

‘*Black Drop* is a joy from start to finish. I particularly liked the glimpses of the grubby machinery of government from the inside, giving a real sense of the intrigues behind closed doors. Jago is a very sympathetic hero, with all his flaws, virtues and secrets, and Philpott made me want to smile and cheer’

Andrew Taylor, author of *The Ashes of London*

‘A gripping, intricate story of Georgian high politics and low life. Leonora Natrass’s historical spy novel is top notch’

W.C. Ryan, author of *A House of Ghosts*

‘A riveting political thriller, set at a fulcrum point in global history. The setting is viscerally immersive and the characters spring to life from the page. This masterful narrative of deception, intrigue and heroism unfolds with compelling pace, wry humour and acute psychological observation. Gripping, moving and utterly engaging’

Philippa East, author of *Little White Lies*

‘A thrilling slice of pitch-dark historical fiction, led by a superbly engaging narrator. Entertaining and deftly written, this gripping tale of murder and treachery on the smouldering streets of eighteenth-century London deserves to be huge’

Emma Stonex, author of *The Lamplighters*

‘Lovers of historical thrillers have a treat in store. A splendid twisting tale of murder and espionage at the political heart of Georgian Britain’

Kate Griffin, author of *Kitty Peck and the Music Hall Murders*

‘In *Black Drop* Leonora Natrass has done that most dangerous thing: allowed fictional characters to mingle with real ones. I’m far too cowardly to do that in my writing, but she has pulled it off. Well written and well constructed, and Jago is a character readers will certainly want to follow’

Alix Nathan, author of *The Warlow Experiment*

‘A sparkling evocation of a distant time, which is remarkably similar to the current one. I loved it. The sights, smells and eccentricities of eighteenth-century Britain are so perfectly captured. Other fictional worlds are going to seem a lot greyer in comparison’

Trevor Wood, author of *The Man on the Street*

‘Leonora Nattrass brings Georgian London vividly to life in a delectable dose of secrets, lies and sinister skulduggery. Take care not to swallow this tincture of intrigue in a single sitting!’

D.V. Bishop, author of *City of Vengeance*

‘This opium-fuelled gem is a murderous romp through the tangled roots of British democracy’

Janice Hallett, author of *The Appeal*

‘Nattrass writes so beautifully. Absolutely compelling, and so atmospheric I felt I was there, following Jago around the mean streets of eighteenth-century London’

Frances Quinn, author of *The Smallest Man*

‘A darkly atmospheric and utterly immersive tale. *Black Drop* is a thrilling, revolutionary ride through the coffee houses and committee rooms of a corrupt and fearful city. Grab your hat and pipe and keep your pistols at the ready!’

Miranda Malins, author of *The Puritan Princess*

‘Superb. Nattrass convincingly recreates eighteenth-century London as a backdrop for spies, murders and a skilful blend of historic and imagined characters. Vivid and fast paced, it’s an impressive achievement, and hugely enjoyable’

Guy Morpuss, author of *Five Minds*

‘An astounding debut novel, written with style and confidence’

A.J. West, author of *The Spirit Engineer*

BLACK DROP

LEONORA NATTRASS



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*BLACK
DROP*

CAST OF CHARACTERS

IN DOWNING STREET

- William Pitt (1759–1806): Tory Prime Minister
Lord Grenville (1759–1834): Whig Foreign Secretary
George Aust (1740–1829): civil servant, Permanent
Under-Secretary to the British Foreign Office
Sarah Murray Aust (1744–1811): author, his wife
Anne Bellingham: her widowed daughter
Sir James Burges MP (1752–1824): Whig Under-Secretary
of State to the British Foreign Office
George Canning MP (1770–1827): Prime Minister Pitt's
protégé in Number 10
Harry Ransome, timber merchant from the West Indies
Will Benson: clerk to Canning, Number 10
Laurence Jago: clerk to Grenville, Foreign Office
Mr Gibbs: his dog
Dora: his landlady

THE AMERICANS

- John Jay (1745–1829): American lawyer, founding father, and
Washington's envoy to the British Government
Theodore Jay: John Jay's son, his secretary
Peter Williams (dates unknown): slave, valet and secretary
to John Jay

THE LAWYERS

Thomas Erskine MP, KC (1750–1823): Whig barrister
Vicary ‘Vinegar’ Gibbs (1751–1820): his colleague, and
Laurence’s former employer

THE ACCUSED

Thomas Hardy (b.1752) shoemaker, secretary and founder
of the radical London Corresponding Society
Lydia Hardy (b.176?): his wife
Robert Watt (d.1794): turbulent Scottish radical,
arraigned for treason
Paul Lemaitre and George Higgins (dates unknown):
members of the Corresponding Society, accused of
participating in the Popgun Plot against George III
Thomas Upton (dates unknown): their accuser

THE FRENCH

Maximilian Robespierre (1758–94): architect of the Terror
Aglantine: a Jacobin spy

THE WRITERS

William Philpott: loyalist journalist, lately returned from the
United States of America, editor of the *Weekly Cannon*
Hannah More (1745–1833): evangelical moralist and writer,
author of *Village Politics*
Thomas Paine (1737–1809): notorious radical, author of
The Rights of Man, 1790, and *The Age of Reason*, 1793–4

PROLOGUE

5 November 1794

ST DUNSTAN'S CLOCK strikes twelve, and in the following hush I hear Gog and Magog thud back to rest in the clock tower, empty-eyed, hammers in hand. Curious to think they do this mechanical duty even in the depths of the night, when the lamps have died, a fine sleet falls, and the watchman is the only one to observe them. Even thus will I perform this last task, with no witness in the quiet darkness except God and Mr Gibbs, my old dog, who looks likely to outlive me after all.

I betrayed myself tonight at five and twenty minutes to ten, left immediately, vomited in the gutter, and fled home on foot. It was a poor sort of flight – near two hours' trek from Kensington through mud and icy rain – and by the time I reached Fleet Street I was limping. I felt dazed, as if I'd drunk a bottle of brandy. I wished I had that gentlemanly recourse at hand – knocked up Jeb Turner at the Cock Tavern – but he was abed, and only cursed me out of the window. So, I have resorted to more Black Drop, which has a similar effect at a fraction of the price.

There was no pursuit, not then, and in my right mind I would not expect it yet – the hammering at the door, the rush of officious feet on the steep staircase. It was past dawn when they roused the shoemaker, Hardy, threw him in the covered cart, and bore him off to prison.

I am unclear as to the true conditions to be found in the Tower. I imagine a medieval dungeon, with poor devils hanging from chains, pulled out of shape by the rack and the screw. I do not think this a likely picture, in these enlightened times, but you can tell by Hardy's sallow, bony face that he has suffered. In court he is clean and decently dressed, but if he is found guilty of treason, the Ministry is determined he shall endure a medieval punishment. He will swing, see his guts burned before his face, and be chopped in four quarters for the edification of the crowd. There is no need for torture when he must live that walk to the scaffold, each night, in tormenting dreams. In France, even Robespierre broke at the prospect of the tumbril, the jeering crowd, the waiting blade. For a man so expert in killing others, he made a sad fist of suicide. Only blew off his own jaw, and went to the guillotine alive, but in agony and degradation.

But it is not arrest, or the block, I most fear tonight, as I flinch at the settling of an old floorboard on the landing outside my chamber. I wish I still had the pistol, but it is gone to the bottom of the Thames by Blackfriars Bridge, and only my own dulled wits can save me from the soft footstep I listen for, the swift blow meant to silence me for ever.

If I am taken tonight – whether by law, murder or the devil himself – these papers must speak for me. Being in my right mind, despite the Black Drop and the terror, I will give you, reader, 'The Confession of Laurence Jago, clerk to the Foreign Office', the truth and the whole truth, as best I recollect it.

Though time is pressing, I will write down everything I remember, for it is only in such details that you will understand my story.

I light a new candle from the stump of the last, warm wax clotting on my fingers, and gaze for a moment into the yellow flame which spits in the damp draught from the window. Where and when to begin? The first cause for my involvement in the following tale lies in my birth, but I have no time for that tonight. Instead, I will begin with the coming of John Jay from America, in the hot days of June. It was that event which drew me down from my stool in the Foreign Office garret, and made me, at last, a person of interest.

I

THE CRUSH OF BODIES crowding into Newgate Street slammed me about like an angry flood. *Meet me by the scaffold*, Aglantine's note had said, and I could see her there by the steps, as I swept towards her, propelled by the mob. The sun shone down out of a cloudless blue sky, the heat was stifling, and the smell from the close-packed bodies foul. I let the current take me along the street, faces looking into mine unseeing, hands on my shoulders, pulling at my coat, inside my pockets. I held on grimly to my new green-lensed eyeglasses, determined not to lose them in the fray. Costermongers perched up on walls, out of the chaos, shouting out their goods in a singsong babble. Children were screaming on their fathers' shoulders, half in fear, half excitement. If anyone fell under the onward sweep of the crowd, they would be another unexpected casualty of the day.

Aglantine had managed to get in pride of place, like an old crone at the guillotine, with her tight black costume and wrinkled, scowling face. I washed up beside her and put my

spectacles back on my nose. I had to shout to be heard over the din.

‘Good God, Aglantine, it’s hell on earth.’

It seemed a ridiculous place for a secret meeting, except that everyone else was bellowing, and no one was listening, not even the guards, only an arm’s length away, lining the platform to keep some kind of order. Aglantine looked at me reprovingly, but the procession was already coming out of the press yard on its short walk to the scaffold, and we both turned to watch. The hangman first, followed by an uncomfortable official from the Home Office, then a couple of constables armed with clubs, and finally a pale stringy fellow who looked like a surgeon, probably come in hope of a corpse. There was something of a pause and then the condemned men appeared behind them, stumbling over their feet as they climbed the steps, white caps on their heads.

‘Three at a time!’ Aglantine looked from the three men to the three nooses dangling from the crossbeam. ‘Is it to be three at a time?’

‘There are only three. The rest have been reprieved for transportation.’

‘Only three!’ Such disgust. Her cold, amphibian eyes disappeared entirely within their folds of flesh. I had forgotten how hideous she was. ‘Only three! For all this circus?’

She was right, in one way. They were a poor selection of villains. An old man accused of forgery, a postman convicted of stealing his letters, and a frail young highway robber, who had killed his first victim in sheer panic. The robber tripped on the stairs and the crowd roared, then clapped.

I realised Aglantine had turned her eyes on me, with a look rather like an undertaker measuring me for a coffin. ‘I hear you are promoted. Senior clerk to the American talks. I had almost forgotten you, until I heard.’

‘Then you’ve heard more than I have.’ Had I really once admired her? Had I really thought her harmless? I had taken an odd dislike to marmalade in recent years, and I saw now that it was because she had always smelled inexplicably of oranges. When we first met, I had thought her a woman like my mother, adrift and alone in a strange land. In that, I had also thought her rather like myself.

The men on the scaffold were pushed into place beneath the nooses, ready for dispatch into eternity. Whatever last words they might have spoken were lost in the hubbub. Their women – wives, mothers, daughters – came up to bid them farewell, but the occasion seemed too much, and they stood there tongue tied. Only one was weeping. Then the caps were pulled down over the men’s faces, the nooses affixed.

The drop was short, and they throttled slowly, jerking, legs kicking as their women watched. The young robber’s mother threw herself at his feet, pulling with all her strength, but it wasn’t enough to break his neck, and she stood up, defeated and bloody nosed from where he had kicked her in the face as he flailed. She shouted to men in the crowd to help her, but they only jeered.

‘It *is* a spectacle.’ Aglantine seemed to have recovered somewhat from her disappointment. ‘But so quickly over.’

Once they were dead, there would be an argument about the clothes and the disposal of the bodies, that was all. ‘Shall we go?’

‘Not until they stop kicking.’ There was a hole in the postman’s boot, and his stockings were rags. The old forger was better dressed, but there was less fight in him. He was already still.

The fickle crowd was thinning as the thrashing above us lessened. An argument had begun between the hangman, the

surgeon and the women as the old forger was cut down. He landed with a thud and the railing shivered.

Aglantine glanced at me, but she could not keep her eyes long from the stripping of the forger's corpse. The hangman seemed eager to assert his rights over the old man's clothes, but he probably wouldn't put up such a fight for the postman's rags and holed boots. I turned my eyes away, with equal measures of pity and disgust. Aglantine's small wizened face, like the capuchin monkey at Pidcock's Menagerie was, for once, a preferable sight. I didn't believe a word of this supposed promotion, but just now it was a welcome distraction from the close press of bodies about me, and the apprehension of contracting a sudden or lingering death from all their multifarious diseases.

'Where did you hear this preposterous tale about me?' I'd been in the garret of the Foreign Office decoding messages for ten years, and there had been no sign in Downing Street of any impending change.

'You are not my only set of eyes in Whitehall.'

'I didn't know.'

She looked at me pityingly. 'How would you?'

The surgeon had got his way as far as the young robber went, and was waving his cart to come through the thinning crowd. The boy's mother had fainted, and the hangman was gingerly reviving her, as if it went against all his training. Aglantine detached herself from the railing, smoothed down her dress, and steered me back along the emptying street. It was still blazing hot, and we kept to the shadow of the overhanging buildings.

'What manner of man is the American envoy?'

'Mr Jay?' I looked at her for a moment, trying to pick my words. In the end I only said what everybody knew. 'An

enigma. The Government hopes for peace but fear his coming means war. He himself is entirely inscrutable. Pale, very cold, and appears calculating.' I'd heard rumours he'd tortured our spies in the Independence War, and from my first glimpse of his colourless face I could well believe it.

'They did not expect him?'

'No, he turned up without any warning. Claimed his previous letters had gone to the bottom of the ocean, but I don't know if they believe that. I saw him at St James's Palace, dressed so plainly the King was offended.'

The cart passed us, the young robber's body thrown in the back. One foot dangled dangerously near to the turning wheel, and I felt afraid for him, until I remembered he was already dead.

I only half heard Aglantine quizzing me about Jay's son, Theodore, who was come to England as his father's secretary. The boy had seemed altogether more animal than his father, his hair unruly under a bob wig. A shy smile. 'Yes, he was there too,' I said absently. 'An eager young lad.'

'Perhaps that might be an opening for you. You are both young; even if, as I see from your face, you are no longer eager.'

The cart was gone from sight, and I turned back to her with a sigh. 'Not so very young. I shall be thirty this year.'

'And I shall be ninety, one day, if I live. We need not speak in platitudes, Laurence. It is of the utmost importance to France that these talks between Jay and the Ministry fail. America is our natural ally and should come into the war on our side. It would make a very great difference to the war – and to Citizen Robespierre.'

Robespierre seemed bent on ruling his population by the expedient of exterminating them by the hundred, and even if the numbers reported executed by the newspapers were

exaggerated by a factor of ten, they were still astonishing. They had always called him incorruptible, unswerving, and now he was single-mindedly pursuing his policy of Terror.

I stared at her. 'Aglantine, it's been over a year. Do you expect to come back into my life and find me unchanged? I won't do it. You say you have other eyes in Whitehall. Use them.'

She paused while I walked on a few paces. 'What do you hear about the army?'

'The British army?' I turned, cautious.

'Of course, the British. Are they in retreat?'

I searched for something to say that would tell her nothing she did not already know from the papers. 'They are in some trouble, I believe. The Austrians have made a deal with the French and are hastening home. Lord Moira has gone to the aid of the Duke of York and his army in Flanders.'

'And water is wet, and grass is green. Where are they heading? Inland, or to the coast?'

'I don't know.'

She frowned at me horribly.

'I don't know, and if I knew, I wouldn't tell you.'

'You are of no use to me, Laurence.'

'I am glad.'

'But I do not release you.'

It was absurd. I had released myself months ago, and she must be desperate to think of approaching me again. Behind her I could see the forger's naked body being bundled into a second cart, bound for a pauper's grave. I looked at the ignoble spectacle rather than meet her eye.

'Just wait till the traitor's trial comes on,' a voice said, approaching rapidly behind us from the direction of the scaffold.

'You mean Hardy? Damn me, I'll not come to that,' another

voice answered. 'There'll be trouble. Church and King on one side, and Jacobins on the other.'

'A right good mill,' the first agreed. 'I'll not miss it.' Aglantine turned her head to look at the fellow, but he only thrust out his tongue at her insolently before pushing past, just one of a faceless crowd.

They were speaking of Thomas Hardy, the latest man arrested among the radical reformers. In the quaint language of the indictment, he had been *moved and seduced by the instigation of the devil as a false traitor against our Lord the King*. He was a shoemaker, and the secretary of something called a 'Corresponding Society', which had a membership more vulgar than the Ministry liked, and a disturbing number of branches across the kingdom. They had threatened to call a mass meeting to demand the vote, and the Ministry, remembering Paris in 1789, had trembled, arrested the ringleaders, and thrown them in the Tower. It surprised me to see they had learned so little from the fall of the Bastille.

But at that time I knew nothing much about Hardy, God help me, save that he apparently intended to *break and disturb the peace and common tranquillity of this kingdom; stir, move and excite insurrection, rebellion and War against our Lord the King; subvert and alter the legislature, rule and government now duly and happily established in this kingdom; depose our said Lord the King from the royal state, title, power and government of this kingdom; and bring and put our said Lord the King to death*. It seemed an ambitious programme for an English cobbler.

Aglantine opened her mouth as if to say something on the subject, but then shook her head. 'Hanging is an unpleasant fate,' was all she said, reflectively. 'So English, so bungled, so undignified. When I die, it will be by the guillotine – or in my bed.'

I didn't answer, but as I walked back to work, I realised she could put the screws to me if she really wanted to. I wondered who her other spy in Whitehall might be, and why he couldn't tell her the army's plans. But then, for all I knew, he might only be a Chamber Keeper – *she* might only be a Necessary Woman with a mop and pail – with no access to real information at all.

2

I TRUDGED THE LONG way back to work. Over the Fleet, which runs close to my lodgings, and has become so vile it has been paved over, and slaps sullenly at its gratings before disgorging its swollen contents into the Thames under Blackfriars Bridge. Every other house a shop of some kind, with its goods set out haphazardly. A huddle of old women sitting in a doorway with a motley collection of useless objects: broken baskets, old walking sticks, a single left boot. But somewhere in the throng, a one-legged customer would be in search of it – a wounded soldier perhaps, discharged and left to fend for himself and make a living the best he could. Noise, mud, squalor, and a tide of small coin circulating up and down the street, without beginning or end.

I had walked under Temple Bar, and was passing the menagerie on the Strand, when Will Benson cropped up at my elbow. He worked in Number 10, in a position very like my own at the Foreign Office, and we sometimes ate a chop together in the Salutation and Cat, sometimes met at

the revels in St James's Park. Though only a junior clerk like myself, and only five years in Downing Street, he was well known in Whitehall, having a sunny disposition that made him popular.

The mynah bird at the menagerie was greeting us from its cage at the bottom of the stairs, inviting us to ascend to view the animals, but Will hardly noticed, looking grey as he fell into step beside me with no more than a nod. He didn't ask me where I'd been, and after one look at his face I didn't ask him either. At the best of times he had a sallow indoor complexion and lank dark hair poking out from a grey scrub wig, but in the normal way of things you hardly noticed, his whole face redeemed by his ready smile. Now he was ashy grey, his usually cheerful eyes dark holes in his face. Hollow despair seemed to steam off him in the hot sunlight. Was he ill? Or had he received some dreadful news?

'Good God, what's wrong with you? You look—' But in truth I didn't really know how he looked. I couldn't exactly frame the words to describe the way he stared back at me, empty space behind the eyes that were usually so merry. 'Has something ...?'

'No!' He hastened his step away from me as we came up to the chaos of Charing Cross. 'No, nothing at all.' And dived across the road under the wheels of a builder's wagon, with reckless disregard for his own neck.

Ahead in the distance lay Westminster and its extraordinary muddle of crumbling medieval battlements, but here in Whitehall the pavements emptied, the pedestrians were more clerkly, and the buildings for a moment more genteel. I caught Will up as he turned into Downing Street, and we paused outside Number 10. I laid a hand on his arm. 'Will I see you in the park this evening? You look like a man sore in need of a drink.'

We should have been allies, for we were both country boys transplanted to the city, but the strange course my life had taken made intimacy too dangerous an indulgence and, though we moved in the same circles, I had rarely spoken to him alone. I knew where he lived, but I had never visited him, and I had certainly never invited him to my own shabby lodgings. There was no especial reason he should confide in me, and at length, when the pause grew awkward, I made my bow. 'Well, if you ever need anything ...' But Will was only silent and I left him, crossing the road to the shadowy Foreign Office.

The lobby was cool, but the temperature rose inexorably as I climbed the three flights of stairs to my room. Up in the garret it was stifling from the sun hammering on the roof tiles and the windows close fastened against the pestilential air. I could feel the sweat gathering on my forehead as I pulled the stack of waiting papers towards me, come in overnight from Dover, and pushed my eyeglasses up on to my forehead. A symbol on the top right-hand corner of the first sheet was the key to the cypher and, dismissing Will Benson and his trouble from my mind, I reached the indicated volume down from the shelf, wiped the sweat out of my eyes, and opened the book at the relevant page.

LATER IN THE AFTERNOON I was called down into Sir James Burges's comfortable old office, with its long, dusty mahogany bookshelves and the antiquated tapestry that led directly into the Foreign Secretary's mysterious domain. Lord Grenville has two under-secretaries, one political, one permanent. Sir James, the Political Under-Secretary, is the senior, and I expected to be sent on some menial errand,

but instead he bade me sit. Then Mr Aust, the Permanent Under-Secretary, came in through the concealed door in the bookcase. He is a man of birth as lowly as my own, but with a long and meritorious history in the Department. He had taken off his shoes, as he often did late in the day, when they began to pinch. It was a habit we clerks much disliked, for it made it hard to hear him coming along the corridors.

Aust sat down among the cushions in the window seat, dust in the sunlight between us, and Sir James turned his moon face on me. 'This business with Mr Jay has caught us quite unawares,' he said. 'With Parliament about to adjourn for the summer there's hardly a soul left in town, and only eleven of us in the Department, if you can even count the young gentlemen upstairs in that number at all. How long have you been with us now?'

'It will be ten years at Christmas, sir.' Ten humdrum years in the garret, and another three before that, in Mr Gibbs' legal chambers in Lincoln's Inn.

'Is it really ten years? Well, well. Now, tell me, Mr Jago, what do you know of the American question?'

A very junior clerk, hardly more than a schoolboy, came in with a tea tray. It held three cups, and as the boy poured, I looked from Sir James's face, to Aust's. This unprecedented courtesy seemed to suggest that Aglantine's other eyes in Whitehall had been well informed after all. She now also provided me with an answer. 'I know that France seeks to bring them into the war on their side.'

The two under-secretaries exchanged looks, apparently impressed by my precocious knowledge of public affairs. 'Very good, Jago, very good. And if we are to prevent it, there will be a deal of advice to be sought, errands to be run, and the whole arsenal of diplomatic entertainments to be deployed.

If you're agreeable, you'll minute the meetings between Lord Grenville and Mr Jay, and act as Chief Secretary to a committee of interested gentlemen.'

I'd been forewarned, but this was a bigger step up than I had ever believed possible. So much has happened since then, that it's hard to remember exactly how I felt. Despite my unease at Aglantine's reappearance, on the whole I think I was pleased – mighty pleased – and with no presentiment of disaster.

'Mr Jay is no common-or-garden envoy, Jago. He would have signed their Declaration of Independence if he'd happened to be in Philadelphia at the time. He negotiated the peace treaty between us, in Paris in '84, and until recently he served as their Foreign Secretary. Yes, yes, a dignified gentleman indeed, and worthy of the greatest respect. You saw him at the palace, I suppose?'

'Yes, sir.' It was also at the palace that I first saw Philpott, I remember now. Hard to imagine a time before his large presence filled my life. Hard to imagine a future without him, but that day in the palace I had only laughed at him behind my hand. His warm Hampshire burr had made the courtiers shudder, as he shook his red face positively in the King's own, leaning closer than was at all proper to the royal person. 'Yes sire, my father was a farmer, and I often earned a penny scaring crows from his corn as a boy.' And then, to a whispered question, too low to catch, he replied cheerfully, 'Damned atheists and Jacobins, all of 'em. Don't you worry, sire, William Philpott will best them yet.' He was a journalist just returned from Philadelphia, someone said, and why he was there, at all, was a mystery.

But I wasn't thinking about Philpott just then, as I watched Sir James sip his tea.

'Have you met Lord Grenville much, since he came to the Department?'

‘No, sir. Hardly at all.’

‘You’ll find him a very pleasant gentleman to serve, and you’ll be at the hub of things, that’s certain.’

A clerk poked his head around the hidden door in the book-case. ‘Lord Grenville wants you, when you have a moment, sir.’

‘Very well.’ Sir James stood up with weary resignation. Aust coughed discreetly.

‘Your wig, Sir James.’

‘Is it ...?’

‘I’m afraid so.’

Sir James tugged his headpiece to and fro until Aust nodded, and then pushed through the tapestry into Lord Grenville’s office.

‘So, if there are no practical matters arising?’ Aust had got to his feet, ready to dismiss me.

‘Well, sir ...’ I pushed my eyeglasses up my clammy nose for the twentieth time in an hour.

‘You are wondering about the money? I imagine there’ll be some increase to your stipend, if it would be helpful to you.’

I USED TO BELIEVE THAT in twenty years’ time Downing Street would no longer exist, that my masters would be philosophers worth serving, and that I might even be one of them myself. But, as I cleared my desk in the garret, I was pleased enough with my more modest promotion. Though I had no more right to vote than the traitor Thomas Hardy, the devil that *moved and seduced* him had admitted defeat in my case, and these days I found myself quite willing to swear allegiance to Lord Grenville and his under-secretaries.

My new office was only a hat-box in the corner between the stairs and the chimney stack, with a view over the back

alley that led into Fludyer Street, where a lively interview was now in progress between the clerks in the garret above and a purveyor of strawberries below. The boys were urging her to attach her basket to the strings they dangled; she was demurring, afraid for the safety of her stock. As they argued, I set out the few homely sticks of furniture I had found for myself in the lumber room. An antique wig stand, a worm-eaten bookcase and an old wine cooler that might serve as a footstool. It was almost the end of the day when I was finished. I took off my wig, set it carefully on the stand, and ran my hands through my damp hair. The new room was only a little less stifling than the garret, the window nailed shut, and I opened the door to let in a current of air from the lobby below.

‘Ha – hm.’

Lord Grenville, the Foreign Secretary, was watching me from the doorway. I straightened, bowed, pushed my spectacles more firmly up my nose and reached for my wig all at the same time, but Grenville only waved his hand. He was good-looking in a way, with large eyes and a pronounced forehead. ‘You’re my new clerk. Mr Jago, I think?’

‘Yes, sir – I mean, my Lord.’ I had seen Grenville often, but never this close and certainly never to talk to. He had a pleasant, practical-sounding voice.

‘I have a ticklish problem and can’t find that damned Chamber Keeper anywhere. It’s somewhat below both our dignities, but the Home Secretary is to come in shortly, and my room is in a state entirely unfit for visitors. Will you help me?’

Grenville was already crossing the landing, flinging open the door to his office. I followed, pausing in his doorway somewhat amazed. A large sash window gave out on to a vista of the park, and I blinked in the sudden brightness, before

noticing the florist's display that filled the entire room.

'Look like a damned actress, don't I?' Grenville smiled with sudden good humour. 'The Home Secretary will never let me forget it, if he finds me in such a jumble.'

'What are they, my Lord?' I was still taking it all in – the air, the light, and the ocean of plants, all glossy green leaves and fat buds. Some had burst into blooms of extraordinary size, the innumerable petals ruffled in shades of white and pink. It was altogether a heaven I had never dreamed of.

'Peonies, Mr Jago, courtesy of an old friend, an intrepid collector of plants in the East Indies. I made the mistake of telling him my wife has a passion for the things, and an ambition to raise a blue variety – a thing never yet achieved.' Grenville was also eyeing it all, somewhat dazed. 'But I had not thought he would send so many. What the devil shall we do with them?'

'We could put some in my room. And some in the garret.'

'Make it so. And I dare say a few in the Cabinet Room would be cheerful.'

A clerk clattered down from the garret with a raft of transliterations as I crossed the landing with an armful of foliage. When Grenville followed me into my room a moment or two later, he was holding a paper in his hand and seemed to have forgotten about the peonies.

'More bad news from Flanders, I'm afraid.' He put the paper into my hand and, remembering just in time that as a clerk I was supposed to understand no French, I resisted the urge to read it at once. 'Will you make a copy and take it across to Number 10? Make sure to put it straight into George Canning's hand. He is my channel to the Prime Minister on these military matters.'

'Very good, my Lord.'

I copied the note out with some difficulty amid the forest of plants. The message was written in the worst hand I had ever read. It was not the clerkish round hand that was ubiquitous throughout the Department. Almost too bad to be gentlemanly either, though I had seen some terrible specimens of that affliction in my time. But once I made sense of it, I scanned its French with a practised eye and perfect comprehension. It was bad news indeed. The Austrians were retreating towards the Rhine, while the English were in flight to the coast at Ostend. If the French only knew it, they could crush us at once, for our forces were split by the River Scheldt. The French had not yet learned of their opportunity, and God send they never would.

I sat back and looked at the words on the paper, remembering Aglantine's questions that morning about the army's flight. 'Inland or to the coast?' she'd asked. This must be a part of the same web of intelligence she navigated, and now I was brought down from the garret I would be a part of it, too. No wonder she had sought me out.

Once, God forgive me, I might have passed on what she wanted, just as I had occasionally let slip the name of an aristocrat fleeing France in the early days of the Revolution. Then I hardly thought my words of much consequence – nor Aglantine much of a danger, being only an old woman. But that was before the war. Now the newspapers screamed that there were scores of spies in London, everywhere from the docks to the House of Commons. French valets and maidser-vants could hardly be trusted, nor the tide of refugee émigrés, nor the general foreign element of the swarming humanity that filled the streets.

And I was certainly a foreign element lurking in a position of trust. The son of a Cornish farmer and a French widow,

come together five years before my birth through an excise dodger out of Roscoff, I had omitted to mention at my Foreign Office interview in '84 that I spoke fluent French, for then it hardly seemed to matter. Later I drew a veil over the summer of '89, when Mother asked me to go home with her and we found ourselves in Roscoff in the middle of the Revolution.

Since Louis was guillotined and the war broke out in the February of '93, I had passed no more information, and the only incriminating item in my possession was the French pistol Aglantine had given me when we began our alliance. In '89 all of England was so delighted with the French Revolution that I might still have been forgiven, if I had spoken at the right moment to the right person. But I had spoken at the wrong moment to the wrong one. And now, with the war and the new Terror in Paris, any chance of confession seemed gone for ever.