

# 1

‘Major Picquart to see the Minister of War . . .’

The sentry on the rue Saint-Dominique steps out of his box to open the gate and I run through a whirl of snow across the windy courtyard into the warm lobby of the hôtel de Brienne, where a sleek young captain of the Republican Guard rises to salute me. I repeat, with greater urgency: ‘*Major Picquart to see the Minister of War . . . !*’

We march in step, the captain leading, over the black and white marble of the minister’s official residence, up the curving staircase, past suits of silver armour from the time of Louis the Sun King, past that atrocious piece of Imperial kitsch, David’s *Napoleon Crossing the Alps at the Col du Grand-Saint-Bernard*, until we reach the first floor, where we halt beside a window overlooking the grounds and the captain goes off to announce my arrival, leaving me alone for a few moments to contemplate something rare and beautiful: a garden made silent by snow in the centre of a city on a winter’s morning. Even the yellow electric lights in the War Ministry, shimmering through the gauzy trees, have a quality of magic.

‘General Mercier is waiting for you, Major.’

The minister’s office is huge and ornately panelled in duck-egg blue, with a double balcony over the

whitened lawn. Two elderly men in black uniforms, the most senior officers in the Ministry of War, stand warming the backs of their legs against the open fire. One is General Raoul le Mouton de Boisdeffre, Chief of the General Staff, expert in all things Russian, architect of our burgeoning alliance with the new tsar, who has spent so much time with the Imperial court he has begun to look like a stiff-whiskered Russian count. The other, slightly older at sixty, is his superior: the Minister of War himself, General Auguste Mercier.

I march to the middle of the carpet and salute.

Mercier has an oddly creased and immobile face, like a leather mask. Occasionally I have the odd illusion that another man is watching me through its narrow eye-slits. He says in his quiet voice, 'Well, Major Picquart, that didn't take long. What time did it finish?'

'Half an hour ago, General.'

'So it really is all over?'

I nod. 'It's over.'

And so it begins.

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'Come and sit down by the fire,' orders the minister. He speaks very quietly, as he always does. He indicates a gilt chair. 'Pull it up. Take off your coat. Tell us everything that happened.'

He sits poised in expectation on the edge of his seat: his body bent forwards, his hands clasped, his forearms resting on his knees. Protocol has prevented him from

attending the morning's spectacle in person. He is in the position of an impresario who has missed his own show. He hungers for details: insights, observations, colour.

'What was the mood on the streets first thing?'

'I would say the mood was . . . expectant.'

I describe how I left my apartment in the pre-dawn darkness to walk to the *École Militaire*, and how the streets, to begin with at least, were unusually quiet, it being a Saturday – 'The Jewish Sabbath,' Mercier interrupts me, with a faint smile – and also freezing cold. In fact, although I do not mention this, as I passed along the gloomy pavements of the *rue Boissière* and the *avenue du Trocadéro*, I began to wonder if the minister's great production might turn out to be a flop. But then I reached the *pont de l'Alma* and saw the shadowy crowd pouring across the dark waters of the *Seine*, and that was when I realised what Mercier must have known all along: that the human impulse to watch another's humiliation will always prove sufficient insulation against even the bitterest cold.

I joined the multitude as they streamed southwards, over the river and down the *avenue Bosquet* – such a density of humanity that they spilled off the wooden pavements and into the street. They reminded me of a racecourse crowd – there was the same sense of shared anticipation, of the common pursuit of a classless pleasure. Newspaper vendors threaded back and forth selling the morning's editions. An aroma of roasting chestnuts rose from the braziers on the roadside.

At the bottom of the avenue I broke away and crossed over to the *École Militaire*, where until a year before I had served as professor of topography. The crowd streamed on past me towards the official assembly point in the *place de Fontenoy*. It was beginning to get light. The *École* rang with the sound of drums and bugles, hooves and curses, shouted orders, the tramp of boots. Each of the nine infantry regiments quartered in Paris had been ordered to send two companies to witness the ceremony, one composed of experienced men, the other of new recruits whose moral fibre, Mercier felt, would benefit by this example. As I passed through the grand salons and entered the *cour Morland*, they were already mustering in their thousands on the frozen mud.

I have never attended a public execution, have never tasted that particular atmosphere, but I imagine it must feel something like the *École* did that morning. The vastness of the *cour Morland* provided an appropriate stage for a grand spectacle. In the distance, beyond the railings, in the semicircle of the *place de Fontenoy*, a great murmuring sea of pink faces stirred behind a line of black-uniformed gendarmes. Every centimetre of space was filled. People were standing on benches and on the tops of carriages and omnibuses; they were sitting in the branches of the trees; one man had even managed to scale the pinnacle of the 1870 war memorial.

Mercier, drinking all this up, asks me, 'So how many were present, would you estimate?'

'The *Préfecture of Police* assured me twenty thousand.'

‘Really?’ The minister looks less impressed than I had expected. ‘You know that I originally wanted to hold the ceremony at Longchamp? The racetrack has a capacity of *fifty* thousand.’

Boisdeffre says flatteringly, ‘And you would have filled it, Minister, by the sound of it.’

‘Of course we would have filled it! But the Ministry of the Interior maintained there was risk of public disorder. Whereas I say: the greater the crowd, the stronger the lesson.’

Still, twenty thousand seemed plenty to me. The noise of the crowd was subdued but ominous, like the breathing of some powerful animal, temporarily quiescent but which could turn dangerous in an instant. Just before eight, an escort of cavalry appeared, trotting along the front of the crowd, and suddenly the beast began to stir, for between the riders could be glimpsed a black prison wagon drawn by four horses. A wave of jeers swelled and rolled over it. The cortège slowed, a gate was opened, and the vehicle and its guard clattered over the cobbles into the École.

As I watched it disappear into an inner courtyard, a man standing near to me said, ‘Observe, Major Picquart: the Romans fed Christians to the lions; we feed them Jews. That is progress, I suppose.’

He was swaddled in a greatcoat with the collar turned up, a grey muffler around his throat, his cap pulled low over his eyes. I recognised him by his voice at first, and then by the way his body shook uncontrollably.

I saluted. ‘Colonel Sandherr.’

Sandherr said, 'Where will you stand to watch the show?'

'I haven't thought about it.'

'You're welcome to come and join me and my men.'

'That would be an honour. But first I have to check that everything is proceeding in accordance with the minister's instructions.'

'We will be over there when you have finished your duties.' He pointed across the cour Morland with a trembling hand. 'You will have a good view.'

My duties! I wonder, looking back, if he wasn't being sarcastic. I walked over to the garrison office, where the prisoner was in the custody of Captain Lebrun-Renault of the Republican Guard. I had no desire to see the condemned man again. Only two years earlier he had been a student of mine in this very building. Now I had nothing to say to him; I felt nothing for him; I wished he had never been born and I wanted him gone – from Paris, from France, from Europe. A trooper went and fetched Lebrun-Renault for me. He turned out to be a big, red-faced, horsey young man, rather like a policeman. He came out and reported: 'The traitor is nervous but calm. I don't think he will kick up any trouble. The threads of his clothing have been loosened and his sword has been scored half through to ensure it breaks easily. Nothing has been left to chance. If he tries to make a speech, General Darras will give a signal and the band will strike up a tune to drown him out.'

Mercier muses, 'What kind of tune does one play to drown a man out, I wonder?'

Boisdeffre suggests, 'A sea shanty, Minister?'

'That's good,' says Mercier judiciously. But he doesn't smile; he rarely smiles. He turns to me again. 'So you watched the proceedings with Sandherr and his men. What do you make of them?'

Unsure how to answer – Sandherr is a colonel, after all – I say cautiously, 'A dedicated group of patriots, doing invaluable work and receiving little or no recognition.'

It is a good answer. So good that perhaps my entire life – and with it the story I am about to tell – may have turned upon it. At any rate, Mercier, or the man behind the mask that is Mercier, gives me a searching look as if to check that I really mean what I say, and then nods in approval. 'You're right there, Picquart. France owes them a lot.'

All six of these paragons were present that morning to witness the culmination of their work: the euphemistically named 'Statistical Section' of the General Staff. I sought them out after I had finished talking with Lebrun-Renault. They stood slightly apart from everyone else in the south-west corner of the parade ground, in the lee of one of the low surrounding buildings. Sandherr had his hands in his pockets and his head down, and seemed entirely remote—

'Do you remember,' interrupts the Minister of War, turning to Boisdeffre, 'that they used to call Jean Sandherr "the handsomest man in the French Army"?''

'I do remember that, Minister,' confirms the Chief of the General Staff. 'It's hard to believe it now, poor fellow.'

On one side of Sandherr stood his deputy, a plump alcoholic with a face the colour of brick, taking regular nips from a gunmetal hip flask; on the other was the only member of his staff I knew by sight – the massive figure of Joseph Henry, who clapped me on the shoulder and boomed that he hoped I'd be mentioning him in my report to the minister. The two junior officers of the section, both captains, seemed colourless by comparison. There was also a civilian, a bony clerk who looked as if he seldom saw fresh air, holding a pair of opera glasses. They shifted along to make room for me and the alcoholic offered me a swig of his filthy cognac. Presently we were joined by a couple of other outsiders: a smart official from the Foreign Ministry, and that disturbing boob Colonel du Paty de Clam of the General Staff, his monocle flashing like an empty eye socket in the morning light.

By now the time was drawing close and one could feel the tension tightening under that sinister pale sky. Nearly four thousand soldiers had been drawn up on parade, yet not a sound escaped them. Even the crowd was hushed. The only movement came from the edges of the cour Morland, where a few invited guests were still being shown to their places, hurrying apologetically like latecomers at a funeral. A tiny slim woman in a white fur hat and muff, carrying a frilly blue umbrella and being escorted by a tall lieutenant of the dragoons, was recognised by some of the spectators nearest the railings, and a light patter of applause, punctuated by cries of 'Hurrah!' and 'Bravo!', drifted over the mud.