

The commotion in the courtyard below reaches Laure when she steps into the Sainte-Claire dormitory. There is only Mireille lying in the long room of tightly made beds when Laure enters with Madeleine. The two girls have been given special permission by the dormitory governess to sit with their sick friend for a few minutes before returning to their needlework lessons. Laure doesn't really believe that Mireille is ill and refuses to show her any sympathy. She knows that Mireille is just trying to get out of her last month in the workshop. Mireille found out last week that she was going to marry an officer stationed in Canada. He is a young and handsome man and wealthy enough that Mireille will not ever have to return to the Salpêtrière. While Laure has been struggling to learn new *point de France* stitches, Mireille has been feigning sickness, the distant soldier's locket tucked under her pillow. Still, Laure is happy to have an excuse to come up to the empty dormitory. With no officers around, she can talk freely without being hushed or told to start reciting the Pater Noster.

Madeleine rushes past the window toward Mireille's bed at the end of the room. She has brought with her, in the pocket of

her dress, an ounce of salted butter that she saved from lunch. She takes out the melting pad and brings it to Mireille's lips.

"Why are you feeding her your lunch? She already gets wine and meat with her pension." Laure can't stand to look at Madeleine fussing over Mireille as if she were a blind kitten in need of milk. How can she be the one getting attention when she already has more than the others? Laure walks to the window and looks down at the dozens of people gathered in the courtyard of the Maison de la Force. They have come today to watch the city's prostitutes being transferred to the Salpêtrière.

The girls of the Sainte-Claire dormitory are forbidden to observe these women. Even mentioning them is punishable. The administrators say that observing the prostitutes will taint the morals of the *Bijoux*. They fear that the years of shaping these carefully selected orphans will be lost by one glance at the ill-reputed women. The Superior herself has told them that their melodic voices singing *Ave Maris Stella* and *Veni Creator* will be spoiled, and that the stitches the *Bijoux'* fingers have been trained to produce in imitation of Venetian lace will unravel in the coarse company of the *filles de mauvaise vie*.

Laure knows she wouldn't be a resident of the Sainte-Claire dormitory at all if it hadn't been for the years she spent being refined in the house of Madame d'Aulnay. Seeing the prostitutes gathered by the archers and the crowd that has come to jeer at them reminds Laure that even the *Bijoux* dormitory of the Salpêtrière, where girls are taught skills, is still a division of the most miserable institution of the kingdom. To those who are not imprisoned within its walls, the Salpêtrière is nothing but a place to lock away the most wretched women of France.

“Madeleine, half of Paris is in the courtyard. We can finally watch the prostitutes being brought in.”

Madeleine’s gentle voice pauses in her recitation of the Pater. Laure waits, but after a moment the girl restarts the prayer from the beginning. Whereas Laure is considered a *Bijou* because of the swiftness of her fingers and the sharpness of her wit, Madeleine is among the favourites of the hospital because she is gentle and kind. The officers must watch over Laure, but they say that Madeleine sets an example for all the lost souls and fallen women of the hospital. Although the tiny girl is but a sheep herself, the officers try to make her a shepherd. They ask Madeleine to read from the giant prayer books at the front of the dormitory. Her voice emerges as the weak murmuring of a distant angel, and the girls hold their breath so they can hear it better. Laure has known Madeleine, her only friend among the girls of Sainte-Claire, since the day she returned to the Salpêtrière at fourteen years old, following her stay with Madame d’Aulnay.

When Laure was ten, Madame d’Aulnay came to the Enfant-Jésus dormitory in search of a servant girl. The children were accustomed to seeing wealthy women walking between their beds, inspecting the *marchandise*, in hopes of finding a girl who could wash and mend clothes, clean floors and scrub pots. Although Laure was afraid, having heard that some mistresses beat their servants with sticks, still she hoped to be chosen. She wanted to go away with one of these wealthy women, to travel by horse, and to see the city beyond the walls of the hospital.

Madame d’Aulnay, who wore bright *fard* on her cheeks and feathers in her hat, stopped in front of Laure’s bed and exclaimed that this was the urchin she wanted. The entire way to her *appartement*, through the filthy and fascinating city,

Madame d'Aulnay prattled on about Laure's pale complexion and black hair and about all the things she would show her about life outside the hospital walls. Laure felt like her chest would burst. Before long, Madame d'Aulnay acquired an *abécédaire* from one of the women in her salon whose children had already grown. Madame d'Aulnay said that Laure would need to learn to read so she could teach her own children one day. Laure had just turned eleven and was not thinking in the least about having children or falling in love. But these two things, finding love and having children, were the central preoccupations of Madame d'Aulnay, although she was not married and was too old to have children. But Laure didn't mind all this talk about husbands and babies so long as it meant she could learn to read the marks, called letters, embroidered on the *abécédaire*.

Laure soon memorized them all. The letters were no different from the patterns she was taught to sew in the dormitory, the butterflies, the flowers, the birds, branches, and leaves. She quickly learned the precise shape of each of them. Before long, Laure had moved on to syllables and was soon sounding out familiar prayers and hymns in Latin.

Laure's most important task in the *appartement* was to serve the women at Madame d'Aulnay's weekly salon. Madame's other servant, Belle, who was mean, and frightened even Madame d'Aulnay, had no desire to interact with the women she referred to as the Wednesday Fools. Laure was slow and clumsy in the kitchen, so she just watched Belle, who was strong and quick, as she prepared syrupy cakes, jams, and butter breads. When the trays were laden with sweets and cut fruits, Laure carried them out to the women.

The guests treated Laure like a doll. They would say that with her complexion, it was unfortunate she was born so low in

rank. But isn't it the way, one of the women said, that the girls with the most beautiful faces are always poor and soon ravaged by it while wealthy women, who have the means to afford powders and perfumes, fine clothing and *une vie aisée*, have only mediocre features to begin with. The women even dressed Laure in some of Madame d'Aulnay's dresses and coats, but she always ended up looking like a puppy beneath the heavy materials. Of course not all the Wednesday women approved of this play with a mere servant girl, especially those who had daughters of their own who were not so pretty.

Once Laure had learned to read, Madame d'Aulnay taught her to write, a skill that Laure found much more difficult to learn than reading. Madame d'Aulnay said that mostly it is men who write. Even some poor men, she said, sit on street corners as clerks and write out accounts and letters for those who require their services. Sewing and needlework are much more useful for girls to learn, but Laure was already quicker and knew more patterns than most eleven-year-old servants girls, so Madame felt there was no harm in teaching her to write a few words.

Laure first traced the letters in a box of sand, over and over, until Madame d'Aulnay was satisfied that she was ready to try writing them in ink on paper. Madame d'Aulnay sat Laure in front of her *écritoire* and removed from it the objects she would need for writing: a sheet of thick paper made of linen fibres, a goose feather, a small knife to trim the nib of the pen, a vial of ink, an instrument to scratch out mistakes from the paper, and sand, to dry the ink. Laure first learned to sign her name, and once she mastered this skill, Madame d'Aulnay told her that she could already do more than most women in France.

But these memories of a better, more hopeful time are long past. Laure would probably still be in her salon had Madame

d'Aulnay not died three years ago. Being forced to return to the Salpêtrière after her mistress's death had been a cruel fate. Not even being placed in the Sainte-Claire dormitory or meeting Madeleine, her first and only friend in the hospital, could compensate for her loss. For Laure, the years since Madame d'Aulnay's, clothed in the hard grey hospital linen, have passed like a prison sentence.

"Don't tell me you're going to sit over there brooding and miss out on your chance to see this. Why don't you tell Mireille to come and see for herself? She might learn something for her new prince in Canada." Madeleine does not respond. Laure turns back to the window and the scene below.

The Superior has reason to be concerned about the morality of the Sainte-Claire girls. After all, the Salpêtrière houses every sort of woman imaginable in the kingdom. Laure has even heard that there is a woman of the court imprisoned in a special chamber on a *lettre de cachet* from the King. There are also some Protestants, and a few foreign women, from Ireland, Portugal, and Morocco, mixed in with the others. Laure isn't sure of all the hospital's divisions. Only that there are about forty other dormitories. Infants are kept in the *crèche*, slightly older boys and girls are put in separate dormitories. There are also several divisions for girls working at cloth making and bleaching, one for pregnant women, another for nursing women and their children, several for madwomen young and old, a number for women with infirmities—blindness, epilepsy. There are a few dormitories too for old women, and one for husbands and wives over the age of seventy. There are no men in the Salpêtrière between the ages of eleven and seventy, other than the archers and the servant boys.

The people gathered in the courtyard of the Maison de la Force are standing in clusters, exchanging news and gossip.

Their voices are loud and punctuated by laughter. Occasionally, someone will glance back at the entrance to the courtyard, eager for the prostitutes' arrival. Laure can see that the people are dressed in tattered clothing and have the same vulgar tongues as some of the Salpêtrière residents. Sometimes a voice will rise above the others carrying a piece of information. She learns things the officers do not tell the residents. The administrators attempt to keep the divisions of women from mixing. Of course, occasional stories still manage to find their way through the dormitory walls, fragments that are whispered at church service, embellished during the long workdays, and passed along so often that they become legends. There are women that everyone knows even though they have long since gone. The Baudet sisters who seduced the cardinal in his antechamber. Jeanne LaVaux who took over her father's poison trade. Mary, the twelve-year-old Irish girl who had been a prostitute since she was six.

Laure is hungry for these stories. She wants to know all that she can about the hospital that is her home and prison. Below, she hears a man with the voice of a market vendor telling the others that the prostitutes are brought to the Salpêtrière once a month. They are gathered in by street constables and held in a smaller prison on rue Saint-Martin until they are transferred here by cart. The man who screams out this information is quickly surrounded and questioned by others who are eager to learn anything they can about the captured women before they arrive. Clearly, this spectacle provides entertainment for those who cannot afford the price of an opera ticket. For the administrators of the General Hospital, the public humiliation will provide the first of the women's punishment.

Madeleine, still sitting next to Mireille, calls across the room. "You shouldn't watch the prostitutes being brought in."

But Laure doesn't want to pull herself from the window. Especially not to go and listen to Madeleine fuss over Mireille. Laure has learned that prostitutes live together in the city with other women in a house like the Salpêtrière, only much smaller. While the royal authorities celebrate the Salpêtrière, showing it off to the princes and religious authorities of the kingdom, the houses of prostitutes must remain secret. Inside, there are many small rooms, but unlike the Salpêtrière, men are invited into them. Laure imagines the prostitutes dressed in bright layers of clothing, the quality of the fabric depending on which men they service, the degree of their beauty, which house they belong to. In Laure's mind, heavy draperies of velvet and silk separate the girls' rooms one from the other. Their skin smells of perfume, and their hair is curled and worn loose. Just like women at court, they are the queens of their domains.

Laure knows that thinking this way about prostitutes is blasphemous, especially for a *Bijou*.

The crowd below begins to cheer at some sign of the arrival that Laure cannot make out. Two archers appear first in the courtyard, pushing their way through the mass with the tips of their bows. "In the name of His Majesty, make way as we pass." The crowd parts for the archers, but grows tight again as onlookers from the edges close in for a better view. Short seconds later, Laure hears a high-pitched screech, like that of a wounded animal, followed by loud wailing. The sound carries above the voices of the crowd. One man cheers, but otherwise an excited hush takes over.

"Laure, please get away from the window. You're frightening Mireille." Madeleine starts to pray louder in an attempt to drown out the noise.

Laure continues to look down. “What are you praying for? Nothing’s happening. They’re just screaming like that to try to get rid of the crowd.” Laure cannot see the women yet, but it sounds like there are many.

More archers arrive in the square. Like their counterparts, they are clad in bright blue and white with red stockings. The gold buttons of their clean uniforms look impressive in the sunlight. Some of them have been recruited from the best of the male orphans. “Make way, in the name of His Majesty, King Louis XIV, and the director of the Hôpital Général de Paris. Make way at this instant.”

The crowd opens up, leaving a circle at the centre for the archers and their sentenced charges. There are about forty women crushed tightly together on the horse-drawn cart. They are standing on straw and are contained by iron bars. Some cover their faces, while others stare out at the crowd. Laure is disappointed to see that the women look so dishevelled. Only a few of the prostitutes have bright tresses and colourful gowns. Most of them have covered their hair in long, dark capes, and some seem to have cuts and bruises on their faces as if they had been beaten.

“They are nothing like what I expected to see. They look like the old beggar women from Les Saints dormitory.” Laure cannot imagine what sort of men would pay to spend the night with these women.

Despite the shabbiness of the cartload, the gathered observers whoop and holler, grabbing at the women’s dresses through the bars. One of the women spits into the crowd. Before the man she hits can retaliate, two of the archers drag her out of the cart. They restrain her with difficulty as she screams at them.

“You should see this one, Madeleine! Two archers can hardly hold her back.” Laure laughs as the woman below hisses at her captors. “The officers are going to have a good time with her.”

Once they reach the doors of the Maison de la Force, the rest of the women are herded off the cart and led to the entrance of the building. They are then made to stand in a line against the wall. The hospital physician comes over to them. Two officers hold a blanket in front of each woman while a doctor kneels to examine them. The women suspected of disease are separated from the others. Laure wonders what symptoms make the doctor suspicious as he passes down the line of women.

Madeleine calls across the room. “You shouldn’t watch them being brought in. We must be examples for all the women of the hospital.”

There are times when Laure believes, like Madeleine does, that they are somehow set apart from the women in the other dormitories. There might indeed be the possibility of a higher plan for the *Bijoux*. The other residents of the Salpêtrière are aware that the girls of Sainte-Claire are the first to receive the *douceurs* of charitable donors, gifts of seasonal fruit or vegetables. They also get the occasional thimbleful of wine in addition to their water rations. But more than just because they receive these coveted treats, the others envy the *Bijoux* because they are being prepared for a future.

Laure isn’t interested in some of the other options available for residents of the Salpêtrière. Sometimes the hospital will arrange a match between a *Bijou* and a tradesman, a shoemaker or an innkeeper who braves public opinion to get his bride from the same place where men send for punishment the wives who dishonour them. Laure has heard that some of these pairings

end badly. The same man who comes to the hospital with his hat in his hand often takes to drinking and mistreating his wife once he has her to himself. Laure doesn't want to take her chances on a blind match. If she can get hired by a seamstress, she will have plenty of opportunities to meet men shopping for ribbons for their sisters and mothers. She will have the time to get to know their character before deciding to marry one of them.

Some girls from Sainte-Claire eventually get chosen to become officers at the hospital. They are then put in charge of the morning *toilette* of dormitory residents, of dishing out the food rations, and of reading prayers from *L'Imitation de Jésus-Christ* to the residents. Laure has no interest in becoming an officer at the Salpêtrière. She couldn't imagine wearing a morose black dress and bonnet like the Sisters of Charity for the rest of her life, whispering at indignant street girls to pray and sing hymns, to straighten their dresses and comb their hair. Besides, officers get to spend only thirty minutes in the parlour with outside guests, and one day a month in the city, and then only if they are chaperoned. Even the letters the officers write must first be read by the Superior. Madeleine, who dreams of joining the Ursulines but has no dowry to pay them, is at least hoping to become an officer of one of the dormitories. She looks forward to teaching the others how to pray.

While the physician's inspection is going on, another group arrives in the courtyard. Several of the archers approach the newly arrived carriages pulled by dark horses. Laure cannot see who is inside. One of the archers has stuck his head into the first set of curtains and emerges after a few moments with a handful of coins. He brings these to the hospital official overseeing the transfer. Then the brigade of archers assembles

around the carriages. One of them uses a trumpet to quiet the crowd and announces that the transfer is now complete and that the assembly must disperse in accordance with the orders of the hospital director and the King. There are a few groans from the crowd, but they begin nonetheless to make their way out of the courtyard.

Once the onlookers have gone, the door to the first carriage opens and the women inside descend. They are older and better dressed than the prostitutes who came on the cart. But Laure assumes by their tight bodices and curled hair that they work in the same business. They must be the ones in charge of the prostitute houses. One of the women pulls out her purse and hands some more coins to the archers, after which the women are quickly taken inside the building.

“Do you remember the cure for the mal de Naples?” Laure asks as she walks toward the back of the dormitory where Madeleine is sitting on the edge of Mireille’s cot, wiping her forehead with a cloth. “I guess they’ll get a good whipping to start. That seems to be the cure for most things around here.”

“Laure, why are you talking about all of this? Mireille isn’t feeling well. One of her teeth has fallen out.”

Laure is surprised to hear this and to see that there is blood on the cloth Madeleine has been using to wipe Mireille’s forehead. She wonders which tooth it is. Laure has lost two of her own teeth since she returned from Madame d’Aulnay’s.

“If that’s all she’s lost, she shouldn’t be complaining.” Laure is glad to see that Mireille does actually look awful. Maybe she has made herself a little sick with all her pretending and going around with a sour face. After all, if you pretend anything for long enough, it starts to become reality. Mireille looks for sympathy from everyone she can, although it is Madame du

Clos, the needlework instructor, and Madeleine who pity her the most. Just because her father was an officer, she thinks she doesn't belong here and that everyone should feel sorry for her.

"I think the cure is mercury and rhubarb. I guess she won't be coming back to the workshop this afternoon. Good timing when we have all that *point de France* work to finish off. I can barely see my own fingers let alone the needle by the end of the day."

"She would work if she could." Madeleine folds the cloth into a square, covering up the bloodstain, and places it on Mireille's forehead.

"What does she care, now that she has a husband waiting for her in Canada? She doesn't have to worry about finding work in Paris." Ever since Mireille arrived at the Salpêtrière the previous year, Laure hasn't spoken directly to her.

"Laure, where is your sympathy? Mireille needs to get better, to be strong for her journey."

"And what about us?" Laure asks. "Left behind in this place that keeps beggars and diseased women from the street. Why should I feel sorry for *her*, when she is the one getting out?"

Mireille tugs at Madeleine's sleeve when she stands up to go. But Laure takes Mireille's arm and shoves it back onto the bed. She is surprised at how easily the light limb relinquishes its hold.