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Parisians

An Adventure History of Paris

Written by Graham Robb

Published by Picador

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GRAHAM ROBB

PARISIANS

An Adventure History of Paris

PICADOR

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TO MY PARENTS

GORDON JAMES ROBB

(1921–2000)

JOYCE ROBB,

née Gall

DEPARTURE

By the time I reached Paris, the Bastille had disappeared. The map supplied by the tourist agency clearly showed a 'Place de la Bastille' in the east of the city, but when I emerged from the Métro at the station called 'Bastille', there was nothing to see but an ugly green column. Not even the vestige of a ruin remained. On the base of the column was a date in dirty gold lettering – 'JUILLET 1830' – and an inscription praising citizens who had died in the defence of 'libertés publiques'. The French Revolution, I knew, had taken place in 1789. Evidently, this was some other revolution. But if the King and the aristocrats had been guillotined, who had massacred the defenders of liberty in 1830? The monument offered no explanation. Later, an older boy at school told me of yet another revolution, which I had missed by only seven years.

For my birthday, my parents had given me a week's holiday in Paris. The package included a room in a small hotel near the École Militaire, some clues to monuments and cheap restaurants, a voucher for a boat-ride on the Seine, and a coupon to be redeemed at the Galeries Lafayette for a free gift. My suitcase contained what seemed an excessive amount of clothing, some emergency provisions, and a second-hand copy of the works of Charles Baudelaire. This was my guide to all the mysteries and indefinable experiences that filled the space between the famous sights. I read the 'Tableaux parisiens' and the chapter on 'L'Héroïsme de la vie moderne': 'Parisian life is bursting with wonderful, poetic subjects: the miraculous envelops us; we breathe it in like the atmosphere, but we do not see it.' Deciphering Baudelaire in a café near the Tour Saint-Jacques, with the rain

blurring the faces on the street, dissolving the Gothic stones into misty air, I was quite certain that I could see it.

During that week, I made a number of other interesting discoveries. I found the little cottage across the river from the Eiffel Tower where Balzac had hidden from his creditors to write *La Comédie Humaine*. I climbed up towards the white dome of the Sacré-Cœur, and found a provincial village full of cheerful cafés and artists all forging the same paintings. I walked through the Louvre for hours, forgetting to eat and remembering almost nothing. I found medieval streets that were paved with sand, and pondered graffiti that seemed to have been written by highly educated people with serious political opinions. I walked past limbless beggars in the Métro, and, in *quartier*s not mentioned in the pocket guide to Paris, I saw women of the kind described in 'Tableaux parisiens'.

On the first day, after trying to practise the language I had understood to be French, I decided that Paris was best experienced in a state of silent contemplation. It turned out to be possible to walk from one side of the city to the other in half a day, and I did this several times, until I began to plan my days by marking numbers on the bus-map. By the end of the week, numbers 27, 38 and 92, and most other routes that ran buses with open rear platforms, were old acquaintances. I left the boat-ride to the last day, and slept through part of it. When I boarded the airport bus at Les Invalides with a bulging case of second-hand books, some of which I suspected of being priceless treasures, I had seen so many sights that I felt only slightly guilty about leaving my free gift uncollected at the Galeries Lafayette.

One of the most important discoveries came too late to be of use. On the plane home to Birmingham, an American gentleman struck up what he must have hoped would be a conversation. He asked if I had seen something called the Latin Quarter. I told him I had not (though I later found out that I had). 'Well,' he said, 'you'll have to go back! If you haven't seen the Latin Quarter, you haven't seen Paris.'

The following year, I returned with enough money for two weeks, determined to find a job, which I did, after three weeks, and then stayed for six months. Later, I came to know Paris well enough to realize that I would never really know it. The sight of a heavy *porte*

cochère closing on an inner courtyard seemed to be a characteristically Parisian sight. I made some Parisian friends, most of whom had not been born in Paris but who were proud to think themselves Parisian. They showed me places I was never able to find again on my own, and they shared a certain Parisian *art de vivre*: sitting in traffic jams as a form of *flânerie*, parking illegally as a defence of personal liberty, savouring window displays as though the streets were a public museum. They taught me the tricky etiquette of pretending to argue with waiters, and the gallantry of staring at beautiful strangers. As a student, I read novels and histories, and tried to match the information to the visible facts. I learned to distinguish one revolution from the next. Eventually, I was able to explain the column in the Place de la Bastille, and I could even understand some of the political graffiti. But there was always something cumbersome and incongruous about this deliberately acquired knowledge. It was the baggage of a historical tourist. I read all seven thousand entries in Jacques Hillairet's *Dictionnaire historique des rues de Paris*, and gazed at all the photographs, but in the open air of Paris, the most brazenly illuminated monument was still a labyrinth on many levels. Even when my French had improved enough for eavesdropping, the crowds on the boulevards and the faces at windows were reminders that a changing metropolis with a population of millions can never be comprehended by a single person.

The adventures that follow were written as a history of Paris recounted by many different voices. The book begins at the dawn of the French Revolution, and ends a few months ago. There are also some excursions to the medieval and prehistoric past. It traces the spread of the city from the island in the Seine that was the home of the Parisii tribe to the mushrooming suburbs that inspire more fear today than when they were patrolled by highwaymen and wolves.

The idea was to create a kind of mini-Human Comedy of Paris, in which the history of the city would be illuminated by the real experience of its inhabitants. Each tale is true, and each is complete in itself, but there are also correspondences and crossroads, both literal and mysterious, which serve as landmarks in time and space. Certain districts and buildings reappear at different stages, seen

through different eyes, transformed by events, obsessions, visionaries, architects and the passing of time.

No completely accurate map of Paris existed until the end of the eighteenth century, and few people wandered far from their own *quartier*. Even today, the discovery of Paris, or of any great city, entails a degree of disorientation and distraction. A pattern of streets, a certain topographical texture, a combination of climate, smell, building-stone and the flurry of humanity create a particular sense of reality. Every vision of the city, however private or eccentric, belongs to its history as much as its public ceremonies and monuments.

A single viewpoint would have turned these representative adventures into a scripted tour. Narrative devices and perspectives were naturally suggested by a place, a historical moment or a personality. Each tale was written with a flavour of the time in mind; it demanded its own explanations and imposed its own forms of courtesy to the past. Descriptions of the architectural transformations of Paris, the development of its police force and government, its infrastructure and housing, its recreations and revolutions, are there primarily because they serve the purposes of the tale. Nothing has been artificially inserted, and no one – except Baron Haussmann, Adolf Hitler and some Presidents of the Republic – discourses on the evolution of the drainage system or the transport network.

A tourist who follows an uncharted course like a train of thought, only later, after retracing the puzzle of streets on a map, recognizes how much knowledge can adhere to the accidental experience. I have tried to replicate the convenient, mnemonic effect of a long walk, a bus ride or a personal adventure, to create a series of contexts to which more detailed information can be attached. Almost every historian of Paris notes the impossibility of giving a complete account of the city, and I am quite confident of having made this impossibility even more obvious than usual. This book is not intended as a substitute for analytical histories of Paris, some excellent examples of which are currently in print. But it is not as remote from traditional history as it might first appear. It required as much research as *The Discovery of France*, which was devoted to the other eighty-five per cent of the population, and the intention was not to treat hard-won

historical data as an amorphous mass of modelling clay. Above all, it was written for the pleasure of thinking about Paris, and I hope that it will be read for the same purpose, which is why an impartial historian should point out that, in the time that it takes to read this book, it would be possible to decipher every gravestone in the Père-Lachaise cemetery, sit at every *terrasse de café* between the Place de l'Étoile and the Place de la Sorbonne, ride a dozen different buses from departure to terminus, or examine every book-box from the Quai de la Tournelle to the Quai Malaquais.

ONE NIGHT AT THE PALAIS-ROYAL

Every Wednesday morning, at seven o'clock in summer and eight o'clock in winter, the water-coach left the town of Auxerre on its hundred-and-thirty-mile journey to Paris. In winter especially, it was the safest, most comfortable route from Burgundy and the south. It took just three days to sail down the Yonne and the Seine to Paris, where it came to rest among the spires and domes in the heart of the old city. A large, flat-bottomed boat painted green and divided into compartments with portholes and a spacious room lined with benches, the water-coach held up to four hundred human passengers and as many animals, bound for markets along the river or for the dinner tables of cousins in the city. There was a galley serving soups and stews for those who came without enough provisions, and, on either side, two half-turrets known as *les bouteilles* (the latrines), for those who paid ample homage to the vineyards along the banks.

Wealthy travellers who had lurched along the post-roads for countless leagues found the voyage a delightful adventure, once they had grown accustomed to the company of soldiers, travelling salesmen, wandering musicians, monks and peasants, and the army of wet-nurses who left their babies at home and went to sell their breast-milk in the capital. A poet who made the journey a few years before this story begins imagined himself 'aboard one of those vessels laden with creatures of every species destined to populate some recently discovered territory overseas'. Passengers who found a quiet vantage point in that Noah's Ark behind the coiled ropes and the piles of luggage observed the peculiar effect of a landscape that seemed to glide past the motionless boat like a painted backdrop. In those long

hours of idleness and gentle progress, in the cheerful promiscuity of social ranks, some passengers experienced a sudden rejuvenation. Men who were eager for the sights of Paris, and curious to test the reputation of Parisian women for congeniality and charm, often found themselves sentimentally attached long before they had glimpsed the towers of Notre-Dame.

Among the passengers who boarded the service from Auxerre on the morning of 7 November 1787 was a young artillery lieutenant from a regiment recently posted to Valence. He was eighteen years old, afraid of nothing except embarrassment; a little too short for his long leather boots, but fierce enough to demand instant reparation from any man who dared to call him Puss in Boots to his face. The inspector of his military school at Brienne had described him with something approaching admiration:

> Upright and thoughtful; conduct most regular; has always distinguished himself in mathematics; possesses a fair knowledge of history and geography; weak in social accomplishments; will make an excellent sailor.

As an avid reader of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the young man was not insensitive to the charms of a river journey, but he was far too conscious of the honour of his uniform to indulge in the sort of dalliance that made the voyage seem all too short to some of his fellow passengers: when he was sent to join his regiment in Valence, he alone in the party of young officers had not taken advantage of the night in Lyon to visit a brothel. In any case, though he was impatient to discover Paris, he had more serious matters on his mind.

He had just returned home for the first time since leaving for school eight years before. His father had died after wasting several years and part of the family's fortune by suing his own relatives. When he saw the house again, he felt no grief at the old man's passing, but when he found his mother performing domestic chores, humiliation struck him like a slap in the face. The family had legitimate and ancient claims to nobility, but the government in France treated them as though they were ignorant peasants. They had been granted a subsidy for planting mulberry trees and introducing silk production to their backward region, but now that they had

invested their money in the scheme, a nameless servant of the Crown had withdrawn the subsidy. Since the older brother was taken up with fruitless legal studies, it was left to him to negotiate with the authorities in Paris.

It had been a long journey up from the Mediterranean, on roads that were already showing the effects of an early winter. It was only now, as he resigned himself to the leisurely andante of a river journey, that he began to think of the city that lay ahead.

He had seen Paris once before, as a cadet, at the age of fifteen, with three of his classmates and a monk from the school at Brienne. There had been just enough time to buy a novel on the *quais* and to say a prayer at Saint-Germain-des-Prés before they were delivered to the École Royale Militaire, from where, in twelve months, he had seen precisely nothing of the city, except the parade ground on the Champ de Mars. But of course, he had heard about Paris and its splendours from his family and his fellow officers. He had read about its monuments and treasures in histories and geographical dictionaries. He had studied its defences and resources like a foreign general planning an invasion.

He remembered his readings and his comrades' half-true tales as he watched the satellite towns of Vitry and Choisy-le-Roi come into view, and the Bercy plain beginning to widen to the north. He stood on the foredeck, looking ahead like the captain of a ship, silent and severe among the pigs and the chickens in baskets, and the children playing at his feet. He felt the boat catch the current of the sea-green Marne as it joined the Seine at Alfort and broadened the brown river into a majestic thoroughfare. Here, the first steeples of Paris could be seen in the distance, and the deep water had yet to be sullied by the effluent of drains and factories. There were long rafts of floated wood steered by wild-looking men in wolfskin cloaks, and boats bringing passengers and paving stones from Fontainebleau. Washerwomen began to appear along the banks. He saw a tree-lined road on which carriages were running, and long wooden sheds where barrels of wine from Burgundy and the centre of France were rolled up to the waiting wagons.

This time, he knew what he was seeing – a city that had grown up like a thousand villages, stifled by privilege and petty competition.

There should have been a proper port to rival London instead of those rickety landing-stages. The government should build huge granaries and warehouses to feed the people in times of need. A city that barely knew how to keep its population alive had no right to compare itself to ancient Rome, still less to be sniffy about provincials.

Now, low houses ran along both banks. The water-coach entered the channel to the south of the uninhabited Île Louviers that was covered with enormous piles of firewood as though the Gaulish forests had only recently been cleared. Behind it stood the tall houses of the Île Saint-Louis, and, behind them, rising out of the river mist and the chimney-smoke like the stern of a great ship, the buttressed mass of Notre-Dame.

The lieutenant disembarked with the other passengers at the Quai de la Tournelle, and pointed out his trunk to a porter from the hotel where he intended to stay. Then, having previously studied the map and committed the route to memory, he set off across the Pont au Double and entered the medieval maze of the Île de la Cité. After getting lost in the cul-de-sacs and the chapel closes, he found the other bank and threaded his way through the crowded streets to the east of the Louvre. He crossed the Rue Saint-Honoré – the main thoroughfare running east to west across the Right Bank – and turned up the Rue du Four-Saint-Honoré, at the point where the heavy stench of the river gave way to the vegetable smells of Les Halles.

The Rue du Four-Saint-Honoré was a street of furnished hotels, patronized mainly by men who came to do business at the central markets. The lieutenant went to the Hôtel de Cherbourg, next door to the Café du Chat-Qui-Pelote. The hotel register (which has long since disappeared) showed that he stayed in room nine on the third floor, and that he signed his name in its native, Italianate form rather than in the French form that he later affected.

When his trunk was delivered, he settled in, and, in that city of six hundred thousand souls, savoured the delight of being alone. In the house where he lodged in Valence, people ambushed him when he left his room each morning and when he returned in the evening; they stole his time and scattered his thoughts with polite conver-

sation. Now, he was free to think and explore, to compare his own experiences with the books he had read, and to find out for himself whether or not Paris deserved its lofty reputation.

Even without the handwritten account that forms the basis of this story – a brief, incomplete description of one night's adventure – it would have been easy to guess the principal object of the lieutenant's curiosity. In those days, there was only one place that every visitor to Paris wanted to see, and any traveller who published an account of his trip and omitted to mention it, or pretended to have shunned it as a place of debauchery, cannot be trusted as a guide to the city. The streets in its vicinity were said to be the busiest in Europe. By comparison, the other sights of Paris – the Louvre and the Tuileries, Notre-Dame and the Sainte-Chapelle, the Bastille, the Invalides, the grand squares and gardens, the Pont Neuf, and the Gobelins tapestry works – were almost deserted.

In 1781, the Duc de Chartres, a pleasure-seeking, fashionably liberal cousin of the King who was chronically short of cash, began to turn the grounds of his royal residence into an amazing bazaar of economic and erotic activity. Wooden galleries were erected along one of the rows of arcades that formed the stately courtyard. They looked (if such a thing had existed) like a railway station implanted in a palace. Shopkeepers, charlatans and entertainers occupied the galleries even before they were finished in 1784, and, almost overnight, the Palais-Royal became an enchanted city-within-a-city that never closed its gates. According to Louis-Sébastien Mercier, 'a prisoner could live there without getting bored and would dream of freedom only after several years'. It was known, half-humorously, as 'the capital of Paris'.

No one who saw the Palais-Royal in 1787 could doubt the progress of industry and the benefits of modern civilization. There were theatres and puppet shows, and nightly firework displays in the gardens. The galleries and arcades housed over two hundred shops. Without having to walk more than a few hundred feet, a man who cared nothing about cost or the honesty of shopkeepers could buy a barometer, a collapsible rubber raincoat, a painting on a pane of

glass, a copy of the latest banned book, a toy to delight the most despotic child, a box of rouge for his mistress and some English flannel for his wife. He could rummage in mountains of ribbon, gauze, pompons and satin flowers. In the slow-moving crowd, he could find himself pressed up against a strangely attractive woman, her bare shoulders glaring in the lamplight, and move on, a moment later, his pockets completely empty. If he was sufficiently rich, he could lose his money in a gambling house on the first floor, pawn his gold watch and embroidered coat on the second, and console himself with one of the ladies who lived in rented rooms on the third.

There were restaurants fit for emperors, fruit stalls with exotic fruits from the suburbs of Paris and wine merchants selling rare liqueurs from non-existent colonies. Everything that made a person beautiful could be bought at fabulous prices: lotions and ointments that whitened the face, eradicated wrinkles or showed up the blue veins on a breast. A feeble old *chevalier* could leave the Palais-Royal a twinkling Adonis, with lustrous teeth, a glass eye of any colour, a black toupee under his powdered perruque and new calf muscles in his silk stockings. An ill-favoured girl in want of a husband could make herself desirable, at least until the wedding night, with false shoulders, hips, cleavage, eyelashes, eyebrows and eyelids.

There were fancy boutiques in which the clothes of gamblers and libertines were displayed in glass partitions, poorly lit to hide their stains, and sold to clerks and *petits maîtres*. There were public latrines where, for a modest fee, a customer could wipe his bottom on the day's news. The Palais-Royal catered to every taste, and, it was said, created tastes that had never existed before. A guide that was published shortly after the lieutenant's visit recommended Mme Laperrière, 'above the baker's shop', who specialized in old men and whips, Mme Bondy, who supplied the foreign and the very young (recruited from the most reputable convents), and Mlle André's fashion store – though 'one should never spend a night there, because Mlle André applies the principle that "at night, all cats are grey"'.

Despite his abhorrence of a place where everyone felt free to stare at everyone else, and despite his aversion to crowds, the lieutenant seems to have made some preliminary forays into the palace gardens – perhaps in the morning, when ragged women rooted in

the shrubberies and drains for dropped coins and trinkets, or at noon, when people set their watches by the cannon that was fired by the rays of the sun through a powerful lens. During one of these reconnaissance expeditions, he visited Jean-Jacques Rousseau's favourite coffeehouse, the Café de la Régence on the square in front of the palace, where chess-players sat at marble tables in a gigantic hall of mirrors and chandeliers. In Valence, he enjoyed a certain reputation as a chess-player. At the Café de la Régence, he marched his pawns across the board, deployed his knights with an occasional flash of brilliance, apparently indifferent to his losses, and always furious to find himself in checkmate.

The Hôtel de Cherbourg stood just five streets from the Palais-Royal, along the Rue Saint-Honoré. On his way back to the hotel from the Finance Ministry, where he spent hours each day in antechambers to learn the outcome of his family's appeal, he often passed the iron railings that ran along the galleries. Eventually, he began to explore the galleries, always later in the day, after dark – to satisfy his curiosity and to fill a gap in his knowledge (though he felt that too much was made of the matter, and that it was commonly approached in a frame of mind that made it impossible to profit from the experience). The Palais-Royal was, after all, a place where a man of philosophy and sense could make some valuable observations. As he wrote a year or so later in an essay on happiness, entered in a competition that was held by the Académie de Lyon, 'the eyes of Reason preserve us from the precipices of Passion'. At the Palais-Royal, he was able to witness the illusory pleasures of bachelorhood and the deleterious effects of the modern contempt for family life. A man might go to the Palais-Royal to see the savages from Guadeloupe, or 'la Belle Zulima', who had died two centuries ago but whose exquisite body was perfectly preserved; but he might also see those civilized monsters who had turned the natural desire for health, happiness and self-preservation into a brutish quest for animal satisfaction.

On the night in question, the lieutenant had spent almost two weeks in Paris, far from his family and comrades. He was no further advanced with the subsidy for the mulberry groves, though he had acquired some useful ideas on the subject of administrative reform.

He felt the need of some distraction. He walked past the Palais-Royal and the Bibliothèque du Roi towards the tree-lined boulevards and the theatre where the actors of the Comédie Italienne performed their comic operas. The 'Italiens' was popular with lovers of light music and humorous innuendo, but also with gentlemen in search of a companion for the night, who appreciated the convenience of finding the ladies already arranged by price, from the expensive *balcons* to the cheap *amphithéâtres*.

On the bill that night was a historical operetta called *Berthe et Pépin*. It was a subject to stir the imagination of an ambitious young officer. By acts of astounding bravery, the diminutive Pépin le Bref impressed the soldiers who dubbed him 'the Short'. Such was his political skill that he had himself crowned King of the Franks by the Pope at Saint-Denis. After imprisoning his brother in a monastery, King Pépin subdued the Goths, the Saxons and the Arabs, and marched victoriously across the Alps into Italy. Pépin, rather than his son Charlemagne, was the first ruler of a European empire.

The operetta was based on an amorous interlude in Pépin's life. Having inadvertently married a tyrannical woman pretending to be Berthe of Laon, Pépin happens upon the real Berthe in the forest of Le Mans. 'Big-Footed Berthe' (so called because of her club foot) has sworn never to reveal her true identity, except to save her virginity. By threatening her maidenhood, Pépin discovers her to be his true queen, and the pair return in triumph to Paris. The main dramatic interest, to an audience chiefly preoccupied with sex, was the pursuit of a club-footed maid by a short and lusting king.

By the end of the performance, the young lieutenant was in a state of agitation that can easily be imagined. The evening was far from over, and all around him people were talking excitedly about the night ahead. He had no desire for cheery company, yet the thought of dining alone at the Hôtel de Cherbourg was repellent. He left the theatre and pulled his coat about him as the winter wind blew down the boulevard. People and carriages were rushing about as though the day had just begun. Impelled by a sudden resolution, he set off down the Rue de Richelieu towards the galleries and arcades where a thousand lamp-lit dramas were acted out every night.

An hour or so later, he returned to room nine in the Hôtel de

Cherbourg. This time, he was not alone. When his visitor had gone, he sat down to record his observations in a large notebook. He never completed his account, but he kept the notebook, perhaps because it recorded an event of such importance in his young life.

Years later, when his life was in danger, he placed the notebook in a cardboard box covered with grey paper, and had it sent to his uncle for safe-keeping. It is fortunate that the manuscript has survived. So many people visited the Palais-Royal, yet so few left any honest account of their dealings there, that the value of the manuscript as a historical document far outweighs its biographical significance.

Thursday, 22 November 1787. Paris, Hôtel de Cherbourg.

I had left the Italiens and was striding along the avenues of the Palais-Royal. Stirred by the vigorous sentiments that characterize my soul, I was indifferent to the cold. But as my imagination cooled, I felt the chill of the season, and took shelter in the galleries.

I was standing on the threshold of those iron gates when my eyes fell on a person of the female sex. From the time of day, the cut of her clothes and her extreme youth, I deduced without hesitation that she was a whore.

I looked at her, and she stopped, not with that martial air of the others, but with an air that was perfectly in keeping with her physical appearance. I was struck by this concordance of manner and demeanour. Her timidity emboldened me, and I spoke to her – I who feel more keenly than any other man the odiousness of her profession and who have always considered myself soiled by a single glance from one of those creatures . . . Yet her pale complexion, her frail physique, and her gentle voice caused me to act without delay. Either, I told myself, this person will be of use to me in the observations I wish to make, or else she is simply a dolt.

'You must be very cold', I said, 'How can you force yourself to walk these avenues in such weather?'

'Oh, Monsieur, hope is my spur. I must finish my evening's work.'

The dispassionate manner in which she uttered these words, and her composure in answering my enquiry, won me over, and I walked at her side.

'You appear to possess a weak constitution', I observed, 'I am surprised that you have not tired of this profession.'

'Indeed, Monsieur, one must do something!'

'That may be, but is there no profession better suited to your state of health?'

'No, Monsieur; one must earn a living.'

I was delighted to see that she was at least answering my questions. None of my earlier attempts had met with such success.

'To brave the cold as you do, you must come from a northern country.'

'I come from Nantes in Brittany.'

'I know the region … You must do me the pleasure, Mademoiselle, of recounting to me the loss of your virginity.'

'An officer took it from me.'

'Does that anger you?' I asked.

'Oh yes, of that you may be certain.' (As she spoke these words, her voice had a charm and richness I had not previously detected.) 'You may be certain of that, Monsieur. My sister is now well established, and there is no reason why I should not have been so too.'

'How did you come to Paris?'

'The officer who degraded me, and whom I hate with all my heart, abandoned me. I was forced to flee my mother's indignation. A second man presented himself. He brought me to Paris, where he deserted me. He was succeeded by a third, with whom I have lived these three years. Although he is a Frenchman, his business affairs have called him to London, where he is now . . . Let us go to your lodgings.'

'But what shall we do there?'

'Come, Sir, we shall warm ourselves up and you shall satisfy your pleasure.'

I was not about to be overcome by scruples. I had provoked her so that she would not run away when I put to her the proposition I was preparing to make, my intention being to feign the honourable designs that I wanted to prove to her I did not harbour . . .

At this point, the lieutenant laid down his pen. No doubt the rest of the evening's adventure scarcely lent itself to the style of prose he had learned in sentimental novels. And perhaps, as he wrote and became entangled in his phrases, he realized that he was not the principal actor in his play, and that there was more to that arduous profession than he had supposed.

The observer had been observed and analysed long before he made his first approach. She had seen him walking in the crowd in his blue

uniform, self-conscious and proud, not quite as elegant as he would have liked, and clearly not from Paris. He wore his virginity like an advertising board. Such a man would appreciate a shy young whore who was dignified in her predicament – and prepared to hold a conversation in the cold. He needed a woman skilled in the art of love who would make him feel that he was leading the dance and teaching her the steps.

The lieutenant shifted uncomfortably in his chair. There was indeed much to be learned at the Palais-Royal. He had shown by his actions more than by his words that he could profit from the lessons: too much time refining tactics and preparing the ground. He had turned the loss of his virginity into a campaign, when all it took was a few sous and five minutes of his time.

He stayed on at the Hôtel de Cherbourg for another few weeks. In one sense, it was a wasted journey. He failed to secure a subsidy for the mulberry groves, which seemed to him a predictable outcome in a city of shopkeepers and libertines. He wrote a few letters and the first paragraph of a history of Corsica: 'Though I have scarce reached the age [here, there is a gap in the manuscript], I have the enthusiasm that a more mature study of men often eradicates from the heart.' Doubtless he became better acquainted with the sights of Paris, but he left no other record of his observations. If he returned to the Théâtre des Italiens in December, he would have seen *The Lover Put to the Test, or The Invisible Woman*, but not *The English Prisoner*, which was premiered two days after he boarded the boat for Montereau on Christmas Eve. He may also have returned to the Palais-Royal, but the crowds were so dense, and an engaging girl from Brittany was rarely short of customers. It is unlikely that he ever saw his first lover again.

The woman herself is known to us only from the lieutenant's account. Even that small amount of detail is unusual. Official statistics show that of twelve thousand seven hundred prostitutes in Paris who knew their place of birth, fifty-three came from her part of Brittany, but no names are attached to the figures – other than the usual *noms de guerre*: Jasmine, Abricote, Serpentine, Ingénue, etc. – and there is nothing to corroborate her tale of disgrace and abandonment.

Perhaps her companion, if he existed, returned from London and rescued her from the Palais-Royal. Or perhaps, like the wife of Balzac's Colonel Chabert, she was picked up in the galleries 'like a hackney cab', and installed in an elegant *hôtel*. Two years after the young lieutenant's visit, when the Palais-Royal became a centre of revolutionary activity, she might have joined her sisters-in-arms in the historic meeting around the fountain, when 'the demoiselles of the Palais-Royal' vowed to publish their grievances and to demand fair remuneration for their patriotic labours:

> The confederates of all parts of France who are joined together in Paris, far from having reason to complain of us, will retain a pleasant memory of the lengths to which we went to welcome them.

She was better placed than prostitutes in other parts of the city to survive those difficult years. When François-René de Chateaubriand returned from English exile in 1800, after passing through a ravaged landscape of silent churches and blackened figures in neglected fields, he was amazed to find the Palais-Royal still ringing with sounds of jollity. A little hunchback was standing on a table, playing a fiddle and singing a hymn to General Bonaparte, the young First Consul of the French Republic:

> By his virtues and attractions,
> He deserved to be their father!

If she was eighteen when she met Lieutenant Bonaparte, she would then have been nearing the end of her professional life. (Most prostitutes in Paris were aged between eighteen and thirty-two.) After the Revolution, life became harder. Whenever General Bonaparte attended the Théâtre Français and parked his carriage near the Palais-Royal, soldiers were sent to 'purge' the brothels, lest the First Consul be exposed to embarrassing overtures. Later still, when the young lieutenant had conquered half of Europe, married an Austrian princess and made his mother the richest widow in France, the whores of the Palais-Royal were fined, imprisoned, medically inspected or sent back in disgrace to their native provinces.

But even Napoleon Bonaparte had little effect on 'the capital of Paris'. According to an English traveller, it remained 'a vortex of

dissipation where many a youth is engulfed'. Its fame spread throughout the empire and beyond. In the depths of Russia, Cossacks talked of it as a place of legend, and when armies from the east crossed the frontiers of the crumbling empire, officers inspired their troops with tales of the Palais-Royal, insisting that, until he had seen that palace of debauchery and tasted its civilized delights, no man could call himself a man, or consider his education complete.