The image features two glass bottles against a dark, textured background. The bottle on the left is a clear, faceted glass bottle with a round stopper. The bottle on the right is a darker, more rectangular glass bottle with a stopper, and a wisp of blue smoke is rising from its opening. The text is overlaid on the upper half of the image.

DAPHNE
DU MAURIER

The Glass-Blowers

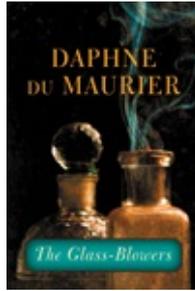
THE GLASS-BLOWERS

Daphne du Maurier

Foreword by Michelle de Kretser



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*To my forebears, the master glass-blowers of la Brûlonnerie, Chérigny, la Pierre and
le Chesne-Bidault.*

Foreword

Daphne du Maurier was the fifth-generation descendant of a French master craftsman who settled in England during the Revolution. *The Glass-Blowers*, the fictionalized story of his family, was originally published in 1963, but du Maurier first conceived of writing about her French forebears in the mid-1950s. She had recently completed her novel about Mary Anne Clarke, her famous great-great-grandmother, and a complementary work about the French side of her family seemed logical. It was also providential. Since the runaway success of *My Cousin Rachel* at the start of the decade, no new idea had arrived to spark du Maurier into fiction. A book with family history as its impetus would fulfill her ever-present need to write, as well as providing a factual skeleton that could be fleshed out with novelistic detail. But when du Maurier visited the Loir-et-Cher region to research the lives of her glass-blowing ancestors, a chance encounter there waylaid her imagination. It led to *The Scapegoat*, a novel about real and assumed identities. No wonder, then, that when she finally returned to her French novel, the tension between history and story, fact and fiction, etched itself onto her narrative.

The Glass-Blowers takes the form of a letter written by Sophie Duval to her nephew, Louis-Mathurin Busson du Maurier, in which she sets out the history of his father's family. Sophie's narrative is impelled by the need to distinguish reality from fantasy. Her nephew has been brought up to believe that his father, Sophie's brother Robert, was an aristocrat who fled to England to escape guillotining during the Revolution. Not that young Louis is much interested in the turbulent events that predated his birth: "What was past was past." For Sophie, however, who has lived through those "bitter and exciting days," it is important that they be remembered accurately. She dutifully hands over the engraved crystal tumbler that is her nephew's inheritance, but the more significant legacy she leaves him is the truth.

Pride plays its part in Sophie's decision to disclose her family's story. Louis will learn that his father was a bankrupt, once jailed for his debts, who emigrated to avoid a second prison sentence. He will learn that he comes from a family of "ordinary provincial folk" and that his father had no right to the aristocratic name of du Maurier. What I find interesting is that Sophie considers this rather sordid story morally preferable to the glamorous tale concocted by Robert. Half a century after the Revolution, she remains true to its spirit. It is better, in her view, to be a bankrupt than a royalist, better to be an artisan than an aristocrat. She wants Louis to know that his father emigrated because he feared the loss of his freedom, not the loss of his privileges. Her condemnation—and by extension du Maurier's—of a corrupt and indolent aristocracy is absolute.

It seems to me that this story about lineage is positioning itself right at the outset in relation to two eminent ancestors. The turn of the twentieth century had seen the publication of Baroness Orczy's *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (soon followed by several

sequels). Du Maurier's narrative scorns the sentimentalization of privilege that lies at the ideological heart of Sir Percy Blakeney's adventures; it counters rose-tinted romanticism with clear-eyed realism, focusing its gaze on a modest social milieu. That focus also serves to ease *The Glass-Blowers* out from the formidable weight of a novel written a century earlier, Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*.

While Dickens brings his characteristic sharpness to bear on the abuses of the Ancien Régime, his narrative, like Orczy's, is organized around the spectacle of innocent lives menaced by the guillotine. Both novels derive their energy from their oppositional engagement with the public sphere. *The Glass-Blowers*, on the other hand, is essentially a private drama. The paraphernalia of domesticity is prominent: family relationships, furniture and linen and household management, pregnancy and childbirth. The narrative carves itself a space that is marked as female and interior, in contradistinction to its predecessors.

Du Maurier was conscious of avoiding the trajectory laid out for French Revolution fiction, warning her publisher not to expect "a suspense story... with heads falling."ⁱ It would have been easy to raise the emotional pitch of *The Glass-Blowers* by inventing an episode along those lines. Instead, the tragedies that befall the Bussons are commonplace: babies die in infancy, a woman doesn't survive childbirth, family loyalties give way before political differences. Emile, whose death is the most dramatic in the book, isn't killed by the guillotine but by a reactionary's bullet. The manner in which characters die is one way du Maurier expresses moral and literary choices in *The Glass-Blowers*: realism, progressive politics, and fidelity to family history are preferred over the cranked-up emotion of "a suspense story." It is ironic—and surely not accidental—that "suspense stories," a label used dismissively by the literary establishment, were synonymous with du Maurier's name. So one way to read *The Glass-Blowers* is as a resolute attempt by du Maurier to dampen her dramatizing instincts. One of the powerful literary ancestors she is taking on here is herself.

The book's preference for the minor key is also evident in its provincial setting. When we think of the French Revolution we think of Paris. The city is inseparable from moments that are symbolically as well as politically crucial: the Tennis Court Oath, the fall of the Bastille, the guillotining of Louis XVI, the murder of Marat; also, of course, the whiff of grapeshot that ended the dream. In Paris the Revolution modulates from history into mythology.

The originality of *The Glass-Blowers* is that it is not primarily concerned with that grand, mythologizing narrative. In fact, those passages that invoke it are stiffly self-conscious: Robert's arch reference to Robespierre as a young deputy to watch exemplifies the problem. Mostly, however, the Revolution du Maurier conjures has escaped the frozen status of iconography. Chapters that describe the looting of provincial châteaux or the Vendean uprising decentralize the Revolution and render it vivid. Here is writing that captures politics as a lived experience, not yet fixed in the embalming fluid of history.

One such episode portrays the Great Fear that follows the storming of the Bastille, when stories of rampaging "brigands" sweep the countryside. The panic is specifically provincial, engendered by distance from Paris and lack of reliable communication with the capital. For provincial France, the need to distinguish between fact and rumor takes on life-or-death urgency. In other words, the Great Fear stages the novel's key

opposition between history and hearsay.

The episode also reinforces Robert's role as an "incorrigible farceur," an inventive fabricator of stories. The lies he tells are symptomatic of what Sophie diagnoses as *folie de grandeur*. They are linked to Robert's attitude to money, to his inability to live within his means. He operates on credit, which is to say on promises—another kind of storytelling. His lies are therefore a symbolic sin against thrift just as his overspending is a literal one. The store Sophie sets on fact—"I have always preferred the truth"—might therefore be understood as a metaphor for the bourgeois virtue of financial responsibility.

That interpretation is reinforced by the impersonal narrator of the Prologue who compares Sophie's status as a landowner who has paid for her property with that of "any outdated seigneur" who has inherited his. It is a neat metaphor for the passage from feudalism to capitalism, of which the French Revolution is the iconic expression. It also marks the limits of the Revolution's drift towards social equality: since property that has been paid for makes a bourgeois the equal of an aristocrat, those who possess neither land nor capital have no status.

With that limitation in mind, it is illuminating to consider the disapproval that flashes through the narrative (via Sophie) whenever excess is depicted. It is present in the scene where a revolutionary crowd inadvertently tramples a woman to death; also in the fanaticism of the Vendean rebels. Note that excess is not in itself politically charged; it occasions censure as a sign of itself, as a lack of control. Sophie's initial support for the Revolution wanes as the enlightened reforms of its early years evolve into the excess of the Terror. Historical orthodoxy has always presented the Revolution as a movement from reason to unreason, from the thrifty management of reform to its passionate squandering. Only, of course, the development was not antithetical but organic: "Revolutionaries always demand more," says Sophie, which I take as recognizing that passion cannot be excised from reason, excess from control.

On the political plane, then, the "excess" of which the narrative disapproves may be either the aristocratic abuse of privilege or the proletariat zeal that would abolish privilege altogether. There is a "proper" revolutionary middle course, represented in the novel by Pierre. But wariness of political outcomes alone does not strike me as an adequate explanation of the novel's concern about excess, which is itself excessive, overdetermined.

This narrative anxiety coalesces around Robert. He has a profoundly unsettling effect on Sophie, who worries far more about his financial and narrative extravagance than about Michel or Edmé; even though they court danger more directly, even though Michel's revolutionary fervor causes him to act in ways that Sophie finds morally dubious. But Michel and Edmé represent a purely political extreme. Robert, on the other hand, the most gifted glass-blower of the three brothers, is the novel's portrait of an artist.

When he creates beautiful glass, Robert demonstrates masterly control of his medium. He knows that the same breath that gives shape and form to his art will destroy it if he does not exercise caution, for the first lesson glass-blowing teaches is that "Control is of supreme importance."

Glass-blowing serves as du Maurier's metaphor for art, in general, and specifically for fiction. And where Robert fails to exercise control is precisely in the invention of

stories; his financial difficulties are the by-product of a seductive tale he has told himself about his rightful place in the world. He refuses the distinction between fact and fantasy, revealing himself as a literary spendthrift who ignores “the limits proscribed.” Here, it is useful to recall that the wild, dramatizing quality of du Maurier’s work was what critics cited when denying her literary respectability. Excess is characteristic of the gothic, of its energetic deployment of suspense and melodrama; excess is shorthand for the triumphant storytelling that had made du Maurier’s name. Consider that it was a name derived literally from a historical fiction authored by Robert, and *The Glass-Blowers* begins to look like a self-directed blow. In exposing the lie that constituted her name, in slanting the moral of her tale towards exactitude over extravagance, du Maurier is restaging the criticism that considered her reputation worthless, founded on gaudy excess.

But here’s the thing: Robert is easily the most compelling character in the novel. When it isn’t focused on his imaginative fictions *The Glass-Blowers* loses its verve, settling into a dutiful chronicle of family and revolutionary history. Du Maurier might have wanted her work to be taken seriously but I think the storyteller in her rejected the terms of assessment. And so Robert reaches through time to steal Sophie’s story. Beside his flash lies, her account-keeping looks a little niggardly.

Finally, a personal coda. I first read du Maurier when I was twelve or thirteen, drawn by those lurid Pan jackets on my older sister’s bookshelves. The novels that held me enthralled were the famous ones: *Rebecca*, *My Cousin Rachel*, *Jamaica Inn*. Of *The Glass-Blowers* I retained only the haziest picture; I suspect I didn’t finish it. When it came to fiction about the French Revolution, I was for the high-octane drama of Sidney Carton and Sir Percy. Until I was invited to write this introduction, I had forgotten du Maurier’s reworking of the subject.

And yet, and yet. Years later and in another country, I wrote a novel set in provincial France during the Revolution, with a heroine called Sophie. My book had its immediate origins in quite other sources. But surely some tendril of memory, however frail, linked it to a day I can no longer remember when a girl lay on her bed reading *The Glass-Blowers*.

So in the end what I find moving about this novel is its understanding of the tenacity of the past, how it keeps us company even when we neglect it. When Robert asks Sophie where our younger selves go, how they dissolve and vanish, she answers that they don’t. “They’re with us always, like little shadows, ghosting us through life.”

Michelle de Kretser,
2004

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank the following for their great help in making known to me the many facts relating to my forebears, the Bussons, during the hundred years from 1747–1845, as well as the historical events in the départements of Sarthe and Loir-et-Cher during the revolutionary period:

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Monsieur Paul Cordonnier of Le Mans, author of *L’Invasion et la Déroute de l’Armée Vendéenne au Mans*, etc.

Madame Marthe of la Pierre, Coudrecieux

Prologue

One day in the June of 1844 Madame Sophie Duval, née Busson, eighty years of age and mother of the mayor of Vibraye, a small commune in the département of Sarthe, rose from her chair in the salon of her property at le Gué de Launay, chose her favorite walking stick from a stand in the hall, and calling to her dog made her way, as was her custom at this hour of the afternoon every Tuesday, down the short approach drive to the entrance gate.

She walked briskly, with the quick step of one who did not suffer, or perhaps refused to suffer, any of the inconveniences of old age; and her bright blue eyes—the noticeable feature of her otherwise unremarkable face—looked keenly to right and left, pinpointing signs of negligence on the part of the gardener: the gravel under her feet not raked this morning as it should have been, the careless staking of a lily, the grass verges of the formal flower bed raggedly clipped.

These matters would be corrected at their proper time, either by her son the mayor or by herself; for although Pierre-François had been mayor of Vibraye for some fourteen years, and was approaching his forty-seventh birthday, he knew very well that the house and grounds at le Gué de Launay were his mother's property, that in all matters referring to their upkeep and maintenance she must be the final judge and arbitrator. This small estate which Madame Duval and her husband had settled upon for their retirement at the turn of the century was no great domain, a few acres of ground only, and the house was of medium size; but it was their own, bought and paid for by themselves, so giving them both the status of landowners and making them the proud equal of any outdated seigneur who still boasted that he held a property by right of birth.

Madame Duval adjusted the widow's cap upon her crown of white hair, set in pin curls high on her forehead. As she arrived at the end of the approach drive she heard the sound she was expecting, the click of the fastened iron gate and the rasp of the hinge as it swung open, while the gardener—later to be reprimanded—who also served as odd-man, groom and messenger, came towards her with the mail he had fetched from Vibraye.

Her son the mayor usually brought the letters back with him of an evening, if there were any to bring, but once a week, every Tuesday, there came the very special letter written to Madame Duval from her married daughter in Paris, Madame Rosiau; and since this was the most precious moment of her week the old lady could not bear to wait for it. She had given special orders to the gardener for many months now, ever since the Rosiaus had left Mamers for Paris, to go himself on foot the few kilometers to Vibraye, and enquire for the letters addressed to le Gué de Launay, and give them into her hands.

This he now did, doffing his hat, and placing uppermost in her hands the expected letter, with his customary remark, "Now madame is content." "Thank you, Joseph,"

she replied. "Find your way to the kitchen and see if there is some coffee for you"—as though the gardener, who had worked for her at le Gué de Launay for thirty years, was looking for the kitchen for the first time. She waited until he was out of sight before she followed him, for it was part of the ritual to be preceded by the servant and walk herself, with measured step, at a certain distance in the rear, the unopened envelope clutched tightly to her, the dog at her heels; and then up the steps and into the house, and to the salon, where she would seat herself once more in her chair by the window, and give herself up to the long-awaited pleasure of the weekly letter.

The tie between mother and daughter was close, as it had been once, so many years ago, between Sophie Duval and her own mother Magdaleine. Sons, even if they lived under one's roof, had their own preoccupations, their business, their wives, political interests; but a daughter, even if she took to herself a husband as Zoë had done, and a very able doctor at that, remained always part of the mother, a nestling, intimate and confiding, a sharer of ills and joys, using the same family expressions long forgotten by the sons. The pains of the daughter were the pains the mother herself knew, or had known: the trifling differences between husband and wife that occurred from time to time had all been endured by Madame Duval in days gone by, along with housekeeping troubles, high prices in the market, sudden illnesses, the dismissal of a servant, the numerous trifles that went with a woman's day.

This letter was the answer to the one she had written over a week ago on her daughter's birthday. Zoë had been fifty-one on the 27th of May. It seemed scarcely credible. Over half a century had passed since she had held that scrap of humanity in her arms—her third child, and the first to survive infancy—and how well she remembered that summer's day too, with the window wide open to the orchard, the pungent smoke from the glass-foundry chimney filling the languid air, and the sound and clatter of the workmen as they crossed from the furnace house to the yard drowning her own cries in labor.

What a moment to bring a child into the world, that summer of '93, the first year of the Republic; with the Vendée in revolt, the country at war, the traitorous Girondins endeavoring to bring down the Convention, the patriot Marat to be assassinated by an hysterical girl, and the unhappy ex-Queen Marie Antoinette confined in the Temple and later guillotined for all the misery she had brought upon France.

So many bitter and exciting days. Such exultation, triumph, and despair. All part of history now, forgotten by most people, overshadowed by the achievements of the Emperor and his era. Only remembered by herself when she learned of the death of a contemporary, and so was reminded suddenly, as though it were yesterday, that this same contemporary just laid to rest in the cemetery at Vibraye had been a member of the National Guard under her brother Michel, that the pair of them, with her husband François, had led the foundry workmen on the march in November '90 to sack the château of Charbonnières.

It did not do to speak of these things in front of her son the mayor. After all, he was a loyal subject of King Louis-Philippe, and hardly liked to be reminded of the part his father and uncle had played in the troubled days of the Revolution before he was born; though heaven knows it tempted her sometimes to do so, when he showed himself more than usually pompous and full of bourgeois principle.

Madame Duval opened her letter and straightened out the closely written pages,

crossed and recrossed in her daughter's cramped hand. Thank God she did not need spectacles, despite her eighty years. "My very dear Maman..."

First, Zoë's grateful thanks for the birthday gift (a patchwork quilt, worked at home during the winter and spring), followed by the usual small items of family news, her husband the doctor producing a paper on asthma to be read before the medical authorities, her daughter Clémentine making excellent progress with piano lessons under a good master, and then—the handwriting becoming more careless because of excitement—the main content of the letter, reserved as a final surprise.

"We spent Sunday evening with near neighbors of ours in the Faubourg St.-Germain," she wrote, "and as usual there was quite a gathering of doctors and scientists, and much interesting conversation. We were both impressed by the fluent talk and engaging manners of a stranger to our particular circle, an inventor who has apparently patented a portable lamp and expects to make his fortune from it. We were introduced, and imagine my surprise when we learned that his name was Louis-Mathurin Busson, that he had been born and brought up in England of émigré parents, had come to Paris at some period after the restoration of the monarchy when he was quite a young man, in company with his mother, now dead, and his surviving brother and sister, and had since lived—chiefly by his wits, I gathered, and his powers as an inventor—between the two countries, sometimes in London, sometimes in Paris, with business in both cities. He is married to an Englishwoman, has a young family, a house in the rue de la Pompe, and a laboratory in the Faubourg Poissonnière. Now, all this might have passed me by but for the singularity of the two names Busson and Mathurin, and the mention of émigré parents. I was careful not to commit myself immediately, or acquaint him of the fact that your maiden name was Busson and Mathurin a family first name, but when I casually enquired if his father, the émigré, had followed any particular profession or had been a man of leisure he answered me at once, and with great pride, "Oh yes, indeed. He was a gentleman glass-blower, and owned several foundries before the Revolution. At one time he was first engraver in crystal at St. Cloud, the royal foundry patronized by the Queen herself. Naturally, at the outbreak of the Revolution he followed the example of the clergy and the aristocracy and emigrated to England with his young bride, my mother, and suffered much penury in consequence. His full name was Robert-Mathurin Busson du Maurier, and he died tragically and suddenly in 1802, after the Peace of Amiens, on returning to France in the hopes of restoring the family fortunes. My poor mother, left behind in England with her young children, little guessed, when she said goodbye to him, that it was for the last time. I was five years old then, and have no recollection of him, but my mother brought us up to understand that he was a man of tremendous principle and integrity, and of course a royalist to his fingertips.

"Maman... I nodded my head, and made some remark or other, while I tried to collect my thoughts. I am right, am I not? This man, this inventor, must be my cousin, son of your beloved brother my uncle Robert. But what is all this talk of his being called du Maurier, leaving a family in England and dying in 1802, when you and I know perfectly well that he died in 1811, and was a widower anyway, with his son Jacques a corporal in the Grande Armée? Why, I was eighteen years old when uncle Robert died, a schoolmaster in Tours, yet here is this inventor, Monsieur Busson, who must be his son, giving a very different account of his father from the one you gave us,

and apparently in complete ignorance of his father's true end, or of your existence.

"I asked if he had relatives. He said he believed not. They had all been guillotined during the Terror, and the château Maurier and the glass foundries destroyed. He had made no enquiries. It was better not. What was past was past. Then my hostess interrupted us, and we were parted. I did not speak to him again. But I have discovered his address—31 rue de la Pompe, in Passy—should you wish me to get in touch with him. Maman, what would you have me do?"

Madame Duval laid her daughter's letter aside, and stared out of the window. So... It had happened at last. It had taken more than thirty years, but it had happened. What Robert had believed would never be.

"Those children will be brought up in England, and make their life there," he had told her. "What should bring them to France, especially if they believe their father dead? No, that phase of my life, like all the others, is over and done with."

Madame Duval picked up the letter and read it through once again. Two courses were open to her. The first, to write to her daughter Zoë and tell her to make no further attempt to get in touch with the man who had declared himself to be Louis-Mathurin Busson. The second, to go herself to Paris immediately, to call upon Monsieur Busson at 31 rue de la Pompe and acknowledge their relationship, and so see at last, before she died, her brother's child.

The first course she dismissed almost as soon as it entered her head. By following it she would deny all family feeling, and so go against everything she held most dear. The second course must be embarked upon forthwith, or as soon as it could be put into practice.

That evening, when her son the mayor returned from Vibraye, Madame Duval told him her news, and it was arranged that she should travel to Paris within the week to stay with her daughter in the Faubourg St.-Germain. All attempts on the part of her son to dissuade her were useless. She remained firm. "If this man is an impostor I shall know it directly I set eyes on him," she said. "If not, then I shall have done my duty."

The night before she left for Paris, she went to the cabinet in the corner of the salon, unlocked it with the key she wore in a locket round her neck, and took out a leather case. This case she packed carefully among the few clothes she took with her.

It was about four o'clock on the Sunday of the following week when Madame Duval and her daughter Madame Rosiau called at 31 rue de la Pompe, in Passy. The house was well placed, on the corner of the rue de la Pompe and the rue de la Tour, opposite a boys' school, with a garden behind and a long avenue leading directly to the Bois de Boulogne.

A cheerful *femme de ménage* opened the door, took their cards, and showed the visitors into a pleasant room facing the garden, from where they could hear the cries of children at play. In a moment or two a figure stepped through the long windows giving onto the garden, and Madame Rosiau, with a brief word of explanation and apology for the intrusion, introduced her mother to the inventor.

One look was enough. The blue eyes, the light hair, the tilt of the head, the quick courteous smile, showing an instant wish to please combined with a desire to turn the occasion to his own advantage if it were possible—here was Robert in the flesh as she remembered him, forty, fifty, sixty years ago.

Madame Duval took his extended hand in both of hers and held it, her eyes, the

mirror of his own, dwelling at length upon his face. “Forgive me,” she said, “but I have every reason to believe that you are my nephew, and the son of my eldest brother Robert-Mathurin.”

“Your nephew?” He looked from one to the other in astonishment. “I’m afraid I don’t understand. I met Madame... Madame Rosiau for the first time nearly two weeks ago. I had not the pleasure of her acquaintance before, and...”

“Yes, yes,” interrupted Madame Duval. “I know just how you met, but she was too overwhelmed when she learned your name, and your history, to tell you that her mother’s maiden name was Busson, that her uncle was Robert-Mathurin Busson, a master glass-engraver who emigrated... I am, in short, her mother, and your aunt Sophie, and have been waiting for this moment for nearly half a century.”

They led her to a chair and made her sit down, and she wiped the tears from her eyes—so foolish, she told him, to break down, and how Robert would have mocked her. In a few minutes she was composed, and sufficiently mistress of herself to seize upon the fact that, although her nephew expressed himself delighted to find that he had relatives, he was at the same time a trifle disconcerted that his aunt and his cousin were not great ladies, but ordinary provincial folk with no claim to vast estates or ruined châteaux.

“But the name Busson,” he insisted. “I was brought up to understand that we were descended from an aristocratic Breton family going back to the fourteenth century, that my father became a gentleman glass-engraver merely for his own amusement, that our motto—Abret ag Aroag, First and Foremost—belonged to the old knights of Brittany. Do you mean to tell me none of this is true?”

Madame Duval considered her nephew with a skeptical eye. “Your father Robert was first and foremost the most incorrigible farceur I have ever known,” she said drily, “and if he told these tales in England no doubt it suited his purpose at the time.”

“But the château Maurier,” protested the inventor, “the château Maurier that was burned to the ground by the peasants during the Revolution?”

“A farmhouse,” replied his aunt, “unchanged since your father was born there in 1749. We have cousins there still.”

Her nephew stared at her aghast. “There must be some misunderstanding,” he said. “My mother can have known nothing of this. Unless...” He broke off, at a loss how to continue, and she understood from his expression that her blunt words had shattered an illusion held since childhood, that his self-confidence was shaken, that he might now even doubt himself and his own powers for the future.

“Tell me one thing,” she asked. “Was she a good mother to you?”

“Oh, yes,” he replied, “the best in the world. And she had a hard struggle, I can tell you, with my father gone. But she had wonderful friends among the French colony. A fund was started to help us. We received the best of educations in one of the schools founded by the Abbé Carron, along with the children of other émigrés, the de Polignacs, the de Labourdomains, etc.” A note of pride crept into his voice, and he did not notice his aunt flinch as he pronounced names reviled and detested by herself and her brothers over fifty years before.

“My sister,” he continued, “is companion to the daughter of the Duke of Palmella in Lisbon. My brother James is in business in Hamburg. I myself, with the help of influential friends, intend placing upon the markets of the world a lamp of my own

invention. Indeed, we none of us have anything to be ashamed of, we have great hopes..." Once again he broke off in mid-sentence. There was a speculative look in his eye strangely reminiscent of his father. This aunt from the provinces was, alas, no aristocrat, but had she money tucked away in a stocking?

Madame Duval could read his thoughts as once she had read her brother Robert's. "You are an optimist, like your father," she told him. "So much the better. It makes life comparatively easy."

He smiled. The look of speculation vanished. The charm returned, Robert's charm, winning, endearing, that could never be withstood.

"Tell me about him," he said. "I must know everything. From the very beginning. Even if he was born in a farmhouse, as you say, and not a château. And far from being a nobleman was in reality..."

"An adventurer?" she finished for him.

At that moment her nephew's wife came in from the garden, followed by the three children. The *femme de ménage* brought in tea. Conversation became general. Madame Rosiau, who felt that her mother had already been far too indiscreet, pressed the wife of her newly found cousin to comparisons between life in London and in Paris. The inventor produced a model of his portable lamp that was to make all their fortunes. Madame Duval remained silent, watching each of the children in turn for a family likeness. Yes, the little girl Isobel, pert and quick, was something like her own young sister Edmé at the same age. The second boy, Eugène, or Gygy, reminded her of nobody. But the eldest, George, nicknamed Kicky, a lad of ten, was her brother Pierre in miniature, the same dreamy reflective eyes, the same way of standing with his feet crossed, his hands in his pockets.

"And you, Kicky," she said, "what do you intend to do when you grow up?"

"My father hopes I'll become a chemist," he said, "but I doubt if I'd pass the exams. I like to draw best of all."

"Show me your drawings," she whispered.

He ran out of the room, pleased at her interest, and returned in a moment with a portfolio full of sketches. She examined them carefully, one by one.

"You have talent," she said. "One day you'll put it to good purpose. It's in your blood."

Madame Duval then turned to her nephew the inventor, interrupting the flow of conversation. "I wish to make a gift to your son George," she announced. "It must be his, by right of inheritance." She felt in the lining pocket of her voluminous cape, and drew forth a package which she proceeded to unwrap. The paper dropped to the floor. From a leather case she produced a crystal tumbler, engraved with the fleur-de-lys, and with the interlaced letters L.R.XV.

"This glass was made in the foundry of la Pierre, Coudrecieux," she said, "engraved by my father, Mathurin Busson, on the occasion of the visit of King Louis XV. It has had a checkered history, but has been in my safekeeping for many years. My father used to say that as long as it remained unbroken, treasured in the family, the creative talent of the Bussons would continue, in some form or other, through the succeeding generations."

Silently, her newly found nephew and his wife and children gazed upon the glass. Then Madame Duval replaced it in the leather case. "There," she said to the boy

George, “remain true to your talent, and the glass will bring you luck. Abuse your talent, or neglect it, as my brother did, and the luck will run out of the glass.”

She gave him the leather case and smiled, then turned to her nephew the inventor. “I shall return home to le Gué de Launay tomorrow,” she told him. “Perhaps we shall not see each other again. I will write to you, though, and tell you, as best as I can, the story of your family. A glass-blower, remember, breathes life into a vessel, giving it shape and form and sometimes beauty; but he can, with that same breath, shatter and destroy it. If what I write displeases you, it will not matter. Throw my letters in the fire unread, and keep your illusions. For myself, I have always preferred to know the truth.”

Madame Duval nodded to her daughter Madame Rosiau and, rising from her chair, embraced her nephew and her nephew’s children.

The next day she left Paris and returned home. She said little about her visit to her son the mayor of Vibraye, beyond remarking that looking upon her nephew and his children for the first and perhaps the last time had revived old memories. During the weeks that followed, instead of giving orders at le Gué de Launay and inspecting her fruit trees, vegetables and flowers, she spent all her time at her bureau in the salon, covering sheet after sheet of writing paper in her formal, upright hand.

Part One

La Reyne d'Hongrie

1

“If you marry into glass,” Pierre Labbé warned my mother, his daughter Magdaleine, in 1747, “you will say goodbye to everything familiar, and enter a closed world.”

She was twenty-two years old, and her prospective bridegroom, Mathurin Busson, master glass-maker from the neighboring village of Chenu, was a childhood sweetheart, four years older than herself. They had never had eyes for anyone but each other from the day they met, and my father, the son of a merchant in glass, orphaned at an early age, had been apprenticed with his brother Michel to the glass-house known as la Brûlonnerie, in the Vendôme, between Busloup and la Ville-aux-Clercs. Both brothers showed great promise, and my father Mathurin had risen rapidly to the rank of master glass-maker, working directly under Robert Brossard the proprietor, who was a member of one of the four great glassmaking families in France.

“I have no doubt Mathurin Busson will succeed in everything he undertakes,” continued Pierre Labbé, who was himself bailiff at St. Christophe and law officer to the district, and a man of some importance. “He is steady, hardworking, and a very fine craftsman; but it is breaking with tradition for a glass-maker to marry outside his own community. As his bride you will find it hard to adapt yourself to their way of life.”

He knew what he was talking about. So did she. She was not afraid. The glass world was unique, a law unto itself. It had its own rules and customs, and a separate language too, handed down not only from father to son but from master to apprentice, instituted heaven knows how many centuries ago wherever the glass-makers settled—in Normandy, in Lorraine, by the Loire—but always, naturally, by forests, for wood was the glass foundry’s food, the mainstay of its existence.

The laws, customs, and privileges of the glass-makers were more strictly observed than the feudal rights of the aristocracy; they had more justice too, and they made more sense. Theirs was indeed a closed community, with every man, woman, and child knowing his place within the walls, from the director himself, who worked beside his men, sharing their labor, wearing the same apparel, yet looked upon by all as lord and master, to the little child of six or seven who fetched and carried, taking his shift with his elders, seizing his chance to approach the foundry fire.

“What I do,” said Magdaleine Labbé, my mother, “I do with my eyes open, without any vain ideas of an easy life, or believing I can sit back and be waited upon. Mathurin has already disabused me about that.”

Nevertheless, as she stood beside her bridegroom on that 18th day of September in the year 1747, in the church of her native village of St. Christophe in the Touraine, and looked from her own relatives—her wealthy uncle Georget, her lawyer uncle Thiezie, her own father in his bailiff’s dress—to the opposite side of the nave, where her bridegroom’s relatives were assembled, and a number of his workmen and their wives, all glass-makers, all watching her with suspicion, almost with hostility, she certainly experienced—so she told us children years afterwards—a brief moment of doubt; she

refused to call it fear.

“I felt,” she said, “as a white man must feel when he is surrounded for the first time by American Indians, and knows that by sundown he must enter their encampment, never to return.”

The workmen from the glass-house were certainly not in war paint, but their uniform of black coat and breeches and black flat hat, worn on saints’ days and holidays, set them apart from my mother’s relatives, giving them the appearance of a religious sect.

Nor did they mix with the rest of the company afterwards at the wedding breakfast, which, because Pierre Labbé was a man of standing in St. Christophe, was necessarily a big event, with almost everyone in the neighborhood present. They stood aside in a group of their own, too proud, perhaps, to exchange the usual quips and compliments with the rest of the guests, laughing and joking among themselves and making a great deal of noise about it too.

The only one to be perfectly at ease was Monsieur Brossard, my father’s employer, but then, he was not only a seigneur by birth but the proprietor of three or four other glass-houses besides la Brûlonnerie, and it was a great condescension on his part to be present at the wedding. He did so because of the regard he had for my father: he had already promised him, within the year, the directorship of la Brûlonnerie.

The wedding was held at midday, so that the happy pair and their cortège could reach their destination the other side of Vendôme before midnight. When the last toast had been given my mother had to take off her finery and put on a traveling dress, then mount one of the foundry wagons with the rest of them, and so drive away to her new home in the forest of Fréteval. Monsieur Brossard did not accompany them. He was bound in the opposite direction. My father Mathurin and my mother Magdaleine, with his sister Françoise and her husband Louis Déméré—a master glass-maker like himself—seated themselves in the front of the wagon beside the driver, and behind them, in order of precedence, came the various craftsmen with their wives: the souffleurs, or blowers, the melters, and the flux-burners. The stokers, along with the driers, came in the second wagon, and a crowd of apprentices filled the third, with my father’s brother Michel in charge.

During the first half of the journey, my mother Magdaleine said, she listened to the singing, for all glass-makers are musicians after their own fashion, and play some instrument or other, and have the special songs of their trade. When they ceased singing they began to discuss the plans for the day ahead, and the week’s work. None of it as yet made sense to her, the newcomer, and when darkness fell she was so worn out with excitement and expectation, and the motion of the wagon, that she fell asleep on her bridegroom’s shoulder, and did not wake up until they were past Vendôme and entering the forest of Fréteval.

She awoke suddenly, for the wagon had left the road, and she was aware of an immense darkness all about her, seemingly impenetrable. Even the stars were lost, for the interlaced branches of the forest trees made a vault where the sky had been. The silence was as deep as the darkness. The wagon wheels made no sound on the muddied track. As they lurched on into even greater depths of forest she was reminded once more of her fancy of an approach to an Indian encampment.

Then of a sudden she saw the fires of the charcoal burners, and smelled, for the

first time, the bittersweet smell of blackened wood and ashes that would remain with her throughout the whole of her married life—the smell that all of us were to know as children and inhale with our first breath, that would become synonymous with our very existence.

The silence ceased. Figures came out of the forest clearing and ran towards the wagons. There was sudden shouting, sudden laughter. “Then indeed,” my mother Magdaleine said, “I thought I was among the Indians, for the charcoal burners, their faces blackened with the smoke, their long hair falling about their shoulders, had their huts as outposts to the glass-house itself, and they were the first to greet me, the bride. What I took to be an assault upon all of us in the wagon was in reality their welcome.”

This astonished us as children, for we grew up beside the charcoal burners, called them by their Christian names, watched them at work, visited them in their log huts when they were ill; but to my mother, the bailiff’s daughter from St. Christophe, gently nurtured, educated and well spoken, the rude shouts of these wild men of the woods at midnight must have sounded like devils in hell.

They had to look at her, of course, by the light of their flaring torches, and then with a friendly laugh and a wave of his hand my father Mathurin bade them goodnight, and the wagon plunged on again out of the clearing into the forest, and along the remainder of the track to the glass-house itself. La Brûlonnerie, in those days, consisted of the big furnace house itself, surrounded by the work buildings, the potting rooms, storerooms, and drying rooms, and behind these the living quarters of the workmen; while further across the big yard were the small houses for the masters. The first thought to strike my mother was that the furnace chimney was on fire. Tongues of flame shot into the air, with sparks flying in all directions; a belching volcano could not be more malevolent.

“We have arrived just in time,” she said abruptly.

“In time for what?” asked my father.

“To put out the fire,” she said, pointing to the chimney. A moment later she realized her mistake, and could have bitten out her tongue for making a fool of herself before she had even set foot within the glass-house precincts. Of course her remark was repeated, amidst laughter, to everyone else within the wagon, and so back to the other wagons. Her arrival, instead of being a dignified affair with the workmen standing aside to let her pass, became a triumphant procession into the furnace house itself, hemmed about with grinning faces, so that she could see for herself the “fire” upon which the livelihood of them all depended.

“There I stood,” she told us, “on the threshold of the great vaulted space, some ninety feet long, with the two furnaces in the center, enclosed, of course, so that I could not see the fire. It was the rest period, between midnight and one thirty, and some of the workmen were sleeping, wherever they could find space upon the floor, and as close to the furnaces as possible, little children among them, while the rest were drinking great jugfuls of strong black coffee brewed by the women, and the stokers, naked to the waist, stood ready to feed the two fires before the next shift. I thought I had entered an inferno, and that the curled-up bodies of the children were sacrifices, to be shoveled into the pots and melted. The men stopped drinking their coffee and stared at me, and the women too, and they all waited to see what I would do.”

“And what did you do?” we asked, for this was a favorite story, one which we