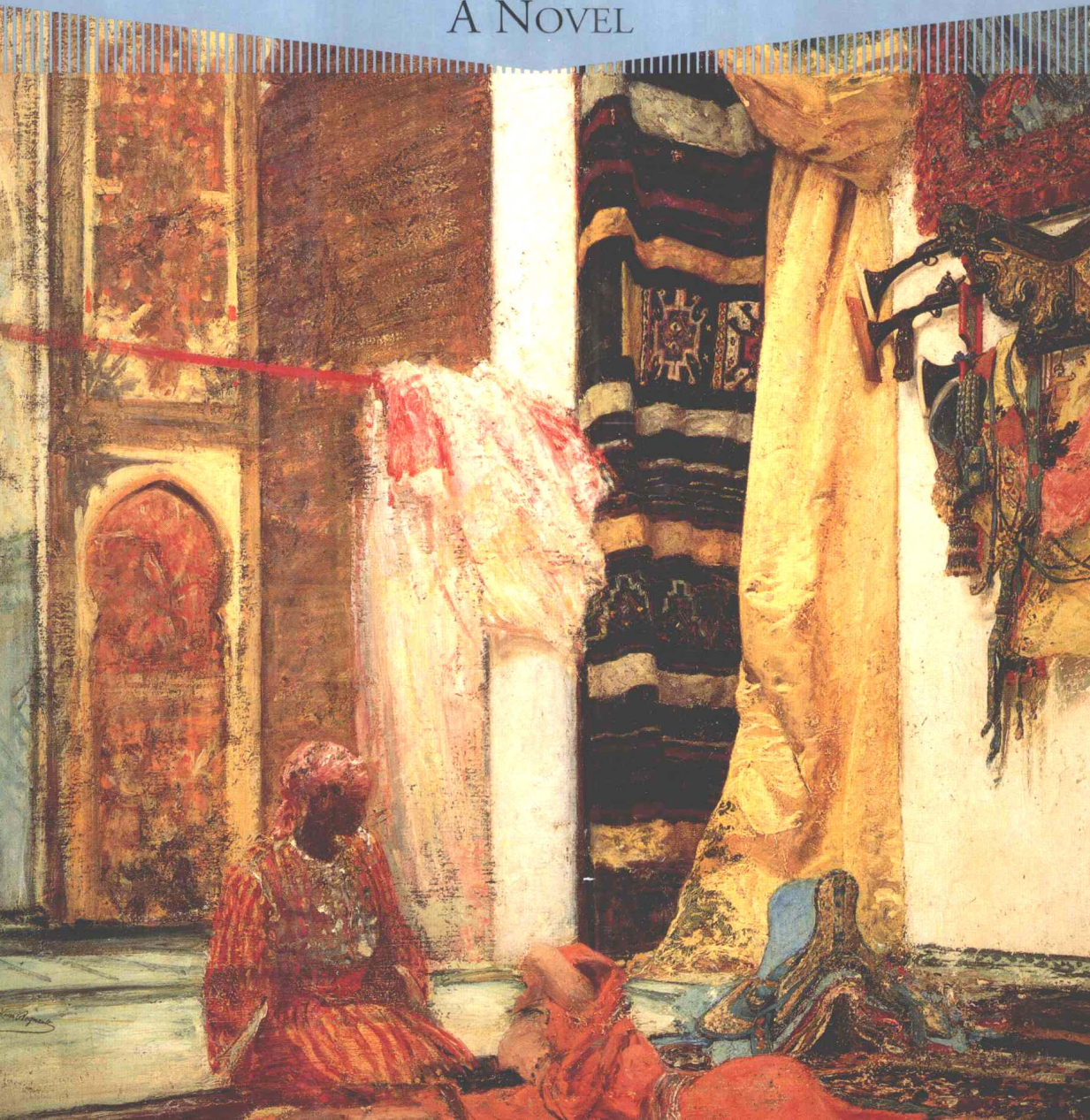
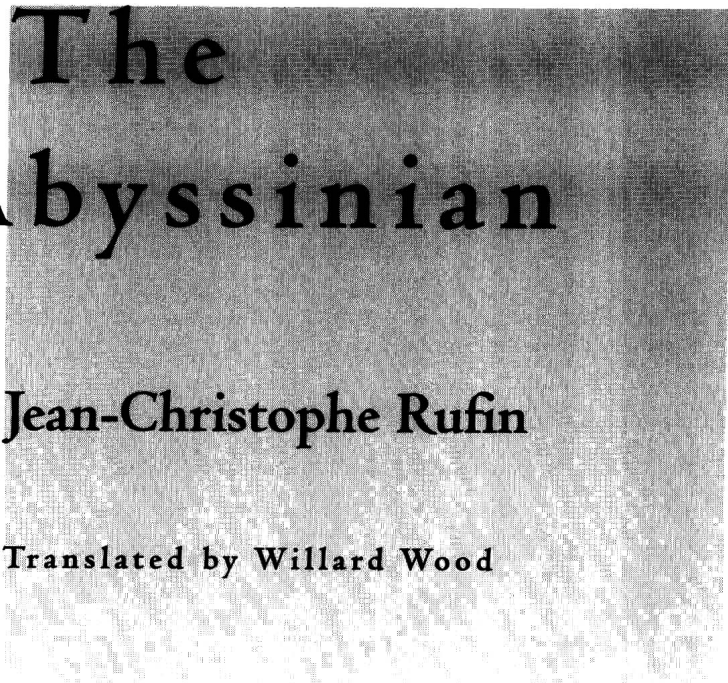


JEAN-CHRISTOPHE RUFIN

THE ABYSSINIAN

A NOVEL





The Abyssinian

Jean-Christophe Rufin

Translated by Willard Wood

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THE ABYSSINIAN

JEAN-CHRISTOPHE RUFIN

WINNER OF FRANCE'S PRIX
MEDITERRANÉE AND THE PRIX GONCOURT
FOR BEST FIRST NOVEL

The beginning of this story is a curious fact: In 1699, Louis XIV of France sent an embassy to the most mysterious and fabled of oriental sovereigns, the Negus, or King, of Abyssinia (modern-day Ethiopia). Louis' hope was to lure that country, nominally Christian for centuries, into the political and religious orbit of France.

Jean-Baptiste Poncet, gifted young apothecary/physician to the pashas of Cairo, is the hero of this romantic epic embroidering upon the known details of that long-forgotten embassy. Selected by the French consul to lead the mission, Poncet travels through the deserts of Egypt and Sinai and the mountains of Abyssinia to the court of the Negus, thence to Versailles and back again. Along the way he falls madly in love with the consul's daughter, deals with the intrigues of his fanatical Jesuit traveling companions, treats the Negus for a mysterious skin ailment, and gains a disastrous audience with the king of France.

Friendship, humor, love, and discovery infuse this gorgeous adventure, but there is a more serious theme as well. Poncet discovers the splendors of an exotic empire and civilization, and, thanks to him, Ethiopia will escape foreign conquest and preserve its mystery into our own times.

(continued on back flap)

In this internationally best-selling novel, Jean-Christophe Rufin yokes the elegant language of the French enlightenment with the storytelling of Alexandre Dumas to bring us a splendid parable of liberty, religious fanaticism, and the possibility of happiness.

JEAN-CHRISTOPHE RUFIN, a doctor, was born in 1952. As an official with the humanitarian organization Médecins Sans Frontières, he has journeyed to war-torn regions such as Sri Lanka and Kurdistan to administer aid; he helped coordinate famine aid in Ethiopia and witnessed both the Sandinista uprising in Nicaragua and the downfall of Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines. In 1993 he led the French Defense Ministry's humanitarian mission to Bosnia and in 1994 traveled to Rwanda with the French armed forces' Opération Turquoise. Rufin lives in France.

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I

The

Castaway's

Order

I

The Sun King was disfigured. A slow leprosy that in the Orient commonly corrupts oils had introduced itself under the varnish, where it was spreading day by day. On Louis XIV's left cheek, the one extended in majesty toward the viewer, sat a large blackish stain, a hideous star projecting its rusty brown filaments out to the king's ear. A closer inspection revealed dark haloes on the body as well, but, except for those spotting his hose, these were less unsettling.

The painting had been hanging for three years in the French consulate in Cairo. It had been executed under the master's personal supervision in the Paris workshop of Hyacinthe Rigaud, the author of the original portrait, and been sent on by sea. By great misfortune, neither Cairo nor any of the stations in the Levant within striking distance could currently boast a master painter, and thus the consul, Monsieur de Maillet, was on the horns of a cruel dilemma. Either a portrait that did grave injury to the king was to be allowed to remain on public display in the reception hall of the consular building, or the painting would have to be confided to inexperienced hands, with a good chance of being ruined entirely. The diplomat turned the matter over in his mind for a period of three months before deciding on the bolder course. He would attempt the repair.

To perform the operation, Monsieur de Maillet chose a druggist then living in Cairo's Frankish colony who was said to be skilled at restoring canvases damaged by the climate. He was a tall fellow, somewhat stooped, his face swallowed almost to the eyes by a dense black-and-gray beard, his hair a mass of tightly coiled astrakhan curls, who moved his massive bulk with brutal energy while flapping his long limbs. Yet when he turned to his work, his gestures became extremely precise. He was known as Maître Juremi, and his one flaw was to be a Protestant. The consul disliked the notion of entrusting the king's image to a fanatic, capable at any moment of

some desperate attempt. But the man had the reputation of being an honest subject, in itself rare among Cairo's turbulent foreign community. And besides, Monsieur de Maillet had no choice.

On seeing the painting, Maître Juremi declared that the work would take ten days. By the following morning he was perched on a seven-foot scaffold with a young Nubian slave from the consulate at his side, stirring great stoneware pots that reeked of turpentine and poppyseed oil. The consul had insisted on being present anytime the painting itself was touched. Therefore, every morning toward eleven o'clock, once the mixtures had been prepared (for only the freshest of materials could be used), the servants called the consul, and Maître Juremi would then embark on the work of restoration under the diplomat's supervision. He attacked the stains on the drapery of the purple tunic first, where they were least noticeable. The immediate results were highly encouraging, as the varnish lost none of its gloss, the colors reemerged unaltered, and the blots vanished almost entirely. Monsieur de Maillet had every reason to be optimistic. Yet each time that Maître Juremi brought one of his small calf's-bristle brushes toward the surface of the royal painting, the consul emitted a succession of open-mouthed moans and whimpers such as a patient in the dentist's chair might give at the approach of the tongs. On several occasions the sessions had to be brought to a halt, having proved too painful.

The day finally came when the cancer that had eaten away at the king's cheek had itself to be addressed. Monsieur de Maillet, wigless, in a light calico dressing gown, agonized on a small bench he had had placed in front of the painting. His wife held his hand, pressing it to her bosom. The pair looked upward with imploring eyes, for all the world like a family group watching the crucifixion of a loved one from the foot of the cross. It was midafternoon in the month of May, and for three days a hot wind from the Nubian desert had flooded the city with dry heat. Maître Juremi, a gray skullcap on his head, seized a fine brush that the young slave held out to him and lifted it toward the august countenance of the king. Monsieur de Maillet rose from his bench.

"Wait!"

The druggist stopped in mid-gesture.

"Are you absolutely certain that . . . ?"

"Yes, Your Excellency."

In his emotions Maître Juremi displayed the same surprising contrasts as in his gestures. He was strongly tempted to give vent to his temper but managed, at the cost of intense concentration, to rein himself in. The effort was visible on his face. At the same time he grumbled under his breath, snorted,

whistled like an overfired oven, yet at no point exploded, even expressing himself with a gentleness surprising in a man who was so clearly overwrought.

"I am simply priming the surface," explained the druggist. "Observe, Excellency, that my brush barely touches the canvas."

Had the decision been left to him, Maître Juremi would have dabbled the fourteenth Louis's nose with scarlet paint and scrawled dog's ears on his periwig. As a Protestant, both he and his entire family had suffered calamity at the hands of this king. That he treated him with the deference he did already surpassed all understanding. Not for the first time, Maître Juremi had sworn to himself that if the day's session was called off with nothing accomplished, he would send the whole business to the devil.

The consul, perhaps glimpsing what tremendous storms roiled behind the restorer's bright glance, fell back on his bench, saying, "Go ahead then. If you must."

Clamping the fingers of both hands between his teeth, he shut his eyes tightly.

At that moment, two hard knocks sounded at the door. The painter stepped back, the Sudanese slave rolled his large eyes toward heaven, and Monsieur de Maillet reopened his, which were pink with emotion. A fraught silence settled over the room, as though the great king himself, annoyed at the indignity about to be visited on him, had hurled two terrible thunderbolts from the heavens.

Three more knocks fell on the door, more heavily this time. There was no doubt about it. Despite the consul's explicit and repeated instructions that he not be disturbed during these sessions, someone had taken the liberty of knocking at the great oak double door leading to the hall and offices. The diplomat, checking to see that his dressing gown was properly closed, walked briskly to the door and jerked it open. In the doorway stood Monsieur Macé. Under his superior's wrathful glance, he seemed to snap at the waist, making an extreme, almost a foolhardy, obeisance, for from the perspective of geometry and logic he should have fallen face-first to the floor. He saved himself, however, righting his body with great promptness, and spoke in the modest yet firm tone that had earned him his chief's favor.

"The aga of the janissaries sends Your Excellency a message. He has expressly noted that it concerns a matter of unusual urgency. The Turks have a special word for things that may not be put off. I can only think to translate it by the imperious obligation in which I find myself to disregard your clearly stated instructions on being disturbed.

Monsieur Macé was known as a "language child," that is, a graduate of

the School of Oriental Languages in Paris. On receiving a diploma, the scholars were sent, as Monsieur Macé had been, to join an embassy, prior to becoming diplomats or dragomans. The consul regarded this young man with particular favor, finding to his satisfaction that he knew his place. Not being of gentle birth, Monsieur Macé approached all questions with reserve, at once displaying his limitations and a judicious awareness of them.

"Was there any letter?"

"No, Excellency. The aga's messenger, who was unwilling even to dismount, informs us that his master is waiting for you now, at his palace."

"So the dogs now summon me, do they?" said Monsieur de Maillet under his breath. "With good reason, I hope, or the pasha himself will hear of it."

Monsieur Macé approached the consul, then pivoted on his heels so as to stand shoulder to shoulder with him, both men presenting their backs to the others in the room. The young man then spoke, using the whisper one uses to disclose a state secret in a public setting. Maître Juremi shrugged at this breach of conduct, performed as though it were the height of good manners, a trick that, among career diplomats, soon becomes second nature.

"The aga is holding at Your Excellency's disposal a French prisoner arrested yesterday in Cairo," whispered Monsieur Macé.

"And is that any reason to interrupt us? Every week they capture one of the pitiful wretches who come here to try their luck. What concern is it of mine if . . . ?"

"Only," murmured Monsieur de Macé even more softly than before, so that the consul had practically to read his secretary's lips, "he is no ordinary prisoner. It is the man we have been waiting for, the king's messenger."

Monsieur de Maillet gave a startled exclamation.

"In that case," he said loudly, "we must waste no time. Sirs," he went on, addressing chiefly Maître Juremi, "our session must come to an end."

The consul left the room with a mixed expression of dignity and displeasure on his face, though inwardly certain that anything was better than the torture he had been about to undergo.

Maître Juremi, alone with the young slave, swore savagely and tossed his paintbrush back into the pot. Several droplets of the precious pink unguent destined for the royal cheek splashed onto the boy's black forehead.

A good walker could in those days make the tour of Cairo in three hours. It was still a small city, one that travelers universally found ugly, worn, and charmless. From afar, the fretwork of its slender minarets and tall, tufted

palms lent it a certain character. But as one entered its narrow streets, the view was blocked by ranks of two-story houses, undecorated except for the *mashrabiyya*, or cedar lattices, jutting dangerously above the passerby. The city's salient structures—the palace of the beys, the Citadel (where the pasha lived, and one side of which opened onto Rumayla Square), the many mosques—all disappeared in the confusion of the whole. Devoid of open spaces or general views, deprived of air and light, the city seemed to push all beauty, all passion, all happiness behind blank walls and dark gates. Few people were to be seen on the public ways, except in the neighborhood of the bazaars or those of the city gates through which the merchants came from the surrounding countryside. Black forms, draped in veils, slipped rapidly past, before restoring the streets to the possession of their resident beggars and scabby dogs.

Rarely did a stranger venture into the old parts of Cairo. Although Europeans had been granted protection by the Ottoman sultan ever since the treaties of capitulation in the sixteenth century, signed with France by Khair ad-Din Barbarossa, and were therefore free to trade and enjoy certain rights, Christians nonetheless felt threatened. The Egyptians were constantly quarreling among themselves: the pasha was pitted against his militia, the janissaries against the beys, the beys against the imams, the imams against the pasha—unless the alignment were entirely the reverse. If the Muslim factions reached a truce and pretended for a moment to be reconciled, it was always by making common cause against the Christians. The matter was never allowed to go very far, and a thrashing or two would restore order—or at least the usual state of discord. But this sufficed to make the Franks, as they were then called, consider it prudent to leave their assigned quarter as seldom as possible.

The ease with which the young man walked on that afternoon through the narrow streets of old Cairo was therefore all the more surprising. He had stepped onto the street a few moments earlier from a perfectly ordinary Arab house, closing a simple plank door behind him, and navigated through the maze of streets with the unhurried familiarity of a native. Yet he was clearly a Frank and took no pains to hide it. All morning the *kham-sin* had blown its sandy breath up from the desert, and the air was stifling and dry even in the perpetual gloom of the narrow streets. The young man, wearing a simple cambric shirt with an open collar, cotton knee breeches and supple boots, walked bareheaded and carried his navy-blue wool doublet over his arm. Two old Arabs, crossing him in front of the Mosque of Hasan, greeted him amiably, to which he responded with a single word, spoken in their language, as he continued on his way. Although he was not

by any means an official, since he was not Turkish, everyone in the city knew that the young man was called Jean-Baptiste Poncet, and that he held a high position in the citadel with the pasha.

Solidly built, vigorous, with wide shoulders and a powerful neck, he had often asked himself why fate had not picked him for a conscript oarsman in the Sun King's galleys. His head, unexpectedly on so solid a frame, was long and fine-featured. His face was smooth and youthful, framed by dark hair and lit by a green gaze. There was a noticeable lack of symmetry in his features, one cheekbone set slightly higher than the other and his eyes curiously placed, giving his glance a startling force. These irregularities added a note of mystery and power to his simple appearance.

Jean-Baptiste Poncet had become, in the three years he had lived in Cairo, that city's most renowned doctor. It was May in the year 1699, and he had just turned twenty-eight.

As he walked along, he swung a small case at his side, which contained a number of medications he had concocted himself, with his partner's help. The vials, knocking against each other, gave off a muffled clink behind the leather. To the crystalline tinkling that accompanied his steps, Jean-Baptiste took pleasure in imparting a merry rhythm. He looked in front of him, smiling peacefully, untroubled by the knowledge that he was being watched from behind many of the blinds and wooden lattices. Most of the houses were ones in which he was received, either to exercise his art or, quite often, as a simple guest, to take tea or dinner with his hosts. Knowing a large portion of the city's small secrets—and a small portion of its large ones—he was used to being a favorite object of the general curiosity, particularly among women, in the darkened seraglios where desire and intrigue were fomented. He accepted this state of affairs without excitement either to his vanity or to his passion and continued to play, though perhaps with a lessening sense of enjoyment, the exotic role of the free-roving animal, on whom the eyes of a thousand hunters are trained, tracking its every movement.

Pursuing his course, he passed near the perfume bazaar and finally reached the banks of the Khalij, or Cairo Canal. He walked upstream for a short time along the rivulet, which was dry at this season but which a storm could bring to a boiling frenzy at others, then started across the bridge spanning it. The spot was always filled with people, in part because of the shops and houses lining the bridge itself, in part because it provided the only path between old Cairo and the Arab quarters. On that day, however, the crowd was particularly dense, and Jean-Baptiste made his way through with difficulty. Reaching the middle of the bridge, he realized that something unusual was going on: clouds of thick smoke were billowing from one

of the houses. It had started at a cloth merchant's, he was told, where an earthenware stove had spilled and scattered its coals. A horde of Egyptians were loudly throwing water onto the fire, drawing buckets from a nearby well and carrying them on the run to the smoldering house. The situation was under control and no catastrophe was expected. But in a town where little ever happened, people had flocked from all sides to watch, and getting across the bridge was virtually impossible. Jean-Baptiste elbowed his way forward. At the entrance to the bridge, on the far side from where he had arrived, a two-horse carriage was stopped in the middle of the crowd. Drawing up to it, Jean-Baptiste saw that it bore the arms of the French consul, to which he reacted by shouldering the gawkers aside all the more roughly, unwilling to linger.

While officially registered as an apothecary, Poncet held no diploma of any sort, and his practice of medicine was strictly illegal. The Turks raised no objections, but his compatriots tended to hold him liable, particularly when there was a licensed doctor among them—luckily, there was none in Cairo at the moment. Constantly under the threat of being denounced, he had already been obliged to leave two cities for this reason. It was therefore only prudent to stay away from the representative of the law, which in everything concerning the Franks meant the consul.

Just as he was passing the carriage, his head tucked into his shoulders and his face slightly averted, he heard an imperious voice calling him: "Monsieur, if you please! Monsieur! Could you spare us a moment?"

The person Jean-Baptiste feared was the consul. The voice, fortunately, belonged to a woman. He approached the carriage, and a lady leaned her head out the window. She was perspiring profusely from the close heat, and her rouge had run, leaving the lead white that coated her face exposed and cracking. Intended to fend off the ravages of time, her artifices had precipitated them instead. Rid of her dripping facepaint, she might have presented the smiling, straightforward face of a fifty-year-old woman, in whose blue-eyed glance there remained traces of beauty, and an air of soft and timid kindness.

"Can you tell us what has slowed our carriage so? Are we in any danger?"

Jean-Baptiste recognized the consul's wife, having seen her once or twice in the gardens of the French legation.

"A small fire was kindled in one of the houses, Madame, and has drawn a crowd of onlookers, but all should return to order shortly."

Expressing her relief, the lady thanked Jean-Baptiste and withdrew her head into the carriage, where she settled herself back into the cushions and resumed beating her fan. It was then Jean-Baptiste noticed she was not

alone. Across from her, lit by the sun slanting through the gap made by the Khalij, sat a young girl.

It would be no exaggeration to say that the flaws of the one set off the virtues of the other: they were exact opposites. The cosmetic layers that caked the face of the elder woman contrasted with the pure complexion of the younger, and the lady's fidgeting anxiety stood in opposition to the calm and serious immobility of the girl. Had Jean-Baptiste been asked to describe her he would not have known how to begin. Of all that his first exposure to beauty had revealed to him, he was conscious only of a general impression. A single detail stood out, both absurd and adorable: she had tied her ringlets with blue silk ribbons. Jean-Baptiste looked at the young woman with astonishment, and though he was generally easy in his manner, he failed, in his surprise, to compose his face. The carriage lurched forward as the coachman lashed his whip, and the silent conversation of their eyes was interrupted, leaving Jean-Baptiste standing alone on the bridge speechless, troubled, and elated.

"Confound it!" he said to himself. "I have never seen her like in Cairo before."

And he continued his walk, at a somewhat slower pace, toward his house in the Frankish quarter.

2

The consul, Monsieur de Maillet, was born into the minor nobility of eastern France, where his family continued to put forth a few sparse shoots. It would be inaccurate to say that his family had slid into ruin, because they had never had much to start with. Hedged in on the one side by an enterprising bourgeois class and on the other by wealthy peasants, these gentry preened themselves on neither doing nor owning anything. What kept them from making painful comparisons was that they belonged, if only at a mediocre level, to the nobility, a fact that transfigured all other aspects of their mediocrity. Their salvation, as they never doubted, would come from above. When some member of their lineage, no matter how distantly related, rose in rank (it was bound to happen someday), then they would all rise. The miracle did not produce itself immediately, but when Louis Pontchartrain, who was a first cousin to Monsieur de Maillet's mother, became the Sun King's minister and then his chancellor, it was clear that the long-awaited event had occurred. No man reaches such heights unaided—even if he has earned his place solely on merit. He must have many men about him, men he has placed and maintained, and may on a particular day call into action. Their devotion is all the greater for their having been nothing beforehand. Pontchartrain knew this and did not forget to use his family.

Monsieur de Maillet emerged from his pious and idle youth having learned little from books and less from life itself. His powerful uncle saved him from nothingness by obtaining the consulship in Cairo for him.

While grateful to his uncle, Monsieur de Maillet also had strong feelings of apprehension. He knew he could not repay the debt solely by his own efforts. Someday this man of enormous power would ask him for a great favor, a favor that he might not be able to perform without putting himself in danger. And Monsieur de Maillet did not like danger.

The Cairo consulship was one of the most enviable posts in the Levant.

The French embassy to which Monsieur de Maillet reported was in Constantinople, at a considerable remove. And the fact that Cairo never received delegations passing on to other, more distant, parts greatly simplified his duties. The task consisted simply in legislating over the few dozen troublesome merchants and adventurers in Cairo's foreign colony. These men, stranded there after what was generally an extraordinary sequence of events, had the audacity to consider courage a virtue, money a source of power, and the duration of their exile grounds for glory. It was Monsieur de Maillet's task to remind them that the only power was the law, which did not look favorably on them, and the only virtue nobility, which they would never possess. But the essential thing, as Pontchartrain reiterated tirelessly, was always to get along well with the Turkish powers-that-be. This coincided with France's overall diplomacy, which was to support (albeit surreptitiously) the Ottoman alliance against the Holy Roman Empire. It also helped maintain civil order, as nothing so held the Frankish community in line as to know that the Turks might, at a nod from the consul, sweep in and expel a foreign troublemaker.

It should also be added that the consul paid no rent, received an annual income of four thousand livres, with a further six thousand five hundred livres for the expenses of his table and domestic servants, and the right to import one hundred barrels of wine a year at two and a half piasters duty per barrel, offering the chance for a considerable profit. These benefits, which made Monsieur de Maillet rich, provoked an extreme gratitude in him. He renewed his protestations of service on a monthly basis, in letters that traveled to his protector via the French East India Company ships laying over in the port of Alexandria. The main ingredient in these missives was certainly praise; but fearing that a diet of honeyed words would in the long run cloy and perhaps even disgust, the consul diluted his encomiums with various subjects borrowed from the local situation. The digressions could sometimes reach the proportions of modest memoranda, such as the one (of which he was inordinately proud, though he never learned his minister's reaction to it) in which he examined the possibility of digging a canal to join the Mediterranean and Red Seas.

Monsieur de Pontchartrain always answered these letters, making comments and sometimes adding a few notes on the political situation. In his last dispatch, already more than a month old, the minister had for the first time expressed what seemed a direct order. The consul was to expect a visit from a Jesuit priest, who was arriving from the court at Versailles by way of Rome. The minister asked Monsieur de Maillet to kindly comply with any orders the ecclesiastic might bring with him. He was to consider them as representing the wishes of the council and King Louis XIV himself.