

THE FOX OF FRANCE

Chapter 9: Friends of the Youth Club

Shortly after this conversation, Armand handed over two scripts, Shakespeare's "Timon of Athens" and Milton's "Samson Agonistes," along with various poems and other materials to Joseph.

"These have been piling up in my place for the past two years, almost half a year... You know, I don't have that much time to work on these. Anyway, it's been delayed, so take your time. They're in no rush on that end." Armand told Joseph after giving him the materials. Joseph had just taken leave and was preparing to return to Corsica.

"Joseph, I hope your father is fine, and you can come back as soon as possible," another classmate named Raphael said. "In our discussions, you always provide us with a lot of inspiration. Without you, our club meetings have become rather dull."

"Raphael is right; our club can't do without you," another student named Oronore, who relied on scholarships just like Joseph, chimed in. Emotionally, he was closer to Joseph due to their shared financial struggles.

The club that Raphael mentioned was called "Youth Companions." It was a small group of young people who had different lifestyles and attitudes but shared a common discontent with the present and a variety of idealistic aspirations for the future. In fact, such idealistic youth were quite numerous in various schools in contemporary France.

Joseph knew that many of these seemingly naive and idealistic youth would later become prominent figures in the French Revolution. Their seemingly childish gatherings in the eyes of contemporary people would evolve into political parties. For example, the famous Jacobins had started as a club.

"Youth Companions" was, in fact, the precursor of such a political party. Its members were a diverse group, including those who lived comfortably like Armand, those with meager means like Joseph, prosperous merchant's sons like Raphael, and impoverished families like Oronore. Although their personalities varied - Armand was outgoing and flamboyant, Raphael was mature and easygoing, and Oronore was reserved but resolute when it came to action - they all shared a common view: that the current French system was unjust and needed reform. However, they had not yet fully agreed on how that reform should take place.

Armand's influence from Voltaire was evident. Like Voltaire, he enjoyed using sharp language to satirize the church, but he admired the British-style constitutional system and often brought up the Glorious Revolution and the Bill of Rights when discussing political matters.

Oronore, on the other hand, opposed any monarchy. One of his uncles had fought alongside General Lafayette in North America and had told him numerous stories about the United States. This made Oronore a staunch supporter of a republic. He believed that France should become a republic and opposed any form of monarchy.

Raphael believed that, in theory, a republic was the best, as it aligned with the principles of equality for all. This, in fact, was consistent with the teachings of Christ. "Even the prophet Moses was against monarchy," Lucien said. However, Raphael also recognized that monarchy was a part of France's tradition, and the common people were accustomed to being ruled by kings. Thus, he thought a constitutional monarchy was an acceptable compromise.

Joseph, on the other hand, appeared less concerned with the form of government and more focused on individual rights.

"I don't care who is ruling the country, whether it's a king or a president," he said. "What matters to me is that their power must be constrained, and they shouldn't arbitrarily interfere with my freedom and rights. In the Declaration of Independence of North America, there is a point I strongly agree with: the people have the right to overthrow tyranny. Only power recognized by the entire people is legitimate power. In this regard, I respect whatever choice the French people make."

This statement was quite smooth, especially the last part. However, the youth of this era, who hadn't been exposed to the diplomatic jargon of a certain future foreign ministry, found Joseph's words quite reasonable. They overlooked the crucial point: who represented the people.

Joseph, after all, had traveled through time and had experience in discussing various forms of government on internet forums. He could present the strengths and weaknesses of different political systems logically and make others think he had a point.

In fact, compared to people in the future who were more experienced and knowledgeable, the young members of the "Youth Companions" club were much more naive and easier to influence. Therefore, Joseph successfully turned his viewpoint into the club's common ideology. He became the spiritual leader of the club. Now, he had to leave Paris temporarily, and several classmates had taken leave to see him off.

"Joseph, don't worry too much about financial issues," Raphael reassured him. "Finding an opportunity to make money in Paris is easier than in the provinces. Come back as soon as family matters are settled. We will find a way together. If you're really short of money, I can ask my father for some

funds. It won't be much, but a few hundred francs should be no problem, and it's interest-free."

"Raphael, didn't you say your father is quite stingy?" Oronore asked.

"That's true. But when it comes to spending money where it's really needed, he's generous," Raphael shook his head. "You see, he strictly controls every penny of mine, and I can't even have an extra glass of beer after a full meal. According to that old man, drinking beer is less efficient than eating dark bread."

"But on the other hand, that old man said to me when he sent me to school: 'Raphael, you know Louis the Great School is one of the best schools. People who can study here fall into two categories: those who are wealthy and have high social status, and those who are very talented. Raphael, you know I'm frugal, and I believe frugality is a virtue. But do you really think I've become rich because I'm more frugal than others? No, it's because I know where to spend money most effectively. I invest money and time to send you to Louis the Great School for two reasons. First, you can learn many skills here that I can't teach you. Second, you can meet many capable people there, make friends with them, and it will be more convenient for you in the future no matter what you do. So, I've never been stingy when it comes to such matters.'"

"Raphael," Armand exclaimed, "Your father is truly an extraordinary man! Perhaps I should introduce my uncle to your father. They'll definitely become friends."

"Oh, Armand, if you can arrange for my father to meet Mr. Lavassee, he'll probably be willing to spend money to treat us all to champagne. But you should consider that my father will likely use this opportunity to make more money," Lucien replied. "Also, my father will definitely not become friends with your uncle; his only friends are wealthy people."

"Raphael, are you sure your father would consider me a worthwhile investment?" Joseph inquired.

"Of course, because I believe so, and my father thinks that first, my loyalty to him is unquestionable. Second, among the people he knows, there are very few who are both loyal and capable of identifying talent and potential. I'm certain to be one of them. Besides, my father has said: 'In business, you won't always make a profit, and you will certainly incur losses. Taking risks is a part of doing business.' I think that although it's not certain, Joseph, you may become a figure of historical significance in the future."

"Ah, Raphael, I'll be remembered in history too. How about giving me some investment?" Armand joked.

Lucien looked at Armand and burst into laughter. "Armand, I believe you might also be remembered in history one day. But my father has said: 'A poet, even one remembered in history, is not a good investment, at least not while he's alive.'"

"Damn, that sounds just like what my uncle said," Armand feigned annoyance.

"Joseph, make sure to come back," Oronore said as he held Joseph's hand.

"If possible, I will return as soon as I can," Joseph replied.

With these words, he lifted his hat to the group and boarded the carriage.

...

Carlo's illness progressed rapidly. By the time Joseph returned to Corsica, Carlo was already in a terminal state. For most of the day, he remained in a coma, with no more than two hours of wakefulness. At this point, the doctors were completely powerless.

In this era, European doctors had only one method for dealing with severe illnesses, bloodletting. Even in the future, stomach cancer would be fatal if not

detected early. In this era, there was no technology for early detection, let alone treatment once the disease was found. So, at this point, the doctor simply told everyone, "Mr. Carlo now needs a priest, not a doctor."

Napoleon had also returned, arriving a day before Joseph. When Joseph came back, the whole family was reunited. On this evening, when Carlo temporarily regained consciousness, the priest began the final prayers for him. Carlo's wife held his hand, and the children gathered around him. His gaze shifted from his wife to his children and finally settled on Joseph.

"Joseph..." Carlo spoke in a weak voice.

"Father, I'm here," Joseph replied.

"Take care of the family..." These were Carlo's last words to Joseph.