Friday, December 13, 1918

Major Jamie Fraser could barely breathe as the packed Metro train lurched out of the station for Les Sablons. A hard object— an umbrella handle?—threatened to perforate his left kidney. He squirmed to ease the pressure. The crowd on its way to greet President Wilson's arrival in Paris was too buoyant for Fraser to complain about a mere kidney. He had another one. The air in the car sagged with the smells of sour tobacco, recent soups, and layers of unlaundered clothes.

It wasn't even five weeks since the armistice ended the war to end all wars, the one that President Wilson promised would make the world safe for democracy. The slogans hadn't entirely lost their power over Fraser. They were why he signed up to be an army doctor at his advanced age. Or part of why. Over the last ten months in Paris, working fourteen and sixteen hours a day, his sense of mission had shriveled. In its place were the mangled and dying soldiers beyond the reach of his medical skills, which made little dent in the insults inflicted by high explosives, shrapnel, bullets, and poison gas.

He helped the men he could, avoided those he couldn't. At mealtimes, he picked at bad food. Late at night he used bourbon to dull his senses—the sights and smells that assaulted him in every ward and examination room—accepting a hazy doze in lieu of actual sleep, grateful when no agonizing dreams startled him awake. The tide of blood and pus and putrefaction swept in from the stinking trenches in northern France to the cavernous American hospital in Neuilly. There it washed away most of Wilson's slogans.

When the armistice stanched the flood of new casualties, Fraser's mind began, tentatively, to recall why he came to France. As it cast about for those reasons, it found the slogans. Today he was on his way to celebrate the war's end with the heaving mass of Parisians. Together, they would cry out fervent hopes for a new world.

Climbing the steps from the Concorde Station, Fraser squinted into a gray sky. On his rare ventures out of the hospital, Paris weather seemed to hover within a narrow range. On some days, sharp chills rose from pavement wet with recent drizzle. On other days, the air felt raw with rain about to start. If a bold scrap of sunbeam burst through the clouds, it soon faded like last night's dream. For him, the City of Lights became the City of Frowns. Distant German guns boomed day and night, occasionally raining shells onto the city, which sometimes cowered, sometimes raged, and sometimes just accepted destruction as part of its life.

Hundreds of those hated German cannons were standing cheek-by-jowl across the cobbles of the Place de la Concorde. The guns, finally silenced by the armistice, were prized prisoners of four years of

slaughter over scraps of muddy ground. Fraser stood still on the plaza and looked around. He wanted to notice everything, to remember it for the letter he owed to his wife Eliza and daughter Violet.

The crowd strolled in every direction, some in groups or pairs, some alone, but all together in their hearts. The dim weather dampened no spirits. Bitter memories were banished for the day. Paris was choosing to be gay. Flags of every nation in the victorious alliance fluttered from lampposts and buildings. Boys sprouted on tree branches like overgrown fruit, their coats and caps giving them unpredictable shapes. Discarded newspapers and crumpled cigarette packs cushioned the plaza's uneven stones, which more than a century before ran with the blood of a king and queen who lost their heads to the heavy blade of Dr. Guillotine.

A sturdy middle-aged woman with apple cheeks stopped before him. She looked into his face. Her smile was sad. She took a step and embraced him through their overcoats, then pulled back and looked down. A tear stood on her cheek.

He gripped her shoulders and leaned down. "Peace," he said, more urgently than he intended.

She pulled a wadded handkerchief from her sleeve and snorted into it. When she walked away, he noticed the small tricolor flag on a stick that trailed from her other hand. He guessed that someone she lost must have been tall and fair like him. Drab civilian clothes looked shabby next to the immaculate uniforms of the soldiers who swarmed the plaza. French blue jackets and scarlet trousers mingled with American olive. The khaki of Britain and Australia receded from the eye when a Sikh platoon marched by with gleaming ivory turbans and extravagant whiskers. A Greek officer in blinding white and a pleated skirt nodded to a soldier sporting a fez and a jacket of red and green embroidery. The soldiers strutted like peacocks, men who had somehow survived the firestorm that killed millions in shin-high mud.

An unshaven man swung by on crutches, his rhythm steady. Fraser had grown used to empty trouser legs, armless sleeves, faces rearranged by bullet or blast. An overage gendarme waved a baton in Fraser's direction. He wanted the crowd to climb out of the street back onto the curb. Wilson's procession must be getting close.

Fraser shrugged helplessly. Too many bodies pressed behind him. The gendarme shrugged back, then walked on. Rising on his toes to peer over the crowd toward the Champs-Élysées, Fraser noticed a woman behind him with each arm over a small child. He gestured for them to move in front of him for a better view. The children slid efficiently into place. The mother nodded thanks as he took a half step back.

Cannon erupted, a steady pounding of the great guns that Fraser never wanted to hear again. The crowd had no such feeling. Their cheers began to the right of him and surged across the plaza. Outstretched hands waved small flags. The people around him picked up the cry of "Vive Weel-SONE."

With only a few military vehicles in the vanguard, the procession slowly made its way toward Fraser. Without a thought, his arms shot up and his voice joined the thundering, wordless shout. They were shouting victory. They were shouting survival. For months, his smiles had been only sympathetic or sardonic.

He broke into a boy's carefree grin. His grinding fatigue lifted.

The president stood easily in an open car, one arm hailing the crowd with his glossy top hat. He acknowledged the cheers with a broad smile, teeth glistening like rows of fresh headstones.

Turning from side to side, he and the crowd were two poles of a giant magneto. Energy surged from one to the other and back. Wilson loomed larger than Fraser expected, squareshouldered, made larger by this welcome worthy of an emperor returned from conquest.

The car drew even with Fraser. Wilson's eyeglasses reflected the silver sky as he pivoted Fraser's way. An ocean of sound burst around them, engulfing everyone within its reach. Nothing could restrain it. It was hope. Fraser shouted louder. He strained forward, reaching to the tall, graceful man.

Wilson was a master of the ultimate weapon, intoxicating words. He used them to promise peace. In his glorious Fourteen Points speech, he laid down rules for the postwar world. Secret diplomacy, he insisted, must end. Individual citizens and communities must determine their own futures. Arms races must end. People must be free to trade with each other, not limited by artificial constraints. Most important for him, all nations must join in a single organization that would guarantee peace and independence to great and small states alike.

Some reacted skeptically to this storm of American idealism. Georges Clemenceau, premier of France, noted drily that God made do with ten commandments.

But Wilson's words promised that the years of carnage were not simply one more spasm of butchery by a species addicted to violence, nor yet another greedy scrabbling after wealth and power. His words

made the war almost holy, a testing that would redeem every ghastly sacrifice, that would lead to true and lasting peace.

And on this day of December 14, 1918, huge crowds shouted that his words were true. The enemy was vanquished. Right had triumphed. It ever would triumph. Paris loved him for it.

Fraser loved him for it.

In the lobby of the Hotel de Crillon, which fronted on the plaza, bright light refracted through crystal chandeliers then reflected off diamond-patterned floors and marble pillars. After the melee on the plaza, the buzz of lobby talk soothed Fraser. He paused in the warmth to gain his bearings.

A dozen knots of men huddled in urgent conversations around plush chairs and settees. Their bright costumes transformed the lobby into an elegant caravanserai for those who held the world's power and those who craved it. Three men wore red fez caps with suits that even Fraser knew were out of fashion. In a far corner, turbans and mustaches recalled the proud Sikh warriors on the plaza. Two Africans looked like kings in flowing gowns of vivid prints. Europeans and Americans had their own costumes. Long, high-buttoned suit coats announced serious purposes. Tailcoats radiated formality and social position. Vested suits with unbuttoned jackets suggested a bit of dash. The newspapers said the American government was bringing five hundred experts to help Wilson make the peace. The British brought even more.

Fraser gathered himself and strode to the concierge's desk. In clumsy French, he asked for the office of Colonel Edward House.

"Colonel House?" The concierge's English was solid. His eyebrows rose to express raw skepticism. "Does he know you?" With a flourish, the man produced a sheet of names in a white-gloved hand. "Are you on the list?"

"Well, he doesn't actually know me, but I am to attend a meeting in his office . . ."

The concierge held out the list again.

Fraser sighed. "James Fraser. Major James Fraser, US Army Medical Corps."

The concierge placed the list on the desk. “You are not on the list.”

“But I’m expected.” Fraser made a face. “Can you call up to the room and see if Admiral Cary Grayson is there? And tell him that I’m here? He’s the man I’m supposed to see. Admiral Grayson.” He said the last name very slowly and with emphasis. The concierge pondered the situation, then lifted the receiver and requested a number. He turned his head so Fraser couldn’t hear him. After muffled talk, he replaced the receiver. “Room 201,” he said, then turned to another guest.

Grayson greeted Fraser warmly at the open door to Colonel House’s suite. “Come.” He led Fraser inside. “You must see the European decadence to which we Americans hope to grow accustomed.”

The room fell into a hush—thick carpet and thicker walls— as soon as Grayson closed the door behind them. Two silent workers sat at elegant writing desks with filigreed accents. The United States government had taken over all of this former royal palace for the duration of the peace conference. Colonel House, the president’s closest adviser, occupied what had been the king’s own suite of rooms with a commanding view over the Place de la Concorde.

Grayson said nothing as Fraser took a few hesitant steps and goggled at the luxury. The furniture was sumptuous, though all for business—desks, conference tables, and large chairs clustered in conversational groups. The decorations were overpowering.

Every surface was carved or beveled, crested or gilt-encrusted. Creatures, mythological and real, frolicked on mantels, window frames, and doorways.

“It’s rococo or baroque or some darn thing,” Grayson said, walking to a small interior room which shared the sixteen-foot ceilings of the rest of the suite. “I stop noticing it after a while, which seems exactly not what the builder intended, but what the heck. We’re all hayseeds here.”

“The colonel has done well for himself,” Fraser said.

They sat in arm chairs that were nowhere near as comfortable as they looked.

“You should have seen Lansing when he took a gander at this. Green with envy, he was. Even though Lansing’s own suite is pretty darned regal, even for a Secretary of State.” Grayson was fortyish, compact, with sharp features and a ready grin. He had the bounce of a gymnast. He was President Wilson’s personal physician and had summoned Fraser for a meeting on his first day in Paris.

Fraser still had no idea why.

“Major,” Grayson began, “I wanted to see you because of the influenza. Before we left, I spoke with Dr. Echols at the Rockefeller Institute. He says you studied influenza in New York before you joined the army. What they’re calling the Spanish influenza?”

“Yes, they are, but not for any particular Spanish quality of it. My research didn’t cover this strain of the disease. I was already here in France before any of this strain broke out.”

“Echols said that you’re the army’s best man on the disease.”

“Heaven help us if that’s so.”

“This is no time for false modesty, Major. The army confirmed Dr. Echols’ opinion. They say you lecture other doctors on the influenza. Echols tells me you’re first-rate. On influenza, who’s better than you?”

Fraser crossed his legs. “Admiral, we’re all pretty terrible on the subject of the flu. You know this from all the flu deaths— back in the States and here in Europe. Even the Germans haven’t figured it out. It may very well have cost them the war. If I’m the best you can find, it’s only a measure of how little we know.”

Grayson tapped a foot nervously. “Major Fraser, I have a single patient, the president of the United States. In ordinary times, that’s a heavy responsibility, but these are no ordinary times. This president, despite appearances, has never enjoyed robust health. In fact, he’s had many physical setbacks that the public doesn’t know about and need not know about. The health of this president over the next weeks and months”—he paused for emphasis while he seemed to inflate to a larger version of himself—“well may determine the fate of the world.”

Fraser nodded, not entirely comfortable with this enlarged version of Grayson.

Grayson leaned forward. “Right now is the most pivotal moment in history for at least a century. All the nations of the world are in Paris, right here, within a mile of this building. They’re here to decide what the world will look like for our children and grandchildren and their children. Why, they’ll decide what to do with Germany, with the German colonies in Africa and Asia, what to do with Austria-Hungary and the Turkish Empire. It’s the most monumental moment. “And”—Grayson pointed in the direction of the plaza outside—“ you saw the special position that President Wilson holds. He’s something the world has never seen, a leader who wants only good. He holds the power to make good into something real. The British and French want to return to the old ways, to imperialism and competing armies, all that medieval nonsense that led to war in the first place. Wilson is different.

He’s no mere politician. Do you know he never asked a man for his vote until he was fifty-four years old? Today he has the power to transform the world. He can make it so right triumphs over might, and will ever after.”

An hour before, Fraser had experienced a sort of ecstasy over the president’s ability to remake the world, but now he drew back. Right has triumphed over might, he thought, because several Allied armies engaged in four years of uninterrupted killing and dying. “How can I help?”

“I’ve tracked the influenza in America. You’re right about that. Of course, it’s been catastrophic. Why, we had almost 50,000 cases in Philadelphia alone. Many thousands have died. Many, many thousands. I have to protect the president from it if I can, and I must know how to deal with it if that becomes necessary. Tell me about the influenza in Europe. Its etiology, its course, its prevalence. What prophylactic measures are prudent. What therapies are available.”

Fraser told him what he could, embarrassed by how little he could relate. Quarantining flu cases from the healthy population did seem to limit its spread, but no one knew how the disease got started. No one knew how to treat it. None of the available drugs made much headway with it. Like in America, a significant percentage of those who got the flu then died from it, gasping in agony, sometimes bleeding from every orifice.

Millions he added, had died around the world.