

Chapter 10

Le Roi Jean

Three days later, as a consequence of a clerical error by one of the secretaries at the Information Service, Guéry was invited to attend a cocktail party at the residence of the high commissioner, General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny. The reception was being held to celebrate General de Lattre's recent victory in the Battle of Mao Khe, and it was going to be a very exclusive affair—the kind of event that the *Journal* would describe as a 'glittering occasion.' Only the most important civil and military figures in Saigon had been invited, so whoever was responsible for including a personage of Jean-Luc Guéry's stature on the guest list had obviously made a grievous mistake. For some reason, though, Guéry took his invitation at face value, and at the appointed hour, suitably attired, covered in eau de cologne and with his hair plastered to his head, he presented himself at the general's residence on boulevard Norodom.

Guéry was careful to arrive at 6.45 precisely, as specified by the invitation, and after identifying himself to the guard at

the gate, he was led along a gravel pathway to the residence itself. The Hôtel du Général, as it is known, is a rather imposing two-storey structure built in the classic colonial style (stucco balustrades, louvred shutters, geometric tiling, etc.). Once inside, Guéry was ushered into a large, rectangular room with high ceilings and arched windows. A decorative screen covered in Chinese dynastic imagery stood in one corner, and on the other side of the room, a small band was playing unobtrusively. The room was already quite crowded, and when a waiter arrived with champagne, Campari, and various liqueurs, Guéry had to repeat his order three times before it was understood. The general had yet to make an appearance, so Guéry wandered aimlessly for a while, drifting here and there as if he actually belonged at such a rarefied gathering. Whenever a waiter appeared, he would take another glass of champagne or one of the liqueurs, and before long he was beginning to feel a strange enthusiasm for the proceedings. Yes, by God, he did belong here, among all these dignitaries and socialites; he wouldn't have been invited otherwise, would he? And it was this growing sense of conviviality that led Guéry to strike up a conversation with a man who was standing by the folding screen in the corner, scrutinizing one of its lacquered panels.

'It's beautiful, isn't it?'

The man turned to face Guéry. He was extremely thin, almost malnourished, and he was wearing a suit made of blue serge, which hung loosely on his emaciated frame.

'Indeed,' he said. 'I was just admiring this scene.' He gestured toward an imperial palace that had been depicted from above, slightly flattened and at an oblique angle. 'They seem to be celebrating something. The guests are walking across this footbridge, and the emperor himself is sitting in this central pavilion, being entertained by musicians and dancers.'

The courtiers are all gathered around him, as if they are too scared to do anything else, and these dignitaries here are waiting patiently for their chance to pay homage.' He smiled. 'How charming it all is, and how appropriate too.'

After disposing of the usual formalities, Guéry learned that his interlocutor was a correspondent for *Life* magazine, and that he had just returned from Hanoi, where he had dined with General de Lattre on more than one occasion.

Guéry explained that he was representing a newspaper by the name of *Le Journal d'Antibes*; and when he did so, the man asked him if he knew Lucien Bodard and Jean Lartéguy.

'Only as respected colleagues,' he replied. 'As *frères d'armes*, one might say.'

'That's wonderful,' the man exclaimed, 'because they're right over there.'

Looking furtively over his shoulder, Guéry discovered, to his horror, that the celebrated war correspondents were standing only a few metres away.

'Shall I call them over?'

'No, no, no,' Guéry said as breezily as he could. 'The night is young, I'll catch up with them later.'

Before his new acquaintance could say anything, they were joined by a third man, who introduced himself as Monsieur Maurice Loubière.

Once again, they exchanged idle pleasantries, and Guéry learned that Monsieur Loubière was the general manager of a local aviation company, Comptoirs Saigonnais de Ravitaillements (COSARA). He had come to Indochina in 1929 to do his national service and, after mastering Vietnamese, had decided to stay for good. During the war, he had established a company that sold food and supplies to the armed forces, and that was when he had realized just how difficult it was to

transport freight in a country with such limited infrastructure. So in 1947, along with a Vietnamese business partner, he had established COSARA, a company whose fleet now included five Bretagnes, four DC-3s, and a couple of Junkers.

The mention of the DC-3s reminded Guéry of the young journalist who had died the year before in mysterious circumstances.

‘Have you heard of Hugo Lefèvre by any chance?’ he asked.

Monsieur Loubière considered this question for some time before responding. ‘No,’ he said finally, ‘I don’t believe so.’

‘He was a journalist who came out here last year to investigate the trafficking of piastres. He was returning to Paris on a DC-4 when it crashed into the Persian Gulf, near Bahrain. There were no survivors and his body was never found. Someone suggested the other day that Pierre Vitelli, the proprietor of the Hotel Continental, may have had something to do with this disaster.’

‘Really? Why?’

‘Lefèvre had accused him of being involved in the piastre trade—and I suppose, by implication, the drug trade too. In the weeks before he left Saigon, Lefèvre sent a number of telegrams to his editor in Paris saying that he feared for his life.’

‘Did he provide any specific names?’

‘No. I believe he only referred to the *clan des insulaires*—the *Unione Corse*. But it obviously had something to do with Vitelli.’

‘I would be very careful about drawing such conclusions, Monsieur Guéry. Particularly in a place like this, where you can be so easily overheard.’

‘Indeed.’ This was the correspondent for *Life* magazine, who had been listening silently thus far. ‘And I certainly wouldn’t put a question like that to Colonel Savani.’

‘Colonel Savani?’

‘The local director of the Deuxième Bureau. He’s another Corsican, like Vitelli, and he’s standing over there by the flag.’

Guéry felt his conviviality suddenly depreciate by a couple of degrees.

On the other side of the room, he could see a man with a long, angular face and slightly tinted glasses. This was Colonel Antoine Savani.

‘He first came out to Indochina in the late thirties,’ Monsieur Loubière said, ‘and then again after the war. No one really knows what he did during the war itself, but he’s been the director of the Bureau since 1948.’

‘And he knows Vitelli?’

‘Undoubtedly, Monsieur. As our friend says, they’re both Corsican, and they both have strong ties to Marseille. Like Vitelli, Savani is also married to a Vietnamese woman, and he speaks the language fluently. Perhaps that’s why his negotiations with the Binh Xuyen were such a great success.’

It was clear that Loubière was speaking euphemistically.

‘What was the nature of these negotiations?’ Guéry asked.

‘Savani managed to convince the Binh Xuyen to shift their allegiance from the DRV to the emperor—in exchange for certain privileges, of course—and they’ve been surprisingly reliable allies ever since. He works very closely with another French officer, a man by the name of Roger Trinquier. They both graduated from Saint-Cyr in the same year, and they’re both actively involved in the counterinsurgency programme.’

‘I see.’

Perhaps unwisely, Guéry was about to ask Monsieur Loubière to elaborate, when another two guests joined their circle. These new arrivals introduced themselves as Mademoiselle Yvette Giraud, a visiting singer, and Monsieur René Branellec, the editor in chief of Radio France-Asie. Mademoiselle Giraud

had come all the way from Paris, they were told, to appear on a radio programme that was recorded live every Sunday evening in the theatre of the Hotel Majestic. The programme itself was called *Recreation*, and it was designed to entertain the soldiers of the Expeditionary Corps.

‘A worthy enterprise,’ Monsieur Loubière said, ‘if ever there was one.’

The correspondent for *Life* magazine agreed (as did Guéry); and for some time, they exchanged more pleasantries along these lines.

As far as Guéry could tell, this largely involved discussing the private lives of the other guests at the party. There was a Monsieur Guy Fourès, for instance, who had made a fortune trading rice in Cholon and then squandered it all on the horses. There was a Madame Jacqueline Armand, whose lover was a lieutenant in the army, and when he was transferred to Saigon, she had enlisted in the PFAT, a female auxiliary unit, just to make sure that he didn’t get into any trouble. And there was even a story about General de Lattre himself. Apparently, his son had been having an affair with a Vietnamese woman who was a former mistress of the emperor; and that was why his father had arranged for him to be transferred, just recently, to the 1st Bataillon de Marche du Régiment des Chasseurs. But of course this was little more than hearsay, and one couldn’t possibly hope to verify such stories.

There was one story in particular, though, that Guéry found quite troubling—and entirely plausible. It concerned a man by the name of Paul Gannay, who had served as the inspector general of the Banque de l’Indochine for many years. (If you look at any piastre note, from one to five hundred, you’ll find his signature right there, on the left-hand side, guaranteeing its status as legal tender.) According to Monsieur Branellec, Gannay had recently undergone a rather traumatic experience.

‘In his capacity as inspector general,’ the editor said, ‘he had taken it upon himself to investigate the illegal trade in piastres; and he was especially interested in the foreign exchange office on rue Guynemer, which is where many of the irregularities seemed to be occurring. Not long after he began making these enquiries, however, his valet, a handsome young Vietnamese boy, was kidnapped, along with one of his most prized possessions: a late nineteenth-century reproduction of the Apollo Belvedere. As you may have surmised, Monsieur Gannay is one of those people who are given to practising the Grecian vice. And this has been common knowledge around here for many years. So he was particularly devastated to lose the young man in question—along with his statue of Apollo. We were never told precisely what the kidnappers’ demands were, but after a protracted series of negotiations, Gannay managed to recover his young employee and his precious *objet d’art*. Everything returned to the way it had been before, with only one crucial difference. From that day on, Monsieur Gannay lost all interest in the illegal piastre trade, preferring to occupy himself with amateur archaeology and cocktail parties such as this one.’

Everyone else found this story highly amusing, but for Guéry it was quite the opposite. Not only did it remind him of Olivier’s fate, but it also made him contemplate, very seriously, the danger that he himself was facing. After all, if the inspector general of the Banque de l’Indochine was not safe from gangsters of one kind or another, then what chance did he have of making it out of Saigon alive? Even the residence of the high commissioner was full of potential enemies, of people like Antoine Savani, who would think nothing of putting a bullet in his head and dumping him in the Arroyo Chinois. The very thought made him give an involuntary shudder, as if he had just ingested some disgusting foreign delicacy. And so he did what

he always did under such difficult circumstances: he made sure that things got even worse.

When I talked to him about it a couple of weeks later, Guéry's memory of the rest of the evening was somewhat hazy. He could remember drinking a series of sugary liqueurs and countless glasses of champagne. He could remember discussing Napoleon's victory at Austerlitz with Monsieur Nguyen Huu Tri, the minister of defence. He could remember tearing his cigarettes in half in order to make them last longer. He could remember trying to find the correspondent for *Life* magazine and being told, by Yvette Giraud, that he had already left the party. He could remember accidentally spilling a glass of Chartreuse on General René Cogny, the chief of staff for the high commissioner. He could remember telling a member of the band that his piano was incorrectly tuned. He could remember offering his professional services to Messieurs Jules Haag and Pierre-Jean Laspeyres, the publishers of *Le Journal d'Extrême-Orient*. He could remember laughing so uproariously that he almost fell over. He could remember requesting that the band play 'Monk's Mood' and being told that it was not in their repertoire. He could remember admiring a pair of spectator shoes worn by Monsieur Hoang Cao Tang, the director of Vietnamese programming at Radio France-Asie. He could remember hearing a female voice say, '*Il a l'air d'un déterré,*' and he could remember feeling certain that it was he, Jean-Luc Guéry, who looked as if he had just been dug up from a grave. He could remember dropping his cigarette and burning a large hole in the upholstery of a Second Empire chaise longue. He could remember running into his nemesis, Monsieur Auteuil, the junior officer from the Information Service on rue Lagrandière, who graciously explained that his *carte de presse* was still not ready. He could remember proposing a toast to Admiral Paul Ortoli and being told that the recipient of

his toast was in fact a man by the name of Jean Aurillac. He could remember feeling a sudden longing for Antibes and the Plage des Ondes. He could remember running out of cigarettes and being obliged to cadge one from Monsieur Jean Letourneau, the minister of overseas territories. He could remember gazing for some time at the picture of the imperial palace on the folding screen in the corner. He could remember discussing the notion of eternal recurrence with Professor Vien Phuoc, an emeritus professor of moral sciences at the Sun Yat-Sen University. He could remember asking a young lady to dance and being told that it was not that kind of party. But all of this was nothing compared to the indignity and humiliation of what was still to come. And life being what it is, he would remember the following scene with a kind of preternatural clarity for the rest of his days.

Guéry was wandering around trying to find a waiter when the band began to play the first few notes of the 'Marseillaise.' This was the sign that the general himself had finally arrived; and as ever, he made a dramatic entrance. Everyone stopped what they were doing and turned to applaud the hero of Mao Khe, his wife, and their entourage. The applause was loud and enthusiastic. It was the beginning of what would come to be known as *l'année de Lattre*, and the general was the most popular man in the country. In December 1950, de Lattre had been appointed high commissioner for Indochina and commander in chief of the French forces in the Far East, thus combining for the first time these two different roles. Over the following year, he won a series of major victories in the north of the country and managed to prevent the fall of Hanoi; but he also lost his only son, Bernard, who was killed at the age of twenty-three in the Battle of the Day River. And then, in January 1952, having fallen ill and returned to Paris for surgery, the general himself would die of bone cancer. On the day of the reception, though,

all of this misfortune still lay in the future, and de Lattre was simply enjoying the adulation of the various dignitaries who had come to celebrate his latest victory.

Needless to say, Guéry had no intention of introducing himself to the general. Even in his advanced state of conviviality, he realized that such a course of action would be extremely ill-advised. So once the excitement generated by de Lattre's arrival had subsided, he resumed his search for a waiter—having one thing, and one thing only, on his mind. It took a couple of minutes, but eventually he found what he was looking for. In order to reach this elusive figure, however, Guéry was obliged to make his way through a dense crowd of chattering people. And when he finally arrived at his goal, he was so relieved that he immediately lunged for the waiter's silver tray without pausing to take in his surroundings.

'Monsieur,' a voice behind him said, 'I believe it is customary, in such circumstances, to give the ladies precedence.'

Guéry turned to apologize and found himself staring directly into a pair of piercing blue eyes. These eyes were framed by a proud, Gallic face that was instantly recognizable. To his utter dismay, Guéry realized that he was being addressed by the high commissioner himself, General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny.

Graduate of Saint-Cyr, veteran of the Armée d'Afrique, hero of two world wars, General de Lattre was a formidable figure, someone to be taken very seriously indeed. He was famous for his eloquence, his ability to inspire, and his courage on the battlefield. Even while he was out here in the tropics, he was always immaculately dressed and expected the same degree of perfection from his subordinates. On one occasion, so the rumour goes, he fired a stenographer because he disapproved of her clothing and thought her hair was dirty. And when he first arrived in Saigon, he publicly reprimanded the guard of

honour for their slovenly appearance. So one can only imagine what he made of our old friend Jean-Luc Guéry, who even at the best of times looked like a recently disinterred vagabond—and this certainly wasn't the best of times.

'I'm . . . I'm very sorry, General,' Guéry stammered. 'I . . . I didn't see you there.' He paused for a second. 'Nor you, Madame de Lattre. Please . . . please accept my deepest apologies.'

'Of course,' Madame de Lattre replied. 'It's very crowded in here, and it's difficult to see what you're doing.'

At this point, Guéry should really have taken his leave, but he found it impossible to do so. It was the first time in his life that he had encountered an historical figure of this stature; and he was transfixed by the sight of those immortal, aquiline features. He felt like Bernadette Soubirous on her knees, in ecstasy, before the apparition of Our Lady of Lourdes. And so, thus immobilized, he made the fatal mistake of introducing himself.

General de Lattre seemed slightly surprised by this impertinence. 'Do you live in Saigon, Monsieur Guéry?' he asked.

'No,' Guéry replied, 'I'm only visiting.'

'I see . . . And how long will you be staying here?'

'I'm not sure.'

This was followed by a long silence.

'Are you here on business?' Madame de Lattre asked eventually.

'Not really—well, yes, I suppose. I'm on assignment here, representing *Le Journal d'Antibes*.'

'How interesting.'

There was another long silence, and after a while Guéry said, 'I should congratulate you, General, on your recent victory.'

De Lattre made a vague gesture with his hand. 'I'm afraid we still have a long way to go, Monsieur Guéry. But we'll get there in the end.'

Guéry nodded enthusiastically and then lapsed into silence once more. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the members of de Lattre's entourage exchanging glances, and the general himself seemed to be studying something just beyond Guéry's left shoulder. But he was still paralysed by the splendour of this messianic figure; and the silence grew longer and longer, like a piece of elastic, until finally he blurted out the first thing that came into his head.

'I wasn't always a journalist, you know. For some time, as a younger man, I wanted to be a writer . . . I even wrote a novel inspired by Gide's *Counterfeiters*, but none of the reputable publishers were interested.'

General de Lattre responded to this confession with a look of profound indifference. 'Really?' he said.

'Yes,' Guéry continued, having already committed himself to this inconceivable folly. 'As a matter of fact, I'm planning on writing another novel when I get back to Antibes. And I've decided that this one is going to be lipogrammatic.'

The word hung in the air like a terrible curse, and suddenly all eyes were on Guéry.

'I don't suppose you're familiar with the term—it's fairly arcane, after all . . . It comes from the Greek adjective *lipogrammatos*, which means "missing a letter." And it's used to describe a piece of writing that deliberately excludes one or more letters.'

This information was received in silence by the general, his wife, and their entourage.

'The Germans say *Leipogram*; the Spanish say *lipogramacia* or *lipograma*; and we say *lipogramme*.'

'If we choose to say it at all, Monsieur Guéry.'

'Quite so, General, quite so. But the practice itself has been around for a very long time, and it can be found in many different cultures. In the second or third century, for instance, Nestor of

Laranda wrote a lipogrammatic *Iliad*, and Tryphiodorus of Sicily did the same thing a hundred years later with the *Odyssey*?

General de Lattre nodded his head very slowly.

‘We find other examples in Spanish literature,’ Guéry continued in an increasingly deranged tone. ‘Castillo Solórzano’s *La Quinta de Laura* includes a story that was written without using the letter Y. In 1640, Francisco de Navarrete y Ribera published a courtly novel, *Los Tres Hermanos*, which doesn’t contain the letter A. And around the same time, Lope de Vega wrote five stories—one with no A, and the others missing E, I, O, and U, respectively.’

‘Fascinating,’ de Lattre said. ‘Quite fascinating.’

‘For some reason, the Italians seem to have a strong aversion to the letter R. In 1633, Orazio Fidele wrote a poem of two thousand lines without once using this particular letter. Antoine-François Riccoboni did the same thing in one of his later stories. And in 1802, an Italian cleric by the name of Luigi Casolini published a collection of sermons that also avoided using the letter R. Apparently, he had a speech impediment that made it difficult for him to pronounce the R sound, and so he decided that it would be better to eliminate this letter altogether.’

General de Lattre, his wife, and their entourage said nothing.

‘As for our own literature, this too provides us with numerous examples. In the early seventeenth century, Salomon Certon published a collection of lipogrammatic verses, each of which suppressed a different letter. Two hundred years later, Joseph Raoul Rondan composed an entire play without using the letter A. And in 1853, having accepted a challenge at a dinner party, Jacques Arago did the same thing with his *Voyage Autour du Monde*—although he later confessed that he accidentally included the word *serait* on page 27.’

Guéry had obviously been researching this subject for some time, and he would have provided many more

examples of such writing had General de Lattre not finally run out of patience.

‘This is all very edifying, Monsieur Guéry, but I don’t really see the point of such an exercise. In fact, I suspect that these works might have been greatly improved if their authors had decided to leave out *all* the letters . . . But that’s neither here nor there, and I’m afraid I don’t have the time to discuss the matter any further.’

‘Yes,’ Guéry said, ‘yes, of course. I should let you go. I’m sorry that I’ve detained you for so long. Sometimes, you know, when I’m nervous . . . well, I find myself . . . yes, yes . . . I should really let you go. Sorry.’

General de Lattre and his wife bid Guéry a rather frigid farewell, as if they didn’t know quite what to make of this strange bird, this anomalous creature from the Cote d’Azur; then they turned and walked away, surrounded on both sides by their entourage. And this was the last thing that Guéry would remember of the night in question, this image of the general and his wife disappearing into a crowd of laughing, animated people. It is impossible to overstate the catastrophic nature of the encounter I have just described, particularly given the time and place at which it occurred. To be in the presence of General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny, in April of 1951, as he celebrates the successful defence of Haiphong, and find yourself talking about the history of lipogrammatic literature—well, it’s difficult to think of a more mortifying experience. But of course Guéry would not understand this until the following morning, when he woke to find himself lying partially naked on the floor of his hotel room. At the time, as the general and his wife receded into the distance, he had other things on his mind, colourful things, syrupy things, things from Armagnac and Calvados and Saint-Barthélemy-d’Anjou—and he was determined to find them as soon as he possibly could.