

Poor Gaston Delaroche. Not only did he lose his position as third most feared man in France, he lost his only chapter in *The Masque of the Black Tulip*. Originally, Chapter Three of Black Tulip belonged to Delaroche—in fact, he was the one who originally got to spill the news about the Black Tulip. But since Delaroche didn't really have much of a role in the rest of the book—and, as usual, the manuscript was running way too long—Delaroche had to go. Voila the one, the only, (the slightly ridiculous) Gaston Delaroche...

Chapter Three

Company, wrong sort of: a murderous band of French agents, employed for the primary purpose of eliminating English intelligence officers.

-- from the Personal Code Book of the Pink Carnation

Gaston Delaroche was in disgrace.

His office, from which he had run one of the most feared spy rings in Europe, had been turned into a broom closet. His personal torture chamber, in which he had assembled a collection of implements of torture to make the Inquisition scowl with envy, had been stripped, down to the last thumbscrew. Delaroche himself, once the third most feared man in France, had fallen to tenth.

The tenth most feared man in France (if rumor was to be believed, rapidly slipping down to eleventh) paced furiously back and forth, his spurs clicking against the stone flags of the floor. Beads of perspiration formed on his sallow forehead and his small, dark eyes glowed with the fanatic fury of a rabid animal. In one furious movement, he yanked off his cravat, as though it had grown too tight. The limp piece of linen fluttered to the floor like a flag of surrender.

Tenth! All those years of grinding thumbscrews, all those late nights spent stretching hapless souls upon the rack, all for naught.

Delaroche's elbow whacked painfully into the wall, the stone scraping the already threadbare fabric of his inky frockcoat, but Delaroche failed to notice the sting. This, this mouse-hole among offices, was what he had been reduced to. He, Delaroche, who, at one point, had been poised to rise to the position of second most feared man in France, second only to Bonaparte himself. Had he captured the Purple Gentian, it would have been he, not Fouché, whose name was whispered in fear in the taverns of Paris and the halls of power in London. It would have been he, not Fouché who bore Bonaparte's ear and wielded his borrowed authority.

Those thrice-damned English flowers had put an end to that.

On the same night, that same hateful night, the Purple Gentian had escaped from his clutches, and the Pink Carnation had made away with the largest shipment of gold Paris had ever seen. He, Gaston Delaroche, had been officially reprimanded—Delaroche's face contorted with remembered pain—he, Delaroche, who never made a mistake, whose quarry quavered at the

mere mention of his name, had been reprimanded, and laughed at, and exiled to this tiny office in the darkest corridor of the Ministry of Police.

Delaroche dropped scowling into his desk chair.

There was no clutter on the top of the desk; like the rest of the room, it was characterized by a spartan tidiness. No paintings enlivened the walls, no rugs the floors. The furnishings consisted entirely of the desk, two straight-backed chairs, and an immense cabinet that scarcely fit along one wall of the tiny room. Inside that cabinet, in strict alphabetical order, sat secrets for which several of France's most important men would have paid dearly.

None of that mattered. Not now, when the one secret Delaroche needed was the one secret he did not have.

The identity of the Pink Carnation.

If he could find and eliminate that flowery menace, Delaroche's consequence would be restored, his future reclaimed. Delaroche could picture the cheering crowd surrounding the guillotine as the guards wrestled the trembling figure of the Pink Carnation out of the tumbril. Fouché would slink into the background, a mere scarecrow among spymasters.

The Pink Carnation had only been operating for a month, but already he had revealed himself a worthier adversary than his predecessors. Both the Scarlet Pimpernel and the Purple Gentian had taken long months to make a name for themselves. They had contented themselves with minor exploits, picking off aristocrats one by one (or sometimes two by two) from the crowded prisons of Paris, leaving dainty, flower printed cards in their wake. True, the operations had been conducted with... how could one put it? A certain flair. Despite being hampered by being Englishmen, that dull and stodgy island race, Delaroche had to concede that his flowery foes had not been without a sense of the dramatic.

All the same, for all the theatricality of their exploits, what had they accomplished? A few noble families saved, a few state secrets wrested from the coffers of the Ministry of Police.... If Delaroche were to give them their due—and Delaroche prided himself on his ability to impartially assess any given situation—their tallies had grown quite impressive over time, but it had taken months, years, to build up their reputations as gadflies of the French Republic.

Indeed, their choice of the more obscure specimens of the botanical kingdom had done little to aid them in their quest for notoriety. When the first news of the Pimpernel's exploits began to be whispered around Paris, the worthy citizens of that city had scratched their heads, and the question wended its way from tavern to tavern: what is a Pimpernel? Some said it was type of sausage, others a lady's undergarment. It had taken months—and several misplaced scarlet garters—to clear up the confusion. The Purple Gentian had encountered similar difficulties, his

career being somewhat hampered by having been mistakenly dubbed The Bluebell, until an irate note from the Gentian, and the testimony of a famed French botanist had proven otherwise.

And then, there was the Pink Carnation.

On the Pink Carnation's first night in operation, he had stolen a heavily guarded shipment of gold from under the very noses of Fouché's agents, all hardened men, with orders to slay first and ask questions later. With that shipment of gold had gone Bonaparte's hope of invading England within the summer. The coffers were empty; the advantage of surprise was lost. All with the seizure of one shipment of gold. In that same night, that very same night, he had stolen from Delaroche's clutches the most wanted man in France, the Purple Gentian, leaving Delaroche gaping like a fish upon the floor of his own dungeon, discountenanced, disheveled, and disgraced.

Beginner's luck, Fouché had termed it. A fluke of fate, nothing more.

Within the week, the Pink Carnation had followed up his first triumph with another daring raid, this time upon the army's primary boot manufactory just outside of Calais. With a few well-placed torches, the Pink Carnation had consigned half the Grand Army to an uncomfortable summer of scraped soles. The army commissioners were still scrambling to award new contracts in the desperate hope of getting the army shod by the time summer gave way to the chill of autumn.

The pink petals scattered around the smoldering ashes had been the final insult.

The English newsheets had reveled in the incident, blazing headline after headline about Bonaparte's Barefoot Army. "Bonaparte's plans," quipped the blasted English newsheets, "are as bootless as his men." Delaroche could practically hear the chuckles from across the Channel.

As if that weren't bad enough, two days later, despite agents scouring the countryside, and barricades blocking every road from Calais to Paris, from the major carriageways to the merest cow path, the Pink Carnation had struck again.

And then, with all of Paris in an uproar, Bonaparte in a temper, and the secret service in disgrace, there had been nothing. An eerie silence had fallen over the Ministry of Police as, day after day, they waited for word of some new exploit, some further humiliation. But no word had come. The Pink Carnation had disappeared as mysteriously as he had appeared.

There had been, of course, the usual incidents with flowers left in suggestive places—so many, in fact, that the First Consul, in a fit of temper, had banned all pink carnations from the capital. An ill-advised move, thought the former Assistant to the Minister of Police with a silent sneer. To do so was a sign of weakness. A sign of fear.

Delaroche never showed fear.

Ah, well. Delaroche dismissed his leader's weakness with a philosophical shrug. Bonaparte was a soldier, a man of action. Such men had little courage when faced with peacetime terrors.

In the past two weeks, aside from a bouquet of carnations tossed into the First Consul's carriage on the way to the Opera, and another left suggestively on his lady's pillow, there had been no sign of the Pink Carnation. Delaroche refused to believe those flowery slights to be the work of the Carnation. They were too clumsy, too mundane. No, the real Carnation was biding his time... but for what?

Delaroche drummed his yellowed fingernails on the desk in thought.

Fouché believed the Pink Carnation was hiding in Paris, waiting his moment. Delaroche knew otherwise. Delaroche's iron maiden might be dismantled, his rack and thumbscrews in packing cases, but his network of agents, scattered across the breadth of England and France, remained intact. To his ears had come a whisper, the lightest breath of a rumor that the Pink Carnation had been in attendance at the wedding of the former Purple Gentian, Lord Richard Selwick, to Miss Amy Balcourt.

Delaroche, for whom weddings held about as much interest as romantic poetry, had pored over every account of the wedding his minions could acquire. And there were many. The English scandal sheets had reveled in the Fairy Tale Romance of England's Favorite Spy (the terms were not Delaroche's), cranking out exhaustive accounts of everything from the number of flowers in the bridesmaids' bouquets (gentians, of course), to the formula used to polish the bridegroom's boots. Delaroche had learned that the bride wore a dress of white satin trimmed with Brussels lace, that no fewer than five hundred lobster patties had been consumed at the reception, that the Prince of Wales had retired early due to a violent bilious attack (after personally consuming forty-three of the said five hundred lobster patties), and that the event had taken place in St. George's Hanover Square on the eighteenth of May—four days after the Pink Carnation's most recent exploit.

The timing worked. Which meant, if Delaroche was correct in his calculations—and Delaroche was seldom known to be wrong—that the Pink Carnation was in London.

Let Fouché trawl through the boardinghouses and taverns of Paris. It would be he, Delaroche, who would have the honor to lay at Bonaparte's feet the head of the Pink Carnation, freshly plucked from London.

Delaroche's thin lips curved into a hideous mockery of a smile. Ha! The English newsheets were not the only ones who could play on words.

Delaroche had declined to go to London himself. First, Fouché would notice his absence. Delaroche had no desire to share his glory with his superior—the credit for catching the Pink Carnation would be his, all his.

There had also been that little incident the last time Delaroche had been sent on assignment to London, involving Beau Brummel, a quizzing glass, and an unfortunate twist of the cravat. Delaroche didn't like to be reminded of that occasion.

Besides— Delaroche drew himself up in his desk chair—he was too well known; the Carnation would recognize him and be on his guard.

Instead, Delaroche had deployed the most deadly tool in his arsenal, a spy more lethal than any combination of implements in Delaroche's torture chamber, a spy so deadly that even Fouché himself blanched at the name. A spy who should even now be in London, poised to strike.

The Black Tulip.