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EPILOGUE

Death in Paris—The Père Lachaise Cemetery

Most of the cemeteries have long suffered from a condition of overcrowding. They can neither hold more corpses nor decompose those that are there. All decomposition takes place practically in the open. The ground has become a pitted black mire from the constant process of decay.

PREFECT FROCHOT TO NAPOLEON, 1801

As the city of light and life, Paris is also a city of the dead—her illustrious dead. Napoleon, Europe's most fearsome warlord since Genghis Khan and the Mongol hordes, left hecatombs of graves from Portugal to Moscow. Though brimming over with ideas for his *embellissement* of Paris for the living, as its civil administrator he had abruptly found himself faced with the urgent problem of creating space for the grateful dead of Paris. By the end of the eighteenth century the problem of burial inside the old city had become acute: within its cramped limits over-population of the dead presented an ever more difficult problem, more serious even than that of housing the living. In the pre-revolutionary capital, pretty well every parish had its own small cemetery, of which the largest, the Innocents, covered only 130 metres by 65. As these filled up, the corpses of the poorer classes were heaped into common graves, most of them many layers deep. Before long, terrible smells began to spread through the surrounding streets. When these common graves themselves reached bursting point, room for fresh bodies was created by disinterring the old bones and piling them up in hideous charnel houses near by.

One night in 1776, a shoemaker crossing the Innocents pitched into one of its open graves and was found dead there the next day. Four years later, the common grave at the Innocents subsided into the cellars of next-door houses, almost provoking the suffocation of their occupants. This was too much for Parisians gradually discovering the importance of hygiene. The Innocents was shut down, its mortal remains conveyed to the catacombs under Denfert-Rochereau on the Left

Bank from which the stone for old Paris had been cut. This was, however, still not enough. It needed a revolutionary government to solve the problem, and under the new National Assembly all graveyards within the city walls were closed down in 1791. But, beyond that, not much was done.

Then, in 1801, Prefect Frochot brought the problem to the attention of the new First Consul. He reported:

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Three years later Napoleon decreed the interment of all the Paris dead in three gigantic cemeteries to be laid out beyond the walls (a development that was not followed by London until 1842). The biggest was set up on property newly sold by a dispossessed landowner called Jacques Baron. The unfortunate Baron himself was among the first to be buried there. It came to be known, down through the ages and across the world, as Père Lachaise Cemetery. There it stands far from the bustle of the *grands boulevards*, in the centre of the unfashionable east end of Paris. Not many of the millions of tourists who descend upon the city each year seem to visit it; yet, one of the world's largest cemeteries, it contains probably more of France's past than any other forty-four hectares of her soil. Even for those uninterested in the stories of the army of eminent Frenchmen and women whose relics lie beneath its eccentric and extravagant slabs, in a city that grows more frenetic by the day Père Lachaise still provides an oasis of tranquillity from which some arresting and unusual views can be obtained. Yet it was also where the most brutal blood-letting in Parisian history took place. In it resides a whole history of Paris, indeed of France herself, in marble and stone.

Back in Philippe Auguste's twelfth century, the hill over which Père Lachaise now spreads was an agricultural smallholding owned by the Bishop of Paris. There he cultivated wheat, vegetables and grapes for his own wine press (handily close to Notre-Dame). In 1430 a rich spice-merchant, called Règnault de Wandonne, bought it and built himself a country house there, known as the Folie Règnault. Some 200 years later, the land was taken over by the Jesuits, who built a retreat there. Then, in 1675, one of their order, Père La Chaise, was appointed confessor to Louis XIV, and as a result of the Roi Soleil's generosity Père La Chaise's estate expanded and prospered. Soon the Mont Louis—as it was known for many years in honour of its benefactor—became a haunt of Paris's elegant courtesans, attracted as much by the prospect of encountering the King's influ-

ential confessor as by the excitement of the *fêtes galantes* held there. The Jesuits' domain evidently earned a powerfully hedonistic reputation, which persisted until long after Père La Chaise's death, at the age of eighty-five, in 1709. In 1762, with the downfall of the Jesuits, the estate was disposed of, and after passing through several hands it was bought by Jacques Baron. When the Revolution ruined him financially, Baron had to sell to the city of Paris.

From the heights of the Mont Louis, Père Lachaise Cemetery enjoys spectacular views over Paris—once the leaves have fallen from the trees. The visitor who stands by the chapel erected alongside the original manor of Louis XIV's confessor will be able to see the Panthéon, the Sacré-Coeur at Montmartre, the Eiffel Tower and the countryside beyond Meudon to the south-west. It was this eminence that led to Père Lachaise, three times in its history, becoming a battlefield—in 1814, 1815 and, its worst ordeal, during the bitter civil war of 1871, when the Paris Commune expired at the end of that blood-soaked May. On Whitsunday, 147 Communards were stood against a wall in the eastern corner of Père Lachaise and vengefully shot down. That wall, its bullet-scarred expanse graced by a simple commemorative plaque to the Communard martyrs, became a rallying-point for France's left wing. For more than a hundred years, every Whitsun marches would solemnly proceed to the Mur des Fédérés, as it is called—occasions that would often turn into political demonstrations on the controversies of the day.

Here, around the Mur des Fédérés, have congregated the tombs of some of France's proletarian heroes—Henri Barbusse, the leading anti-war novelist of the post-1918 generation; Picasso's friend Paul Eluard, the poet; Marcel Willard, the defender of Georgi Dimitrov, who was tried and acquitted of complicity in the Reichstag fire of 1933, later to become Prime Minister of Bulgaria. Near by a gleaming slab of black granite coneals the final resting place of Maurice Thorez, the influential and long-standing boss of France's Communist Party. Also in this section of Père Lachaise, which has become known as the Coin des Martyrs, are to be found various memorials to more recent examples of man's inhumanity to man. Plaques honouring young men of the Resistance murdered by the Gestapo are intermixed with grim monuments to the victims of the Nazi concentration camps. The courageous Frenchwomen who died at Ravensbrück are commemorated by a pair of manacled stone hands; Belsen by a group of emaciated figures in blackened bronze, looking with bitterness up at the heavens; and Mauthausen by a plain stone shaft inscribed with the chilling statistics of mass murder.

Between the opening of Père Lachaise on 21 May 1804 and the end of 1815, some 530 graves were sold; twenty years later 11,289 plots had been bought and embellished. Meanwhile, with consummate artistry, in 1810–11 Prefect Frochot had the existing skulls and bones from the old Paris cemeteries reinterred in ele-

gant arrangements in the catacombs. Laid out like a modern grid-form metropolis, Père Lachaise has the feel of a town—truly, a city of the dead—with tidy paved and cobbled "streets," complete with cast-iron signposts. By the 1820s it had become an international tourist attraction, featuring prominently in all guidebooks to Paris. As it expanded over the years, Père Lachaise came to embrace, in closest proximity, all the violent contrasts of Paris life. Not far from the Mur des Fédérés, on the very spot where the last Communard cannon fired its final round, there now stands a small chapel, built by the Municipality of Paris in memory of the man principally responsible for the defeat of the Commune—Adolphe Thiers. Also up by the Mur lie the bodies of Karl Marx's daughter Laura and her husband, Paul Lafargue—who committed joint suicide in 1911; while near them is the painter Amedeo Modigliani, buried together with his lover, Jeanne Herbuterne, who killed herself a few days after his painful death from meningitis.

In death democracy reigns. Close to the unadorned tombstone of Communist boss Thorez are massed the sumptuous vaults of the haute bourgeoisie, enemies of the French left. For while the scions of the pre-revolutionary nobility still tend to be interred (like Charles de Gaulle) in their own country parish churchyards, the remains of the bourgeois *deux cents familles* occupy a substantial part of Père Lachaise's forty-four hectares. In row after row stand the mausoleums carrying the hyphenated names of great banking, mercantile and industrial families. Together they present the greatest collection of architectural singularity in all Paris. Miniature pyramids rub shoulders with gothic chapels decorated with gargoyles and lacy pinnacles. A reduced Madeleine vies with what seems to be a replica of the Panthéon or a tiny Taj Mahal; another caprice is a pyramid supported by turtles and illustrating on its four sides an ibis, a bullock, a car and a sunburst, the whole *bombe surprise* topped by a giant egg. One imposing tomb was commissioned by a chess enthusiast to accommodate an additional thirty-one occupants—on the ground that the chessboard holds thirty-two pieces.

Over this labyrinth of extravagance rises the imperious alabaster tower erected by a tycoon, at least half as high as the obelisk in the Place de la Concorde. But few mausoleums are stranger than that inhabited by the Duc de Morny, Napoleon III's natural half-brother, great lover and statesman of the Second Empire, which seems to illustrate every known style from Rome to Armenia, with a hint of the Bogumil heretics of Bosnia, and is crowned by four protuberances shaped like public drinking fountains or giant golf-tees. The closest approximation to it, though on a larger scale, is the cemetery crematorium, with poignant rows of plaques registering the incineration of such and such an *inconnu* killed in the Allied air-raids of 1944. Once the site of a Muslim enclave set up by Napoleon III—who was vainly seeking friends—to please the Turks, it was designed as a grotesque copy of Istanbul's Aya Sofia, its furnace spiralling up

from four ersatz minarets. Père Lachaise today still exerts itself to attract the bones of Muslim oil potentates. Behind the crematorium lies Isadora Duncan, the American dancer of the 1920s strangled by her scarf in an open-top car; while just across the way is Marcel Proust, concealed in the bourgeois family tomb constructed in honour of his father's success as a professor of medicine.

From the imposing vulgarity of the nineteenth-century bourgeois repositories one turns almost with relief to the discreet imperial dignity of the tomb of Napoleon's favourite actor, Talma, and to the less lavish memorials to the great writers, painters, musicians, scientists, soldiers and explorers. It is here that reside the foremost historical treasures of Père Lachaise. But the whereabouts of these distinguished men and women, strewn across the cemetery, are often hard to locate; the tomb of Alphonse Daudet, for instance, lies almost entirely hidden between two bourgeois family crypts. The *gardiens* are helpful, although they sometimes seem to follow whims of their own. On my first visit, in the 1960s, it was Sarah Bernhardt I particularly wanted to find, but they insisted on marking my map with the name of Edith Piaf, then recently buried (together with her stuffed rabbit, squirrel and lion), to the accompaniment of thousands of mourning fans. On my next visit, Colette, under a simply marked pink stone, was the name pre-empting all others.

Some groups, such as the marshals of Napoleon (the most eminent French soldiers, Turenne, Foch and Bonaparte himself, are of course enshrined in the Invalides), are conveniently clustered together. Here in Père Lachaise, as might be expected—given its founder—one can find names evoking the martial glory of the Empire: Davout, Gouvion Saint-Cyr, Ney, Grouchy and Masséna; Nansouty and d'Hautpoule-Salette, commanders of the celebrated cavalry charge at Austerlitz; and General la Valette, married to a niece of Empress Josephine, and condemned to death by the second Restoration, but saved by his wife, who switched clothes with him in prison. Though executed like Ney, Murat lies in a new crypt built by the family, which flourishes to this day; here too is the no less ill-fated General Huchet de la Bedoyère, who helped Napoleon escape from Elba and who was executed after the Restoration the following year, aged only twenty-nine. Another illustrious name in the Napoleonic section is that of General Hugo, father of Victor—who resides, however, at the Panthéon, the highest honour Paris can accord her *grands hommes.*

Among the florid extravaganzas of the *deux cents familles* stand the more simple effigies of a M. and Mme. Pigeon, laid out on their sarcophagus like two Plantagenet crusaders, side by side in bed beneath a stone sheet—a model of French bourgeois constancy. But the most famous as well as the cemetery's most senior incumbents are those doomed twelfth-century lovers Héloïse and Abélard. After many separations they lie together at last under an open gothic canopy (though

whether the remains are really theirs has been questioned). Dating from 1701, an inscription composed by Héloïse's successor as Abbess of the Paraclete Convent speaks with a surprisingly tolerant sympathy of "the love which had united their spirits during their lives, and which was conserved during their absence by the most tender and most spiritual letters." Then there is Rachel Félix, the beautiful and impassioned actress of Louis-Philippe's reign, who exchanged the pithiest of love letters with the Prince de Joinville. After seeing her on stage, the Prince despatched his card to her: "Where? When? How much?" Her equally concise response was, "Your place. Tonight. Free." Aptly enough, her tomb bears just the succinct inscription "Rachel."

Just beyond the main gate and inscribed with equal modesty is the tomb of a more recent lover who paid the price in full: President of the Republic Félix Faure. In 1899 the screams of a woman in extreme distress were heard coming from the President's office. Orderlies who dashed to the rescue found a naked President of the Republic dead of a heart attack, his hand clutching with the fixity of muscles in spasm the hair of a sobbing redhead, in equal *déshabille*. (Some visitors feel Faure's tomb is more deserving of the inscription accorded to the soldiers killed on the battlefield—*Mort en brave*.) A short distance away is the more recent grave of the pop singer Jim Morrison of the Doors, dead—mysteriously—at only twenty-eight. Here bands of devotees are likely to be found today rolling joints against a backdrop of Doors lyrics, declarations of love and paeans to drug use graffitied on to every surface within reach.

Right at the other end of Père Lachaise lies yet another penalized for the pursuit of illicit love: Oscar Wilde. In death poor Oscar underwent the same mutilation that Abélard suffered in life—a vandal emasculated the ugly Epstein angel that stands over his grave. Oscar's manhood was later restored, and protected by a glass cage. A sign in English and French now says: "Do not deface this tomb; it is protected by law as an ancient monument and was restored in 1992."

Near the outer wall lie the graves of two more recent literary partners, from the 1920s, in the "Love that dare not speak its name"—Gertrude Stein, patroness of the Lost Generation, and her "tiny, nimble and mustachioed" lover, Alice B. Toklas. Surprising, too, is the number of expatriates who—like Wilde—are buried in Père Lachaise. One is the renowned English roué and eccentric Lord Henry Seymour, founder of the exclusive Jockey Club but also one of the most popular figures with the Parisian proletariat of the mid-nineteenth century, who immortalized him with the jocularly appropriate sobriquet of "Milord l'Arsouille" (roughly, Lord Crapulence or Ruffian). His favourite pastime seems to have included shooting cigars out of the mouths of his servants with a rook rifle; putting itching powder in the clothes of his fencing master; and being boor-

ishly rude to that unappealing last of the Bourbon monarchs, Charles X. He seems to have used his mistresses as sleeping potions. To one he wrote:

> *My dear Claire,*
>
> *Come to Sablonville at 9 a.m. John [the valet] will introduce you into my chamber. Sit near my bed and watch well over my slumbers. Your beautiful eyes will perform miracles, calming my long-disturbed sleep.*
>
> *Henry.*

Milord l'Arsouille died miserably in the middle of a platonic affair, of anthrax. His half-brother, the fourth Marquess of Hertford, reputedly the richest and meanest man in Paris, also lies in the family vault at Père Lachaise; as does his natural son (it was a clan that went in for illegitimates), Richard Wallace, a man who did much to atone for the family shortcomings through his exceptional generosity to the needy during the Siege of Paris in 1870, later providing the city with drinking fountains for her poor which are still to this day known as "Wallaces." Two distinguished nineteenth-century British admirals also ended their careers in Père Lachaise: Sydney Smith, who inflicted upon Napoleon one of his earliest defeats at the Siege of Acre, but subsequently became an ardent francophile, dying in Paris; and Alexander Cochrane, the officer responsible for burning down the White House during the War of 1812.

Scattered among the vaults of the *deux cents familles,* the various great representatives of the arts make an imposing list: Molière, La Fontaine, Musset, the eccentric poet Gérard de Nerval, who trailed a tame lobster on a lead, and Honoré de Balzac. "Friendship and glory are the only inhabitants of the tombs," wrote Balzac; while he had his hero Rastignac bury the penniless Père Goriot among the ranks of wealthy bourgeois that fill the avenues of Père Lachaise. (*Père Goriot* ends with Rastignac looking down from the cemetery on the great city lying below and issuing his famous challenge: "Paris, à nous deux maintenant!") Transferred from defunct cemeteries within the old walls, Molière and La Fontaine now rest side by side, in two unassumingly dignified caskets. Alfred de Musset, whom debauchery carried to Père Lachaise at the early age of forty-seven, was blackballed from Milord l'Arsouille's Jockey Club because his horsemanship was below standard; but on his death at least one of his ambitions was realized—that of having a birch tree planted to provide his grave with shade. Every summer evening Musset's birch used to be lovingly watered by the *gardiens,* but eventually it had to be replaced. Alongside Musset lies Prefect Georges-Eugène Haussmann, the Second Empire creator of modern Paris—so

applauded by some but condemned by others for destroying the old centre of the city.

There are also the composers Bizet, Cherubini and Chopin (Maria Callas embarked on death here, but her ashes were later removed to be scattered on her beloved Aegean; Rossini, too, was transferred to his native Italy); and the painters Corot, Daumier, Géricault, David, Delacroix and Ingres. In contrast to Musset's birch, fresh geraniums always seem to adorn the tomb of Chopin, renewed year in and year out by some anonymous admirers. Strangely enough the one person in Père Lachaise to attact even more attention than Chopin is a celebrated medium of the Second Empire, Allan Kardec, whose Stonehenge-like monument is often festooned with flowers by believers—apparently in hopes of transferring to themselves his physical potency. Another contemporary of Kardec's with a special appeal for the fetishist is Victor Noir, a journalist shot down by an enraged Prince Napoleon in 1870, whose death provided a *cause célèbre* that made the Empire totter. The guidebook notes of Noir's darkened bronze effigy that "a certain part of the body shines brightly, thanks to the caresses of sterile women." It is not entirely clear why a defunct journalist should be held capable of such wizardry. A less sought-after writer, but one who exacts the compassion of fellow strugglers in Père Lachaise, is the Abbé Delille. An Académicien at the age of thirty-four, Delille was forced by the Terror into exile, where he married his strong-minded governess. She used to lock him up until he had finished his quota of verse each day; the strain seems to have proved too much for his eyesight, and he died blind in 1813.

Among the great actors and actresses here, Sarah Bernhardt has an honoured resting place at Père Lachaise, while a less enlightened age denied poor Adrienne Lecouvreur (mistress to Marshal de Saxe) access to hallowed ground despite the protests of Voltaire, so she still lies interred beneath the intersection of the Rues de Bourgogne and de Grenelle on the Left Bank. Close to the "Divine" Bernhardt lie together two more recent thespians, heartthrobs of mid-twentieth-century France—Yves Montand (born Ivo Livi) and Simone Signoret (born Simone Kaminker).

Interspersed among the famous, some tragic inscriptions catch the eye, such as that on the tomb of a bereaved family man to a deceased wife, mother and daughter: "This tomb encloses, *hélas*, the three things which made the happiness of a father and a husband."

Finally, there are the scientists and explorers: Champollion, the "Father of Egyptology," who began deciphering the Rosetta Stone in 1822; Claude Chappe, the inventor of the semaphore, who when his patent was contested flung himself into a sewer in 1805, aged forty-two; Antoine-Augustin Parmentier (1727–1813), the biochemist who introduced the potato to a reluctant France. Potatoes had previ-

ously been thought fit only for animals, but Parmentier was so persuasive that soldiers had to be called in to guard his own stocks; several new recipes were named after him, and his tombstone bears a bas-relief of potatoes and a chemistry still. The Parisian inventor of the gas-filled balloon, Professor Charles, appropriately lies in Père Lachaise. Also keeping company with the Professor is one of the earliest aviation casualties, Mme. Blanchard, killed in 1819 on her sixty-seventh ascent, when she was accidentally brought down over Paris by a festive rocket.

Unless you have a family vault with a *concession perpetuelle,* it is difficult to obtain a lodging at Père Lachaise today. Plots can be "leased" short term, and after five years are cleared and relet, the remains deposited in a central ossuary. The cemetery is heavily overcrowded with some 10,000 tombs and the space was further reduced in 1874 when a tunnel of the Ceinture railway beneath it caved in, scattering corpses over the tracks; after that the whole section was emptied and turned into an avenue. Gaston Palewski, one of de Gaulle's most senior colleagues, confided to me in the 1960s that he had just applied for a shady plot, but had been told that he could only be placed on the waiting list and—to his great distress—could not even be guaranteed a site "with a view over Paris." On that same occasion, Nancy Mitford teased Palewski, her faithless lover, that she was sure that a space would be found, as "Every once in a while they dig up the old bones, and then grind them up to make cosmetics for Chanel."

The demand is only too understandable. Apart from the honour of sharing the last resting place of so many illustrious sons and daughters of France, it would be hard to conceive of a more agreeable place in which to be laid away than Père Lachaise, with its glorious views over Paris and its many tree-lined avenues. There used to be a bistro opposite, on the Rue de Repos, called Mieux Ici Qu'en Face. But that has itself passed on, and—with the exception of the melancholy reminders of the Coin des Martyrs—Death shows few signs of his sting in Père Lachaise today. For mothers and children and laughing couples, the cemetery has become something of a family park. Gossiping nursemaids tether their prams to the tomb railings, to stop their charges accelerating away off down the steep slopes; children climb gaily over the grandest crypts, as soon as the *gardiens'* backs are turned; and, just as Love and Death represent but two Janus faces of the same head, lovers sit heedlessly entwined on benches set in the sheltered alleys between the tombs—just as in the times of Père La Chaise himself the courtesans and gallants liked to travel out from seventeenth-century Paris to seek their pleasures on the Mont Louis.

Yet, for all the ephemeral human drama and sadness embraced in those shady avenues of Père Lachaise, rising above it all Paris lives on, grumbling but radiant,

evolving but immutable—and eternal. Parisians may suffer perilously from ennui at regular intervals; but can Paris herself ever bore? Thoroughly female, at each age a particular woman or women, good or bad—a Héloïse, a Reine Margot, a Ninon, a Josephine, a Païva, a Sarah Bernhardt or a Piaf—arises to delineate its passing features, but in the end there is always only one: Marianne herself.