

# **Liberté, Egalité, *Fraternité*?**

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## *Paris, 1789*

The Bastille. Political prison, guarded fortress, symbol of order and authority. Completely impenetrable. The storming of the Bastille. Heroic, barbarous, shambolic. Before Marat was stabbed and David whipped his paints out, before Louis and Marie's rather sticky end, before the bloody massacres of The Terror and before Robespierre himself there was Madame Dupont and she happens to be 3 minutes late.

Now, dear reader, this may seem a trivial point to make but believe me, if Copernicus' earth rotates around the sun, Madame Dupont's rotates around the clock. In particular, a green Thuret pendulum swinging dubiously on the wall with a crack running up the centre of it from where a prisoner hurled a croquet ball at it. She forgets which prisoner it was but she would bet a Louis D'or or two that it was the Comte de Malville. It is *always* the Comte de Malville. Albeit rather tardy, she makes her rounds of the prison and doles out soup to the criminals who clutch wooden bowls in their hands and inhale it as though they haven't eaten in weeks. That was the starter; the main and desert would be around shortly on embossed dishes for the two counts and on a plank of wood for the four forgers. *Only distinguished criminals deserve to eat from fine chinaware*, Madame Dupont thinks. *Serves the lower classes right for being so repulsive. The rich, bless them, tumbled into the lion's pit of sin through ennui whereas the poor – well, they're poor due to laziness.* She herself belonged to the middling sort of Parisians. Jealousy at not being of noble birth meant she cursed the rich yet was so embarrassed of her own lowly status that she was hell-bent on obsequious submission to them.

Her rounds are almost complete when the sudden blast of a gun sounds outside followed by the overwhelming stench of saltpetre that seeps into her throat. "*What on*

*earth?*” She turns as a cannonball smashes into the window before shattering into tiny fragments and scattering like grapeshot. A shard of glass the size of a fingernail flies across the room and falls straight into the Comte de Malville’s bowl with a deliberate *splash*.

“Ah, a crouton,” he cries with admiration and stirs his soup.

A bag of a jacket with a small man inside it wearing striped breeches and a cravat strewn around his neck storms into the fortress with two pistols at his hips. He has a bonnet crudely knitted by a pair of desperate hands and an air of arrogance one could smell from the Rue de Sevres.

“Where is the governor?” he demands.

“Upstairs. I’m serving the prisoners their luncheon now. Pray, have some soup, Monsieur?”

“I’m not hungry. I shall only be sated once the cinders of the bourgeoisie have been well and truly snuffed out and the only food to pass my lips will be the wine of liberty.” He spits on the ground; she rolls her eyes and wipes it with the pointed toe of her mules.

“We have wine, if that’s what you want.”

“I don’t want your wine, you saddle goose.”

“What *do* you want, horrid little man?”

“Freedom, citizen, for me, you, the whole of France,” he proclaims, eyes sparkling, hand thrust in the lapels of his jacket. “For if the world is to be free we must first liberate our great nation.” He coughs after finishing his spiel.

“The cinders of the bourgeoisie, I know, always clogging up my throat.”

“Don’t take that tone with me, citizen,” he snaps with the authority of a newly promoted leader eager to showcase his dominance. The striped breeches clamber onto the dining table where the Comte de Malville is stirring his soup with the watery gaze of a man too tired for such antics. His words are punctuated by the mob’s hands banging on the

fortress walls in rage as he cries, “We liberate the prisoners! How many are held captive here, 100? 500? 1000?”

“Seven.”

“We liberate them all! Wait, did you say seven?” he asks, bewildered, his face the same shade of red as the Phrygian cap on his head, but the crowds have already entered. Armed with pitchforks and makeshift weaponry they ransack the prison. Paintings are ripped from the walls and thrown into the blazing fireplace. The flames lick higher around Maria Therese’s neck until there is nothing left – the portrait is completely engulfed by fire.

“Quickly, hide.” He pulls her onto the floor behind the table whilst dozens flood through the building waving muskets, pitchforks, flags and bits of rag.

“If ammunition’s what they are looking for, they won’t find any here,” she says in a forced whisper. “It was taken weeks ago; this fortress is empty now.”

“Fear not citizen, what starts here doesn’t end here. We’ll take to the streets of Paris and soon every man, woman and child will never know the feeling of hunger again.” He gets to his feet as the seven prisoners are being ushered out by a league of rebels. Their eyes are wide and inquisitive, curious as to their sudden release. More like a field trip than a jailbreak.

“Welcome to the revolution, citizen.” He tosses a red bonnet to her and flees out of the open gate into the skirmish outside.

“Aww, much obliged.” Madame Dupont catches sight of the old clock on the wall, smiles as she dons the cap, and raises her newly acquired pistol to the ceiling. “Right,” she fires it, “everybody out, there’s work we have to do.”

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Outside the Bastille stands Madame Dupont wandering aimlessly along the façade and haggling with the townsmen. One stroller seems to be a man of means. She walks over to him and watches as the July sun makes the gold buckles of his shoes gleam.

“Monsieur,” she addresses him. “You look to be a man of the world, surely you care about learning the history behind the tumultuous times we’re living in?”

“I suppose so.” He examines her with suspicion, noting the flamboyant feather on one side of her wig and the tricolour cockade on the other. *Clever, he thinks. Hedging her bets on whether to appear an aristocrat or an alley cat.*

“Why then follow me and I can lead you through the events of last week, after all this is living history good sir. You too can walk on the very same stones our brave countrymen walked upon and share the same sense of zeal and patriotic fervour all for the bargain price of *1 ecu.*”

He hands over the money and follows her through the demolished gate leading to the Bastille. Cannonball after cannonball meant that the wood is covered in indentations and every wall looked close to crumbling. They enter the sanctuary of the prison, now prisoner-less. The walls once adorned with artwork have been stripped bare, the regimental tapestries have been torn from the pediments and dumped in a mass on the floor, covering a lump of something in the corner.

“Step this way monsieur, tread carefully though, the blood of the *vainqueurs* still runs down these halls.” With a flick of her wrist, she pours a glass of wine onto the floor and watches as it spills down into the stone cracks of the floor.

“Oh my, I can see it,” the tourist says, his voice a whisper as if he’s frightened the ghosts of the fallen revolutions are laughing at his agitation. Madame Dupont promptly recoils and covers her face with her hands in mock distress.

“Monsieur, if your constitution is weak do not go any closer to that machine.” She rushes over to the ramshackle printing press in the corner of the room and leans against it.

“It seems to be a ramshackle printing press, no?”

“Oh, but appearances can be very deceptive. What seems to resemble a printing press was once a torture device, used in the battle for Bastille only three days ago.”

“My God!”

She discreetly hurries over to the Thuret clock and picks at a piece of rotten wood sticking out from the crack running along it. “Here, we have a piece of shrapnel from the great gate outside the fortress,” she says holding up the wood against the light of the shattered window like a jeweller demonstrating the authenticity of his diamonds. In the corner of the room sits a pile of bones. Human bones, cleaned by the other enterprising salesmen and women who realised there was money to be found in the rubble of the Bastille. Madame Dupont didn’t need to grind chalk like the bakers who artificially whiten their bread and create fake artefacts, the remains spoke for themselves and they told of the human cost that came with rebellion.

The man slowly lifts a regimental banner of the floor only to find the body of a young man in a jacket too big for him, curled up beneath the protection of the tapestry which serves as a duvet for him. He bows his head and mutters a prayer to himself. Madame Dupont shudders slightly. She forgets for a moment what she is doing by showing this man such macabre curiosities but then the coins clink in her purse and she remembers. The man nods respectfully at her, then exits in silence. Laughing, Madame Dupont counts the money from her endeavours. *12 ecus*. She glances once more at the body of the man in the striped breeches.

“Thank you, *citizen*, for your... sacrifice.”

She throws the cap onto his lifeless body and leaves.

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