The Tuesday Club

by Katherine Neville, 1945–

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Franklin would not have been Franklin without a club, and his club in France was the Lodge of the Nine Sisters.
—Carl Van Doren, *Benjamin Franklin*

August 31, 1784, 7:00 a.m.
Auteuil, France

Today, the day of the crisis, was a Tuesday.

As always, thought Mme Helvetius with irony, things went more to the mark in French— *non?* For example, in French, the name Tuesday was *mardi*, Mars Day, the day of the god of war.

And given the impending crisis, and the message she'd just received, any thought of Mars spelled more than it seemed—indeed, it could spell *la calamité!*

Although Mme Helvetius had been awaiting such a message for months, it was so cleverly coded that even the messenger who'd brought it from Scotland could not understand it. Still, given his urgency, she knew it could only mean that what she had expected was about to happen, quite soon, something that could ruin all her well-crafted plans, that might place their entire enterprise—their very lives—in danger.

But to deliver the message right away would require a deception.

In stealth, she let herself out the side French windows of her private salon to where her gardener's large white mule stood patiently, saddled and waiting. The mâitre d'hôtel of her estates—a very bossy man, indeed (servants today carried themselves with more pretensions than the nobility ever dreamt of)—had insisted she must take care, if traveling in secrecy and alone.

She understood that the extensive entourage within her household would be inflamed with curiosity if they saw her depart so early. She hoped they all believed in a clandestine tryst she'd never taken pains to deny. At home or abroad, these days, every room and road in France was riddled with spies, acting on behalf of one fractious faction or another: to be cautious was to be wise.

Nonetheless, Mme Helvetius felt a complete fool in this ridiculous disguise, dressed as she was in the faded blue costume borrowed from her milkmaid (which smelled rather rich) and a dilapidated straw hat. Done up like a strumpet, astride a big white mule—she, Anne-Catherine de Ligniville-Autricourt, Mme Helvetius—one of the wealthiest women in France and, at one time, among the most beautiful. Well, that had been another day.

And she was, assuredly, another woman.

With impatience, Mme Helvetius prodded the mule to go faster through the rolling hills and vineyards still drenched with dew, along the dusty, winding road from her *banlieue* of Auteuil, just outside Paris, to its neighboring suburb of Passy. When she noticed the mule eyeing a heavy bunch of grapes along the road, she tapped his rump firmly with her hand, muttered, *"Obstiné,"* under her breath, and jerked at the reins.

Although she might be anxious to reach her destination, Mme Helvetius couldn't help thinking about the strangeness of the message running unbidden through her mind like a long-forgotten melody. The oddity of it—so peculiar, like nothing she'd ever thought of. Whatever could it mean? There was only one person, she knew, who could decipher it. She must get to him—and quickly.

The mule was so slow, it seemed hours before Mme Helvetius at last spied the sun breaking over the eastern cliff. And there, high on its perch above the river Seine, lay her destination: Le Valentinois. Tucked like an ostentatious jewel into its lavish setting of gardens and follies, plashing fountains and octagonal pools, the famous château was a bastion of extravagance that would rival a pasha's palace.

Mme Helvetius felt the chill she felt whenever she came here, which was more often than she cared think of. Given the criticality of her mission, she was grateful she'd come in this attire, so she might eschew the carriage entrance and enter through the gardens where she wouldn't be recognized. For Le Valentinois, despite its opulence, was known as the nest of gunrunners, speculators, thieves and

spies—a notorious circle formed and fed upon war and crisis, of the sort they'd just come through in Europe.

This circle was ruled by the most dangerous man of all: the château's wealthy, mysterious owner, Donatien le Ray de Chaumont. Given the importance of her message, she prayed she was not walking with open eyes into a trap. At whatever cost, she must deliver the message in private, before the household was stirring. She must get the message to Franklin at once—here in his private wing of the château.

Only Dr. Franklin would know what they must do—what action the club must take when it met tonight—that is, once he had deciphered the message in that song.

8:00 a.m.
Auteuil, France

One might be lonely in Paris, thought Abigail Adams with chagrin—but one could surely never be alone!

Wherever one tried to move, crowds of unwashed bodies closed in about one. The streets were a cesspool. No wonder the Parisians wore more lace around their necks than a Dutch tablecloth—within easy reach of their noses, to block the smell!

Hadn't her dear Mr. Adams fallen deathly ill each time he'd crossed the waters here from America?

And the women! There were forty thousand of them licensed as whores (she blushed even to think the word) who'd been sanctioned to "ply their craft" within the very city gates.

And the boxes! A horror she'd gleaned from the churchwardens themselves: boxes set out on designated street corners for women to drop their unwanted children into. An improvement, they said, upon the "old days" of the philosopher Rousseau, when babies had been left on church steps to die of exposure—some frozen so hard, they had to scrape their little bodies off the stones. O, iniquity!

After just a few days in Paris, Abigail felt, before exposing them further to this rotten decadence, she should take herself off with her own two children, Nabby and Johnnie, for a steam cleaning at a thermal spa.

So thank heavens, Abigail sighed in relief, from now on they would not have to spend another moment in the sordid sink. Her dear Mr. Adams had secured them a place in the country, at Auteuil.

The house was quite impressive—fifty rooms! Replete with gardens and servants, far across the river from the city's turmoil.

There was an extra plum in the pudding, too, for just next door to their new residence lived the woman whom Dr. Franklin had once described to Abigail as "a true Frenchwoman, free of all pretension… the best person in the world." Her name was Mme Helvetius.

It did seem to Abigail, despite the lady's heralded modesty, that Mme Helvetius had a few gifts and accomplishments of her own to boast of. Among these she was still considered, at nearly age sixty, to be among the most beautiful women in

France. It was said that the poet Fontenelle, on his hundredth birthday, had sighed, “Mme Helvetius makes one long to be eighty again.”

Abigail had learned, too, that the lady’s late husband was a famous philosophe who’d planned to found a club of distinguished dignitaries and scientists. Upon his death, his widow, Mme Helvetius, had drawn upon her own fortune to fund the club’s creation: “The Lodge of Nine Sisters” it was called, referring to muses of the arts and sciences. As its official founder, Mme Helvetius was the only woman admitted to the Lodge’s private meetings. Though these were by invitation only, they were far from secret, for the club boasted among its early members Lafayette, Voltaire and Dr. Franklin: the doctor had tapped its financial connections for monies needed to ensure the success of the American Revolution.

Her new neighbor here in Auteuil must be a great lady indeed, thought Abigail as she dressed to depart for her day at Le Valentinois—Abigail couldn’t wait to meet her. But hadn’t Dr. Franklin said that Mme Helvetius’s club always met on a Tuesday?

So Abigail might make her acquaintance, even tonight.

9:00 a.m.
Bois de Boulogne

John Adams truly loathed Anne-Catherine de Ligniville-Autricourt, Mme Helvetius. Like his attitude toward most French aristocracy, he’d despised her nearly from the day they’d first met.

Cantering on his gray gelding through the Bois de Boulogne, as he did each morning, Adams thought of this woman who had wreaked so much damage, over all these years upon the American mission to France. Naturally, he couldn’t share these feelings with Abigail—though he’d never kept secrets from his dear spouse before. But La Helvetius, like so many of these useless upper-class women, had captivated the great Dr. Franklin with her so-called “gaiety and charm.” The doctor was besotted with all things French.

Adams knew he must exercise caution in his dealings here on the continent. He’d been recalled once by Congress, from a previous mission, due to complaints by the French minister, Ver-gennes, about his comportment in diplomatic circles. But Adams had always suspected it was Franklin himself who’d gotten him recalled. For the doctor, who’d lived much of his life abroad and had soaked up the sins of each land, could no longer abide Yankee honesty and directness.

Adams could only pray that, if not he, then at least Thomas Jefferson would be able to talk some sense into the good doctor, regarding the critical treaties that they three were to forge with England and France. And there was something more.

There was a fly in the molasses when it came to this blighted French mission. Adams suspected it had been there for quite some time: there was a spy—perhaps even a double agent—working all this while in Passy, right under the nose of Benjamin Franklin. As God himself knew, that residence, Le Valentinois, was fraught with dire possibilities. Not only Chaumont, its arms-dealer owner, was suspect. But also Franklin’s own twenty-two-year-old grandson who lived there,

Temple Franklin, a youth whose father William (Ben's bastard son) was himself a Royalist exiled from America.

In John Adams's view, however—of the elitist aristocrats, Royalist sympathizers and nouveau riche the doctor always sucked into his orb in that retreat at Passy—the most dangerous of all was Mme Helvetius. And for very good reason.

The Sieure Helvetius, her late husband, had made his fortune by royal sinecure, hadn't he? He was one of the "Farmers General," those who'd been given exclusive rights, monopolies, one might say, over all sale and purchase of goods produced or imported by France. The same people who still held sway, today, over American trade with France and her dominions.

As for La Helvetius, she'd even established a secret society to help her circle of vipers maintain control—a club whose members had the audacity to call themselves liberals, Freemasons!—

when half its founders came from the nobility of France!

As Adams patted the flanks of his steaming horse and prepared to make toward Passy to attend his morning meeting, he smiled at a private thought: He imagined his wife, a preacher's daughter, meeting La Helvetius for the first time.

It might happen today, mightn't it? After all, today was a Tuesday.

10:00 a.m.
Passy, France

Benjamin Franklin plucked his knight from the chessboard and set it down beside his opponent's rook. He tapped his finger on the table for attention.

"If you take that knight with your castle, my friend, it's mate in three," he announced to Thomas Jefferson, who'd glanced across the board in surprise. "But if you don't take my knight," Franklin added with a wry grin, "then I'm afraid it will still be mate in five."

"My dear Jefferson," said John Adams, standing at the wall of windows overlooking the vast, manicured gardens of Le Valentinois, "that's the third game you've lost in a row. If your skills at negotiating treaties—for which Congress sent us to France, after all—are no better than your skills at chess, we may as well pack up our portmanteaus and go home."

"Nonsense," said Franklin, putting the chess pieces back in order on the board. "Jefferson hasn't had the practice I've had.

When I play chess, I brook no distractions. Why, I've played a full evening, whilst Mme Brillon, my erstwhile *amour*, sat in a state of deshabille, soaking in her bath!"

Franklin laughed uproariously, then he saw Jefferson rubbing his unpowdered head of thick hair with both hands.

"Too much mental stimulation for one morning, I'm afraid, and not enough accomplishment," Jefferson said, adding apolo-getically, "I seem to feel one of my migraines coming on."

"Willow bark," said Franklin. "It contains a pain-killing ingredient specific to headaches. I never disturb the servants this early, but I'll ring for them to find Bancroft, the secretary of our embassy—high time you met—and he shall make

you a willow tisane. The chap's a medicinal genius," Franklin assured Jefferson. "Worked on a plantation in Guiana. He's patented all sorts of textile dyes made from barks and tropical plants. I sponsored his election, years ago, to the Royal Society in London—he's been our covert British agent ever since."

"But how do you know you can trust the fellow?" asked Adams. "Some say Edward Bancroft's a war speculator, only out to profit himself. If he takes our money, he may do the same with the French or British. Should he be privy to communiqués from Congress? And take notes of our private councils?"

"My dear Adams—" Franklin was already pulling the bell cord, as if shrugging off such concerns "—everyone in France is a spy of some kind. You'll find that a few things have changed since your last foray to this continent. For one, there's no war going on, upon which one might speculate—either financially or philosophically. We keep eyes on the British only to make sure they won't begin one! For another, here at Le Valentinois, we live life so openly and blamelessly that there is really nothing to spy upon!"

No sooner had Franklin released the bell cord than the door to the outer hall popped open. There stood Edward Bancroft, splendidly outfitted in lacy jabot, satin breeches and powdered wig—dressed, as always, for a fancy ball. Adams shot a wicked glance toward Franklin, who ignored it.

"Dash me," said Franklin with his same wry smile. "It seems the walls have ears. My dear Bancroft, we were just speaking of you!"

"I must possess better powers than Professor Mesmer," said Bancroft, returning the smile. "Only a moment ago, whilst in the small salon, I had the intuitive feeling I was wanted here in this room. Now I find you—uncustomarily dressed at this hour—and locked away with some colleagues. By all appearances, you three gents are already working up a storm of intrigue before your secretary's arrival."

"Nothing of the sort," Franklin assured him. "We were playing chess. May I present Mr. Jefferson—lately arrived from America?" Bancroft took Jefferson's proffered hand as Franklin added,

"And, of course, Adams here is not unknown to you—though his wife and daughter, who've just set foot on these shores, will be joining us to dine."

"I've had the pleasure of their acquaintance moments ago," Bancroft told him.

"Yes," explained Adams. "My family wanted to arrive early.

John Quincy had promised to take the doctor's little grandson, Benny, for a ride in Mr. Jefferson's trap."

"As we've so many young folk, my dear Bancroft," said Franklin, "you might ask the servants for an earlier meal than our usual two o'clock repast. Oh, and while you're at it, a willow bark tisane for Mr. Jefferson."

The instant John Adams was sure that Bancroft was out of earshot, he struck out again: "Do you not find it odd that your secretary was lurking at the door, just when his name came up in conversation?" he demanded of Franklin.

"Our secretary," Franklin corrected him. "He is paid by the mission. And I don't find it strange, when I was just ringing to find him myself—"

"Good Lord!" cried Jefferson, peering out the library's French windows. "There is a barnyard animal eating your costly roses, and the wench who's astride him clearly can't manage the beast!"

The two men went to the windows. There, at the center of the jewel-like garden, a middle-aged woman sat astride an obdurate white mule, yanking at the reins. When this got her nowhere, she swung her leg over the saddle in apparent exasperation, dismounted like a man, and still grasping the reins forcefully, she uprooted a bunch of flowers from a nearby garden bed and shoved them into the mule's muzzle. The beast, instantly diverted by the fresh buds, took a healthy mouthful.

Franklin smiled a strange, private smile.

"I believe that I am acquainted with that 'wench' out there—

though not with her beast," he informed his companions. "I may add, in my experience, the lady has assuredly mounted animals superior to that one." He laughed as he saw the astonished faces of Adams and Jefferson.

"Do you not recognize her?" Franklin asked Adams. When the latter shook his head, Franklin clarified: "It is Notre dame d'Auteuil."

"Madame Helvetius?" cried Adams, aghast.

When Franklin nodded, Jefferson said, "Not the wife of the philosophe! But why is she dressed as a farmer's wife?"

"Ah, the upper classes are always a mystery, aren't they?" said Franklin. "Our charming queen, Marie Antoinette, has a peasant farm on the grounds of the palace, where she plays at being a poor shepherdess. Rousseau has made these 'natural' ideas so popular."

But privately, Franklin couldn't imagine why Anne-Catherine Helvetius would arrive here in this fashion, astride a recalcitrant mule. The situation did not bode well.

Suddenly he saw that Mme Helvetius had lashed her mule to a tempting-looking lemon tree with lush green leaves. While it was occupied, she was headed on foot—with a swiftness that almost resembled stealth—straight for the garden entrance to the salon, where the others Bancroft had mentioned would be waiting.

What in blazes was the woman thinking, prancing about in the garden instead of using the customary entrance? And where was her driver? Where was her cabriolet? Action seemed called for on Franklin's part—and quickly.

"Enough for the morning, gentlemen, I can rest here no longer," he announced, rubbing his leg as if to plead his eternal gout. "Let's attend to the others, shall we?"

And, leaving the two men to collect themselves, he hobbled swiftly out the door.

He was too late—at least, too late to halt the explosion.

Echoing down the long gallery of mirrors and many-paned windows that led from the library came a piercing shriek that had emanated from within the salon. Franklin knew it could only be Anne-Catherine Helvetius:

"*O, mon Dieu, ou est Franklin? Et qui sont ces dames-là?*"

A bit more commotion from within—raised voices, the sound of a door opened and banged shut, then a moment of silence.

Franklin stepped up his painful gait along the corridor. All at once, Anne-Catherine Helvetius came hurtling down the hall toward him, her idiotic straw hat askew. In her flush of excitement, she nearly collided with him.

Grasping her by the arms, Franklin said, "My beloved friend…" But then he caught a whiff of her. "What is that interesting aroma—a new *eau de parfum?*"

Helvetius glared up at him in fury.

"My milkmaid's dress! I am *en camouflage!* " she said, trying to keep her voice down. "That *cafard* of a mule. I have been on his back for hours. And now this—a roomful of women. You never entertain so early—and so many guests! I do not wish to intrude, but this is of great urgency, *mon ami…*"

"*Au contraire*, my beloved *madame,* " Franklin assured her, "you're always a welcome guest. I pray you'll join us for an early dinner." Casting an eye again at her attire, he added with amusement, "I am sorry to inform you, however, *madame,* that no cows will be available for milking—we were not planning to hold our meal alfresco!"

"Canaille!" cried Mme Helvetius, stamping her foot.

"*Madame!* Your language!" Franklin cautioned with a saucy grin.

With her next words, he looked as though he'd been seized with an attack of kidney stones, on top of the gout.

"Faites attention!" she told Franklin, sotto voce, lest prying ears overhear: *"Le message est arrivé!"*

"The message!" he nearly cried aloud. "Then we should not be seen here…"

Just then came the distant sound of the library door closing, followed by clicking footsteps approaching.

"My colleagues arrive," whispered Franklin. "What is the message?"

"C'est encodé!" Mme Helvetius whispered back, her silvery eyes enormous.

"Of course it's encoded!" snapped Franklin, pulling in irritation at the long tail of his own hair that clung to his shoulder.

"What is it?"

When Anne-Catherine stood on tiptoe and put her lips to Franklin's ear, he caught another whiff of her attire—earthy, like a barnyard, but not altogether rank.

"'Frère Jacques,'" Mme Helvetius whispered.

The silence was broken only by the footsteps approaching the corner, where they would soon be exposed, huddled together here in the open hall.

"A name?" Franklin whispered back. "No other clue? Just *Brother Jacques?*"

"Non, non, mon ami," she breathed in impatience. *"C'est une chanson!"*

"A song is the message?" said Franklin in confusion. But when Mme Helvetius hummed the first notes under her breath, he said,

"Ah, I see—very clever!" With a quick pat on her rump, he said,

"Make haste. To the salon, by the far door. I shall join you."

In swift comprehension, she vanished into the east hall just a moment before Adams and Jefferson rounded the corner. With his colleagues close at heel, Franklin entered the salon just as Mme Helvetius appeared breathlessly through a door at the opposite side of the crowded room. All the guests and family members turned to greet Franklin. Though his own heart was beating like a Mohican drum, he shot Mme Helvetius a confident smile across the room. He knew exactly what he must do.

12:00 noon
Le Valentinois

Benjamin Franklin looked around the table at the assorted group who had collected, as customary, for the seven-course afternoon repast at the expense of his host. Today it was a few hours early—but then, time was of the essence, was it not?

Here at the table were those who would soon represent the past: the owner of this magnificent château, the pudgy million-aire Donatien le Ray de Chaumont, who had an ax to grind: he was still outraged with the American Congress, which had never paid his bills to supply arms for the Revolution. Beside Chaumont, his attractive wife—the mistress, some said *(de temps en temps)* of the naval hero John Paul Jones. Then the revolutionary playwright Beaumarchais, author of huge hits, *The Marriage of Figaro* and *The Barber of Seville,* a man who had run more munitions into the British colonies than any other, in aid of the revolution. Mme Helvetius was seated between Franklin himself and John Adams, with Abigail at Adams's far side—looking annoyed by Notre dame d'Auteuil's blithe bantering to her husband—part of her inane camouflage.

Thomas Jefferson sat at the side of the table that Franklin viewed as the future. Beside Jefferson was young John Quincy Adams, seventeen, who seemed to dote on the Virginian's each word. Quincy's sister, Abigail the younger—Nabby Adams—

who at age nineteen seemed to have captivated Franklin's twenty-two-year-old grandson, Temple. And Benny Franklin Bache, Franklin's other grandson, the youngest at the table at age fifteen, who was bracketed at the other side by Edward Bancroft, the mission's secretary and sometime spy.

After the soup course had been served and the servants had departed, Franklin announced portentously, "Thirteen at dinner, an inauspicious number—for it reminds one always of that other supper where the host said, 'Tonight, one of you shall deny me and one of you shall betray me.'"

Mme Helvetius shot Franklin a steely sideways glance. Then, unilaterally changing the subject, she picked up her spoon with a charming smile, removed a bit of crayfish from her bowl and deposited it on her plate.

"This month does not have an *R*," she informed the group.

"One should never eat *les crustaces* in months spelled without *R*—they may contain poison."

"But, Grandfather," said Benny Bache, as if she had not spoken, "do you really expect someone to deny or betray you tonight? And even if you did, it surely wouldn't be any of us, here at this table."

"I have reason, my child, to believe precisely that," Franklin assured his grandson. "In support of this view, I must mention that I have recently received an encrypted message…"

He paused, for Mme Helvetius was choking on her soup; Chaumont dashed around the table with some Madeira from the sideboard, and poured it into her glass. She swilled down several large gulps—more than the Adamses had ever seen a woman put away at one sitting. When things had calmed a bit, John Quincy Adams chimed in, "Dr. Franklin, we all realize that an encrypted message must be held in the greatest secrecy. Especially if it might pertain—as you seem to believe—to someone in this room. I confess I am fascinated with codes. And Mr.

Jefferson here, like you, is an expert of sorts. He has promised to help train me in the basic ideas while my family and I are in France. I'd be glad if you could tell us only two things. How did you know that the message was encrypted? And have you been able to decipher what it means?"

Franklin was wolfing down his crayfish soup with gusto—with seeming disregard for whether the month was spelled with an R or not—also disregarding his painful gout and kidney stones, which he referred to as his "Grit and Gravel."

"Your first and second questions both have the same reply,"

Franklin said, setting his spoon aside from his empty bowl. "I knew it was encrypted, and I know what it means because I have the key!"

There was much commotion, which afforded Mme Helvetius the opportunity to give Franklin a healthy poke in the ribs. As he leaned to peck her cheek, he whispered, "Say nothing at all—the game has just begun." She lapsed into silence.

"Today is a Tuesday," Franklin said. "As many of you know, Mme Helvetius, who sits by my side, for decades held philo-sophical salons on that day with her husband in their Paris mansion. You may also know that Madame is the founding sponsor of an elite lodge of Freemasons, here in France, known as the Loge des Neuf Soeurs. This club, of which I am an initiate and twice a grandmaster, also meets on Tuesdays, and continues to perform many useful services for our United States. What significance can we assign to this day of the week?"

"It's the day of the Norse god, Tiw, which is Mars in French," said Quincy.

"Indeed," agreed Franklin. "But there is something more."

The servants had arrived to remove and replace the plates.

When they had passed the platters of duckling, truffled foie gras, quail, rabbit and legumes, they topped off the wineglasses and departed. Only then did Franklin take the floor.

"I once attended the meeting of another such club, in another time and place," Franklin began. "It was nearly thirty years ago, in 1754, that I had reason to leave my home in Philadelphia and travel to points south. At that time, there was no inkling that one day—a day not far in our future—we colonists would revolt against the mother country and form a new republic. Indeed, at the moment we were having more trouble with the French, who were fortifying the Ohio River Valley. And with the Indians, whom they were also fortifying, with French weapons and Louisiana rum.

"In a few years, a young soldier named Washington would fire the first shot in the French and Indian War. As that war soon dragged all of Europe, even India, into a Seven Years War leading to our own revolution, it would truly become the *first shot heard round the world.*

"In January of that year, I'd just attended a summit of some of these disgruntled Indian nations—only to learn, on my return to Philadelphia, that I'd been appointed deputy postmaster for the colonies, an important role. As there was another Indian conference looming in a few months, at Albany, I determined it would be a prudent time right now for me to make a quick tour of postal facilities throughout the southern colonies. Among the most important of these was Annapolis, on the Chesapeake Bay.

"My reputation as an inventor preceded me—as the discoverer, only a few years back, of harnessing lightning from the skies.

The instant the *Maryland Gazette* announced the new deputy postmaster's arrival in the bustling waterfront community, I received a flood of invitations from political, social and scientific societies.

"The most mysterious of these was from a group of gentlemen claiming to be none of the above. Rather, they represented themselves as amateur musicians, many of Scottish descent, who met twice a month to compose and perform music. As these meetings always took place on Tuesdays, they had dubbed their little group 'The Tuesday Club.'" As Franklin began his tale, the only sound to be heard was that of cutlery scraping on plates…

The Tuesday evening that I joined the group was a dismal, rain-splashed night on the waterfront. The founder of the club, who greeted me at the door, was a native of Edinburgh, a recent transplant to our shores: one Alexander Hamilton—no relation to our congressman and war hero by that name. The Hamilton name is a powerful one in Scotland. I soon had cause to understand what that might mean, in the grander scheme.

The members, whose names I've long forgotten, played amusing songs all the night. We were dubbed with secret names—I was called Electrico Vitrifico, I recall, for my bringing of the power of lightning to earth. They had made a model of my glass 'armonica for playing watery tunes. There was a supper, much drinking of alcohol, and between, some Freemason ditties were sung. Since I'd been a chartering member of Philadelphia's lodge in the 1730s, I recognized myself to be among the brethren, and felt well at ease. There is nothing better than the camaraderie of a club.

It was late that same night, after most of the young gents had returned to their households, when I found myself alone with Hamilton's inner clique, as it were. It was then that I came to pose the most important question: "What song is it that you've asked me here to listen to?"

The members, by all appearances, were exceedingly pleased by my remark. They stood one by one to sing, a cappella, a familiar rondel or canon of ancient origin. First they sang in French, then in English, a song like this:

Frère Jacques, Frère Jacques,
Dormez-Vous? Dormez-Vous?
Sonnez les Matines, Sonnez les Matines,
Din-Dan-Don, Din-Dan-Don…
Are you sleeping? Are you sleeping?
Brother John, Brother John,
Morning bells are ringing, morning bells are ringing,
Ding-Ding-Dong, Ding-Ding-Dong…

As each singer finished his repeats of the song he took his seat, one by one, until only a sole singer was standing, singing the last chiming bell. When he, too, was seated, the men all looked at me in silence. Only the sound of rain could be heard, pattering on the roof.

I was the first to speak:

"Simple ditties like this one, gentlemen," I said, "have long been used to communicate hidden meaning across time and place. In the case of 'Frère Jacques,' as I now perceive, it is a meaning that may, indeed, have been hidden for a hundred years or more. Not only a secret is hidden—perhaps even a conspiracy of sorts, from the Latin conspirare, 'to breathe together'—suggesting a mystery of the kind that oughtn't be more than whispered. But I believe I do comprehend your mission, and I shall assist you, my brethren, in any way I can."

They applauded this comment, and each man came up in turn to give me a "brotherly" handshake. When the others had departed, their leader, Hamilton, offered to see me home in his carriage. As we drove to my lodgings, only the sounds of the clopping horse hooves on cobbles broke the silence. Despite the wintry season, you could smell the fresh aroma of salt in the air.

"My dear doctor," Hamilton addressed me as we moved through the deep black velvet of the Annapolis night. "I wonder if you do understand completely what we meant tonight, in singing that old nursery song for you?"

"Why yes, I think I do," I told him. "You've sung me a charming French song, with a very poor English translation. For in French, I do not need to point out that the word 'Jacques' does not mean 'John' as it might in English—it means James. And 'matins' are not 'morning bells,'

but a canonical hour of both the Catholic and Anglican Churches—the call to prayer, just after midnight, with the related offices of devotion.

"Brother James," I went on to suggest, "would be James the Greater, brother of Jesus in Holy Scripture, who founded the first Celtic Church in Spain (Santiago, as they call him there) as well as those ancient parish churches of the French Pyrenees.

"You are mostly Scotsmen here by origin, are you not?" I added. "It seems to me that the Scots, in recent memory, have been aligned with only one dynasty of great power and ancestry, and with whom the Scottish royal families have intermarried on numerous occasions—that is, with the French. There was Mary of Guise, who married the king of Scotland two hundred years ago—and then her daughter, Mary Queen of Scots, who married the French dauphin. And of course, young Mary's Scottish son, James Stuart, the successor to Queen Elizabeth who became King James I of England." I turned to Hamilton in the darkness of the carriage, and added, "Given the canon of the song, this is the true James that your chantey refers to—is it not?"

"It is," Hamilton replied quietly. "It is, indeed."

It took no Doctor of Philosophy to read the meaning in that message. But it did take a bit of initiation into other hidden significance.

The Tuesday Club was asking my future aid, as a brother, in the time of their need…

Franklin paused in his story to look about the room of attentive listeners, then he added with effect, "This very same chanson was delivered to me, only this morning, from Scotland. I at once recognized its import—for nearly thirty years ago, I'd been warned by a club of Scotsmen, an ocean away from here—a warning that has now come home to roost.

"As we know, my friends, for more than one hundred years, the Scots have continually struggled to expel the Hanover usurpers from the throne of England

and to restore the Scottish blood. From the English Civil War right down to the battles of Bonnie Prince Charlie, the son of the last King James who tried to seize England again only nine years before my trip to Annapolis!

"This song's deeper meaning was that my fellow Masons at Annapolis were initiates into an ancient, hidden rite of masonry known only to Scotland. Some call it the Rite of Strict Obedience, others the Rite of Kilmarnock, named for an earl who founded the rite and who was executed, nearly one hundred years ago today, for supporting the Stuart return to the throne. The Tuesday Club knew the meaning of Brother Jacques, and seemed prepared to implement its logical outcome—as they might, even today.

"But how many realize," Franklin asked his fellow diners, "that that same Bonnie Prince, Charles Edward Stuart, who claims the British throne, lives only kilometers from where we sit? At St. Ger-main en Laye, on the road from Paris to Versailles. There the Stuarts have remained under the protection of the Bourbon kings for one hundred years, ever since their ouster from Britain's throne."

"You don't mean to suggest," interjected John Adams indignantly,

"that the exiled Stuarts are still a factor in European politics?"

"Europe—no," agreed Franklin. "It is America that is forefront in my mind. Our newly fledged country has, as yet, no true ruler—no chief of state. General Washington, everyone's choice, has—like Julius Caesar—thrice been proffered a kingship, and thrice declined. A great man, who is married to a long-barren wife with useless offspring of her own. Shall he produce the necessary dynasty to keep us safe?"

"Dynasty?" cried Adams, leaping to his feet. "Why have we fought a revolution? Are you gone mad, sir?"

"Look about you, my friend," said Franklin coolly. "Is there a country on any continent that exists with no line of succession?

What would ours be? Kings deal with kings. Washington knows this—that is why he's sent a private delegation to ask whether the Stuarts are prepared. My message suggests that the Stuarts are prepared—their ship departs for the coast by the canonical hour of Matins—that is, by midnight, this very night! They are bound for America, and the children of the Kilmarnock Order will greet them when they arrive."

Adams was blathering, tugging at his wife's arm, as the younger folk around the table scrambled to their feet.

"This is monstrous!" Adams informed Franklin. "I shall see you tomorrow, sir, when you've had time to reflect!"

Franklin nodded gravely as the Adamses took their leave.

Taking Mme Helvetius by the arm, he retired to the salon as customary, to bid all his guests adieu before his afternoon nap.

But as he passed the windows, Franklin noticed that the French contingency—his hosts, the Chaumonts, and the playwright, Beaumarchais—had stepped into the garden and were close at heads with the American mission's secretary. After a moment, Beaumarchais reentered the house as the others were still collecting their things to depart, and he took Franklin aside.

"Look here, my dear doctor," said the dashing playwright, "we're flustered at this turn of events. Though no one believes a Scottish king is in the stars for America,

it will create a furor if true. You mentioned that your message suggested a spy among us. However did you deduce such a thing from a nursery song?"

"Ah, a mere ruse," Franklin assured him. "I know who the spy is, you see! Despite the revolution, I'm afraid there are those in our ranks who remain Anglomanes. I've had this particular gentleman recalled to America more than once, but our Congress keeps sending him back. I wasn't surprised that he left our company so abruptly today—off to send a message to his friends across the channel, no doubt!"

"You mean Adams?" whispered Beaumarchais in amazement.

"Please don't share it with a soul," Franklin said. Then he turned to Mme Helvetius, a short distance away. "A game of chess before my siesta, my dear?"

Midnight in the Gardens of Le Valentinois

The gardens were beautiful by night, thought Franklin. "Canonical hour!" He laughed to himself at his own cleverness. It was the best time to be abroad in the world. Beneath the star-filled August sky, a breeze ruffled the citrus trees. Moonlight drenched the pools and fountains a milky white. In the distance, the river Seine snaked across the land like a serpent of liquid silver.

At first sight, no one would imagine that this fairyland was only a short carriage ride from the steaming streets of Paris.

Franklin knew he was fortunate, indeed, to have a host like Chaumont. When it came to intrigues and money, the man was a true rapscallion, but he wasn't the worst of his lot.

As he strolled along the promenade, Franklin took Mme Helvetius's arm.

"You did well this afternoon, my friend," Franklin told his companion. "I refer not only to your prowess at chess, but to your flair for intrigue." He paused to sniff at her clothes, and added,

"I've become quite attached to that fragrance. Might we send your milkmaid by some afternoon to share tea with me in my boudoir?"

"Vieux cochon," Mme Helvetius replied with a naughty smile.

But as she glanced over the railing into the lower gardens, she tensed. "I thought everyone had long gone. Who are those men down there by the pool?"

Far below, at the edge of the cliff that rose from the Seine, was the large, octagonal pool designed by Donatien le Ray de Chaumont, with its famous, water-driven carillon of bells, which struck the hours. Close together at the pool's edge, two figures were sitting in shadow.

"It is Jefferson and John Quincy Adams," Franklin explained.

"I asked them to stay on and meet me here to watch the show.

They told the boy's parents he'd be staying in town at Jefferson's rooms. Come, let's descend to join them."

"But isn't it dangerous to involve others?" asked Mme Helvetius.

"Just as dangerous as a game of chess," Franklin replied. "And very like it. Young Quincy wants to learn the art of encryption and decryption. What better opportunity than tonight?"

When they reached the spot, Jefferson and young Adams rose to greet them.

“Dr. Franklin,” said Quincy. “I believe we’ve broken most of your code, and Mr. Jefferson’s headache has quite vanished in the process. But we’ve still a few questions.”

“Broken my code?” scoffed Franklin. “Very well—out with it, if you please.”

John Quincy glanced for approval to Jefferson, who nodded for him to proceed.

“First, the delivery of the message by Mme Helvetius,” said Quincy proudly. “She tried to arrive privately. When all the world recognized her, you admitted you had a message. But to throw the spy off the trail, you focused on the French version of the song, thereby diverting attention from the words in English—

‘Are you sleeping, are you sleeping, Brother John, Brother John.’

That would give a wholly different meaning.”

“And precisely what would that be?” said Franklin, with a pleased smile.

“The mention of *Brother*,” explained Quincy. “It’s the word by which Freemasons greet one another, with no titles like Seigneur, for all men are thought equal, regardless of their circumstances of birth. Then there was the repetition ‘Brother John, Brother John.’ This would refer to the two patron saints of the Freemasons—St. John the Baptist and St. John the Evangelist—whose saint days are celebrated at summer and winter solstices, indicating a message meant for Masonic, not just Scottish, ears.

So ‘Are you sleeping,’ and ‘Morning bells are ringing’ would mean ‘Wake up, Brothers!’ I’m afraid in our decipherment, this is as far as we’ve come.”

“Excellent!” Franklin commended him. “You have covered much ground.”

“But, my dear doctor,” said Jefferson, “we don’t know the real meaning of the message sent by the Masons of Scotland. For surely if there was a spy in our midst, as you say, your story by now has likely raised many eyebrows among London’s cohort at this side of the channel—‘Bonnie Prince Charlie sailing on the morning tide to become first emperor of the United States!’ Do you think anyone swallowed that?”

“I hope so, for it’s quite true!” said Franklin. “I should know. I myself was initiated into the very Rite of Kilmarnock I spoke of, not long after my evening in Annapolis in 1759, when I went up to St. Andrews University on the Scottish coast to receive my honorary doctorate. The Bonnie Prince still has an enormous following there, and in America—though not, of course, with General Washington, myself or our fellow Masons. The arrival of a prince of the blood on our shores could be devastating at this moment—so soon after our revolution, with as yet no fixed government and a gaggle of factions bickering like brainless geese.

Hence, the urgency of my warning from the Scottish Masons.

What better hope have we than to stop the problem before it arrives? And what better chance than to place a bug into the ear of King George III and his British Secret Service? The idea of a Scottish king on the throne of his former colonies should friz-zle George’s wig something proper!”

“So one coded message was hidden within another,” Quincy observed. “‘A coup is under way, and the Masonic brethren must awaken to the call!’”

“It has traditionally been our way,” Franklin agreed, “to conceal layers within layers…often within other layers.”

“But who shall bell the cat?” asked Jefferson. “Who is the spy that carried your message away into British hands this afternoon?”

“I’m afraid I had to suggest someone to divert attention,” Franklin said. “So I chose your father, Quincy. Please forgive me.

“In fact, it’s our secretary, Edward Bancroft. We have long followed his movements. Bancroft leaves Le Valentinois each Tuesday night and retires to the gardens of the Tuileries at the heart of Paris. There, at eleven-thirty, under cover of darkness, he deposits a packet of papers inside the hollow of an old oak tree—a packet containing all the intelligence he’s gathered from us in the week. The British Secret Service pays him five hundred pounds per annum to spy upon us, and we pay him to spy on them. It’s the only way we can be certain that the British are receiving the news we want them to know. When you, my dear Jefferson, replace me in this French mission, I pray you may find him useful!”

Jefferson laughed modestly. “As I often say, I can only succeed you—no one can replace you. It seems now you’re a master of the French art of espionage, too. But if that message was calculated to trick the British into thwarting a Jacobite plot, something remains unexplained. Why did you invite us to meet you in the gardens here tonight?”

At that moment, the carillon of water bells from Chaumont’s octagon pool began striking the hour of twelve. When the tones had died out, Franklin said, “Invite you? Why, to attend the salon of Notre dame d’Auteuil, of course!”

Mme Helvetius had stood all this time gazing down at the river. Now she said, “The Loge des Neuf Soeurs. They arrive with the water bells.”

Slipping from shadow on the river below, they saw a long boat rowed by nine sturdy men that was pulling toward the moonwashed pier.

“Nine muses, and a carillon of bells in E-flat major,” Franklin explained to Jefferson. “That is the missing code that you and young Johnnie here were seeking. In both versions of our ditty, one hears three chimes of the bell, three notes that are repeated: Din-Dan-Don… Ding-Ding-Dong. These three notes represent the Masonic code—the number three. Masonic songs are always written in E-flat major, containing a musical signature of three flats—with the E itself being the third note of the octave music scale. The repetition of the bell, three and three, represents three-squared, which is nine, reflective of the name of Madame’s lodge down there, filled with musings and dedicated to muses.” He laughed.

“But then, at last, as in any code,” Franklin added, “there is always that final question which explains all the rest.”

Jefferson had joined Mme Helvetius in gazing down at the nine men below, who had lashed down their boat and were disembarking on the pier. Despite the warm night, they were shrouded in black. For a time, no one beside the pool spoke. It was Jefferson who broke the silence.

“Tuesday,” was all he said.

“Precisely!” agreed Franklin in astonishment. “What made you think of it?”

“And what does it mean?” asked Quincy breathlessly.

“The message was not about something that would happen on a Tuesday,” Jefferson explained. “Nor was it about a Tuesday.

No—just as the doctor’s Annapolis frères had meant to communicate to him—the message is *Tuesday!*”

“Ah, oui!” said Mme Helvetius in comprehension. “The Day of Fire!”

“Tuesday,” Jefferson added for John Quincy, “was the day in the ancient calendar dedicated to fire. Delphi was the Greek temple of fire, conquered by Apollo, the sun god. The number three forms a triangle, a pyramid, a temple of fire, as its name suggests. And while there are many music scales that contain three flats or sharps, the E that Dr. Franklin mentioned is the only one of these carved above the door of the Delphi temple—a sign so ancient that no one has ever learned what it signified…”

“And do not forget,” chimed in Mme Helvetius, “we French have a royal family descended from a Sun King, too! But, like others, this light does not burn so brightly any longer. Perhaps it is time to replace it with a new flame.”

“Good Lord!” cried Jefferson. “You are both speaking of revolution! A revolution in France! In Europe! Tuesday really does refer to fire—and Mars, the god of war!”

“I’m afraid,” said Franklin, “that I am a very old revolutionary. You know what they say of revolutionaries—‘Once it is over, we must vanish, for the fire that destroys cannot build.’ But you, my noble colleague, have wits so full of fire they’ve made your hair fiery red!” He patted Jefferson on the shoulder. “Do not forget, my friend—three knocks, three bells, three points that form a triangle. A square of triangles creates a pyramid of fire. The con-flagration is coming. We’ve already lit the match! Now, come join our colleagues—and may the god Mars protect us all!”

Franklin headed with Mme Helvetius down the stone steps to the pier, but he added to Jefferson, “When you yourself are Sun King, which may be sooner than you think, you must not pause while crossing that fiery river Styx. Just remember, you can always call upon friends, as long as you can hum a tune!”

And Franklin and Mme Helvetius went off down the steps in front of the others, singing “Frère Jacques,” all the way.