currents pull. That *other reason* was a life I was writing of France's incomparable statesman, Prince Talleyrand, the ace of diplomats, who owes his reputation as the greatest survivor of the revolutionary age – perhaps of

all time – to his own guile, certainly, but more directly to Danton. For it is Danton, boisterous, alarming, yet essentially practical, who saves Talleyrand's precious neck. At his own peril, Danton helps him escape the guillotine, together with others of Talleyrand's old-world stamp, because he deems it a folly to lose for ever the services of such talents.

The vaudeville swordsman at the gates of the Bastille is, then, by physique alone, a giant figure for his times. His family background and the profession he enters boost his revolutionary credentials. He is born into the rural bourgeoisie in the flat, thinly populated southern rim of the Champagne region, beyond the reach of the province's fabled vines – a land where wheatfields pierced by rare village spires spread either side of the looping river Aube, a minor tributary of the Seine. This is *France profonde*. Its greatest chronicler, Honoré de Balzac, awards Danton's birthplace, Arcis-sur-Aube, the badge of pure authenticity: 'Nothing better explains provincial life than the deep silence in which this little town slumbers.'

Danton's family has not long climbed out of the peasant class and its roots continue to tug. All the same he receives a thoroughly middle-class education, one liberally dosed with the Enlightenment thinking that is gripping France and making the rest of Europe sit up and listen. With this behind him he trains for the law. Bourgeois upbringing, liberal ideas, the law . . . what better credentials, as the world will learn, for joining a revolution still ten years off ?

The right credentials may indeed place him near the controls of revolution, but to grasp the controls he needs something more, some singular asset that sets him apart. The weapon of revolt that distinguishes Danton is his voice – a perpetual roll of thunder which spurs fellow men to action without his always quite knowing where he intends to drive them. His immense lungs work to no script, expelling rich, earthy phrases that somehow fall into a purposeful pattern

to excite bourgeois reformers and street crowds alike. To hear Danton is to hear the heartbeat of revolution.

Peer into the 1789 volcano and amid the flame and fury two principal actors, two complete opposites in style and psyche, soon take focus. One is Danton, the other the puritanical Robespierre. This book only sketches in Robespierre; it is not *his* life. It is hard, though, not to side with the all-too-human Danton, for the death-struggle in which the pair become locked sounds a powerful warning against letting utopian zealotry take charge of men's affairs. Robespierre calls adversaries who disagree with him 'monsters'; Danton calls his opponents 'rascals'. There's a smile in the word 'rascal', a smile that shows understanding for human frailty. Danton cannot hate. He is not the most brilliant actor in the Revolution; he is not the most thoughtful, nor always the most convincing in his impulses. Theory and dogma are not his strong suit. But his heart and his voice drive the common people to action, and this is what keeps the Revolution alive when it is on the brink of going under.

There is a further striking side to Danton – the pent-up brevity of his existence. He wades for all he is worth into revolution at the age of twenty-nine and is dead at thirty-four. So much of him, so reckless and thankless a life, such exertion – all concentrated into barely five years. A short life has the nerve and elan that a long life spread over decades of achievement cannot match. A short life collects no dust; it is somehow touched by martyrdom. Its great mystery is where it might have led.

Perhaps it is better not to know Danton at sixty-four. Better not to know his contemporaries in revolution – friends or enemies – when their hair has turned white. He is far from alone, in fact, in coming to a terrible and premature end. The poignancy of what befalls the hot-blooded Danton somehow embraces them all, including those with ice in their veins. Robespierre goes to the guillotine at the age of

thirty-six, having fed it heads by the thousand; Saint-Just, his brilliant scaffold-hand, loses his at twenty-six. And it may be worth remembering that as these scalded sons of Icarus tumble, an ambitious soldier, aged twenty-four, is battling his way towards power of a kind unseen since Julius Caesar. Napoleon Bonaparte already holds a military command.

A curious problem in writing a life of Danton is that he himself hated putting pen to paper. He scarcely wrote a private letter. Not one has surfaced in which he even begins to lay himself bare. There is surely a psychological block here. Even if he had lived beyond the age of thirty-four and had led a full political life thereafter it is unlikely that he would have started writing out his extraordinary speeches in advance, let alone penned private letters. His hand is near unreadable, as a shocked barrister who first takes him under training as a lawyer and examines his copy testifies (‘Good God, man. What an atrocious fist!’). Against that, he has a photographic memory for text and recites Cicero and the classical orators by the yard. A prodigious memory encourages Danton to demonstrate mastery of the word with his tireless tongue alone.

All the same I’ve found myself cursing him for not leaving behind at least some personal reminiscences. It would have been nice to know how his brash bravura in speech translated to paper. His personal indifference to pen and ink is bizarre in one so educated. This was an age of letter writing: the educated sent notes in the morning to friends and lovers they intended to see in the afternoon. It is true that Danton can rely on others to compensate, which may be a factor. His trusty lieutenant Camille Desmoulins is a professional writer who makes full use of his own gifts and is usually at Danton’s side, pen cocked. As Robespierre observes: ‘Desmoulins writes, Danton roars.’ They are all members of the radical Jacobin club, the Right Bank brain centre of the Revolution in Paris, and Danton and

Desmoulins double as leading lights of the Cordelier club, its Left Bank boiler house. Leadership of the Cordeliers makes Danton political master of his riotous Paris district, later to be known as the Latin Quarter.

There exists, to be sure, a written record of many of the Danton speeches that so arouse Jacobins, Cordeliers and the nation. The trouble is that they are truncated versions, lacking the booming richness and classical range of the original, since they are printed from notes taken by clerks who cannot be expected to capture Danton's rhetoric, or worse, by notetakers commissioned to sabotage it. The speeches appear, mutilated, in the semi-official government gazette (which continues to publish right through the alarms of the Revolution) and in minutes of meetings held by the Jacobins and Cordeliers. As such, they may seem somewhat shaky justification for his reputation as the hardiest orator of the turbulent age – a voice more resonant than that of the great Mirabeau, another tribune with a remarkably unpretty face. Nonetheless, even the disjointed excerpts of Danton's speeches that come through suggest that the absence of faithful, unabridged texts is a great loss to public oratory.

For all of these reasons it requires a fair degree of intuition and deduction to reach Danton. The record of his childhood and adolescence is sparse and some of it, which I have tried to weed out, is probably pure fancy anyway. So I present this life, yes, as authentic history – page notes doubling as a bibliography appear at the end – but also in some instances as romanced history, for to find Danton you need to imagine him and thus to an extent invent him.

That said, Danton in manhood is probed and skilleted, admired and reviled in a multitude of memoirs written by contemporaries who love him, loathe him or simply stand and watch as the Danton tempest roars past. Fortunately, the revolutionary age is inhabited by numerous perceptive chroniclers – men and women of high and middle society, survivors and victims – who scarcely put their quills down in

their desire to bequeath a telling memoir. The new republic's high priestess, the beautiful Manon Roland, who nurses a curiously complex hatred for Danton, is busy at her memoirs until the very moment her executioners rope her into a tumbrel bound for the guillotine. At Danton's trial, luck also takes a hand: the official transcript is so painfully one-sided as to reveal precious little of what really occurred, but a juror breaks the court rules and makes notes, subsequently published, that provide the hellish flavour of Danton's ordeal.

Just as it is hard for anyone with an interest in history's human dimensions to avoid taking sides between the Revolution's two principal actors, it seems downright impossible for professional historians to avoid fighting over Danton's character. He tries academic nerves. He excites extreme views. Corrupt demagogue! Lionhearted saint! Few figures in history present quite so stark a contrast, a sure sign that extreme verdicts do not get him right. The ultimate struggle is between two late-nineteenth-century French historians, Alphonse Aulard (1849–1928) and Albert Mathiez (1874–1932). Once Aulard's student, Mathiez is a passionate critic of Danton, nailing him for every sin under the sun; his indignation causes him a nervous breakdown, but not before he has scuttled Danton in the eyes of generations of French left-wing purists, who applaud Robespierre to this day and view the Terror as the harsh but vital tool of republican principle. Aulard, an august liberal and holder of the famous history chair at the Sorbonne, which Mathiez covets for himself and fails to wrest from his rival, is strongly partisan on Danton's behalf, though a calmer observer – which only maddens Mathiez the more.

Danton's biographers are in fact rather few in number, perhaps due to the unusual dearth of personal archive material. In the English language a youthful Hilaire Belloc produced what I find the most readable life of Danton. It was

published in 1899. The biographical penury may have a further explanation. Danton is a figure made for the theatre. Playwrights indeed have a strong nose for him. Shakespeare would have loved him. He has all the stuff of tragedy – the vigour, the rise to power, regicide, hubris, vulnerability, the spiralling fall. Plus the poignant irony: the wild man of 1789 who starts out as an enemy of moderation ends up losing his life in horrendous fashion for insisting on it.

A good dozen dramatists – from Germany, Italy and the old Habsburg lands, as well as from France – have been moved by the dramatic force of his short life. Of their plays the most popular is *Dantons Tod* by Georg Büchner, a German political dramatist born as Napoleon reaches his military peak. Astonishingly, Büchner was only twenty-one years old (he died of typhoid at twenty-three) when he peered with such empathy into the heart of Danton, and it may be a premonition of his own youth cut short that inspired him. Even as the centuries move on, Büchner's Danton lives; his play continues to be widely performed.

Still, the theatre aims to capture a salient part of its subject, a part that holds an eyeglass to the whole. My aim in this book is to show the whole: to enter the life of a man who stands up, warts and all, for humanity against ideological fanaticism, who reveals how dark are the paths down which patriotism that asks no questions leads. These are conflicts that are always with us.

Let the curtain rise.

ONE

Bullfights

A countryman born is a countryman for life, and this may be truer of the people of France than of most anywhere on earth. Georges-Jacques Danton was reared in a flat, chalky tract of the Champagne region, and no matter how large a part of his heart he put into driving the great city of Paris to revolution, a still larger part was yoked to his rural birthplace. It was an attachment that would cost him dear.

He was born on 26 October 1759, the fifth child and first son of a couple from the provincial petty bourgeoisie. His father, Jacques Danton, had fairly recently stepped up a class from the peasantry, and peasant roots still clutched at the Dantons as the little market town where they lived, Arcis-sur-Aube, sleepwalked into the turbulent final third of the eighteenth century. The land stretching flat around Arcis was the backside of the wine country to the north and was known as the Champagne badlands, though it was bad – ‘flea-ridden’ was the description used in cartographic tradition and indeed by the king’s provincial administrators – only by the bountiful standards of France’s countryside, for it grew wheat and barley aplenty and helped keep Paris, the metropolis 100 miles to the west, in bread. Moreover, its plainness was alleviated by the river Aube which looped across it in a rich green ribbon, hidden by willows and sycamores from strangers passing through. If local eyes were at all open to the outside world, it was due to the tranquil Aube, which was navigable in those days and flowed into the Seine some thirty miles yonder, so that travellers with time on their hands could ride a barge

straight from Arcis to Paris, thence to the English Channel if so inclined.

Still, country people knew where best to congregate and the population around Arcis was as thin as its chalky soil. Only within the little town, where the Dantons made their way better than most, did the population multiply. Not many years before Danton's birth, stocking-makers had set up looms in Arcis thanks to a local grandee with influence at the Bourbon court in Versailles, which decided where industries were permitted to set up in France. Arcis' good fortune, then, was to hold a royal charter for the manufacture of woollen and cotton hose, and while its peasantry sowed and reaped, its spinning machines hummed and clacked in local cellars from dawn to dusk.

Even so, the song of the stocking looms failed to break the town's deeper slumber. At the time of Georges-Jacques' birth few in this corner of *France profonde* sensed that the nation at large was alive with discontent, girding for change as never before. Yet in respect of timing the gladiators of social change fairly hovered over the Danton boy's cradle. In the very year that he was born the philosophical bomb that freethinkers called the Enlightenment went off with a great bang: the notorious Voltaire, at his malicious best in exile, published *Candide*; the determined philosopher Denis Diderot relaunched his banned *Encyclopédie*, questioning each and every truth that monarchy held dear; and Jean-Jacques Rousseau was completing his *Contrat Social*, a trumpet call for reform of the French state.

War was declared that year on the old order and on the absolute rule of kings.

In looks, Danton was closer to the barnyard than to the Enlightenment. He was a robust child, an exception in the family. Two of his four older sisters died in childhood, true to a high mortality rate set by five siblings from his father's first marriage, which ended with his wife's death in labour.

Danton’s own mother, though sturdy of constitution, was unable to provide him with the mother’s milk he required and took to having him suckled by a cow from the barn, a common expedient in the countryside. The infant Georges-Jacques was equal to the test until a jealous bull entered the barn and gored his face, splitting his top lip. He carried the vivid scar all his life. A further encounter with a bull at the age of seven crushed his nose, compensating for the first atrocity in so far as it gave his face a certain misshapen balance.

Rural life thus left its harsh tattoo on the Danton boy even as his father, the son of a peasant farmer, moved away from it. Having broken with the family history of tilling the land and turned instead to law, Jacques Danton was edging through the provincial legal orders. From court bailiff and below he rose to prosecutor – still a relatively minor post but one which carried weight in Arcis, combining as it did the duties of justice of the peace and country solicitor; he spent a good deal of his time stamping documents and registering ownership of fields and copses. Prior to his own abrupt death at the age of forty, not a hint of dissent or rebelliousness, not a shadow of political contrariness, marked Jacques Danton’s career in the king’s service. The one reforming move he made, if such it was, was the break with his peasant class that enabled him to install his second family in a large house backed by a barn and several acres of land on the edge of Arcis where the town’s weathered stone bridge spanned the Aube.

Georges-Jacques held no memory of his father, who died when he was three. Parental influence came from his mother, née Madeleine Camut, who had married down, at least in economic terms. Her own father was a building contractor commissioned to keep the king’s roads and bridges in running order in the Champagne badlands. His income gave the Camut family a comfortable living and opened up prospects for the younger generation.

Madeleine's brother was a village curate, soldiering in the most conservative corps of the kingdom; her two sisters found worthy husbands in the bourgeois class – one was the postmaster in Troyes, the provincial capital situated a morning's coach ride away, the other a merchant in the same city.

Madeleine was a practical woman, slight but of strong constitution, who overcame her husband's premature death and the shock it caused her and her expanding tribe (she bore two more boys after Georges-Jacques) by taking a new husband – an Arcis clothmaker named Jean Recordain – just as soon as the niceties of Catholic Church doctrine allowed. Practical though she was, she was also loving and affectionate towards her children, a combination that rubbed off on Georges-Jacques. He adored his mother and was always close to her, though like her first husband she too was no agitator. By provincial class ratings the Dantons remained a good deal closer to the eternal peasant smallholder than to the occupant of the princely Arcis chateau that rose above the trees across the Aube from their home. Their modest rung of the bourgeoisie manned the king's administrative services – magistrates, lawyers, inspectors, notaries, doctors and civil servants who kept the wheels of the *Ancien Régime* turning. Only on the bourgeoisie's upper rungs – a wealthy elite of bankers, industrialists and landlords – was the middle class on something of a level with the nobility, for all it lacked was enjoyment of the king's favour, which exempted those of blueblood birth and the high Catholic clergy from paying taxes. Nor were the Dantons within earshot of that most energetic bourgeois breed of the day, the men and women of letters – the educated elite of the French masses – who appointed themselves to goad and rattle the monarchy into doing what their hearts told them was fair and right.

If peasant roots tugged at Georges-Jacques through such bourgeois layers it was because in his case they were

overpowering. As he grew up, the rural masses indeed began scenting change in the air. But there was something that lulled and pacified peasant minds, something as old as the land itself, and this was the eternal bounty yielded by the French soil. The food. The wine. Who could imagine such marvels ever ceasing?

* * *

The boy Danton ate like a horse. He was as big and strong for his age as he was ugly, which granted him protection against the taunts of Arcis boys. To keep her first son from running wild on the banks of the Aube, his mother placed him in the charge of a neighbouring spinster who offered rudimentary instruction in reading and writing and used a stick pouched in her apron to discipline him, when she was able to catch him. Much of the time Danton hid from her and splashed about in the Aube, regardless of his mother's concern for his safety. He tested himself against the powerful current that ran beneath the bridge, for the water there came bouncing across a weir created by riverside threshing mills at which barges bumped and manoeuvred to fill up with grain for the trip to Paris.

As Danton turned eight, his mother recognised the need for more authentic schooling; she placed him in the Church-run Arcis grammar school, where he learned the rudiments of Latin. Here too he was unruly. He cut school regularly to spend the morning playing cards in the grass with fellow truants on a quieter reach of the Aube half a mile upstream from the bridge; there they competed to see who could swim from bank to bank the most times without stopping. Danton was a powerful swimmer with a broad chest for his age. Alas, too much time in the water took its toll. At ten, he caught a chest infection that exposed him to a severe bout of smallpox which further blighted his farmyard face, leaving his cheeks as rudely rutted as a pumice stone. The older he became, the more terrible his countenance grew. While his

mother’s affection wasn’t blunted, her tenderness was slow to impose on her oldest boy the education of her class. Only under pressure from his Camut uncle, the priest, was the young smallpox survivor packed off to Troyes to enter a college that prepared boys to enter a Church seminary.

On first sight the provincial capital appeared to Danton to offer temptations greater than the Aube, for the river Seine ran through its heart. Discipline at the new school, which went at its task in all earnestness, at once killed these fancies. Outside the holidays Danton was not permitted to return home. When he did he let his mother know that he couldn’t stand the monotony of the place and its strange customs. After two years there he was convinced that he was not cut out for the Church; he would never understand its ways. He hated all the bells. They never stopped ringing. He particularly disliked the one that rang to end recreation time. ‘If I have to go on hearing that much longer, it will be my death knell,’ he advised his mother, employing ecclesiastical terminology to convince her. She accepted the advice, though coming from her twelve-year-old it sounded over-defiant; to his pre-seminary teachers it was plain refusal to accept authority.

The following year he entered a lay boarding school in Troyes where pupils took most of their instruction at a next-door college run by Oratorian fathers. This suited him better. The Oratorians were liberal Catholic priests sceptical of hoary Church tradition, who kept abreast of public opinion. They were a renegade part of the Church, cramming Enlightenment thinking into their pupils’ heads along with the Latin and Greek classics that were the core of their teaching. Furthermore, they had a progressive constitution – superiors in the order were obliged to take account of novice priests’ views – so that Danton, with hindsight, was able to see his Oratorian schooling as a clerical probing shot before the full blast of revolution.

His mother had at last found the place for her son to shine, though bad writing pulled down his average marks. He had an explanation for her about the writing which he was not sure she understood: he remembered the sound of words perfectly, but not the sight of them. (Dyslexia was not yet part of the physician's vernacular, let alone a schoolroom excuse.) To compensate, he excelled in Latin. His recitations from Cicero had his classmates clapping and his master at times joined in the applause. They enjoyed his performances; his forte was to turn around the most striking words and phrases to give them a still bolder twist. He revelled in Ancient Rome and its republic, memorising whole chunks of Cicero and reeling them off without a stumble. The pure, frightening justice of it all was riveting. The part played by plebeians. The outlandish conspiracies. The personal power struggles. And behind it all the unblinking regard for democracy. Furthermore, pagan antiquity was in fashion: recent discoveries of extraordinary ruins at Pompeii and Herculaneum excited freethinkers, encouraging the republican urge. All this enthralled the adolescent Danton. From his second year with the Oratorians, the prize for Latin discourse was his.

Rhetoric was a second strongpoint, or so he fancied, for when it came to arguing things out it most likely occurred to him that his physique and his alarming face gave him an edge. Rhetoric meant sounding off. Oratorian friars did not discourage speechifying, but what they wanted more from their wards was sounding off on the written page – a logical written argument. Writing again! How it irked Danton. His teachers said he was lazy. They said he could not be bothered to submit to the intellectual grind of written prose. But his fingers just didn't seem to operate with a pen between them. His hand betrayed him. Once a pen held command, even the spelling of words escaped him, words that were perfectly clear in his mind and which he had no trouble using when answering a question in class.

Why was writing so important? Why didn't speech count for more? Speech was the first link between human beings. Danton tested his theory in class one day when a novice teacher rebuked another pupil for not preparing his written work. The offender was a friend of his named Jules Paré, who made things worse by appearing unapologetic. The rhetoric teacher ordered Paré to fetch the rod from a junior classroom for a beating, which brought Danton to his feet. Now aged fifteen, he argued in a shaky adolescent baritone that it was morally wrong to consider inflicting on pupils of their age a punishment meant for minors. The proposition lit a heated debate, which soon brought in Oratorian fathers from around the college. It was a glorious dispute for this liberal establishment to throw itself into, and in the end, while the youthful teacher was somehow saved from humiliation, Paré was spared the rod. Alas, Danton's aptitude for oral argument went unrewarded: he came close to bottom of the rhetoric class that term. There was gratitude, though, from one quarter. Paré, who was no dunce and was to become a government minister at the height of the Revolution, gave Danton his undying loyalty.

Before turning sixteen Danton took a larger risk. When King Louis XV fell ill and died in 1774, his eldest son set 11 June of the following year to take the crown as Louis XVI in the magnificent cathedral at Reims, as tradition demanded. It promised to be a sumptuous occasion attended by the mightiest figures in France, the high society from Paris and Versailles – the cream of the aristocracy, bishops, statesmen and generals with their elegant ladies and mistresses. The Oratorian fathers in Troyes, both fascinated and perplexed by the coming event, made it the subject for the annual college essay prize.

Reims was not a world away from Troyes. It was situated in medieval glory in the north of the Champagne region, the hub of the sparkling wine trade, and was reachable, Danton