Conductors of Light

by Aramley

Summary

What is the position of magicians in France? As well ask, what is the position of one who practices the law? It varies.

Notes

For yunitsa. I couldn't resist your magic!au suggestion, and I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it!

Magic is less common in France now. Perhaps this should be cause for concern, and yet it seems of a piece with the times: France humiliated, France mortgaged for foreign wars, France whose crops rot in her fields.

That is not to say that there is no magic left. No, not quite. Perhaps all that is needed is a spark.

"We did not mean it," Charlotte says, weeping childish tears.

"Here, give it to me," Maximilien says, and Charlotte tearfully hands over the little box with its poor inmate. Max reaches in for the bird, cups his hands gently around the soft cool body and wings as he would do with one of his living birds. Its neck lies over his fingers.

At first he does not know what he is doing. Then the little heart thuds violently: a convulsion of
life stirs hard against his hands. Shocked, he releases the bird and it falls onto his knees, looking back up at him with its startled black bead of an eye.

Max is only dimly aware of Charlotte's scream. For himself, the numbness goes beyond shock - he seems to have retreated into an unknown inner place, as though in a crowded and noisy house he has stepped unexpectedly into a still, quiet room. He hardly knows what happens next. Nothing matters that is not caught in the bright black gleam of life, the dove's eye on his.

Matters progress rapidly after this. There are family conferences, letters are written, at astonishing speed an introduction is obtained and a scholarship procured, and in a lightning-flash Max is gathering his things for Paris and the College Louis-le-Grand. The aunts and his grandfather assure him that this is the finest establishment in France for (a delicate pause) children of his disposition. But the speed of it all, as hastily arranged as a face-saving wedding - no, Max is not ignorant of his circumstances. To have magic in a family is hardly a scandal, but still: the de Robespierres are people who feel they have had their share of familial excitement, and Paris is a comfortable distance.

His doves are given away. The resurrected one? Not that one. It lived for a little while, but then one morning was found cool and stiff on the dove-cote floor. But for a little while, it lived.

- The stutter comes in with the magic. This is outrageous, Jean-Nicolas says. I commit my child, my perfectly ordinary child (it pays to stretch the truth in these matters) to your care, and what is returned to me at term's end? A sorcerer with a stammer. When he looks at Camille now it is with a wary, short-changed look, as though he suspects his original son has been substituted.

The reply comes from Cateau-Cambresis: on his first day at our establishment, your son contrived to set fire to his bed linens. Between the lines the Fathers clearly say: we assumed you knew, and it really is your problem. They make so bold as to suggest the College Louis-le-Grand in Paris, where it is generally known that gifted young men are accommodated and instructed in the matter of diverting their talents into more useful, less startling displays. In addition there is a bill for the various articles of school property to which Camille has applied his talent over the course of the school year.

"It would appear," says Jean-Nicolas, sardonically, "that you have a prodigious gift."

Camille shrugs silently. Since his return from school he's affecting this stoic silence. In charitable moments his father suspects that he is embarrassed by his newfound difficulty of speech. Privately, he suspects the boy of cultivating a pose.

The College Louis-le-Grand is applied to. It is the finest foundation in Paris, and in his study Jean-Nicolas costs out his son's future. Fortunately, there are the Godard cousins.

"I am to go to Paris, then?" Camille says.

"Yes," Jean-Nicolas snaps. "You will go to Paris, and learn how to behave."

When he thinks back on this remark in the years to come, he could put his head down on his desk - on the laborious pages of the Encyclopaedia of Law - and just howl.

Camille, for his part, sits in his father's study under the weight of his disappointment and thinks how wonderful it would be if the words of the Encyclopaedia suddenly rearranged themselves on the page in a flurry of ink. Stubbornly, they don't. It's probably not an accident, Camille reflects ruefully, that the stammer and the magic came in together.
We must not forget Danton, of course. In Arcis-sur-Aube, Georges-Jacques Danton survives his encounter with the bull, and he is on his way to surviving the fever that chases him to the very brink of death.

"Madame," the priest says, wiping his forehead in the little kitchen, where a glass of fortifying wine has been conducted into his hand. "I begin to fear the boy is quite out of my jurisdiction.

Coming from the parish priest, Madame Recordain is not sure that she appreciates the sentiment. He is, after all, only a boy still (even if the mind balks a little at that word, that only).

"There is always, you know," Jean says, mildly, talking around what he can't quite name. "Well, if it isn't the will of God that keeps him alive it must be some other power, and there's money in it, so they say. Perhaps Father can make introductions."

"It might be a relief to you," says the priest.

A relief to you, Madame Recordain thinks.

When the priest is gone, Madame Recordain sits at her son's bedside and regards him. Even in sleep his scarred and fever-flushed face looks fierce, as though he has won a victory. Put magic in his hands? When consulted, her sister-in-law looks aghast and says, "By God, will the end of days not come to us in its own time?"

A decision is made. Georges-Jacques will go to school and take his chances with an ordinary education. He is a bright boy who takes to instruction, and providing he can be kept from farmers' fields and winter rivers for the remainder of his youth the family have hopes that he will turn out to be quite an ordinary person, after all.

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Rumour attends Camille on his arrival at College Louis-le-Grand. It is said that through a feat of magic he had burned his last school to the ground, that as a result he had been excommunicated by a convention of the priests of Picardy. The Elders do not give credence to the rumours, of course, but all the same it is thought prudent to prefer him to the care of Maximilien de Robespierre, who since he arrived at the College has proved to be sober and hardworking, impeccably controlled, really everything one could hope a scholarship boy to be. It is generally supposed that he will be a good influence, and moreover it is generally hoped that he himself is not easily influenced.

They are not natural companions to look at, this pale serious boy and the precocious child, and Max himself supposes that when the boy has found his feet the natural order of things will resume and he, like the others, will take to calling him Thing and generally treating him as though he were an item of school furniture: something to be occasionally remarked upon, possibly subject to a new and interesting spell or turned over in a violent mood, but otherwise ignored.

A curious thing, though: the Desmoulins boy keeps appearing, even at moments when there are other more interesting boys available and in places where Max usually finds himself alone.

"What are you reading?"

"A book," Maximilien says, spreading his hand over the close-set type. The magic is advanced, and it has been impressed upon him that perhaps not all of his peers are as responsible with their gifts. The Elders had not especially mentioned Camille, but there was a certain tone to the way they had asked Max to take particular care of him on his arrival at the College. Camille tilts his head like a small quizzical bird, and Max finds himself elaborating, "A book of spells."
"Do you think magic ought to be contained in books?" Camille asks, dark curls falling over his dark eyes.

Max shrugs. "Where else, if not there?"

"I mean, why contained at all? And these spells, this Latin, why should magic work better if I decline my nouns?"

"You're an argumentative boy," Max says, disliking the sound of it even as he says it and knowing that it is the reason why he is recommended to smaller boys as an example: this desire to do what is expected, which he can't seem to help. Still, Camille has touched on thoughts which he himself has pushed to the periphery of his mind. Dangerous thinking in this ancient house of magic. He slides the covers of the book closed. "I shouldn't try that with the Elders, if I were you."

"I mean, I didn't know a word of a spell when I burned down the parish school," Camille says, ignoring him. It would not surprise Max to learn that he ignores most things that he does not agree with. He leans over and taps Max's little taper of candle; the flame leaps obligingly, affectionately onto his fingers. "I don't know the spell for this, but I do it. And look."

He holds out his hand and Max puts out his fingers the way he would for one of his doves. The candle-flame hops between their fingers, a little warm point of power. The shadows play over their hands, back and forth.

Max says, "I know you didn't burn down your school."


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In Troyes, then, Georges-Jacques Danton is not learning magic. But he's learning other things - what school teaches, yes, but mainly about himself. He is beginning to recognise a kind of power he seems to possess: a force outside the ordinary run of will or luck, attributable not just to his stature (for he is a large boy, and growing) or the uncommon condition of his face. A thing both apart and not, that you might call the genius if you read enough of the classical authors. Emperors had genii, did they not?

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It is a rainy day in 1775, and in a coach the king of France turns to his wife and says, "When I was a child, you know, my grandfather brought in magicians from the College to test me for magic. It was found that I had none."

"You astonish me, my dear," says Antoinette.

If Louis attends to his wife's words, he hides it well. He is looking back, as he sometimes does, with Bourbon eyes.

"He had no magic either," he says. "Although once, we are told, there was quite a connection between magic and royalty. And history tells us that Henri-Quatre was a magician of extraordinary power."

"It seems to me," says Antoinette, not quite deigning to look behind at the diminishing school - the children in their draggled rows, the speech she had only half-heard and attended to not at all - but indicating them with a gentle motion of her head, "that on today's evidence, the aristocratic connection is quite broken."
Behind the royal couple, forgotten, the scholarship boy finishes his speech. In Latin it is easier to disguise his Artois accent, but still he had felt, palpably, the lap of contempt from the carriage. What gave it away? The children are conducted inside to their cold dormitories, dripping with unseasonable rain.

"Cheer up, Max," Camille says. He's grinning, ebullient, even as his chilled fingers slip on his sodden shirt. "Perhaps if things continue as they do we won't even have a king much longer."

"Camille finds the overthrow of the natural order comforting," Freron says. "The rest of us just think it was rotten bad luck. They ought to have cast a weather-spell."

"And I suppose Rabbit finds handwringing over the weather comforting," Camille says. "Like a maiden aunt, about a spoiled wedding day."

"I've told you not to call me that," Freron says, sharply. "Max, you'd better change out of those wet things."

He puts out a hand to direct de Robespierre to his clothes-chest and the second-best linen, but he draws his hand back with a strangled shout. Max blinks at him. His coat isn't wet. He feels hot and strange, and an unpleasant smell of singed wool hangs in the air. Max catches Camille's eye. He's grinning, triumphant, and Max can't tell what expression is on his own face but he thinks: you would, wouldn't you, you'd burn down the whole thing and smile for joy. In a suspended moment of intimacy, he understands.

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What is the position of magicians in France? As well ask, *what is the position of one who practices the law?* It varies. This is France, after all, and a thousand contingencies attend every man and his fate. Where are you from? Who are your parents? What school did you attend? How are your finances?

Elder Poignard looks at the boy Maximilien de Robespierre. He is not tall, but he gives the impression of being at the end of his growing, at the frontier of boyhood and manhood. His technique is immaculate, his control enviable; his tutors all report that he can conduct the spells they have taught him with perfect skill. One could not accuse him of genius, but perhaps this is to be commended given the company he keeps (Elder Poignard imagines himself attempting this conversation with the Desmoulins boy; it's enough to make the blood run cold. Elder Poignard does not wish to know what it is that Camille intends to do with his life).

"I should like to help people," de Robespierre says, looking up at Elder Poignard with his steady, polite green stare. "I cannot see what else the magic should be for, if not for that."

Help people, yes. He will go back to Arras and heal the lame legs of cows, and disappoint provincial young ladies who wish to be loved by provincial young men, and cast spells of encouragement and protection over the wheat crop - and be unhappy, partly because he does not look like a boy who has the trick of happiness, and because we live in such degraded times that it is more likely than not that his spells shall fail. And if by magic we could control the price of bread, then we had just as well do away with Louis and crown a magician-king of France.

"And do you feel encouraged?" Camille asks, later. "Did Elder Poignard instil in you the proper respect for the position in society you will hold, when you are exiled back to Arras?"

"Don't call it exile," Max says. "It's just, my family. There are obligations."

"There are grander obligations," Camille says, with the authority of a prophet. He has lately
perfected this trick of throwing back his quantity of dark hair in what he imagines to be a wild, untamed manner consonant with the proper bearing of a magician. Rousseau, the great advocate of natural magic unconfined to books and spells, is much in vogue among their set these days. Max smiles.

"You haven't met my grandfather Carraut," he says.

"The brewer," says Camille. "Well, don't stagnate in the provinces for too long, Max, or you'll become one of them. The work is here, in Paris - our work."

It's a kind of magic in itself, Max thinks, Camille's trick at drawing lines and inviting you onto his side of them. And how grateful you are, when he does.

- Camille too is going back to his family home, though not for good: the short visits are enough to strengthen his resolve to remain in Paris no matter how ridiculous his situation there becomes.

Seated at the middle of the table, Camille is amusing his siblings by conducting small flames from the candelabrum to dance along his fingertips. It is a pretty trick, a smart piece of salon magic; Jean-Nicolas regards it sourly over his thin soup even as his wife smiles and his younger children clap their hands.

He clears his throat. "It is the fashion now in Paris, to dine in the dark?"

He regrets the short speech immediately, as he comes to regret all sharp words spoken to his eldest son. There's the gleam of satisfaction in those very dark eyes, and Jean-Nicolas feels as though he's been tricked into a conspicuous cruelty.

"Quite the contrary," Camille says. He extends a lazy white-fleshed wrist. The little lights hop back one by one to their wicks, shivering. "In Paris it is becoming the fashion to be a conductor of light."

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