

Will Paine - *The Final Voyage of Charles Le Corre* extract: *Paris* - 842 words

Charles then roamed the City of Love and Light in search of a bed. He evaded the ravenous eyes of the prostitutes for he knew too well that whores who spoke his own language had far too much power over him. The relaxed laws of the Republic, however, meant that they no longer had to solicit through whispers and winks but could openly tempt their clientele in the street. He was thus followed by four women – two of whom he recognised from the cabaret the night prior – who offered to cure his condition with acts of deviance even the well-sailed Charles struggled to visualise. They blocked his path, took off his hat and caressed his bald head with their masterful hands, singing sweet nothings into his ear. But their tired charms and siren's songs proved useless on a man void of desire, and in the end he had to pay them to leave him alone and provide a gratuity for the return of his hat.

After enjoying a stretch of unhaggled walking Charles caught a glimpse of one of the women still in pursuit. Unlike the others she couldn't have been older than fifteen and did not touch or talk to him but simply followed at a cautious distance, silently as a scent. Her blonde hair was free of the festoonery of her coworkers – hats, feathers and bouquets of botanical wonders – and instead fell past her timid breasts in a sleepy, sunny heap. She had the air and aroma of one who'd just emerged from a regal bath, and yet her clothes and unshod feet bespoke a much humbler status. Charles didn't so much behold her as perceive her in his own rescued mood and the colour her presence seemed to cast upon his surroundings. He thought that by setting his eyes on her he might scare her away, that his resting expression had the power of saying *fuck off* to anyone he fixed upon. In the narrowing streets she would occasionally bump into him or brush past him and the hairs on his arms would stand up, like foot soldiers startled into an attitude of readiness. After a few such instances Charles could no longer resist the torments of his phantom, but when he finally turned to see her, to seize her, she was not there.

He was disturbed by the fact that the girl's sudden absence made him long for his mother—thoughts he sent scrambling with a series of cognacs and a bottle of wine. In a swaying ramble he reached Pont Neuf, where acrobats, fire-eaters, musicians, tooth pullers, affordable whores and last-hope doctors all operated by day. The

only one who could entice Charles was a man hawking a powdered mineral by the jar which he claimed would reverse the process of ageing. Against the instructions of the vendor, and inspired by defeat more than hope, Charles funnelled the entire jar into his bottle of wine. Then finding some empty railing to lean on he gazed upon a Seine that ran brown and wild from days of rain. Under his feet the mouth of the bridge devoured brooms, baskets, ladders, children and broken furniture, and from the other side he watched such items expelled as urgently as they were consumed.

Daylight was soon chased out of the sky by a fast darkness that brought with it songs, brawls and a cloak of fog befitting the month of *Brumaire*. Charles crossed the river and walked along the left bank where piles of hunger-worn Parisians took their places under bridges, blanketed in coats and the bodies of shivering loved ones. He climbed a hill and sat on the steps of a colossal church which had just been converted into a mausoleum to celebrate agents of change. Too sad and drunk to continue his search for a bed, he pitilessly laid himself on the marble steps and went about sleeping with open ears. He listened to faraway shouts and smashing bottles and could not decide if they were the clamours of joy or unrest. Either way it remedied neither the sadness nor cold setting in. He tried to warm himself by conjuring his mother, whispering incantations of longing into his shell. But unassuaged he turned to his phantom whore, chasing her fading memory through burning streets as though she were his salvation. Curled against the stone, only then did the grief of his mother's passing make sense to him: without her, he now felt closer to death than ever before—a feeling hardened by the roars of a city too lively to notice him.

He hadn't slept deeply enough to be startled by the dawning day, but with the birds astir and her citizens heavily drowsed the streets were cast in a new light, allowing Charles to catch his first glimpse of the Paris worth all the fuss: placid, stupendous, eternal. In that moment Paris resembled the tumultuous lover whose beauty is nightly lost but daily found in the bliss of watching her sleep. He was keen to leave without waking her.