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Season of Light

Written by Katharine McMahon

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Season of Light

Katharine McMahon



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are natural, renewable and recyclable products and
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It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way – in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.

From *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens

Part One

Paris, 1788

Chapter One

On John Morton's arm she floated from the carriage and crossed a courtyard where fountains played amid cravat-sized strips of lawn. A pair of footmen in blue and gold livery bowed them into a marble-floored entrance hall, glossy under the thin soles of her slippers. Double doors were flung wide open, admitting them to a chamber filled with light; suddenly, sensationally, Asa realised that her entire life had been a preparation for the Paris of May 1788.

Sunshine flooded through a dozen windows draped with silk of palest eau de Nil, sparked off the crystal droplet of a chandelier, a gilt-framed mirror, a woman's earring. Music trickled from a spinet, swagged skirts swayed and merged, and laughter trilled amid a scent of lilies and almond biscuits. Asa's hand dropped from Morton's wrist as other conversations faded and there was just one voice, over there by the window; one speaker, to whom all faces turned.

'Has everyone heard about the events in Grenoble?' His voice was low but emphatic and the gaze of his sky-blue eyes flashed from one face to another. 'The people have risen in defence of their magistrates. They have refused to let the *parlement* be disbanded. The king has been foolish in attempting to force through his reforms without the *parlement*'s consent.'

'Your support of the reforms does you credit, Didier,' called a woman's voice. 'As such a fine lawyer, you are bound to be elected to the *parlement* one day. The old constitution would serve you well.'

‘What do I care about my own future, Madame de Genlis, if I could be rid of this old constitution? I would give everything I have – wouldn’t we all – to serve a new France?’

‘And in Grenoble? What was the outcome?’

‘The outcome was bloodshed, martyrs among the common people, some of whom could scarcely have known what they were fighting for, and casualties among the soldiers brought out to keep the peace. But just think, Grenoble hardly has a reputation as a seat of rebellion – what has happened there could happen anywhere.’

Asa, who had crept to the very edge of the group, was transfixed. Yes, this was it. This was being alive; to be amid people who were actually at the heart of tumult and change. She might have been a million miles from her home in Sussex, where even in the most heated debate at the Abolitionist Society nobody spoke with half such passion. This man, Didier, was vigorous and clean cut. A single slanting gesture from his hand opened a future of infinite possibility. And yet, as he ran his fingers through his unruly dark hair and clapped a friend on the shoulder, he also revealed himself to be boyish, perhaps scarcely older than Asa herself.

‘That’s my brother Didier. I told you about him, remember?’ A touch on Asa’s elbow; Beatrice Paulin, daughter of a professor at Caen university and Asa’s sole connection in Paris. ‘Look at the state of his clothes. He’s a disgrace. If he didn’t spend so much time at the Palais de Justice representing penniless clients who do nothing for his pocket or his career, he might be able to afford a new shirt.’

The sleeves and high collar of Paulin’s coat were indeed shiny with too much wear, his necktie askew as he tugged at it in the heat of the moment, his shoes worn down.

‘What does it matter?’ Asa whispered. ‘What do clothes matter? Surely he puts the rest of us to shame for caring about them at all.’

Meanwhile a young poet had unfurled a scroll with mock

solemnity and was reciting a poem entitled 'Liberty', lamenting the fact that although the French people had helped to free America from the tyranny of British rule, they still found themselves under the heel of an absolute monarch at home, bankrupting themselves into the bargain. Asa could not help glancing back to the window, where Didier Paulin stood at the centre of a knot of young men deep in conversation. He was talking very fast and gesticulating with scholarly fingers, favouring one listener then another with a glance from those astonishing blue eyes. Next time she glanced at him, Asa drew breath sharply, because he had caught sight of her and seemed to pause. She turned her head away abruptly so that a lock of burnished gold hair, in a shaft of sunlight, fell across her breast.

'Come and meet Madame de Genlis,' said Beatrice, leading Asa towards their hostess, who was holding court from a sofa near the hearth. Her corsage was of peach and white roses and her frivolous retroussé nose seemed at odds with the brilliance of her wide-set eyes.

'So this is the little English scholar my dear friend Beatrice has been telling me about. You are most welcome, Mademoiselle Ardleigh. What do you think of our Paris?'

'I think it is a city of extremes, madame.'

'Indeed it is. But don't be deceived by appearances. You might think it would suit some of us very well to rattle through the streets in our great carriages, oblivious to the suffering of those crushed beneath our wheels, but every right-thinking person in Paris longs for change.'

The ladies around her eyed Asa's narrow waist and vivid complexion as they fluttered their fans in agreement. 'Take my dear friend the Duc d'Orléans,' added Madame de Genlis. 'He may sometimes seem intent only on pleasure, and may not always find the appropriate words, but one shouldn't be deceived. His was the lone voice that dared tell his wretched cousin, the king, that he could not force edicts on the *parlement*.'

‘Though she would say that,’ whispered Beatrice as she and Asa moved away, ‘since everyone knows the pair are lovers.’

Goodness, wait until I tell Caroline Lambert about all this, thought Asa, and she glanced nervously at John Morton, who had bustled over to them and might have overheard. Thankfully he had other matters on his mind.

‘You will not believe who’s just arrived; a relative of yours, Harry Shackleford. I met him earlier in the week and he said he might be here today. He wished to be introduced to you. If only your sister had been well enough to accompany us.’

‘What kind of a Shackleford is he?’ demanded Asa. ‘I hope he is not from the branch of the family who will inherit Ardleigh.’

‘That’s it, the Shacklefords of Compton Wyatt in Somerset. This is the younger brother, more’s the pity, but then the older is already married, I believe.’

‘Then I would rather not meet him, Mr Morton, if you don’t mind. Perhaps when Philippa is better . . .’

Too late; the young man, resplendent in coral-pink satin and looking very hot in his high boots and tight cravat, was weaving through the throng towards them.

‘My dear sister-in-law,’ said Morton, ‘may I introduce a young man who is very anxious to make your acquaintance: your cousin, Mr Shackleford.’

‘*Distant* cousin,’ Shackleford corrected, gazing at Asa admiringly. ‘Miss Ardleigh, I can scarcely believe my good fortune in meeting you here in Paris.’

As he bowed over her hand Asa was treated to a glimpse of elaborately dressed hair and a whiff of citrus perfume. Meanwhile Beatrice had faded into the crowd. Oh dear God, prayed Asa, please let her introduce me to her brother before he leaves. ‘Mr Shackleford,’ she said coldly.

He spoke with the drawl of one educated at Eton and Oxford. ‘Delighted to make your acquaintance, Miss Ardleigh. I’m so sorry to hear that your sister is unwell. I had

hoped to meet you both here and congratulate her on her marriage.'

Asa made a cursory bow. What right had he, a stranger – no, worse, a usurper – to pretend concern for Philippa?

'Will you give her my kindest regards?' he urged, still gripping her hand.

'If you wish.'

'How d'you find Paris?'

'I am fortunate to be here.' Asa withdrew her hand. Out of the corner of her eye she spotted Beatrice's sea-green gown and beyond, still by the window, the brother, Didier. Had he noticed that she had been cornered by the most foppish man in the room?

'And Paris shares your sense of good fortune, Miss Ardleigh. Even had I not met your brother-in-law I would still have known you were in town. Everyone is talking about you.'

Asa lifted her chin. The name Shackleford was anathema to her at the best of times but here, in Madame de Genlis's radical salon, she felt tainted even talking to him. Everyone must know that the Shackleford wealth came from slavery and this man exuded ill-gotten gains.

'Mr Shackleford intends to be in Paris for several weeks,' said Morton, 'so we shall see a good deal of him, I hope. And then perhaps we shall meet up with him again in Rome. He is travelling. Mostly for pleasure, he says, and the culture. And some business.'

'Business, Mr Shackleford?' Asa said. 'What kind of business might that be?'

'My father's business really. He expects me to be the family's ambassador while I'm in Europe.'

'And what might you be an ambassador for, exactly?'

Shackleford was watching her cautiously, as if he sensed she was waiting to pounce. 'Trade. You know. Of various kinds.'

'Various *kinds*?'

'What I've found very disappointing, Shackleford,' said

Morton hastily, 'is that so few people in Paris speak English. I have much advice to offer – I should so like to enlighten these fellows as to the merits of a well-run parliament – but I can't make myself understood. I have to rely on my dear sister-in-law here.'

'Mr Morton tells me you are quite the linguist, Miss Ardleigh,' said Shackleford, still with a dewy-eyed look of fascination. 'Now that I admire. My own French is stilted, my German and Italian worse.'

'I am lucky to have had an excellent teacher since I was eight years old.'

'Do you read in French?'

'I do.'

Both Shackleford and Morton were regarding her as one might a performing dog. 'And which is your favourite novel, Miss Ardleigh?' said Shackleford.

'At the moment, Goethe's *Werther*, of course. Isn't that the answer you'd expect of any young woman at present, Mr Shackleford? But I am also reading the Abbé Raynal.'

His brow lifted. Good, her comment had hit its mark. He could not be quite so foolish as he looked if he recognised her allusion to a writer who had made a scathing attack on the practice of slavery.

And then all other thoughts were driven from her head because Beatrice approached, gripping her brother's hand. 'Here is Mademoiselle Ardleigh, Didier. Her teacher in England is our father's dear friend Mr Lambert. Do you remember, he stayed at our house in Caen when we were children?'

Paulin's unpowdered hair was held back by a crumpled ribbon and his blue gaze concentrated on Asa as if the rest of the room were an irrelevance. 'You need no further recommendation, mademoiselle, if you are a friend of Monsieur Lambert.' His lips had a distinctive upward tilt at either end so that he seemed on the verge of laughter. Minutes earlier, as

she had watched him talk about Grenoble, Asa had thought him impassioned and serious, but now there was a lightness to his voice and smile that was somehow heart-rending by contrast.

She had no choice but to introduce Morton and Shackelford. 'Delighted to make your acquaintance, Paulin,' said Morton a little stiffly – he had learned to be circumspect in the presence of carelessly dressed Parisian radicals.

'I hear that you are a lawyer, Paulin,' Shackelford said. 'Thought of taking up the law myself but decided it would require far too much study. Curse of the younger son, to be without direction.'

Paulin raised his fine brows and replied in fluent English. 'But there is so much to be done. How can anyone lack direction in times such as these? And if your family happens to have money, that always helps.'

'Then we must dine together, and you can tell me what's needed.'

Paulin shrugged. 'We'll dine, yes, if you like. But really, you don't need instruction from me. Look about you, Shackelford. You'll soon see that France is on its knees.'

The clock was striking six, which in England would have signalled the end of dinner, but in Madame de Genlis's salon was the impetus for women to pick up their skirts and gentlemen to lead their ladies towards the door, as if some invisible force were funnelling them towards other important assemblies.

Morton was deferential in his leave-taking of Shackelford: 'We will meet again on Friday next, at *Figaro*. And do call at our hotel, the Montmorency, where my wife' – the word *wife* was spoken by Morton with a self-conscious smile that never ceased to infuriate Asa – 'will be delighted to receive you.'

A lock of Shackelford's powdered hair had lost its curl and hung over his cheek as he kissed Asa's hand once more. By the time he'd backed away, with obvious reluctance, Didier Paulin

was standing beside Madame de Genlis, arms folded, absolutely at ease as he inclined his head to offer her a confidence.

'Didier is an affectionate soul,' said Beatrice. 'Some men would forget their family at times like this, but not Didier. That turquoise handkerchief he carries in his pocket used to be my mother's. She died three years ago and he wears it in remembrance of her because she came from generations of silk weavers.'

'Beatrice, we have so much in common,' said Asa. 'Except in my case it was different – it was my fault. My mother died giving birth to me.'

'Then you have suffered the most,' said Beatrice gravely. 'I at least was brought up by my mother.'

The room was emptying. Any moment now Morton would offer to escort Asa back to the hotel. Paulin abruptly crossed the room and slipped his arm around his sister's waist so that Asa, while rejoicing in his nearness, felt a pang that she did not have such a brother and that no male arm except her father's had ever held her close.

'Didier, I've not seen you for days,' cried Beatrice, resting her head on his shoulder. 'You must come to visit Father and me tomorrow, and eat a proper meal.'

'What's a proper meal?' He pinched her cheek and kissed her. 'You and Father would like to fill me up with foie gras, I suppose.'

Asa noticed Didier's ink-stained fingers as they rested on the folds of Beatrice's skirt. 'How long have you been in Paris, mademoiselle?' he asked her.

'Over a month.'

'And how much longer will you stay?'

'I cannot be sure. I am here as a companion to my oldest sister on her wedding journey and our plans depend on my new brother-in-law, Mr Morton.' Asa nodded towards Morton, who was still mercifully engaged in elaborate farewells.

'Then I must hope to see you again soon.' These words, like soft, momentous blows to Asa's heart, were followed by a short pause. 'I suppose you have visited Versailles, Mademoiselle Anglaise, like every other visitor to our city.'

'Indeed I have.'

'And?'

'It filled me with dismay. So much money squandered on so few.'

'Did you view the state rooms?'

'We did, although my brother-in-law was more interested in the gardens since he is designing his own. I had no wish to glimpse the queen in a state of undress. They say her son is very sick and that makes me feel sorry for her. But is it true she orders a new gown every other day?'

Had she said the right thing? Was compassionate contempt for the monarchy an acceptable attitude? Apparently so.

'Mademoiselle, I'm sure my father would like to meet a friend of Monsieur Lambert's. I heard Monsieur Morton say you will go to *Figaro* this Friday. We shall also be there.' Releasing Beatrice, he darted forward and took Asa's hand.

'Ronsard,' he murmured, 'do you know his work?'

She shook her head.

'You should. I feel as if I recognise you because you are in every word he writes.'

On the brief journey back to the hotel, Morton talked exclusively about Shackleford: 'Such a pity he's only the younger son. He seemed very taken with you. Couldn't keep his eyes off you, in fact, begged me to introduce you. Your dear sister will be sorry to have missed him. He has many acquaintances in Paris and says ...'

Meanwhile Asa was reliving her conversation with Didier. Her blood surged with the recollection of what he'd said, the slight pressure of his thumb on her palm. *Ronsard*. Why had Mr Lambert never introduced her to the poetry of Ronsard?

How ignorant she must have seemed. Well, by the time she met Didier at the theatre next week she would have educated herself.

At the Montmorency they found Philippa collapsed against the pillows, nauseous and clammy-skinned, insisting weakly that the source of her troubles must be last night's veal. Morton wanted to call a doctor at once but was urged by his wife to wait until morning. So Asa, having bathed her sister's face and combed her hair, spent an anxious, emotional evening in her own room. To her middle sister, Georgina, she wrote a long letter about her meeting with the notorious Shackleford. To her friend, Caroline Lambert, she described in glowing terms her meeting with sensitive Beatrice Paulin and her radical brother.