



BORN IN
HELL,
BAPTISED IN
BLOOD.

THE
TWELVE
CHILDREN
OF
PARIS

TIM WILLOCKS

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About the Book

Paris, August 23rd, 1572.

What do you do when your wife disappears . . .

In the middle of the bloodiest massacre in European history . . .

And you know she is about to give birth to your only child?

Three wars of religion have turned Paris into a foetid cauldron of hatred, intrigue and corruption. The Royal Wedding, intended to heal the wounds, has served only to further poison the fanatics of either creed. But Carla could not have known that when she accepted an invitation to the ceremony.

When Mattias Tannhauser rides into town, on Saint Bartholomew's Eve, his only intention is to find her and take her home. But as the massacre of tens of thousands of Huguenots begins, and the city plunges into anarchy, Carla is abducted by Grymonde, the grotesque gang leader of the Yards, and Tannhauser finds himself imprisoned in the Louvre, at the centre of a vicious conspiracy.

Wanted by the law, the assassins' guild, and a militant army who call themselves the Pilgrims of Saint-Jacques, Tannhauser must rise to pitiless extremes even he has never known before. With no one to help him but a stable boy, he wades a river of blood without knowing what lies on the other side.

As he harrows Hell in search of his beloved

His destiny is changed forever by

The Twelve Children Of Paris . . .

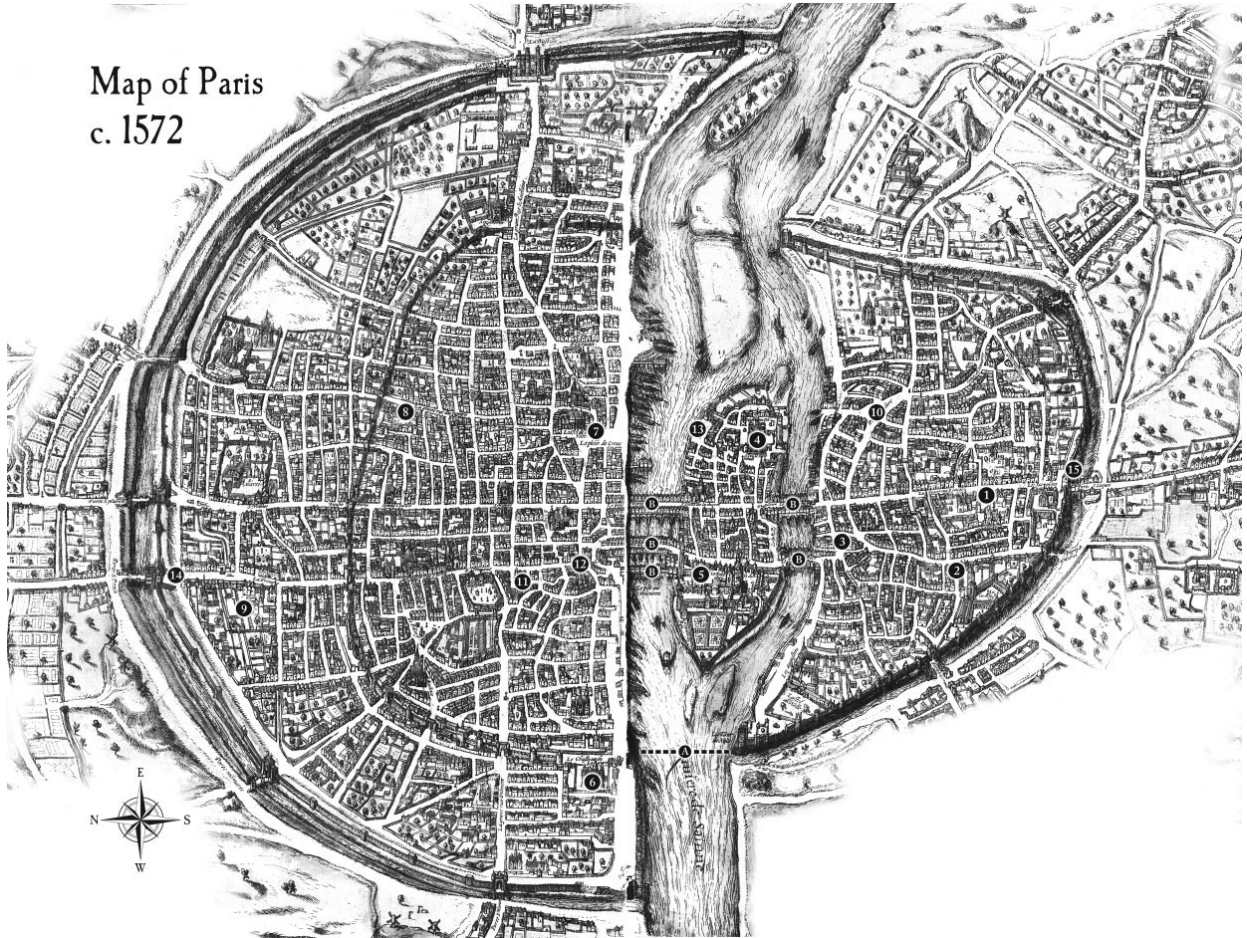
About the Author

Tim Willocks was born in Stalybridge, Cheshire, in 1957 and studied medicine at University College Hospital Medical School. He is the author of four previous novels: *Bad City Blues*, *Green River Rising*, *Bloodstained Kings* and *The Religion*.

Also by Tim Willocks

Bad City Blues
Green River Rising
Bloodstained Kings
The Religion

Map of Paris
c. 1572



Principal sites

- 1 Engel's Stable
- 2 The Printer's House
- 3 The Collège d'Harcourt
- 4 Notre Dame
- 5 The Grand Palais
- 6 The Louvre
- 7 The Place de Grève

- 8 Hôtel D'Aubray
 - 9 The Yards
 - 10 Place Maubert
 - 11 Les Halles
 - 12 Hôtel Le Tellier
 - 13 The Quays at Saint-Landry
 - 14 Porte Saint-Denis
 - 15 Porte Saint-Jacques
- A The boom across the Seine
B The bridges

To my friend
DAVID COX
who walked every step of the way

The Twelve Children of Paris

Tim Willocks



JONATHAN CAPE
LONDON

PART ONE

THIS FEARFUL SLUMBER

CHAPTER ONE

The Printer's Daughters

NOW HE RODE through a country gutted by war and bleeding in its aftermath, where the wageless soldiers of delinquent kings yet plied their trade, where kindness was folly and cruelty strength, where none dared claim his brother as his keeper.

He passed gallows trees where red-legged crows roosted black as their carrion, where knots of children in rags and tags returned his gaze in silence. He passed the roofless hulks of burned churches where shards of stained glass glimmered like abandoned treasure on the chancel floor. He passed settlements tenanted by gnawed bones, where the yellow eyes of wolves gleamed from the darkness. A blazing hayrick lit some yonder hill. In the moonlight the ashes of vineyards were white as tombstones.

He had covered more miles in fewer days than even he had thought possible. Yet here at last he was and there it stood. The walls quavered in the distance, warped by the August heat, and above them glowered a swag of ochre haze, as if the walls were not walls at all but, rather, the lip of some vast shaft sunk into the nether realms of the earth.

Such was his first impression of the Most Catholic City in Christendom.

The sight brought him little comfort. The forebodings that had driven him were undiminished. He had slept by the road and taken to the saddle in the cool before the dawn, yet

every morning his destiny had risen before him. He felt it lying in wait, behind those Plutonian walls. In the city of Paris.

Mattias Tannhauser pressed on to the Saint-Jacques Gate.

The walls were thirty feet tall and studded with watchtowers as high again. The gatehouse like the walls was stained by time and the shitting of birds. As he crossed the drawbridge his eyes watered from the fumes of the putrid garbage filling the ditch. Through the blur, as if in a dream, two families tottered out between the enormous timber doors.

They were dressed in black and he took them for Huguenots. Or Calvinists, Lutherans, Protestants, or even Reformers. To the question of what to call them he had never found an answer that served all needs. Their new conception of how to live with God had hardly learned how to walk, yet their factions were already hard at each other's throats. To Tannhauser, who had killed for God in the name of more than one creed, this came as no surprise at all.

The Huguenots, women and children too, staggered beneath a diversity of bags and bundles. Tannhauser wondered how much more they had left behind. The two men, who had the look of brothers, exchanged a glance of relief. A slender boy craned his neck and stared at Tannhauser. Tannhauser mustered a smile. The boy hid his face in his mother's skirts and revealed a strawberry birthmark on his neck below the angle of his jaw. The mother saw him note it, and covered the mark with her hand.

Tannhauser pulled his mount aside to ease the pilgrims' progress. The elder of the brothers, astonished by this courtesy, looked up. When he saw the Maltese Cross on Tannhauser's black linen shirt, he dropped his face and hurried by. As his brood followed, the little boy looked back into Tannhauser's eyes. His features lit up with a grin, and it was the gladdest sight Tannhauser had seen in many a day.

The boy tripped and his mother caught his arm and dragged him across the bridge towards hazards unknown.

Tannhauser watched them go. They put him in mind of a flock of ducks. They were poorly equipped for the road, whose dangers were considerable, but at least, or so it seemed, they had escaped from Paris.

‘Good luck.’

Tannhauser received no reply.

He pushed on beneath the first of two portcullises and into the gatehouse, where a customs officer was too busy counting coins to afford him more than a sour glance. Here more emigrants were being fleeced and they, too, were clad in black. He entered the city and stopped in the shade of the wall. The humidity was suffocating. He mopped his brow. The journey north from the Garonne had consumed eight days and a dozen mounts, and had almost wasted him, too. He felt as if he didn’t have a mile left in him. But this was his first time in the capital and he roused himself to take some measure of its spirit.

The Grand Rue Saint-Jacques ran ahead, downhill towards the Seine. For most of its length it was no more than five yards wide. Every square foot teemed with human beings and their animals. The clamour of voices, the bellowing, the bleating, the barking, and the snarling of flies, would have made a field of war seem tranquil; and those among the damned whose eternal task it was to scour Satan’s piss pot with their tongues knew not a fouler smell. All this he might have expected, but beneath the workaday turmoil he sensed a more malignant tension, as if too much fear and too much fury had been swallowed by too many for too long. Parisians were a truculent lot, prone to disobedience and public disorder of every kind, but even they could not sustain a mood so febrile as a matter of course. In a different circumstance, this might not have caused him much unease, but he had not travelled the length of France to pull on trouble’s braids.

He had come to find Carla, his wife, and take her home.

Carla's foolhardiness in visiting Paris had caused him an agony of worry and exasperation, emotions compounded by the fact that she was, by now, exceeding late in pregnancy. It would be their second child, and God willing the first to survive. Yet her behaviour had not much surprised him. Carla's mind, once resolved on any matter, evinced an iron fixity of purpose, and practical hurdles of any kind aroused her scorn. This was one of the qualities he loved in her, and a wall he had cracked his skull against more than once. If one added to this the fact, as he had it on good advice, that pregnancy was a temporary state of insanity, then her journey to Paris, along roads unimproved since the fall of Rome, might even seem unremarkable.

And few women can resist an invitation to a wedding, especially one between two royal houses and celebrated far and wide as the union of the age.

A pair of child prostitutes tottered towards him through the muck, their faces caked with white lead, their cheeks and lips daubed with vermilion. The little girls were perfect twins, which no doubt added to their asking price. The radiance that had once lit their eyes had been snuffed and would never shine again. As if trained in the same school of depravity, they mimed lewd smiles for his delectation.

His stomach turned and he searched the press for their pimp. A brutish adolescent caught his gaze and realised he was staring down the bore of a thrashing or worse. The pimp let out a shrill whistle. The wretched girls turned on the spot and scurried back to his side, and they vanished into the crowd to be raped elsewhere.

Tannhauser urged his horse into the throng.

His knowledge of the city and its geography was primitive, gleaned from the letters of Orlandu, his stepson, who was here to study mathematics and astronomy at the Collège d'Harcourt. This southern half of the city, on the Left Bank, was called the University. The island in the Seine was the

City. The Right Bank beyond the river was known as the Ville. Beyond that he knew only that it was the biggest city on earth, a vast overpopulated warren of uncharted streets and nameless alleys, of palaces, taverns, churches and brothels, of markets, abattoirs and workshops, of multitudinous hovels too desperate to contemplate.

He had travelled using the relay network of post-horses re-established after the wars. The final stable in the chain lay on a side street west of the Rue Saint-Jacques. He found it easily enough - the Écurie D'Engel - but not without repelling further entreaties from the off-scourings of humanity. Paris was home to more beggars, whores and thieves than existed in the whole of the rest of France. Hired assassins were so numerous that, like the goldsmiths and the glovers, they boasted their own guild. Criminal gangs flourished in league with various of the *commissaires* and *sergents*. And at the other end of the hierarchy, the Crown and the great aristocrats, when not plotting against each other or fomenting mindless wars, devoted those energies surplus to their debaucheries to robbing their subjects with ever more ingenious taxes, these latter being, in Tannhauser's view, the most heinous of their many crimes.

After the street and its open sewer the smell of the stable afforded his nostrils and eyeballs some relief. He heard the sound of someone being flogged, and it wasn't a horse for the victim was too quiet. The grunts of pleasure accompanying the lashes came from the flogger's throat. Tannhauser dismounted in the yard and followed the sounds to a stall, where a muscular fellow, stripped to the waist, worked up a sweat by whipping a boy with the sharp end of a bridle. Tannhauser glimpsed bloody rags, an ungainly body curled and writhing in silence on a mass of straw.

It didn't sit right with him.

He caught the bridle by its bit as the hostler cocked his arm, and looped the strap around the hostler's neck and heaved. As the hostler choked on his own fist, Tannhauser

stomped on his Achilles tendon and rammed a knee into his spine. He rode him down with his full weight and the hostler's face bounced from the flagstones. A piss runnel carved into the floor ran past the stalls, replenished by the frightened mare. Tannhauser crammed the hostler's nose and mouth into the stream and let him inhale. He wondered if this were Engel himself. The hostler squirmed and wheezed in the piss until his strength fled. Tannhauser let go of the bridle and stood up.

The flogged boy was on his feet. He was a big lad but otherwise nature had been no kinder than life. A harelip exposed his gums as far as the left nostril. His age was hard to guess, perhaps ten or so. To his credit, there were no tears on his cheeks. His lower jaw was misshapen and Tannhauser wondered if he might not be an idiot.

'The mare needs a rub.'

The boy bobbed his head and disappeared.

Tannhauser booted the hostler in the chest until he crawled out of his way, then unloaded his gear and stripped the saddle. As the boy arrived with a currying glove, Engel stumbled past, dragging one leg and clutching his ribs, and reeled towards the street. The boy watched him go. Tannhauser wondered if he'd done him any favours. Future beatings would likely be more vicious than before. He contemplated the weight of his belongings and the prospect of hauling them through crowded streets and crippling heat.

'How well do you know the city, boy?'

The boy garbled something unintelligible. He uttered a strange, halting laugh. He hunched his shoulders and made odd gestures with his spade-like hands. All Tannhauser gleaned was a sense of enthusiasm.

'What's your name?'

He had a stab at interpreting the strangled, nasal reply.

'Grégoire?'

Again the laughter. Furious nodding. Tannhauser laughed, too.

‘Well, Grégoire, I’m going to make you my lackey. And I hope my guide.’

Grégoire fell to his knees with his hands clasped and chanted what might have been a blessing. The boy would make a singular Virgil, not least because Tannhauser could hardly understand him. He raised him to his feet and looked in his eyes. They were bright with intelligence.

‘See to the horse, Grégoire, and we’ll find you some decent clothes.’

Grégoire, reattired in Engel’s white cambric shirt, bore up well under the burden of two enormous saddle wallets, a canvas sleeping roll, a goatskin of water and a pair of holstered horse pistols, from which Tannhauser had blown the priming so that the boy wouldn’t blow off a foot. Tannhauser carried his wheel-lock rifle cradled in his arm. His hand-and-a-half sword was slung by his side. As they approached the Grand Rue Saint-Jacques, Engel reappeared.

His nose and lips looked like a mass of rotten pears, and one eye was swollen shut. He was in the company of two *sergents à verge* armed with short bows. Tannhauser wondered how much Engel had paid to recruit them. The *sergents* weighed up the large, well-armed figure striding towards them and concluded that their fee had been inadequate.

‘Thanks be to God,’ said Tannhauser. ‘You’ve arrested him.’

The *sergents* stopped.

‘I found that man bugging my horse.’

Engel’s jaw dropped. Blood drooled from the new gaps in his teeth.

‘In fairness, it was a mare, but I trust that the penalty is no less severe.’

Engel took a breath to protest and Tannhauser stepped up and fed the butt of the rifle into his brow. Engel toppled as if his feet were nailed to the ground, his fall only broken when

the back of his skull cratered a mound of filth. Tannhauser smiled at the *sergents*, who had retreated and grabbed at their sword hilts.

'My lackey here can testify to his crime. Can't you, Grégoire?'

Grégoire garbled something incomprehensible.

'Now, do you officers need anything else?'

'Carrying that gun contravenes the law.'

'Your laws don't apply to the Knights of Saint John.'

The *sergents* looked at each other.

'As the last thief I met discovered, this gun enforces statutes of its own.'

To compensate himself, and with the pleasure of a connoisseur in life's injustices, one of the *sergents* smirked at the luckless hostler.

'Don't worry, sire. We'll make sure this sodomite gets everything he deserves.'

They left the *sergents* to rifle Engel's pockets and walked to the Grand Rue where Tannhauser stopped. Somewhere in this vast midden was Carla, and in her belly was their child. As to her exact location, he had no clue. His hopes of finding her hinged on the assumption that her son, Orlandu, would be rather better informed.

'Grégoire, I want to find the Collège d'Harcourt, on Rue de la Harpe.'

Grégoire emitted one of his cackles and set off through the crowd.

Tannhauser followed. They gave a wide berth to a pair of lunatics chained together and shovelling sewage into a cart. They saw a priest and a slattern rutting in an alley, their skirts pulled up round their waists. From Saint-Jacques they turned west into a seething maze, where the buildings were piled so high their roofs almost touched above the thoroughfare. At length they entered a quarter full of students and a corresponding ubiquity of whores. Tannhauser caught fragments of several different tongues. If

any among this elite were wrestling with metaphysics, he did not hear them, though he did see one pair wrestling in the filth, to the amusement of drunken friends who spoke in English.

The stern ambience of the Collège d'Harcourt restored some of Tannhauser's hopes for the groves of academe. The entrance hall was deserted but for an ancient porter on a high stool in a recess behind a counter. The old man looked as if he hadn't left the stool in years. He wore a short horsehair periwig a size or more too small and which partly concealed the disease consuming his scalp. Grey lice scouted the wig's edge above his ears. His eyeballs bulged proud of his cheekbones and flitted back and forth beneath closed, blue-veined lids. Tannhauser rapped on the counter.

The porter awoke without moving, like a lizard. His eyes were a shocking blue, as if the ancient carcass were inhabited by the spirit of some other being. They took in Tannhauser's clothes, the white cross on his chest, the cradled rifle. They took in Grégoire, festooned with luggage and dripping sweat. They returned to Tannhauser. They saw everything that he was: a foreign, lowborn killer, upon whom Fate had smiled. The porter despised him. The porter did not speak.

'I'm looking for Orlandu Ludovici.'

'The college term is long over, sire.' This seemed to gratify the porter. 'Few of the students remain in these lodgings at this time of year.'

'But do you know Orlandu Ludovici? And is he among those few?'

'The Maltese has not lodged here since, oh, Michaelmas last.'

'Do you know why he moved out?'

'I am not privy to Master Ludovici's thoughts, still less his motives.'

'Do you know where I can find him, or where he lodges now?'

'I'm afraid not, sire.' This ignorance, too, appeared to please him.

Tannhauser had been warned that any interaction with Parisian officialdom, no matter how petty, would require considerable tenacity.

'But he remains a member of the college.'

'As far as I know, sire.'

'When did you last see him?'

'I don't recall, sire.'

'A week? A month?'

'I don't recall.'

'You recall his moving out a year ago but not when you last saw him.'

'At my age, sire, memory becomes unreliable.'

Tannhauser had last written to Orlandu four months ago, before the voyage that had detained him in Velez de la Gomera and parts far beyond. He pointed to the rack of lettered pigeonholes that hung at the rear of the porter's domain. Filed in the box marked 'L', he saw papers. He propped his rifle against the counter.

'Has he any messages or letters?'

'No, sire.'

'I'd be grateful if you'd make sure.'

'I am already sure, sire.'

Tannhauser swung open the hinged flap and strode to the pigeonholes.

'No one is allowed behind the counter, sire.'

Tannhauser shuffled the papers from box 'L' through his fingers. There was nothing for Orlandu. The box marked 'O' was empty. He turned.

There was a smile in the old man's eyes. His lips didn't move yet conveyed the depth of his scorn. Tannhauser had the disconcerting sense that the porter had been expecting him, that his visit had been foretold; that the porter knew who he was.

'You know who I am.'

'A gentleman of very great eminence, I am sure, sire.'

'Orlandu must have friends, tutors.'

'No doubt, sire. But it's not my job to be expert in such matters.'

'Is there anyone else here I can question?'

'On a Saturday, sire?'

'Then, so far as the college is concerned, Orlandu has vanished.'

'There are ten thousand students in Paris, sire, from all over Europe. Who knows what such young men get up to? Especially in times such as these?'

'Orlandu is my stepson. He is dear to me.'

The porter's indifference had been hardened by an endless horde of whining youths, each of whom believed himself the most notable person in the world. Perhaps a whiff of royal intimacy would loosen his tongue.

'Orlandu may be with his mother, Lady Carla, Countess of La Penautier. She was the Queen's guest at the royal wedding. Do you know where I might find her?'

'If you don't know where your wife is, sire, how should I?'

Tannhauser ignored the pain in his skull and deployed a final stratagem.

'If you have any information at all that would help me find Orlandu, or Lady Carla, I can show my gratitude with gold. A contribution to the college, perhaps.'

The porter arched a hairless brow as victory was delivered into his hands.

'A bribe? You do me a grave injustice, sire.'

Tannhauser had offered said bribe with all due delicacy. Any insult offered lay in the porter's reply and the old scab knew it. Tannhauser dropped the papers and put an index finger against the old man's chest. He sensed the mean, sinewy carcass under the greasy coat. He pushed the porter backwards from the stool. The porter's limbs jerked outward as he crashed to the floor. The groan that arose therefrom was the first sincere sound to have escaped his lips.

Tannhauser ignored him. He rummaged beneath the counter and found paper and ink. Amid a bundle of used quills he found one whose tip looked functional. He wrote in Italian, in a crude hand.

Dearest Orlandu, I am in Paris. I do not yet have lodgings. Leave a message here, at the college. Tell me where I can find you and your mother.

He paused. He had little faith that Orlandu would find the message in the near future, or that, even if he did, the porter would not tamper with any reply. He had noted a tavern on the opposite corner of the street.

He added: *Leave a copy at the Red Ox. I must find Carla at once.*

He searched his mind for the date. Tomorrow was the feast of Saint Bartholomew the Apostle. He signed his name and dated the message *p.m. Saturday 23rd August 1572*. He flapped the paper to dry the ink. He looked at Grégoire, who observed the proceedings with wide eyes, an open mouth and a runny nose.

‘The taverns,’ said Tannhauser. ‘We will search the student taverns.’

Tannhauser folded the paper twice and wrote ‘LUDOVICI’ and ‘MATTIAS’ on the back. The letters that identified the pigeonholes were painted on wooden tags nailed above the slots. He prised the ‘L’ tag free and used it to pin the message to the box where its title could be read from beyond the counter. He returned to the porter and kicked him in the ribs.

‘Get up.’

Despite his apparent decrepitude, the porter scrambled to his feet with an agility a younger man might have envied. Indeed, denuded of the wig, and with his face taut with rage, the porter might have passed for fifty rather than seventy. His scalp was a mass of scabby, peeling lesions. Tannhauser stepped back in case they were catching. He retrieved his rifle and nodded at the pigeonholes.

‘Make sure my message reaches Master Ludovici.’

Out in the street, the sun was hotter, the crowds denser, the stench more odious than before. Tannhauser scraped his fingernails through his beard. Sweat crawled down his flanks. His eyes felt gritty. He wanted a bath, if such existed in Paris. He wanted his horse back, so he might ride above the slime congealing on his boots. Grégoire pointed at a long row of clamorous, overcrowded pigsties.

‘The student taverns.’

The first three alehouses roared with drink and argumentation but proved barren in respect of his search. In each he had the landlord bellow Orlandu’s name above the din, but no one responded. When this tactic failed in the fourth, the Red Ox, Tannhauser took a table near the door. He ordered wine, a cold goose pie and two roasted pullets. The conversation of the surrounding clientele had an undertow of dread. Some urgent news had broken, it seemed. Tannhauser tried to catch the gist but he was tired, and his ear was poorly attuned to the local accents.

He heard mention of the Queen, Catherine de Medici; and of her son, King Charles; and of his brother, Henri, Duc d’Anjou; and of the Duc de Guise, the Catholic champion of Paris. More often than he liked, he heard the name of Gaspard Coligny, the Huguenot demagogue and Grand Admiral of France. The man had starved Paris in ’67; his German mercenaries had despoiled much of the country; and now, so rumour had it, he hungered for conflict with Spain in the Netherlands. The same cast of imbeciles and villains had thrice plunged France into the horrors of civil war.

Tannhauser had abandoned all involvement and even interest in political matters, for there was nothing he could do to alter their course. The high and the mighty remained spellbound by their own self-importance; their basest emotions turned history’s wheels. The rulers of France were

no more corrupt and incompetent than those who governed anywhere else, but because he had come to love the country, their crimes caused him a deeper despair. He brightened as the drink and the pie arrived.

The serving girl was unsure as to whether Grégoire was to be included in the meal. When Tannhauser indicated that he was, the boy was more surprised than she. Grégoire appeared not to have eaten so well since the milk from his mother's breast, if he had ever known that pleasure. Tannhauser had changed the boy's destiny on a whim. As a child his own life had changed on the impulse of a stranger. He might have picked someone better made, who might have lent him more prestige; but his heart rebelled against the notion. He had chosen this boy, and he would do right by him.

Grégoire exploded in a fit of violent coughing. When he turned beetroot-red, on the way to turning blue, Tannhauser rose and pounded the flat of his hand between his shoulders. Fragments of pie scattered the table and the boy heaved for breath. He snorted hard and more detritus flew from his nostrils.

'Take small bites and chew twelve times. Can you count to twelve?'

'I can count to fifty.'

'Then you're better informed than most but twelve will do.'

As Grégoire followed these orders, he caught sight of something behind Tannhauser, and his face once again turned red and he lowered his eyes to his plate in shame. Tannhauser turned.

At the next table a pair of students sniggered while twisting their lips into grotesque shapes and mimicking an idiot's speech. Two girls in their early teens sat with them, though neither seemed impressed by their companions' antics. Tannhauser wiped his mouth on the back of his hand

and stared at the students, who must have been the worse for wine for this entertained them, too.

'If you find misfortune amusing, I can give you plenty to laugh about.'

This too provoked a titter, more likely due to nerves than insolence, but a man was entitled to enjoy a pie without scum making mock of his lackey. By the time he was on his feet, he had one youth by the throat. The other lurched from the bench but Tannhauser seized a handful of his hair. He let them get a closer look at his face and they wilted in his hands. He dragged them to the door and into the street.

He hauled them towards the open sewer, where mounds of filth lay in stagnant pools awaiting the shovels of the lunatics. He slammed their skulls together and left them sprawled in the ordure. He returned to the tavern. Standing in the doorway was the taller of the two girls. Her fists were clenched by her sides. He noted that both her hands were stained with ink. She stuck her chin out at him.

'Why did you do that?'

Her eyes were dark and fierce, her hair as blue as a raven and cut short, almost like a boy's. She was skinny and he guessed her age at around thirteen. She wasn't exactly pretty but she lacked for nothing in spirit, which in his book was the better end of the bargain. She wore no face paint but her fury lent high colour to her cheeks.

Tannhauser dipped his head in courtesy.

'A lesson in manners will stand them in good stead.'

'Manners?'

She seemed to imply that his own were less than impeccable.

'You forget I invited them to apologise.'

'They were cruel to your boy, yes. But you attacked them before they had a chance to reply.'

'You'll forgive me if our recollections differ.'

She glared at him, unwilling to relinquish her ground. Tannhauser looked over his shoulder. The youths had

clambered as far as their hands and knees, and were assessing the damage to their clothing, which was catastrophic. They saw him watching them and must have seen the girl, too. They stood up and fled.

'You see? No harm done that a soak in the river won't repair.'

He turned back to the girl. She was not mollified.

'Though if I may say so,' he continued, 'abandoning you to the company of a brute is a black mark against their gallantry.'

'I am not in your company.'

'Then accept my invitation to share our table, and make it so. Mattias Tannhauser, Count of La Penautier, Magistral Knight of the Order of Saint John.'

She did not reply but no longer clenched her fists.

'I'm hardly an hour in this city, and for the first time, too. So far I've found the natives less than cordial.'

She folded her arms beneath her breasts. 'I do not wonder.'

Tannhauser inclined his head in acceptance of this rebuke.

'In any event, I apologise for any distress I may have caused you.'

Her lips were compressed, as if now she were as vexed with herself as she was with him. She looked away and stood aside. Tannhauser bowed again and went indoors.

The roasted chickens had arrived on a large platter. Tannhauser dismembered them and told Grégoire to fill his plate. The boy turned aside to expel a green pea from one nostril, then set to. As Tannhauser ate, he brooded on what to do next.

He was here, indirectly, because of the wedding of the King's sister, Marguerite Valois, to her cousin Henri Bourbon, Prince of Navarre, which had taken place the previous Monday. Marguerite was a Catholic, the daughter of Catherine de Medici. Catherine was Italian, a species generally loathed by the French, and credited, even by her

devotees, with diabolic powers. She had ruled the country since her husband's death in '59. Because Charles IX, now twenty-two, remained little more than a monstrous child, Catherine, despite her son's fantasies, continued to do so.

In the eyes of many, Catherine's policy of toleration towards the Huguenots had caused three civil wars. The marriage of Marguerite to the Protestant Henri, neither of them twenty years old, represented Catherine's latest effort to secure the fragile peace between provincial warlords. The union was at best unpopular, not least with the newly-weds. Much of the Huguenot nobility, and most Catholic Parisians, considered it an abomination.

Such Tannhauser had gleaned on his journey north.

During the week now ending, which had followed the royal wedding, numerous grand balls, tilts, masques and feasts had been held in celebration. According to the letter that Tannhauser had discovered on returning home from the sea, Carla had been invited 'by the Queen' to perform at the climactic gala on Friday the 22nd - last night - in the Louvre palace.

Carla's mastery of the viola da gamba was no news to Tannhauser; she had bewitched him with her music before he had ever set eyes on her. That her fame had spread quite so far had surprised him. She had assured him that she would be safe, for an armed escort had been sent to bring her to Paris. She was also under the protection of the one man Tannhauser suspected he might not best in combat, the Serb and former janissary Altan Savas. The letter had contained no details as to where Carla would be quartered in the city, because at that time she had not known herself. She had made plain her intention of contacting Orlando on her arrival. Now that his hopes of finding Orlando were thwarted, he was left with only one avenue to explore.

'The Louvre,' he said to Grégoire.

Grégoire nodded and smiled.

The sight of his gums made Tannhauser want to turn away. He didn't.

As for the Louvre, Tannhauser did not relish the prospect. Once inside, numberless practitioners of virtuoso obstructiveness would stand between him and whoever it was might know of Carla's whereabouts.

The royal household, the *Maison du Roi*, was a vast and parasitic entourage. Thousands of functionaries, in scores of different departments, competed to squander the nation's wealth in a frenzy of extravagance and corruption. The largest department was the *Bouche du Roi*: the King's mouth. By all accounts the King could not put his shirt on, the 'Chamber' being the second largest department, without a dozen men in attendance, most of them nobles on enormous public pensions; and His Majesty's every royal stool - the expulsion of which required the nobles to assemble at the royal commode - was the subject of scrupulous study, though what fragrant auguries might be writ there, Tannhauser could not guess. He doubted that Catherine de Medici, prior to the ball, had been aware of Carla's existence. But someone in that palace had put Carla's name on a list, and had organised her travel and accommodations.

He fended a wave of despondency and drank wine.

He remembered that Carla had mentioned some fellow in the *Menus-Plaisirs du Roi*, the department of the King's 'lesser pleasures'. This, surprisingly enough, did not include those specialists who attended him at stool, but it did include those responsible for his lavish entertainments. What was his name? Carla's letter was in his saddlebags.

Tannhauser started as the two girls appeared at his table. The second was the meeker in manner, her hair summer-blond. He clambered to his feet and bowed.

'We accept your invitation,' said the girl who had confronted him.