

Chapter Two

Joséphine Balsamo, Born in 1788...

Cagliostro! The amazing man who had mystified all of Europe and so strongly upset the Court of France during the reign of King Louis XVI! The Affair of the Queen's Necklace... The intrigue between Cardinal de Rohan and Queen Marie-Antoinette... So many mysterious episodes of French History!

Cagliostro! A strange and enigmatic character, with a genius for political intrigue, endowed with superhuman powers of mind-control, about which we still know very little today.

Was he a charlatan? Perhaps; but can anyone deny that some men might be endowed with superhuman senses and are able to cast upon the world of both the living and the dead a gaze denied to ordinary mortals? Should we call such a man a fraud if he can recall the secrets of past lives and, using such memories, profit from the wealth to be found in their lost knowledge and forgotten mysteries? Should we look upon his gifts as supernatural when they may only be but the stumbling, uncertain use of forces as yet unknown, but which we may soon master ourselves?

In his secret watching post, Raoul d'Andrézy remained skeptical and even laughed—although perhaps not without some qualms—at this surprising turn of events. The conspirators, on the other hand, appeared to be unquestioningly accepting the extraordinary statements that had just been made. Could it be that they had some evidence known only to themselves? Had they observed in the young woman who, according to them, claimed to be Cagliostro's very own daughter, the same gifts of clairvoyance and divination attributed to the famous mage, whom many had thought a warlock and a sorcerer?

Godefroy d'Etiques, who was the only man still standing, leaned towards the woman.

"Your name really is Cagliostro, isn't it?" he asked.

She pondered her response. It was as if, in order to marshal her defense, she desperately sought the best answer to that question. Before committing herself to a deadly struggle, she obviously wished to find what weapons her enemies had at their disposal.

"I'm not obliged to give you an answer," she finally said, "since you have no right to interrogate me. Still, it would be pointless to deny that the name of Joséphine Pelligrini is indeed on my birth certificate. And, if I whimsically chose to call myself Joséphine Balsamo, Countess Cagliostro, since those names are connected to that of Joseph Balsamo, a great man in whose life I have always been interested, then it's none of your business."

"So, unlike what you have said in the past, you now deny being Cagliostro's direct descendent, is that right?"

She shrugged, although no one could have guessed if it was in contempt, to protest, or merely to remain silent out of caution.

"We cannot consider her silence as either a confession or a denial," continued Baron d'Etiques, addressing his fellow conspirators. "This woman's words carry no weight with us and it would be a waste of time to try to pick apart her conflicting statements. We are here to make important decisions in an affair that involves us all, but certain details of which have not yet been shared with some here. It is therefore necessary for me to go over the basic facts. They are summarized as briefly as possible in the memorandum that I am now going to read to you, and to which I ask you to give your greatest attention."

Then, slowly and deliberately, he read the following document which Raoul guessed must have been prepared by Beaumagnan:

"At the beginning of March, 1870, that is to say four months before the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian war, none attracted greater attention among the crowd of foreigners who, as usual, descended upon Paris every spring, than the so-called Countess Cagliostro. The woman was beautiful, elegant, a lavish spender, mostly alone but occasionally accompanied by a young man whom she introduced as her brother. She became the object of the greatest curiosity at all the salons she frequented and she was soon welcomed everywhere.

"Her name alone excited interest, but there was also the remarkable way with which she emphasized her relationship with the legendary Cagliostro. Her mysterious manners, the miraculous cures she performed, and the stunning answers she gave to those who consulted her about their pasts

or futures, amazed everyone. At the time, Alexandre Dumas' novel had made the character of Joseph Balsamo, a.k.a. Count Cagliostro, famous. Using the very same methods, but even more boldly, that woman claimed to be Cagliostro's own daughter, and to be privy to the secret of eternal youth, while she smiled and recounted encounters and events that had taken place in the days of Napoleon I and which she had personally witnessed.

"Such was her fame that she soon succeeded in getting invited to the Palais des Tuileries where she met Emperor Napoleon III. Private meetings with Empress Eugenie followed, and the beautiful Countess was invited to meet some of her closest friends and confidantes. An issue of the satirical newspaper *Le Charivari*, which was sold clandestinely before being seized by the police, told the story of one such meeting, by a writer who attended it:

"There is something of the Mona Lisa about Countess Cagliostro. Her expression changes very little and remains indefinably sweet and candid, although some might see it as cruel and wicked. There is so much experience in her eyes and so much knowledge in her smile that one might easily believe that she is indeed 82 just as she claims. In those moments, she pulls a small gold mirror from her pocket and lets fall on it two ruby-red drops from a tiny flask she always carries with her. She then wipes it clean and looks at her reflection again, and it is as if the wisdom of the ages is gone, and her adorable beauty and youth has returned.

"When we questioned her about it, she replied:

"This mirror belonged to Cagliostro. For those who boldly look into it, time stands still. Look, the date is engraved on its back: 1783. And beneath it are four lines which summarize the four great secrets of the Kings of France, which Cagliostro received from the very lips of Queen Marie-Antoinette herself. He intended to solve them all, because it was said that the man who would know them would become King above all other Kings."

"May one hear those lines?" someone asked.

"Why not? To know them is not to solve them. Cagliostro himself wasn't granted the time to do so. They are mere titles, descriptions if you will. They read:

"In Robore Fortuna

"The God-Stone of the King of Bohemia

"The Treasure of the Kings of France

"The Candlestick with Seven Branches"¹

"She then spoke to everyone in turn and made some astonishing revelations, but that was only a prelude. The Empress, although not wishing to ask questions about personal matters, decided to ask about the future.

"Would Your Majesty be so kind as to blow lightly on the mirror?" said the Countess, presenting her gold mirror.

"Then, after peering at the mist thus created on the surface, she murmured:

"I see many beautiful things... A great war in the summer... Victory... The returning troops marching under the Arc-de-Triomphe... Crowds cheering the Emperor... The Prince Imperial..."

"These are the revelations contained in that article," Godefroy d'Etigues continued. "They are indeed striking, since it was published several months before war with Prussia was actually declared. Who was this adventuress whose dangerous predictions doubtlessly influenced the Empress' gullible mind and likely played an important part in bringing about the catastrophic defeat of 1870?

"According to *Le Charivari*, someone once asked her:

"I'll accept that you might be Cagliostro's daughter, but then, who was your mother?"

"My mother?" she replied. "Seek her among the highest contemporaries of Cagliostro... Higher still... Yes, that's right... Joséphine de Beauharnais, the future wife of Napoleon Bonaparte... The future Empress of France..."

"Naturally, the police of Emperor Napoleon III could not remain idle. At the end of June, they presented a report by Clampin, one of their best agents, who, after a long and difficult investigation, wrote:

¹ The first secret was solved by Dorothee in *Dorothee, Danseuse de Corde* [Dorothee, Rope Dancer a.k.a. *The Secret Tomb*]. The next two secrets were solved by Arsène Lupin in *L'Ile aux Trente Cercueils* [The Island of the Thirty Coffins] and *L'Aiguille Creuse* [The Hollow Needle]. The fourth secret is the theme of this book. (Note from the Author).

“ *The Signorina’s Italian passport, while featuring some possible signs of tampering with her date of birth, does identify her as Joséphine Pellegrini Balsamo, Countess Cagliostro, born in Palermo, Sicily, on July 29, 1788. Having gone to Palermo, I managed to dig up the old parish registers of Montarana and, in one of them, on the date of July 29, 1788, I did find the declaration of birth of one Joséphine Balsamo, daughter of Joseph Balsamo and Joséphine de la P***, a French subject.*

“ *Was her mother Joséphine Tascher de la Pagerie, the maiden name of the young wife separated from her husband, Vicomte de Beauharnais, the future wife of General Bonaparte? I looked into the matter further and, after more inquiries, I discovered a batch of letters written by a Lieutenant from the Paris Prévôté who, in 1788, had been tasked with arresting Cagliostro. Even though he had been officially expelled from France after the notorious Affair of the Queen’s Necklace, the charlatan still resided in a small private mansion in Fontainebleau under the name of Pellegrini, where it was said he was visited every day by a tall, slender and beautiful lady. As we know, Joséphine de Beauharnais also resided in Fontainebleau at that time, and she certainly was tall, slender and beautiful. The day before he was scheduled to be arrested, Cagliostro disappeared. The following day, Joséphine de Beauharnais also left Fontainebleau, rather abruptly.² A month later, the child was born in Palermo.*

“ *These coincidences, in and of themselves, are impressive. But they take an even greater meaning when one learns of two additional facts: Eighteen years later, Empress Joséphine brought to Malmaison a young girl whom she said was her goddaughter; she quickly won the Emperor’s heart, to the degree that he almost treated her as if she were his own daughter, lavishing gifts upon her. Her name was Joséphine, or Josine.*

“ *After the fall of Napoleon’s Empire, Joséphine went to live at the Court of Tsar Alexander I, where she took the title of Countess Cagliostro.’ ”*

Baron d’Etigues allowed the impact of that last revelation to reverberate in the silence of the room. The conspirators had listened to him with the deepest concentration. Raoul, taken aback by the incredible tale, sought in vain to detect a hint of an emotion or feeling on the young woman’s face. She remained totally impassive, with only her beautiful eyes faintly smiling.

“That report,” the Baron went on, “and the dangerous influence that Countess Cagliostro was beginning to acquire at the Imperial Court, cut short her career. A decree of expulsion was signed and she and her so-called brother were kicked out of France. He went to Germany, and she to Italy. One morning, as she had just arrived in Modena, she met a young officer. It was Prince d’Arcole, who is with us here today. He is the one who located those old issues of *Le Charivari* and the police report, the original of which, signed and stamped, is in his possession. It’s also he who, only a short while ago, testified as to the unmistakable identity of the woman he saw then, that day in Modena, and whom he sees again before him here today...”

Prince d’Arcole stood up and bowed.

“I normally do not believe in miracles,” he said gravely, “but what I say to you now is the affirmation of such a thing. Yet, my devotion to truth compels me to declare on my honor as a soldier that that woman is the same woman whom I met in Modena 24 years ago.”

“Are you the type of man who would leave a beautiful woman without saying a kind word or two to her, Prince?” Joséphine asked suddenly, with a tone of mockery in her voice.

“What do you mean, Madame?” said the Prince.

“I mean that a young and handsome French officer like you were then would be far too courteous to take his leave of a pretty woman with just a formal good-bye.”

“I don’t grasp what you’re trying to say...”

“I’m saying that you made a lovely declaration to me.”

“Perhaps... It was so long ago that I no longer remember...” said the Prince, embarrassed.

“Fortunately, I do. You leaned forward and kissed my hand tenderly, rather longer than strictly necessary, and whispered: ‘I hope, Madame, that the hours I have had the pleasure of spending with

² Until now, none of Joséphine de Beauharnais’ biographers have explained why she appeared to have almost fled Fontainebleau so suddenly. Only M. Frédéric Masson, sensing the truth, wrote: “Perhaps one day some letters will be found that will explain the *physical* necessity for her departure.” (*Note from the Author*).

you will not be the last. For my part, I will never forget them.’ And you repeated, to better emphasize your gallant meaning: ‘Never, Madame, never.’ ”

Prince d’Arcole was an old, fearless soldier and a man of impeccable manners. Yet, when he heard the precise and exact recounting of a moment that had taken place a quarter of a century ago, he became extraordinarily upset.

“For the love of God!” he muttered.

But then, he recovered his composure and, in a somewhat bitter voice, took the offensive:

“I confess that I had forgotten, Madame. If the memories of our first encounter were indeed pleasant, they were erased by that of our second encounter.”

“Please, do tell,” she replied.

“It was at the beginning of the following year, at Versailles, when I accompanied the French ministers tasked with negotiating a peace treaty to end the war with Prussia. I saw you in a café, sitting at a table, drinking and laughing with German officers, one of whom was on Bismarck’s staff. That day, I understood what a terrible part you had played at the Tuileries, and who you were really working for...”

All these revelations, this uncanny series of moments in what seemed to be an enchanted life, had taken less than ten minutes to recount. There had been no arguments, no attempt to impose a logical or believable framework upon the proceedings. It had just been a dry recitation of facts, hammered like a series of blows, telling an incredible story. The scene was even more astounding because some of the evidence which was used to attack this seemingly young woman was more than a century old!

Raoul was stupefied. This spectacle was right out of a dark and fantastic gothic melodrama. The conspirators also seemed illusory, all too willing to believe in fairy tales as if they were indisputable facts. Raoul was well acquainted with the intellectual mediocrity of country squires for whom time and progress had stood still. But how could they not bring themselves to realize that all their fanciful theories could not prevail against the incontrovertible reality of the young age of the woman sitting before them? However gullible they might be, did they not have eyes to see?

As for the behavior of the so-called Countess Cagliostro, it was, if anything, even more surprising. Why did she keep silent, which, ultimately, meant that she accepted their delusions and had as good as confessed to the crimes of which they were accusing her? Was she doing it because she didn’t want to undo the legend of her eternal youth, something from which she obviously derived great pleasure and must have made the accomplishment of her plans easier? Or perhaps, she was unaware of the terrible danger hanging over her head, and looked at this quasi-theatrical display as merely some kind of practical joke?

“Such is this woman’s past,” concluded Baron d’Etigues. “I shall not dwell on other episodes which link the past with the present. While always careful to remain hidden behind the scenes, Countess Cagliostro played a part in the tragic comedy of General Boulanger³ and the sordid scandal of the Panama Canal.⁴ One finds her hand in almost every tragedy that has afflicted our country. But we have only circumstantial evidence about her role in these affairs, and no hard proof, so we’ll ignore them and move on to more immediate concerns. Before I continue, however, do you have anything to say about these matters, Madame?”

“I do,” she said.

“Please proceed.”

“Since you seem so intent on conducting my trial in this rather medieval fashion,” she said in the same mocking tone, “I would like to know if you plan to indict me on all the charges that you have brought against me so far? If so, you might as well burn me at the stake like a witch right now, since my sins, according to you, include sorcery, espionage, heresy and other crimes surely worthy of the Inquisition.”

³ Georges Ernest Jean-Marie Boulanger (1837-1891) was a French General and a reactionary politician who, at the peak of his popularity, in 1889, considered seizing power in a coup d’état, but procrastinated and, under threat of arrest, fled abroad.

⁴ The collapse in May 1889, after eight years of work and \$235 million spent, of the French attempt at building the Panama Canal, was a major financial and political scandal and became a by-word for disastrous investments. Over 100 legislators were found to have been involved in the corruption and Jean Jaurès was commissioned by the French Assembly to conduct an inquiry into the matter, completed in 1893.

"No, Madame," responded Godefroy d'Etigues, coolly. "I have only reported your past crimes in order to convey a more accurate portrait of your character."

"I see. Do you believe you have conveyed such a portrait?"

"For our purposes, I do."

"You're easily satisfied. And what evidence do you have for all these alleged crimes?"

"First, we have eyewitness testimonies of people who have met you in the past, some a century ago. Then, we have your own confession..."

"I beg your pardon—what confession?"

"You've just repeated to Prince d'Arcole the very conversation you had with him in Modena 24 years ago."

"Ah, yes, so I did. What else?"

"We have these three portraits which are all of your likeness, is that correct?"

She looked at the portraits.

"Yes, they're portraits of me," she said.

"Well, then," continued Baron d'Etigues, "the first was painted in Moscow in 1816 and is supposed to be the likeness of Josine, Countess Cagliostro. The second is a photograph taken in 1870. The third is another photograph, taken very recently in Paris. Note that all three are autographed by you, bearing the same signature, in the same handwriting."

"What does it prove?"

"It proves that they're portraits of the same woman."

"The same woman," she interrupted, "who, in 1894, bears the same face as in 1816 and 1870. Hearing this, I can only guess that your next words will be 'burn the witch!'"

"Do not joke, Madame! That would be an abominable blasphemy!"

She struck the arm of her pew impatiently.

"Let's put an end to this farce then, Monsieur. What do you want from me? What do you have against me? Why am I here?"

"You are here, Madame, to account for the crimes you have committed."

"I ask again: what crimes?"

"My friends and I were 12 men united in the same goal. Today, there's only nine of us left. The other three are dead—because you killed them."

A fleeting shadow of concern—or at least, Raoul thought so—crossed Joséphine's beautiful Mona Lisa face. But almost right away, her features resumed their normal expression, as if nothing could disturb this woman, not even the terrible accusation launched with such violence against her. It was as if she was beyond human emotions, or, at least, able to completely hide any symptoms of the indignation, horror and revolt that would have overwhelmed a normal person. Any other person in her place, guilty or not, would have protested with vehemence, but she remained silent, and no clues betrayed if it was because of her cynicism or her innocence.

The Baron's associates remained still, their brows furrowed and their faces stern. Behind them, almost totally hidden from Joséphine's sight, was Beaumagnan, whom Raoul could see clearly. His arms rested on the back of the chair in front of him and his face was partially buried in his hands, but one could see his eyes gleaming between his parted fingers; they never left the face of his enemy.

Then, in complete silence, Godefroy d'Etigues read the indictment, or rather the three terrible indictments. He did it just as coldly as before, without raising his voice or making any comment. It was as if he read an official document.

"Eighteen months ago," he began, "Denis Saint-Hébert, the youngest of us, was out hunting on his estate near Le Havre. Late in the afternoon, he left his gamekeeper and one of his farmers and went off, his gun slung over his shoulder, to look at the sunset from the top of the cliffs—or so he said. He didn't return that night. The next day, his body was found on the rocks below when the tide withdrew.

"Could it have been a suicide? It's unlikely. Saint-Hébert was rich, healthy and in good spirits. What reasons could he have had to kill himself? Could it have been murder? Lacking any suspects, no one thought so, and the investigation ruled his death to be accidental.

"The following June, we mourned the passing of yet another friend, who died under similar circumstances. Georges d'Isneauval was shooting gulls in the early hours of the morning at the foot of the cliffs of Dieppe when he allegedly slipped and fell in such a way that he hit his head against a rock

and fractured his skull. His body was found hours later by two fishermen. He left a widow and two small children. Was it another accident? It certainly was a catastrophe for his family. As for us, we couldn't help wondering whether another death in our little group was too coincidental. Twelve friends had banded together to solve a great secret and work for a goal of considerable importance, and now, two were dead. Wasn't it logical to suppose the existence of some kind of criminal conspiracy threatening us as well as our project?

"It was Prince d'Arcole who opened our eyes and set us on the correct path. He knew that we weren't the only ones to know of the existence of that great secret. He knew the story of the four secrets of the Kings of France, which had been passed on by Marie-Antoinette to Cagliostro, and which had been revealed to Empress Eugenie at the Tuileries by a woman who claimed to be the mage's daughter. The Prince remembered that one of the four secrets—that of the Candlestick with Seven Branches—was that which we, ourselves, were trying to solve. Consequently, if we had a rival, we should be looking at those who had access to Cagliostro's secret.

"Thanks to our excellent investigation, we had our answer within a fortnight. We learned that a woman named Pellegrini lived in a small mansion in a quiet street of Paris; she seemingly led a secluded life and often went away for months at a time. She was reportedly very beautiful, but behaved discreetly, as if she was trying to not attract any attention. She used the name of Countess Cagliostro and was said to patronize the esoteric circles frequented by dabblers in the occult and black magic.

"We managed to get a photograph of that woman and sent it to Prince d'Arcole who was traveling in Spain. He was amazed to recognize the very same woman whom he had met 24 years before.

"We then looked into the woman's movements. On the day of Saint-Hébert's death near Le Havre, she was in that city, and she was in Dieppe when Georges d'Isneauval died there.

"I questioned our friends' families. Georges' widow confided to me that her husband had had an affair just before his death with a woman who caused him—according to her—great suffering. And Saint-Hébert's mother found a note written by her son in which he admitted that he had been careless enough to write down our 12 names and some facts about the Candlestick in a notebook, which had been stolen from him by a woman of great beauty.

"Things were now beginning to fall into place. The same woman, who obviously already knew a portion of the secret and wished to discover more, had seduced d'Isneauval and Saint-Hébert, and, after getting as much out of them as she could, had killed them both to cover her tracks. That woman is the one we see here before us!"

Godefroy d'Etigues paused again. The silence in the room became even more oppressive, so heavy that the conspirators seemed almost paralyzed by the anxiety that surrounded them. Only Countess Cagliostro appeared distant, as if none of the proceedings mattered to her.

Still hidden in his observation post, Raoul admired her nonchalance, her beauty and sensuality; yet, he also felt troubled by the evidence piled up against her. The Baron's indictment was irrefutable. All the facts were against her. And Raoul suspected that another new, ever deadlier attack was about to be launched.

"Should I now come to your third crime?" continued Godefroy d'Etigues.

"Could I stop you?" Joséphine replied in a weary voice. "I don't think so. Everything you have said so far is meaningless. You mentioned people whose names I have never heard before. So what is another crime more or less...?"

"You claim that you didn't know Saint-Hébert and d'Isneauval?"

She shrugged her shoulders but did not answer.

Godefroy d'Etigues bent closer to her.

"What about Beaumagnan?" he asked in a lower voice.

"Beaumagnan?" she repeated, raising her eyes.

"Yes, the third of our friends whom you murdered, very recently... You poisoned him... Don't you remember him?"