

# I

*Nothing in all Creation exerts such power over  
me as the face of a beautiful woman.*

CASANOVA

Night swarmed through the streets of Paris, casting its black veil over the carriage standing motionless in the middle of the deserted thoroughfare. Buttoned tightly in his dark coat, the driver kept a close rein on the horses as they jostled nervously. A slender, cloaked silhouette climbed down from the coach. The hood, pulled low, concealed the features of a young girl. Shadows stole over the surrounding walls, extending hooked fingers in her direction. A horse tossed its mane. The driver stared straight ahead, imperturbable.

‘It’s late. Take care, child: good people cleave to daylight, but the wicked come out at night!’

The voice came from inside the carriage. Tired, but with a rich timbre that was pleasing to the ear. As if in response to some invisible signal, the vehicle shuddered into life with a clatter of wood and iron. The unknown girl trembled. She stood alone, her white fingers clenched as if preparing to strike out with her fist. The darkness made everything unfamiliar. Fantastical forms suggested themselves to her searching eyes. Unwittingly, throughout her childhood, her mother’s bedtime stories had peopled her nights with werewolves, thieves and ghosts. For an instant, she thought she heard footsteps, and froze to listen. But there was nothing. Only silence.

At that moment, the clouds shredded and pale moonlight flooded the street, revealing the entrance to a small courtyard, and the red glow of a bread oven on its far side. The young

girl started forward, happy and relieved. A tinkling, crystal laugh rose unbidden in her throat, and she strode quickly in the direction of the wavering light.

A sudden movement pierced the night. A shadow loomed and spread over the walls, in the girl's pursuit. Presently, a scream tore through the dark.

A mild spring night in the year 1759. The light from the oil lamps and candles, flickering in their lanterns, had drawn a crowd of onlookers, like fascinated moths. The precinct chief swallowed hard and averted his gaze from the bloody spectacle before him.

'Dead,' he stated. 'I have no idea why or how it was done, but the skin has been completely torn from her face. No one could recognize her in that state.'

'As though it had been eaten away by a wolf!' declared one of his men.

A muffled cry greeted his words, and a low rumour spread through the assembled company.

'Wolves! The wolves have entered Paris!'

The precinct chief shot a dark look at his officer.

'I'll thank you to keep your thoughts to yourself, in future!'

The man shrank back, colliding as he did so with a solemn, impassive figure—a recent arrival, who had been watching in silence.

'Ah!' There was a note of irritation in the precinct chief's greeting. 'The Inspector of Strange and Unexplained Deaths... Who in hell's name sent for you, Volnay? And how did you get here so quickly? Do you never sleep?'

Volnay stepped forward. He was a tall young man with a pleasant enough face, offset by his dark gaze and stiff bearing. The moonlight modelled his features in stark relief. He wore no wig and his long, unpowdered, raven-black hair floated

behind him on the gentle breeze. From the corner of his eye, a scar curled around his temple, prompting its share of speculation. He was plainly dressed in a black jerkin, with a bright, white, frill-necked shirt and cravat. Despite the late hour, he was impeccably turned out. He made no reply to the precinct chief, but knelt and examined the body from head to toe before turning to his colleague.

‘I want the body brought for examination—not to Châtelet. Not the city morgue. You know the place.’

The precinct chief shivered and tried to protest.

‘You’ve only just got here. Let us begin our inquiries before we decide if this is a case for the scientific police!’

Volnay gave him not so much as a glance.

‘By order of the king,’ he said firmly, ‘I am authorized, as you know, to investigate every strange or unexplained death in Paris. As you can see, we are in the presence of a victim who has had the skin torn carefully from her face, so as to render her unrecognizable.’

He took a bell lantern from the grasp of an officer of the Royal Watch and cast the dim light of its tallow candle over the body.

‘As you may also see, there is not a trace of blood on the woman’s clothing. From which it seems clear she was killed first, then had her garments removed, was disfigured after that, then dressed again, and finally placed here. And sure enough, even though your officers have trampled everything and very probably spoilt any available clues, I have observed no spot or trail of blood in the vicinity.’

The precinct chief shook his head and breathed a long sigh.

‘Clues! You’re obsessed, Volnay...’

‘If I can trouble you to establish a police cordon and keep everyone at bay,’ Volnay continued smoothly, ‘I would prefer us to attend the scene of the crime in privacy.’

He waited while the order was issued and carried out, then took the victim's hands in his and examined them carefully.

'The hands are well cared for, and show no signs of manual labour,' he said quietly, as if thinking aloud. 'This is a person of some standing.'

'Or a whore from one of the finer parts of town.'

Volnay gave no reaction, but scrutinized the dead woman's body, pausing briefly at her breast, and stopping at her neck. Delicately, his long, slender fingers lifted a small chain and medallion engraved with an image of the Virgin. On the reverse, he read a Latin inscription, and translated it with ease.

*'Lord, deliver us from Evil.'*

Volnay turned to his colleague with a thin smile.

'A somewhat unusual whore, if so!'

Half stooping, he began a methodical examination of the ground. But so many feet had trodden the area around the body that it was impossible to make anything out. He searched in his pocket, took out a stick of charcoal and a piece of paper, and began to draw the dead woman and her surroundings. The precinct chief grinned in amusement.

'So, it's true what they say: you're quite the artist. You've missed your vocation!'

Volnay answered with a cold stare. At times, his blue eyes appeared veined with ice.

'Every detail is important in its own, particular way. I commit them all to memory, but not only that—I note everything down on paper, too. A murderer may leave traces of his presence at the scene of a crime, just as a snail leaves its trail of slime. Observation is the bedrock of our work. Take an example—have you counted the number of people in their nightclothes at the front of the crowd?'

The precinct chief had not.

‘Six,’ said Volnay smoothly, sketching all the while. ‘Unless others have arrived in the last minute. Am I right?’

‘Dear Lord, so you are!’

‘I should like your men to question them. They are here in their nightclothes because they live nearby and were alerted by the noise. They may have seen something, or noticed someone.’

Their exchange was broken by the creak of cartwheels on the cobblestones. At the sight of the new arrival, the precinct chief’s stomach churned, and he swallowed hard. Volnay raised one eyebrow.

‘Ah, here he is! I had him sent for. Only the Devil himself is quicker, as you can see!’

The cart was driven by a dark, spectral figure shrouded in a monk’s habit, the cowl pulled down to conceal his face. Many of the onlookers crossed themselves. Noiselessly, fearfully, the crowd shrank back as the vehicle passed.

‘Ah yes—and who discovered the body?’ asked the inspector sharply.

‘That gentleman there.’

Volnay looked in the direction of the tall individual who had been pointed out. His jaw dropped in recognition. Serene and self-assured, the fellow stepped forward. He had a pleasing, sallow face. He was elegantly dressed in a velvet coat of deep yellow with a woven pattern of small flowers and cartouches, and buttons covered with silver thread. His jabot and frilled cuffs were of costly bobbin lace. His entire person radiated natural good humour and an irresistible, lively charm.

‘The Chevalier de Seingalt, sir!’ His tone was bright and amiable.

‘I know who you are, Monsieur Casanova,’ said Volnay, quietly.

Who had not heard of Giacomo Casanova the Venetian, by turns banker, swindler, diplomat, army officer, swordsman, spy, magician, and of course, ever and always the arch-seducer? Casanova was a walking legend, whose reputation preceded him wherever he went.

Volnay's expression left no doubt as to his profound disapproval of the immoral behaviour of such as Casanova, a man who bedded barely pubescent girls, and sometimes even mother and daughter together.

'The Chevalier de Seingalt, at your service!' persisted the other, ever-eager to be addressed by his title. 'Decorated with the Order of the Spur by His Holiness the Pope himself!'

'Indeed. Who among us is not?' retorted Volnay, with a scowl.

He knew perfectly well that the title—pronounced *Saint-Galle* in the French manner—was a fabrication. The chevalier himself responded with insolent charm to anyone who laughed at his affectation, urging them to make up their own title if they were jealous! Volnay observed him quietly. He had no liking for Casanova and his kind, but the man was a creature of the great of this world, or tried his best to seem so, at least. He had arrived in Paris three years earlier, and his energy, vivacity and intellect had secured him an entrée to the highest circles. He frequented the loftier ranks of the nobility—the Maréchal de Richelieu, or the Duchesse de Chartres—and the country's intellectual elite. He was a man to be handled with care.

'How did you discover the victim?' Volnay asked, curtly.

'It happened that I was accompanying a delightful young lady back to her place of residence. As you know, nothing in all Creation exerts such power over me as the face of a beautiful woman! Well, we were going on our way when, quite simply, we ran into the body lying here. I bent down to lift her hood and... my companion screamed, very loudly.'

‘Did you notice anyone nearby, when you discovered the dead woman, or just before?’

‘Absolutely no one, Inspector.’

Without a word, Volnay turned on his heels and knelt once more beside the body, forcing himself to scrutinize the bloodied mask of the face, in an effort to understand how the murderer had proceeded. A wolf? Certainly not, but very likely something far worse.

The scene was bathed in silvery moonlight. Volnay cursed suddenly, under his breath. Transfixed by the dead woman’s face, he had omitted to search her body. Now, mechanically, his hands discovered and pulled a letter from the victim’s pocket, almost before he knew what he had done. Volnay felt Casanova’s eyes on him. He glanced at the seal and experienced a wave of dread.

‘Well look at that, Inspector! A letter in the dead woman’s pocket!’

‘You’re quite mistaken, Chevalier,’ said Volnay, allowing Casanova his usurped title for once. ‘This letter just fell out of my sleeve.’

‘But I assure you—’

Volnay shot him a cold stare.

‘It’s mine, I tell you!’

Casanova fell silent, but he continued to watch the inspector with keen interest.

Among the onlookers, a black-clad figure stood watching Volnay’s every move, long and lean as a hanged man against a winter sky. His face and the skin of his bald scalp shone disconcertingly white, like milk or a faded flower on a tall stalk. His grey eyes seemed washed of all colour. They held not a shred of humanity. He turned at the approach of the cart. The monk sat waiting placidly for the corpse to be lifted aboard.

The pale man frowned, as if struggling to remember where he might have come across the hooded figure—the source of such fear and astonishment—before. A hideous grin lit the pale man's face, but stopped short of his eyes. His mouth spat a silent curse. Hastily, furtively, he made the sign of the cross. He noted Casanova's presence with interest, and gave a short gasp of surprise when Volnay slipped the letter discreetly into his pocket. His features hardened. After a moment's hesitation, he pushed through the crowd and hurried away, as if the Devil himself were at his heels.

It was late when Volnay made his way home. The night was beset with shadows. He gripped the hilt of his sword as he walked, alert to the silhouettes of furtive figures who crossed his path, and others who kept out of sight, behind pillars or under the dark overhangs of the houses. Each morning, the street sweepers of Paris gathered up the bodies of incautious nightwalkers.

A cobbled passage led from Rue de la Porte-de-l'Arbalète to Rue Saint-Jacques. Stone wheel guards jutted from the walls, protecting them against passing carriages. Partway along, the passage opened onto a series of tiny courtyards, the first of brick and stone, with a stone well in the middle; a second, smaller court, and a third, even tinier, the last almost entirely filled with a tall acacia tree. Here Volnay lived, happy with his own company, and that of his tree, glimpsed from every window on both floors of his little house. The acacia was a symbol of life in this unfrequented place, a link between the earth with all its woes, and the indifferent eye of heaven.

Volnay stepped inside and bolted the heavy door behind him. The ground floor served as his parlour, study and dining room. But the house's *raison d'être*, its defining, unifying force, was its books. The books filled Volnay's living room, glowing

in the candlelight. Their remarkable sheen lit the walls, nooks and corners with scattered specks of ochre and gold. There were books bound in leather or parchment, and books with studded or embossed covers. Their presence and prominence hinted at the scope of their owner's inner life, and its limits. Two mismatched armchairs and a wooden table set with fine candlesticks stood their ground with a determined air. Faded tapestries—family heirlooms, perhaps—contributed an unexpectedly soft touch.

'And how are you, my fine friend?'

The question was addressed to a splendid magpie, eyeing Volnay through the bars of her cage. She had a long tail, and black plumage with a purplish sheen on her back, head and chest. Her underbelly and the undersides of her wings were pure white, and her tail showed flashes of oily green.

'What, no answer? Are you sulking?'

The bird kept her silence. Volnay shrugged lightly and crossed the room to one set of bookshelves. He chose a volume bound in red vellum, caressed its cover lovingly and settled himself into his favourite armchair beside the chimney, piled with extinct logs. After a moment's hesitation, he placed the book on a side table and fished in his pocket for the young victim's letter. He had taken it—unusually for him, and right under the nose of the Chevalier de Seingalt—for one very simple reason. He stared gloomily at the seal, and sighed heavily. The wax was imprinted with the seal of His Majesty the king.

*Why me?*

Dark thoughts flooded Volnay's mind. The monarch's depravity knew no bounds. It was rumoured that he purchased or stole young girls from their families and took them to live in the palace attics, as fodder for his debauched appetites. In Versailles, Volnay knew of two quarters—the Parc-aux-Cerfs and Saint-Louis—where one or more secret houses were

used as trysting places for the king and his young conquests. When royal bastards were born of these illicit liaisons, they were removed from their unfortunate mothers forthwith and placed in the care of wet nurses.

What if the young woman had come from the king's bed?

Louis XV's favourite, Madame de Pompadour, had installed the young girls in the Parc-aux-Cerfs, the better to satisfy the king's unstinting desires. No longer the object of royal lust herself, and fearing to lose her position at Court, she had devised a way to pander to His Majesty's pleasure with a hand-picked array of willing girls from the lower orders, all thoroughly unversed in the intrigues of Court life. In this way, La Pompadour nipped potential rivals in the bud, by ensuring none of the king's mistresses rose too high in the royal favour. Ultimately, she dispensed with the girls by marrying them off to members of the royal household.

Volnay often wondered how Louis XV reconciled his vices and his very great fear of God. But the king considered himself a ruler by divine right. Hell was for other people. And he was at pains to ensure that the unfortunate children recited their prayers after he had taken his pleasure, so it was said, to avoid eternal damnation!

Deep in thought, Volnay turned the letter over and over in his fingers, but he did not break the seal. The king's secret harem of young mistresses was common knowledge, but Paris was rife with even wilder rumours: the king was said to have contracted leprosy as a result of his debauchery. Bathing in the blood of innocent children was the only thing that kept him alive.

What if the young woman had come from the king's bed? Volnay asked himself, again. What should I do then?

His logical, deductive mind had run ahead, to the inevitable conclusion: doubtless, one day, he would be forced to

return the letter to its rightful owner. He was even more careful not to break the seal now, despite his burning curiosity. He swore under his breath.

'To think that that arch-rogué Casanova saw the whole thing!' he declared out loud in exasperation. 'Casanova!'

'Casa! Casa!'

Volnay jumped half out his skin, then turned to look at the great birdcage and its splendid occupant.

He smiled.

'Yes, that cretin Casanova!'

'Cretin Casa! Cretin Casa!' repeated the magpie obediently. Volnay laughed aloud.

Casanova had played a superb hand, drinking little but frequently refilling his opponent's glass, losing at first to raise the stakes, then delivering his fatal blow with immediate, sobering effect.

'I played on my word, Chevalier...'

The Venetian straightened himself in his armchair, a slight smile playing at his lips.

'A gambling man keeps his money about his person, Joinville,' he said quietly.

His opponent rolled his shoulders uncomfortably and ordered more drink. He peered anxiously into Casanova's face, from which all trace of affability had now disappeared. The pair sat in a smoke-filled den where a player's rank in society counted for less than the cash he could lay on the table. A place for cavagnole and manille, faro, biribi and piquet. Ladies pressed their generous bosoms against the shoulders of the luckier players. The Chevalier de Seingalt's eye alighted on a girl in pink silk stockings, then turned coldly back to his debtor. He never mixed money with pleasure, unless the money belonged to someone else.

‘You had a run of luck tonight, Giacomo,’ said Joinville, gruffly.

The Venetian gave a quick smile and sat back in his armchair, eyes half-closed as if remembering things past.

‘There have been times in my life,’ he confided lazily, ‘when I gambled daily and, losing against my word, found that the prospect of having to pay up the next day caused me greater and greater anguish. I would fall sick at the very thought, and then I would get over it. As soon as I regained my health and powers, I would forget all my past ills and return to my usual pursuits.’

‘So you played on your word, too!’

Casanova opened his eyes wide.

‘Could that be because my word was valued more highly than yours?’ he retorted, wickedly.

A peculiar, bitter smell wafted from the candles on the table, stinging the nostrils. With forced gaiety, Joinville snatched his tankard from the serving girl’s hands and tried, clumsily, to pinch her backside. She trotted off, giggling. Joinville shrugged, and boomed out a song that had been a great source of merriment the length and breadth of France under the previous reign, when the Italian-born Mazarin was first minister, governing the country with Anne of Austria, his supposed mistress, the erstwhile infanta, and mother of the child king Louis XIV:

‘Mazarin’s balls don’t bounce in vain,  
They bump and bump and rattle the Crown.  
That wily old Sicilian hound  
Gets up your arse, princess of Spain!’

Casanova wasn’t singing. He sipped his Cyprus wine and kept his opponent firmly in his sights.

‘I’ll take your credit,’ he said suddenly, ‘if you can tell me a good story. I know you’re privy to all the secrets at Court.’

‘Well now! Where to start?’

‘With whatever is of greatest interest.’

Joinville took a deep breath. He was a wine merchant, serving the finest households in Paris. His honourable dedication to sampling all of his merchandise had given him a fine paunch; and his dutiful drinking bouts with each eminent client made him an inexhaustible fount of gossip, ingested more or less accurately, depending on his state of drunkenness at the time.

‘Do you know how La Pompadour first seduced the king? She attended a costume ball dressed as Diana the Huntress, with threads of silver plaited in her hair, and her breasts very much on display, carrying a quiver of arrows and a bow on her back. The king had her there and then.’

Joinville heaved himself to his feet and declaimed:

‘What care I, who seem so bold?  
What if my husband be cuckold?  
What care I for anything,  
When I’m the mistress of the king?!’

Casanova stifled a yawn. Joinville watched in alarm as he got to his feet.

‘Wait! Wait! There’s fresher meat than that! The Devout Party—the religionists—detest La Pompadour, as you well know. They’ll do anything to destroy her...’

‘Nothing new there,’ remarked Casanova, adjusting his waistcoat and looking around for the girl in the pink silk stockings.

‘Wait, I tell you! They say the Devout Party have found a way, and soon La Pompadour will be a mere memory.’

‘A plot?’ Casanova was interested now.

‘So it seems. But I know nothing more for the moment. Father Ofag, a Jesuit, is the leader.’

‘Is that all?’

‘His devoted accomplice goes by the name of Wallace. A soldier. Visionary type. Skin as white as milk, and eyes to make your hair stand up straight on your head. He’s very dangerous.’

Joinville underscored his message by dragging his thumb across the skin of his throat. Casanova looked at him thoughtfully for a moment, cold and calculating.

‘I’m not sure I believe you,’ he said at length. ‘But get me some first-hand information and I’ll cancel our debt. I may even throw in a few coins, but only if it’s truly worth my while.’

He glanced at a woman in a low-cut corset standing at a table nearby, then reluctantly turned his attention back to Joinville.

‘Do you know a police officer by the name of Volnay?’

Joinville laughed heartily.

‘Of course! Volnay saved the king’s life a couple of years back, when Damiens tried to assassinate him. The king knighted him, made him a chevalier.’

‘Indeed!’

‘He is known as an upright man of great integrity. The king asked if he might grant Volnay a favour for having saved his life, and Volnay answered that he should like to be put in charge of investigating every strange and unexplained death in Paris. The king laughed at the idea, but he was in Volnay’s debt. And so, for the past two years, Volnay has been just that: His Majesty’s Inspector of Strange and Unexplained Deaths, with no particular mandate other than to investigate especially nasty or complicated cases of murder in the capital. It was he who solved the Pécoil affair. You’ve heard about that?’

The Venetian shook his head. Joinville lit a cigar and leant forward with a slight, condescending smile.

‘Pécoil had accumulated vast riches from the *gabelle*, the salt tax. He kept it all under his house, in a vault sealed by three doors of solid iron. Like any self-respecting skinflint, he would go down each evening and revel in the sight of his gold. One evening, he failed to come back up. His wife and son were concerned, of course, but it was two days before they sent for the police and forced the three doors. They found Pécoil with his throat cut, lying on the floor beside his treasure, from which not a single crown was missing. His arms were outstretched, reaching into his blackened, burnt-out lantern, the flesh partly consumed by fire.’

Joinville blew a thick cloud of smoke.

‘Volnay solved the case in less than a week. They say he’s highly competent.’

Casanova raised one eyebrow.

‘I hope he is,’ he said coldly. ‘For his own sake.’