



# THE SILVER BLADE

Run like the wind, the devil's own is on your trail

SALLY GARDNER

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藏书章

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## *Prologue*



**T**here is no more terrifying a sight in all Paris than that of the guillotine. Never before has it been so easy to exterminate so many so quickly. Come rain or shine, come fog or snow, this indomitable killing machine is heedless of the weather or the passing seasons. It has no opinion of its victims or the number of times its blade is made to rise and fall in a single day. It is as blind to the innocent as it is to the guilty; both receive the same dreadful, swift punishment. Never before has Death walked with such an assured step as it does in these dark days of the Reign of Terror.

The guillotine stands in the Place de la Révolution between the Garde-Meuble and the pedestal on which the Statue of Liberty has been erected. At night it is protected against the elements by a large canvas cloth tied fast with ropes. Even covered in its bloodstained winding sheet, it is a sight that inspires fear, and it is fear itself that like a contagious fever has taken hold of the city. It takes away all rational thought, bringing with it a delirium in which even your own shadow cannot be

trusted. It spares neither the wise man nor the fool, the brave man nor the coward. Fear feeds on fear and, in March of 1794, it never goes hungry, for it is the devil's own supper.



Midnight in Paris and the bells ring out the hour, each peal skimming like a pebble over the surface of the city. Not a peaceful lullaby to the end of the day, but a troubled warning: 'Lock your doors, shut your shutters and hide.'

You can almost hear the universal prayer on every citizen's lips: that the morning light might find them still asleep in their bed; you can never tell which door the National Guards will come knock-knock-knocking on next, whose name will be written in that little black book.

'What's that noise?'

'There on the step.'

'Who's coming in at the gate at such an hour?'

'Shh, listen, isn't that the sound of boots upon the cobbles?'

'Who's next to be arrested?'

'Did you hear that the seamstress was taken on the death cart only yesterday? Four children she leaves behind, orphaned.'

'As long as it is not us.'

'Quiet! What was that?'

'Pull your sheets about your ears, go to sleep, my dear.'

Out there in this gated, barred and locked city, a foggy

mist rolls up the Seine from Rouen, clinging like a lady's veil just above the water line. It spreads into the narrow streets of the Place du Carrousel with its wretched hovels. Here lives Remon Quint. Once keymaker to the King, he sits in his tiny apartment regretting he hadn't left Paris when he had the chance. Now, blowing out the candle on his way to bed, to lie tossing and turning in a dreamless sleep, he wonders if it is all too late.

The mist rolls on to spy into cracks and crevices as it makes its way up the pickle of streets, by the ruins of a church, past the riding-school, hanging like ghostly leaves on the rows of bare lime trees. In sight of the Tuileries Gardens, it lingers in the gutters, moving through the overcrowded slums where live the bird-sellers, the brokers, jugglers and dentists, quacks and dog gelders. Gathering strength round Loup's butcher's shop, with its sign of a black iron pig that wheezes on rusty hinges, it sneaks up to look in through the chink in the shutters. Madame Loup, the butcher's wife, is all alone tonight. The two people she dreads most in the world, her husband and her son Anselm, are away from home. Where they are she doesn't know, she doesn't care. Lying in her wooden bed she dreams of her childhood, when she skipped barefoot through fields of sweet purple lavender, when the world was young and there still was hope.

In the Place de la Révolution, the moon has drawn back the heavy clouds which have been shading its mournful gaze to see, emerging from the shadow of the guillotine, Count Kalliovski. He is tall, meticulously

dressed, but his clothes offer little protection against such an inhospitable night as this. And though a wind is beginning to chase the mist away, making a threadbare thing of the vapours, it blows not one item of his clothing.

If you were a mouse, and a brave one at that, you might have the courage to creep closer, for those are expensive riding boots he wears, that have to them a red heel. Whoever this man is – whatever this man is – he is reckless indeed to wear so openly such decadent symbols of aristocracy as red heels, black silk breeches and a silver buttoned waistcoat embroidered with tiny silver skulls. He has red kid gloves, the colour of poppies, his cravat is white as white can be, studded with a huge ruby pin like a single drop of blood. His coat collar rises to meet his hairline so that it looks as if his head is perched on, rather than connected to, his body. He appears to be a man of disjointed parts. But it is his face beneath the hat that makes all the rest quite forgettable. Those black eyes do not look human, so dark and dead, eyes from which no light shines. His skin is like tallow wax, his hair, swept back, is black, his lips a red wound. This is a face of nightmares.



Kalliovski goes walking here every night, the smell of blood drawing him time and time again to the guillotine. It is like a fine wine to his nose, a perfume to savour. He takes a last deep breath, inhaling the scent of death before setting off towards the Pont Neuf. He

walks without a shadow to mark his passing.

On the shoreline of the Seine, near the Louvre, he stops and whistles. He hears the wolfhound before he sees him. Balthazar is no longer the loyal dog he once was. He looks larger, his fangs longer and sharper, his claws have the sound of iron in them. His coat is mangy, grown odd in patches, he lacks the grace that once was so natural to him. He lacks the devotion to his master that once marked him out.

On the south side of the river they make their way up to the rue St-Jacques. Here in a passageway lives Maître Tardieu in his mole-like house. One miserable lantern lights his door. Kalliovski looks up at the shuttered window and wonders if the old lawyer knows where she is, and if he does, would he tell? It matters little. He will find Sido de Villeduval with the lawyer's help or without it. Nothing will stop him.

His motto is and always will be the same: have no mercy, show no mercy.

Balthazar, restless to be gone, is at his master's side as they set off together down the deserted streets of the rue Jacob. They alone inhabit the night, spectres of terror made visible, and Kalliovski revels in it. It has taken him time to accept that his power comes within the limitation of darkness. At the Place de Manon, Balthazar breaks away, howling, a sound which sends shivers down the spine of the living, a sound loud enough to wake the dead.

Kalliovski calls him back, but the dog has vanished. Turning on his heel, he curses as he walks up the rue



des Couteaux until at last he reaches a shop with three dimly lit red lanterns glowing in the window.

Inside the shelves are bare. But from behind the velvet curtain at the back a man appears, dressed from head to toe in black. Seeing his master he bows.

‘Has it arrived, Serreto?’ asks Kalliovski.

‘Yes, master.’ He stands back to let Kalliovski pass, notices that once again Balthazar is not with him.

At the back of the shop Kalliovski starts his descent, down the spiral stone stairs into the bowels of the earth where the air has a familiar smell of home, for twenty-one metres beneath the city is where the Count now resides, in the catacombs. For years he planned his new abode, as if he had foreseen his own terrible destiny.

This is a palace as detached from reality as a ship from the shore. It is a world where Kalliovski makes the rules, he is its king. Now he sits in a wing-back chair studying the table before him.

In a frosted-glass dome, like a cake in a pastry shop, sits the waxwork head of the needy, greedy Marquis de Villeduval. It has been copied by Madame Tussaud from his death mask, for Kalliovski had only one request when he ordered the murder of the Marquis on the eve of the September Massacre: that his face should remain unmarked.

‘My mad Marquis, what say you to your fate?’ Kalliovski asks.

The wax head is silent, its watery blue eyes lost.

‘Nothing to say, my dear foolish friend? Why, has the cat got your tongue?’

Kalliovski stretches his long legs, puts his poppy-red gloved hands in front of him, dark threads spinning from his finger tips towards the wax head. His thoughts are a smouldering cauldron of revenge. He will have Sido. This time there will be no escape. He will play his high card and the game will be his.

The thin waxen lips of the late Marquis de Villeduval begin to move.

‘The devil take you,’ he says.

Kalliovski throws back his head and laughs.

‘He already has.’

## Chapter One



**Y**ann Margoza was dressed as a vagabond in an old greatcoat that had seen better days, with a muffler wrapped round his neck and a hat that had equally lived life to the full. Only if you saw his dark eyes with their unmistakable intensity would you ever have recognised him. His companion, Didier, was a huge bear-like figure of a man. Both had one thing in common: they possessed the ability to merge almost unseen with their surroundings.

They had been on the road now for three days and, although it was late March, they could still feel winter's bitter breath in the wind. By late afternoon, an eerie yellow light flooded the woodland path before pitch-blackness descended as if the sun had been snuffed out.

Thunder trumpeted in the approaching storm, a furious call to arms. Lightning tore at the fabric of the sky. Finally the heavens opened.

Didier once more had the feeling that had troubled him ever since they left Paris three days previously: they were being followed.

‘Listen,’ he said.

‘It’s the wind,’ replied Yann.

‘It sounded more like the howl of a wolf to me.’

Yann kept on walking, not listening, not looking, thinking only of Sido. The thought of her weighed heavily so that he barely noticed how cold, footsore and hungry he was. Or that Didier was right.

‘Sido, Sido.’ In his mind’s eye he could see her oval face, her blue eyes, her mass of wavy dark hair. He knew there was no other road his heart would travel but the road that led to her.

His thoughts had been thus engaged ever since leaving Paris; a tangled knot of desires. His mind drifted back to when he’d first seen her, all those years ago, at the Marquis de Villeduval’s château. A fateful night that had changed the course of both their lives. His employer, Topolain the magician, had been shot dead by Count Kalliovski, and in the space of a few hours he had not only met his greatest adversary, but a young girl destined to be his greatest love, the keeper of his soul.

Kalliovski was long dead and Sido free, safe in England. No harm could come to her there. Why then did he have this feeling of foreboding?

Balthazar had followed Yann. Keeping his distance he

was looking for telltale signs that he was on the right track. Mere mortals can't see in the dark without the light of a full moon or a lantern to guide them, especially not on such a stormy night as this, but the young man in the vagabond coat was different. Like his master he walked with an almost supernatural confidence, as if it were broad daylight. Balthazar watched his every move, could smell his blood, hear his heart beat, almost taste his flesh.

He longed to find his old voice. He had been robbed of it; the only sounds left to him were those of a wild beast. He gave a mournful howl, as hunger for the young man overcame him.

'I'm right, aren't I?' said Didier, water dripping miserably off the brim of his hat. 'There is something out there.'

'Let's just keep walking,' Yann shouted above the scream of the wind.

Didier, still feeling uneasy, reassured himself with the sound of his footsteps. One-two, one-two, the rhythm comforted him. He thought back to the time when Yann, spiriting a prisoner out of La Force, had left a silver blade from a street pedlar's toy guillotine suspended over the sleeping head of a corrupt corporal. The weasel-faced man, instead of keeping his foul mouth shut, had boasted to one and all that the next time the Silver Blade, as he called him, came into his prison he would have his guts for garters, so he would. Didier, even in this bitter wind and with a stomach like an empty larder, felt comforted thinking of it. The corporal's boasting

had backfired. He was sent to fight and was never heard of again, while the Silver Blade became a legend, a name whispered on the lips of despairing men, a name that brought hope to a city where hope had been banished.



No one who had been lucky enough to see Yann Margoza perform as the Harlequin in Paris at the Circus of Follies would ever in a thousand years of Sundays have suspected that the star of Monsieur Aulard's pantomime led a double life. But that is exactly what he did. The theatre was a smokescreen for an altogether more subversive operation, that of helping citizens escape from the guillotine. Every member of the theatre company played his or her part in this dangerous venture, all knowing that their lives depended on Yann's talent. Their backers were two English bankers: Charles Cordell, who lived in Paris, and Henry Laxton, with whom Yann had spent three years in London when younger. It was due to Laxton that he had received the education of an English gentleman. Both men had immediately seen the potential in Yann, demonstrated by the near-impossible feat of snatching Sido de Villeduval from the carriage of Count Kalliovski. Neither doubted that Yann could save many more lives, for he possessed courage and an ability to hold his nerve, no matter what situation he found himself in. That on its own would not have been enough, but Yann was of gypsy blood, and had unusual skills. He was able to read people's thoughts, and had a gift for making clients

forget quite how they ever came to be rescued in the first place, so his identity had remained something of a mystery. Without Yann's talents, the whole enterprise would have amounted to nothing more than a barrellful of good intentions, but with him it had proved to be one of the most efficient operations in Paris.

Têtu, the dwarf, and Citizen Aulard, the theatre manager, worked together behind the scenes. It was their job these days to make sure that Yann and Didier had everything they needed to make each assignment a success, and recently, with the rumours of impending massacres once more circulating in Paris, their workload had doubled if not tripled.



Their business, this time in Normandy, was to arrange the escape of the Duc de Bourcy and his family.

It had been Têtu's decision that Yann and Didier should not travel from Paris by coach or on horseback, for such things would be remembered and such memories could prove fatal. Instead he had insisted for their own safety that they take a boat up the Seine into the heartland of Normandy and go the rest of the way on foot.

What Têtu hadn't reckoned on was the weather. Originally they were only meant to be gone for five days, three of which had already passed and they were yet to arrive. The delay put their whole operation at risk, leaving poor Monsieur Aulard and the rest of the company to cover for the Harlequin's absence.

‘Did you hear it? Did you?’ asked Didier, desperate not to be the only one to hear the low, menacing growl. ‘Wasn’t it you who told me that a wolf at the beginning of a journey is bad luck?’

‘No,’ said Yann. ‘Russian gypsies believe it is a good omen.’

‘I hope to God they’re right,’ said Didier.

Lightning flashed, illuminating everything with looking-glass sharpness. They were in an abandoned graveyard, filled with silver birch trees which stood guardian over the crumbling tombstones and broken, wingless angels. In the middle were the skeletal remains of a church, its roof long gone, only three walls preventing it from total collapse.

Yann moved towards it, quickly followed by Didier, both glad at last to have some protection, feeble as it was, from the spiteful wind which hissed and wheezed round the masonry.

Looking into the bleakness of that devil-dark night, Yann heard no wolf howl, he heard nothing but his own gallow’s-bird thoughts.

Why hasn’t Sido replied to my letter? Three weeks and not a word. Perhaps I misunderstood her. What did she write?

Oh Yann, I long for thee.  
Come back to me.

No, I didn’t misunderstand her. We have hidden nothing from each other. Nothing. Except I have never



told her I'm a gypsy. I will when the time is right. Now I have told her what I should have told her ages ago, that I love her.

In the dark of the forest, in the light of his imagination, he pictured Sido as they had stood alone in the garden two years before, the smell of sea and autumn in the air, that moment when he had kissed her and held her. Why hadn't he had the courage to tell her then he loved her? Instead he had given her his precious talisman to wear, an amulet, the *baro seroeske sharkuni*, the shell of the shells. She had held it in her hands and brought it to her lips as he turned and walked away. She had whispered into it and he heard her words, soft as the waves kissing the sea shore. Even then he could have changed everything. Why hadn't he? It was simple: he wanted to earn her love, to prove, despite his gypsy blood, he was worthy of her.

That was when he started writing to her, frightened he might have lost her altogether. Soon their letters, dangerous as they were, became their lifeline, each more poignant, yet still skimming over what they longed to say.

Why do I torment myself? I am a tightrope walker over the Valley of Death. If I lose my balance I am lost. Sido's feet are on the ground, she owns all her tomorrows, has all her years to be arranged. A suitable husband, children. She lives in another country, her time is measured by another clock, her life has longitude and latitude, mine has only now. If I live to see the end of the Terror, I will be a fortunate man.