

T W O

THE PLAYWRIGHT

Paris, 1767

The audience began booing before the curtain descended. Angry painted faces with hair stacked like wedding cakes, men and women—stuffed into heavy gold embroidery, silk, linen, ruffles, and lace—snarled like wild dogs. The play, which opened in Paris at the Comédie-Française on January 29, 1767, closed the same night. Despite a talented cast, the first performance of *Eugénie* was long, overwrought, and too controversial for the audience. One vicious critic hissed that the playwright, a young man named Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais, “will never achieve anything, not even mediocrity.”

That was untrue. Beaumarchais had already written one moderately successful comedy, a short sketch called *The Barber of Seville*. *Eugénie* was his first attempt at a serious full-length drama, and the criticism stung him deeply. He had labored for eight years on the script, and he had taken command of every detail of the performance, staging, and lighting. He had even designed and built new equipment for moving scenery. Still, the fact remained that his play

was a flop, and at thirty-four, though he had done many things, he had not yet found his true calling.

Beaumarchais was a man blessed with many talents, but cursed with a restless mind that never found true contentment in any of his accomplishments. From an early age, Beaumarchais, born Pierre-Augustin de Caron, displayed a genius for music, but at thirteen Pierre-Augustin began working as an apprentice to his father, a modest watchmaker on the bustling rue Saint-Denis in Paris. Possessing a sharp mind and the discipline necessary for detailed work, Pierre-Augustin excelled as a watchmaker's apprentice. With his fine fingers, accustomed to playing viol, guitar, harp, and flute, he had extraordinary dexterity, which enabled him to work on very small watches. The same creative passion that inspired him musically, also sparked his inventiveness. He tinkered with watches, trying to find ways to improve the precision of timekeeping. One might expect that a serious young man obsessed with mastering music and learning the solitary craft of watchmaking would be awkward socially. To the contrary. People quickly took to the young man with his witty conversation, physical grace, and almost feminine beauty.

At the age of twenty-two, Pierre-Augustin Caron revolutionized timekeeping. He designed a radically new escapement—the device that regulates the movement of a clock. Before Caron, watches were spherical and awkward to strap onto a wrist. Caron's escapement kept time more accurately and made it possible for a watch to lie flat against the wrist. If he accomplished nothing else in his life, he would be remembered for the Caron escapement, which is still used today.

The young Caron proudly showed his design to the king's watchmaker, Jean André Lepaute. Lepaute was impressed enough to submit the design to the French Academy of Sciences as his own. Caron might never have learned that Lepaute had stolen his invention

except that the design sparked so much interest that a Paris newspaper, the *Mercure de France*, reported that Lepaute had invented a new watch. As bold as he was ingenious, the twenty-two-year-old wrote to the Academy and to the *Mercure de France*, exposing Lepaute's fraud. The Royal Academy was persuaded by Caron and declared that Caron's escapement "is in watches the most perfect that has been produced, although it is the most difficult to execute." He won both the patent and considerable public acclaim for his genius. His bold move pushed Pierre-Augustin Caron onto the public stage for the first time.

Caron's defiance and brilliance also won him the attention of Louis XV. In 1754, he was invited to Versailles to meet the king, who was fascinated by the young man and commissioned a watch for himself and the tiniest watch possible for the dainty wrist of his powerful mistress, Madame de Pompadour. For her, Caron disguised her watch within a ring for her small finger. She was delighted. Soon, all of the king's ministers were ordering watches from Caron, who replaced the disgraced Lepaute as the king's watchmaker.

Now tall and slender with a handsome face and confident expression, Caron caught the attention of the court at Versailles. The young courtier had many social opportunities, but he hungered for wealth and fame. At that time, public offices in France were routinely bought and sold as personal property. He had an affair with the beautiful Madame Francquet, ten years his senior and the wife of the aged Comptroller of the Pantry. Madame Francquet persuaded her frail husband to retire and sell his office to Caron for a modest annuity. In reality, the comptroller's job was merely honorary; its only perk was that Caron had the right to promenade into the royal dining room behind the king's dinner—but it was a start for an ambitious young man. Two months after selling his office, Monsieur Francquet died of apoplexy, and Caron was thus freed

from the obligation to make annual payments. Once the estate was settled in 1756, Francquet's grieving widow quickly married Caron. Caron now had servants, a carriage, a mansion in Paris, and another in the country. Caron was particularly taken with the large country house in Alsace called "Beaumarchais" (or "beautiful walk"). He thought that the name of his wife's house sounded more suitable to his new rank than Caron, so Pierre-Augustin Caron restyled himself Caron de Beaumarchais.

Madame Francquet, like Beaumarchais, was a gifted harpist. She encouraged him to redesign the pedals, an arrangement that remains in use on harps today. Beaumarchais organized recitals for his friends at his home, and his reputation as a musician grew. Madame Francquet's happiness was short-lived, however. The youthful Beaumarchais was unfaithful, and their marriage rapidly deteriorated. She died from typhoid fever in 1757, less than a year after marrying Beaumarchais. Her family immediately challenged Beaumarchais's right to inherit anything from his wife's estate. As Beaumarchais had failed to record the marriage contract in a timely manner, a long court battle determined that he was not entitled to any of her property. All he kept was the name Beaumarchais. Once again, he was a watchmaker.

Louis XV took pity on the recently widowed Beaumarchais. When he learned of Beaumarchais's musical talent, he invited Beaumarchais to tutor his four daughters, the princesses Louise, Adélaïde, Victoire, and Sophie. Beaumarchais earned nothing as a tutor, but access to the royal family was a valuable commodity at the Court of Versailles.

In the spring of 1760 Beaumarchais was invited to visit Madame de Pompadour's glittering château d'Etoiles. There he was introduced by Pompadour's husband to Joseph Pâris-Duverney, one of the richest men in France, who had made a fortune selling arms in the war against Austria in the 1740s. Pâris-Duverney, at seventy-six,

was a heavysset man with a double-chin and an upturned nose that veered sharply to the left. He had recently established L'Ecole Militaire to provide military training for the sons of impoverished nobility. Pâris-Duverney had repeatedly invited the king to visit the school, located near Hôtel Royal des Invalides, but Louis XV had little interest in this project. Pâris-Duverney, who could afford nearly anything, was completely frustrated in his efforts to get the king's attention. When Pâris-Duverney heard of Beaumarchais and his close relationship to the princesses, he set up this meeting. Pâris-Duverney was immediately enchanted by the young man with the dark, intelligent eyes. Pâris-Duverney offered Beaumarchais "his heart, his help and his credit, if he could succeed in doing what everybody has tried to do in vain for nine years." If Beaumarchais could arrange for Louis XV to visit the military academy, Pâris-Duverney would become his patron.

Beaumarchais invited the princesses to see the academy first, and they were delighted by the young officers in their handsome uniforms parading on the grounds. They rushed back to Versailles excitedly to tell their father that he really should see the academy for himself. The king agreed to pay a formal visit, and Pâris-Duverney was thrilled. From this small exchange an intense and intimate relationship blossomed between the twenty-seven-year-old music tutor and the seventy-six-year-old financier.

Pâris-Duverney, who was unmarried and childless, pursued the young man like a prize, buying him extravagant gifts and launching him in a number of ambitious business ventures. "I love you, my child," Pâris-Duverney gushed to Beaumarchais in a letter. "From now on I will treat you like my son. Only death will prevent me from my commitment to you." Pâris-Duverney gave him an annuity of 6,000 livres (about \$46,000 today). He taught Beaumarchais the business of arms trading and gave him a percentage of his military

contracts. He loaned Beaumarchais a considerable sum to purchase the offices of Secretary to the King, Lieutenant General of the Chase of the Tribunal, and Bailiwick of the Warren of the Louvre, responsible for enforcing hunting regulations on the king's property—all sinecures from which Beaumarchais derived a small income. Pâris-Duverney also helped Beaumarchais purchase a mansion at 26 rue de Condé, where Beaumarchais lived with his father and younger sister. Over the next decade Pâris-Duverney gave or lent Beaumarchais at least 800,000 livres (about \$6 million today).

For his part, Beaumarchais offered the older man companionship, youth, and affection. For nearly a decade the two men were inseparable. Beaumarchais composed romantic songs for Pâris-Duverney and penned intimate letters. Their ambiguous correspondence suggests that Pâris-Duverney may have been more than a patron to the beautiful young inventor. Beaumarchais teased Pâris-Duverney affectionately, calling him “dear little girl”: “How goes the dear little girl? It is a long time since we embraced. We are queer lovers. We dare not see each other because our parents frown at us; but we still love each other. Come now, my dear child. . . .”

Some biographers have suggested that this language was a quaint form of salutation, but it was hardly customary among men, even in its time; other biographers have insisted that Beaumarchais was writing to Pâris-Duverney in what they called their secret “oriental” code. Yet there was nothing “oriental” about the language, and why would two grown men have found it necessary to disguise the contents of their private letters? The plain language of their few surviving letters and the circumstances of their relationship suggest that theirs was not merely a “father-son relationship,” as some biographers have described it. Whether or not their relationship was physical, there were at least homoerotic overtones, which would hardly

have shocked anyone around Versailles. While sodomy was officially outlawed in France, same-sex relations were neither uncommon nor well hidden at the court, where courtiers winked at men with what they called the “Italian taste.”

Pâris-Duverney introduced Beaumarchais to the world of politics and diplomacy. As a military veteran and an ardent nationalist, Pâris-Duverney believed passionately in the necessity of revenging France’s defeat at the hands of the British in the Seven Years’ War. He impressed upon Beaumarchais the historic conflict between these two powers and the rightful place of France as the Continent’s dominant power. Only France could safeguard European society and check the power of Britain’s navy, Pâris-Duverney argued. To do that, Pâris-Duverney believed France must first divide Britain’s colonial empire, which was the source of its economic power. This strategic lesson was not lost on Beaumarchais.

While Pâris-Duverney tutored Beaumarchais in business and politics, he also encouraged Beaumarchais’s playwriting. At first Beaumarchais showed little talent as a playwright, and his early plays were poorly received. One of his early works, *The Two Friends*, was about the moral relationship between two businessmen. It was probably based in part on Beaumarchais’s partnership with Pâris-Duverney. The play was a failure. On a poster outside the theater advertising *The Two Friends* one wit scrawled: “By an author who has none.” Nevertheless, Beaumarchais kept tinkering with theater in the same spirit of experimentation with which he had tinkered with watches and musical instruments. During a business trip on behalf of Pâris-Duverney to Madrid, Beaumarchais was inspired to write a play set in Spain—a farce about a clever barber who helps a young suitor to insinuate himself into a noble household as a music tutor, and it ends with some confusion about a marriage

contract. *The Barber of Seville*, which eventually became one of his most successful plays, and inspired Rossini's classic opera, drew on his experience as a music tutor and entrepreneur.

BEAUMARCHAIS WAS DETERMINED to salvage *Eugénie* after the withering criticism it had received. He quickly revised the second and third acts and reopened the play two days after it had ignominiously closed. The response was vastly different—literally overnight. The critics now roared their approval and audiences flocked to it. *Eugénie* went on to shatter performance records at the Comédie-Française. Suddenly, Beaumarchais was the bright young talent of the Parisian stage. It made no sense to him, but he smiled at the fickleness of his audience. Beaumarchais's fortune often swung from disaster to triumph.

Beaumarchais lived much of his life onstage, and it was not merely his theatrical productions that were mounted as public spectacles. His inventions, music, writing, romances, legal problems, and political battles were public performances, part comedy and part drama. But the most fascinating plot Beaumarchais ever imagined was the one he enacted behind the scenes—the one story he never had the chance to write.

T H R E E

THE SPY

London, 1771

The crowd at Jonathan's coffeehouse in Change Alley was glad to be warm and dry on a Saturday in late March. No one minded the stench of pipe tobacco or the noise. For two pence a waiter brought you a "dish" of tea, coffee, or hot chocolate. You could trade political news, and you could conduct some business as well.

Jonathan's was located in a wood-framed building with small windows near the Royal Exchange and was one of London's most famous—some would say notorious—coffeehouses. In 1771, it was the hub of stock trading in Britain. The main room was up a narrow set of stairs on the second story. It was sparsely furnished, the floor was rough-hewn, and the walls were stained brown from generations of smoke. There were usually knots of well-dressed bankers, merchants, and stock traders, the latter known derisively as "stock jobbers," clustered around the few tea-stained tables. Most English gentlemen regarded these stock jobbers as gamblers whose wild

speculation would lead to their financial ruin. Though the better classes snubbed these men, Jonathan's patrons would eventually form the London Stock Exchange. In addition to trading shares, the clientele at Jonathan's regularly bet on the occurrence of almost any event. There was always someone willing to scratch out a betting contract on whether the government would fall, or whether a famous person would die, or whether France would go to war.

On this particular Saturday the room grew unexpectedly quiet at the appearance of an extraordinary-looking stranger wearing the crisp dark green-and-crimson uniform of a captain of the French dragoons bedecked with military honors. It was the Chevalier d'Eon. That very week, articles had begun appearing in the *London Evening Post*, the *Public Advertiser*, and the *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* about wagers as to whether or not the French diplomat and soldier was a woman in disguise. Hundreds of pounds sterling were being bet on this unlikely proposition.

The assembled stock jobbers—with their frilly Irish linen blouses, embroidered jackets with contrasting waistcoats bordered in gold and silver, three-cornered hats, and silk stockings in a dizzy array of purple, blue, white, and black stripes, specks, and patterns—were not accustomed to being confronted by a French military officer in their cozy coffeehouse. In a thick accent the chevalier demanded to know if a certain “money-broker” Mr. Bird were present. The chevalier had a handsome face with a prominent nose and a strong chin. His muscular body moved with a swagger. He appeared taller than he was in his knee-high boots. The chevalier's right hand rested on an ornate walking stick that he wielded like a weapon. When Bird meekly stood up, the French captain angrily accused him of initiating these “impudent” bets and warned Bird that he had better “beg his pardon.” The banker fumbled for the right words to apologize. After all, he had done nothing wrong; English law permitted anyone

to place a bet, even concerning the royal family. But d'Eon was in no mood for legalisms. He demanded satisfaction and challenged the whole roomful of incredulous stock jobbers to fight him. No one would dare to cross sticks with this accomplished swordsman. The terrified stock jobbers fell silent. They avoided his glare, looking down at the reflection in their shiny black high-heeled shoes. The point was made. No one doubted the chevalier's mettle. Yet, his intemperate outburst only underscored in everyone's mind that d'Eon was an unpredictable creature. And that may have been precisely the chevalier's intent.

ONE OF D'EON'S BIOGRAPHERS later wrote that he was "one of the strangest challenges that history has ever offered to fiction." The unusual circumstances of d'Eon's astonishing life continue to be a subject of scholarly inquiry and debate, and the chevalier's luminous writings have only obscured the truth and enlarged d'Eon's mystique.

Christened Charles-Geneviève-Louis-Auguste-André-Timothée d'Eon de Beaumont, he was born in 1728 in Tonnerre to a petty noble family with an ancient lineage of eccentric personalities. (Indeed, one of his twelfth-century ancestors had claimed to be the only son of God.) Tonnerre was a rural town with a population of a few thousand along the Armançon in Burgundy, more than a hundred miles east of Paris. D'Eon lived near the center of the small town in an impressive stone mansion built by a duke in the 1500s. D'Eon's father was the mayor of Tonnerre, and the rest of his paternal family was equally if not more distinguished.

From an early age, d'Eon was an accomplished student, athlete, and swordsman, and, much like Beaumarchais, he showed considerable musical talent and a keen wit. At thirteen, he entered the College



E I G H T E E N

THE BRITISH ARE WATCHING

Philadelphia and Paris, March–July 1776

Deane left Philadelphia on March 8, and after about two months of delays, he set out on the *Betsy* for France in late April. Though Deane owned a schooner and had prospered from trade with the West Indies, he had never sailed on the ocean before. He missed the luxuries of home and the comfort of the familiar. For six weeks he suffered the deprivations of life at sea—the blustery damp wind, the nauseating odors belowdecks, the dark cramped cabin, the coarseness of the seamen, the salty overcooked food, and the daily monotony broken only by violent storms.

Deane had no way of knowing whether his family was safe, or whether he would reach Paris before the British crushed the Continental Army. He worried that at any point they would be stopped and boarded by the British navy. In the event he was seized by the British, he kept among his papers a letter from Captain William Hunter, a British officer captured by Benedict Arnold at St. John in New Brunswick, Canada. Hunter was being held prisoner at Wethers-



field under the supervision of Deane's brother, Barnabas. Hunter wrote to any British officer who might capture Deane to treat him with "as much Politeness" as the British officers had received from Deane's friends.

On June 6, 1776, after three months at sea Deane sailed into the Bay of Biscay and arrived in Bordeaux, having evaded the British navy's watchful eye. Now his mission began in earnest.

Deane had never seen a place as old or as lively as Bordeaux. Along the banks of the Garonne he was jostled by wealthy wine merchants and sweaty dockworkers rushing from ship to ship. The old city, surrounded by a medieval wall and dotted with spires, was one of Europe's leading ports. Shops and stalls crowded the Basilica of St. Michel with merchants offering their wares in a strange tongue. The noise of the stone cutters and the smell of the tanneries overwhelmed Deane's senses. He spent a few weeks in Bordeaux, hoping to purchase cloth, blankets, and other essentials for the army. He found some English-speakers among the prosperous merchants, especially in the Chartrons quarter, but generally, he avoided Englishmen. Goods were far more expensive than he expected, and he decided to wait until he reached Paris before procuring supplies. He wrote to Franklin's contacts in France and England to inform them of his impending arrival in Paris.

The three-hundred-mile journey by coach from Bordeaux to Paris took two weeks. The road was slow and bumpy and often crowded with peasants and soldiers. He passed majestic stone châteaux that glowed pink with the setting sun, and fields of gnarly vines submerged in a green sea of ripening grapes. The summer air seemed almost intoxicating. Each day, Deane's excitement grew with the anticipation of meeting the French monarch and his court. As the coach lumbered north he watched peasants in the field bent over their crops, tending animals, and carrying firewood to their modest

cottages. Deane's carriage crossed a bridge over the clear rushing water of the Loire and entered the ancient Gallo-Roman city of Tours, where he stayed overnight. He saw the splendid gothic Cathedral Saint-Gatien in the center of town. The enormous stone façade seemed too massive to hold itself up. Inside, the damp cool air offered a welcome relief from a hot June afternoon. The scent of incense, the chanting of monks, and the gaudy display of gold and silver were unlike anything he had ever experienced. No Yankee Congregationalist could imagine praying in a church like that. Just outside the cathedral stood the skeletal ruins of a Roman fortress—a reminder of the impermanence of empires. For a man who had lived his whole life within the narrow circumference of colonial Connecticut surrounded by fellow Congregationalists, it must have felt both exhilarating and lonely to be in a place so remote and exotic.

Finally, the moment came when Deane could make out a dark line at the horizon. "*C'est-ça. Paris,*" the coachman shouted. To the son of a Connecticut blacksmith who was once thrilled by the romantic notion of New Haven, Paris was mythic. As the coach approached the city, the road improved considerably. The clatter of wheels rumbled louder on stone pavement. The thin dark line at the edge of the horizon grew taller and wider. Spires soared overhead. The road widened and then narrowed as the carriage rumbled across a bridge.

After nearly four months of travel, Deane at last arrived at the Porte d'Orlean gate to Paris on July 6. He had no idea that Congress had declared independence just days before, and that he was now the sole foreign representative of a new government. Not comprehending any French, he watched in puzzlement as the rude customs officials poked his few small bags with poles, searching for contraband. They did not discover his secret instructions hidden in a hollowed-out volume. He had left Philadelphia in a hurry with only

the clothes he had brought with him to Congress the previous September. There had been no time to be fitted for a new suit in which to present himself to Louis XVI. Once inside the city gates, Deane continued to the Hôtel du Grand Villars at 31 rue Saint-Guillaume.

Neither New York nor Philadelphia could rival the density or beauty of Paris. The street sounds of horses, carriages, church bells, and street hawkers enveloped him. The foul smell of humans living in close quarters mingled with the sweet aromas of bakeries and vegetable stalls. The city was glorious, filthy, refined, and disordered. The magnificent palaces and the elegance of the gardens contrasted markedly with the people he saw on the streets. Hungry men, women, and children stretched out their hands to passing carriages. Occasionally, Deane might glimpse through the window of a passing coach the profile of a woman powdered white as a ghost with a tower of hair adorned by gold brooches, diamond pins, feathers, or even small birds. Splendor took no notice of despair. Aristocrats seemed to inhabit another city entirely.

Deane passed his first few days there in wonder, glorying in the magnificence and the strangeness of Paris. He took long walks, marveling at the strange foods and customs. He stammered a few phrases in French; merchants stared back, uncomprehending. He found a wine merchant and ordered one bottle of every varietal, curious to sample everything. (After a few weeks, he ordered only Burgundy.) He crossed to the Ile Saint-Louis and gazed at the boats as they passed under the arch of the Pont Neuf. The Seine was not nearly as broad or as fast-moving as the Connecticut River. He stood for a time admiring the rose window of Notre Dame and wished he could share this experience with someone.

Deane found himself in peculiar circumstances, which, he thought “no man now living in Europe or America, and but few in any nation

or age of the world, ever found themselves in.” It was not just that he lacked any rudimentary knowledge of French or diplomatic etiquette; he was an unofficial representative of a nonentity asking the French monarch for support against the British crown. Unaware that Congress had already declared independence, he felt obliged to state that he was a loyal subject of George III. “I could not therefore solicit for the aid which I was commissioned to procure from the court of Versailles on the ground of our having declared ourselves independent,” he later wrote, nor could he even suggest “our intentions to do so.” Instead, he was compelled to argue that no sovereign had the right to tax his subject without their consent and that the colonies had resorted to arms solely “to enable us to bring the King and Parliament of Great Britain to recede from these their unwarrantable claims, and to accede to reasonable terms of accommodation.” The awkwardness of this argument was apparent: the French king was unlikely to agree that discontented subjects had a natural right to rebel against their sovereign.

Though Franklin thought that Deane could escape suspicion, practically from the moment Deane landed, the British ambassador to France, Lord Stormont, knew of his presence. Stormont had informants posted at various French ports reporting on the arrival and departure of vessels. Any American arriving in France was immediately suspect. Deane noticed two Englishmen, whom he had seen when he arrived in Bordeaux, trailing him in Paris. Stormont had sent them to watch Deane and prevent him from meeting with French officials. He plotted to have Deane seized if he tried to return to America. Deane wrote that Paris “swarmed with Englishmen” who followed him everywhere, causing him “heartrending anxiety.” Deane could trust no one.

It was not idle paranoia. Paris was lousy with British spies. Less obtrusively, the French police chief Jean-Charles-Pierre Lenoir was

also watching Deane and reporting all this British espionage regularly to Foreign Minister Vergennes. Marveling at Britain's economic competitiveness, Vergennes remarked that the British government was hardly "economical" when it came to espionage. Spying on foreigners was not uncommon, but Vergennes mused that only a government as free as England's would be so suspicious of its own subjects.