THE HERO OF THE PEOPLE

A Sweeping Historical Romance of Revolution, Loyalty, and Forbidden Love at the Fall of the French Monarchy

One Volume of a Continuing Story

by Alexandre Dumas

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The Hero of the People

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Preface
Message to the Reader

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Introduction

IN OCTOBER 1789, a crowd of Paris women marched out to Versailles in the rain, and the next day the King of France was brought to the capital to live among the people he ruled. Most histories treat that day as a climax. Alexandre Dumas treats it as a pause, the moment when quieter and more dangerous people begin to move. The Hero of the People starts there, on a road outside Sèvres, with a stranger waiting at a wine shop door and a locksmith who has just done a job he was not supposed to talk about.

The book is a story about what happens after a revolution seems to have won. The old order has been dragged to the Tuileries, the Bastille has fallen, and the crowds are tired. Yet someone is still pushing. Dumas, who could make a conversation over a bottle of Burgundy feel like a trap closing, turns that unrest into a novel of plots, rumors, and unlikely friendships.

Dumas and the Revolution

Alexandre Dumas was born in 1802, the son of a general of the Revolutionary army, and he grew up in a France still arguing about what the Revolution had meant. He became the most famous popular storyteller of his age. The Three Musketeers and The Count of Monte Cristo appeared in the 1840s, in newspaper installments that readers followed week after week.

He wrote with the help of collaborators, a common practice in the serial trade, and he wrote at astonishing speed.

The French Revolution was a subject he returned to again and again, in a long run of novels set between the 1780s and the 1790s. The Hero of the People belongs to that group, and it is a good place to meet Dumas in a more political mood. The famous swashbuckling is replaced by something closer to a thriller of the street, where the weapons are information, suspicion, and the power of a crowd.

The setting matters, too. In 1789 and the years after, ordinary Parisians were learning that they could change the fate of a king. Bread prices, rumors from Versailles, and the memory of the Bastille all fed a mood in which anything seemed possible. Dumas, writing about half a century later, knew the outcome of those years and the grief that followed. Readers today, who also know how the Revolution is remembered, will find the book alive with the uncertainty that the people of that time felt. Dumas gives the Revolution a workshop and a wine shop as well as a palace, and he lets a royal locksmith talk about his king as a pupil at the forge.

A Locksmith and a Stranger

Dumas was a general's son, and he wrote about the Revolution with a storyteller's eye for its newspapers, clubs, and street gossip. The book follows the years just after the fall of the Bastille, when Paris argued daily about what the King's presence in the city would mean. The novel belongs to a long cycle that Dumas built around the Revolution, and he filled it with real names such as Lafayette, Mirabeau, and Mayor Bailly.

A reader who knows a little French history will enjoy spotting them, and a reader who knows none will lose nothing. Dumas also gives the Revolution a human scale. The twenty-nine chapters move between farm country, the roads to Paris, and the royal

apartments at the Tuileries, so the great events are always seen through ordinary people, from a village to a palace.

Dumas tells this in the voice of a confident storyteller who is happy to stop and comment on the nature of revolutions. The early chapters are built largely from talk, and the talk is a pleasure. People hint, flatter, brag, and probe, and each chapter title promises a new corner of the story. The book holds twenty-nine chapters, most of them short, and the pace is brisk. History and invention mingle freely, so real figures such as the King, the Queen, and General Lafayette are named alongside characters the author made up.

A first-time reader meets a good many names in the first pages, from courtiers to ministers, but the story does not depend on remembering all of them. The mood is lively, sometimes comic, and often tense. Dumas likes his dialogue sharp and his scenes quick, and he pays his readers back for attention with a turn at the end of nearly every chapter.

Hands That Give Things Away

Dumas plants small details early, and they invite questions. Why does a man dressed as a workman have such delicate hands, and what does it say about the people who take up arms in a time of riots? What does a man who works with locks and secret doors know, and how far will he go in sharing it over a glass of wine?

There is also Louis XVI's own fondness for metalwork, a hobby he pursued in a private workshop at Versailles, and the book makes it a way into his character. Is a gentle, plainspoken man a danger to the people, or only to himself? And behind the movement of the crowds stand those who, the narrator says, planned the first attack and wait for the rush. Who are they, and what do they want from a revolution that has already come so far?

Chapter 1

Locksmith and Gunsmith

THE FRENCH REVOLUTION HAD BEGUN with the people of Paris taking the Bastille on the Fourteenth of July, 1789, but it seemed to have reached its high-water mark when King Louis XVI, his Queen Marie Antoinette, and other members of the Royal Family left Versailles for the capital, Paris, after some bloody rioting.

But anyone who thinks, during such lulls in a popular uprising, that all the trouble has passed is mistaken.

Behind the men who make the first attack are those who planned it and wait for the rush to begin. Then, while others grow tired or satisfied, they slip into the crowds to stir them up.

Mysterious agents of secret, deadly passions, they drive the movement forward from where it had stalled. After pushing it to its furthest limit, those who opened the way are horrified to wake and see that others have reached the goal.

At the doorway of a wine shop in Sèvres, by the bridge over the Seine, stood a man who had played the leading role, unseen, in the riots that had forced the royal family to abandon an attempt to flee the kingdom, as many of their sycophants had done, and go from Versailles Palace to the Tuileries.

This man was in his prime. He was dressed like a workman, wearing velveteen breeches covered by a leather apron with

pockets like those used by roofers to carry nails and by blacksmiths, farriers, and locksmiths. His stockings were gray, and his shoes had brass buckles. On his head he wore a fur cap like a grenadier's, cut in half, or what is now called an artilleryman's busby. Gray locks straggled from beneath it and mingled with shaggy eyebrows, shading large, bulging eyes—keen and sharp, shifting so quickly that it was hard to tell their true color. His nose was somewhat thick, his lips full, his teeth white, and his complexion sunburned.

Though not heavily built, the man was well proportioned. His joints were not coarse, and his hands were small and might have seemed delicate, if they had not been dark like those of metalworkers.

Despite the strength of his biceps, visible because he had rolled up his shirt sleeves, his skin was strikingly white and almost aristocratically fine.

Within reach lay a richly gold-inlaid double-barreled shotgun, stamped with the name of Leclere, the fashionable gunsmith of Paris. You may wonder how such an expensive firearm came into the hands of an ordinary craftsman. In times of rioting, it is not always the whitest hands that seize the finest weapons.

He had arrived from Versailles only an hour earlier and knew perfectly well what had happened there. When the innkeeper asked him questions as he handed over a bottle of wine, which the man did not touch, he had replied:

"The Queen is coming with the King and the Dauphin. They set out in the middle of the afternoon, having finally decided to live at the Tuileries. So from now on Paris won't have to worry about bread, since it will have the Baker, the Baker's Wife, and the Baker's Boy in its midst—that's what the people call the three 'Royals.'"

As for himself, he said he was going to hang around and watch the procession go by.

That last claim might have been true, although it was easy to see that he looked more often toward Paris than Versailles, leading one to suspect that he did not feel bound to tell Boniface exactly what he intended to do.

Within a few seconds, he seemed to get what he was waiting for: he spotted a man, dressed much like himself and apparently in the same trade, silhouetted on the crest of the road. He walked heavily, like someone who had come a long way.

He seemed about the same age as the man waiting for him—that is, what people call the wrong side of forty. His features belonged to a common fellow, with base inclinations and vulgar instincts.

The stranger fixed his eye on him with an odd expression, as though he hoped a single look would measure the gold, if any, and the alloy in his character.

When the traveler from town was within twenty paces of the man lounging in the doorway, the latter stepped inside, poured the wine from the bottle into two glasses, then returned to the doorstep holding one glass aloft and called out:

"Hello, mate! It's pretty cold, and the road is long. How about a drop of red wine to cheer us up and warm us?"

The workman from town looked around to make sure he was alone and that the greeting was meant for him.

"You're speaking to me?"

"Who else? You're alone."

"And offering me a glass of wine?"

"Why not? We're brothers in the file and hammer—or close enough."

"Anyone can belong to a trade," said the other, looking hard at the speaker. "The question is, are you an apprentice or a master of the craft?"

"I suppose we'll find out how much we've learned while we drink and talk."

"All right, then!" said the other, walking up to the door, while his host pointed out the table set with wine. The man took the glass and studied its contents suspiciously, but his doubts disappeared when the stranger poured himself another generous glass.

"Come on, what's got into you? Are you so proud you won't drink with a fellow tradesman?"

"No, I'll be damned if I am. Here's to the nation's good fortune!"

The workman's gray eyes met the eyes of the man proposing the toast.

He drained the glass in one gulp and wiped his lips on his sleeve.

"Damn, but this is Burgundy," he remarked.

"And good wine, too, eh? It was recommended to me. I happened to be passing and stopped in, and I don't regret it. But why not sit down and make yourself at home? There's more in the bottle, and more in the cellar when that's gone."

"Tell me, what are you doing here?"

"I've finished for the day. I wrapped up a job in Versailles, and I'm heading to Paris with the royal procession as soon as it comes by."

"What procession?"

"Why, the King, the Queen, and the little Prince, returning to the city with the Fishmarket women and two hundred members of the Assembly, all under the protection of General Lafayette and the National Guard."

"So the fat old gentleman has decided to come to town?"

"They made him."

"I suspected as much when I set out for Paris at three this morning."

"Hello! You left Versailles at three without being curious about what was going on?"

"No, no, I was dying to know what the gentleman was up to. We're acquaintances—chums, you might say, though I'm not boasting—but you know, my friend, a man has to keep working. I have a wife and children to support, and times are no joke now. I don't work at the royal forge."

The listener let this pass without asking any questions.

"So you went back to Paris for an urgent job?" he asked.

"Just that, as it turns out, and handsomely paid, too," said the workman, jingling some coins in his pocket. "Though it was paid for by some kind of servant, which wasn't polite—and a German, too, so I couldn't have any pleasant conversation while I worked. I'm not much for chatter, but it's amusing as long as you're not saying anything bad about people."

"And it's no harm if you are saying bad things about the neighbors, eh?"

Both men laughed. The stranger showed a fine set of teeth against the other's broken ones.

"So you've finished a fine job, one that had to be done in a hurry, and you were well paid?" said the stranger, like a man who advanced only a step at a time, but kept advancing all the same. "It must have been hard work?"

"You bet it was hard. Harder than a secret lock—an invisible door. What do you make of one house inside another? Someone must want to hide, that's for sure. What a game he could play, coming and going as he pleased. 'Is your master in?' 'No, sir, he just stepped out.' 'You're lying—he just came in.' 'You'd better look, if you're so sure.' So they look around, but I defy them to find the gentleman. It's an iron door, you see, closing over a paneled frame, and it runs on balls in a groove like wheels. The metal is covered with a veneer of old oak, so you can rap on it with your knuckles and it sounds exactly like a solid plank. I tell you, once the job was done, even I would have been fooled by it."

"Where on earth would you do a job like that? But I suppose you wouldn't tell even a pal?"

"I can't tell you because I don't know."

"How did they fool you?"

"Guess again and you'll still be wrong. A hackney coach was waiting for me at the city tollgates. A fellow came up and asked, 'Are you so-and-so?' I said, 'I am.' 'Good. We're waiting for you. Get in.' So I climbed into the coach, where they blindfolded me. After the wheels had turned for about half an hour, a large carriage door opened. They helped me out and led me up ten steps into a vestibule, where I found a German servant who said to the others, 'Good! Get out of here; we no longer need you.' They hurried off, the blindfold was removed, and they showed me what I had to do. I set to work like a good hand and finished in an hour. They paid me in brand-new gold, blindfolded me again, put me back in the carriage, dropped me at the same spot where they had picked me up, wished me a safe journey home—and here I am."

"And you saw nothing at all, not even out of the corner of your eye? Damn me if I've ever heard of a blindfold that keeps a man from catching a glimpse to one side or the other. Come on, admit you saw something," the stranger pressed.

"Well, I did stumble on the first stair, and when I threw up my hands to keep from falling, the handkerchief shifted and I caught a glimpse. I saw a straight row of trees on my left, which made me think I was in some kind of avenue. That's all, I swear."

"I can't say that tells us much. The main avenue is long, and there's more than one house with a carriage entrance between the St. Honore Coffeehouse and the Bastille."

"The truth is," said the locksmith, scratching his head, "I don't think I could identify the house."

The questioner seemed satisfied, though his face rarely betrayed his feelings.

"But," he exclaimed, as if changing the subject, "are there no good locksmiths in Paris that they had to send to Versailles for one?"

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