

THE
CARDINAL'S
BLADES

PIERRE
PEVEL

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Translated by Tom Clegg



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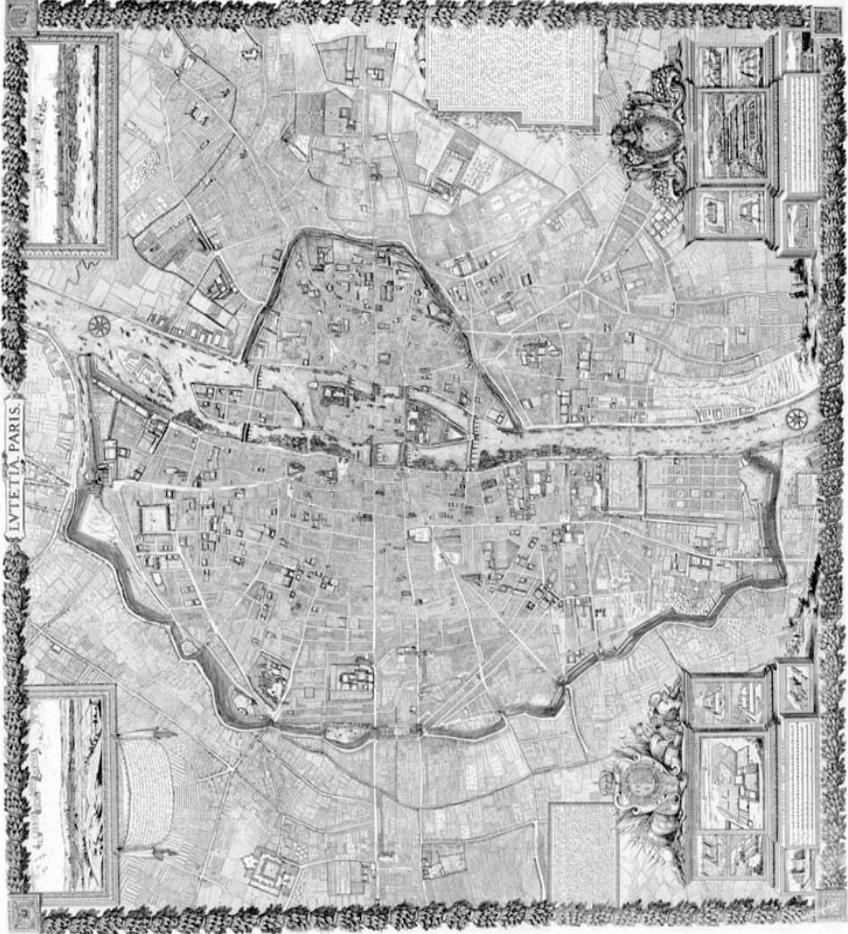
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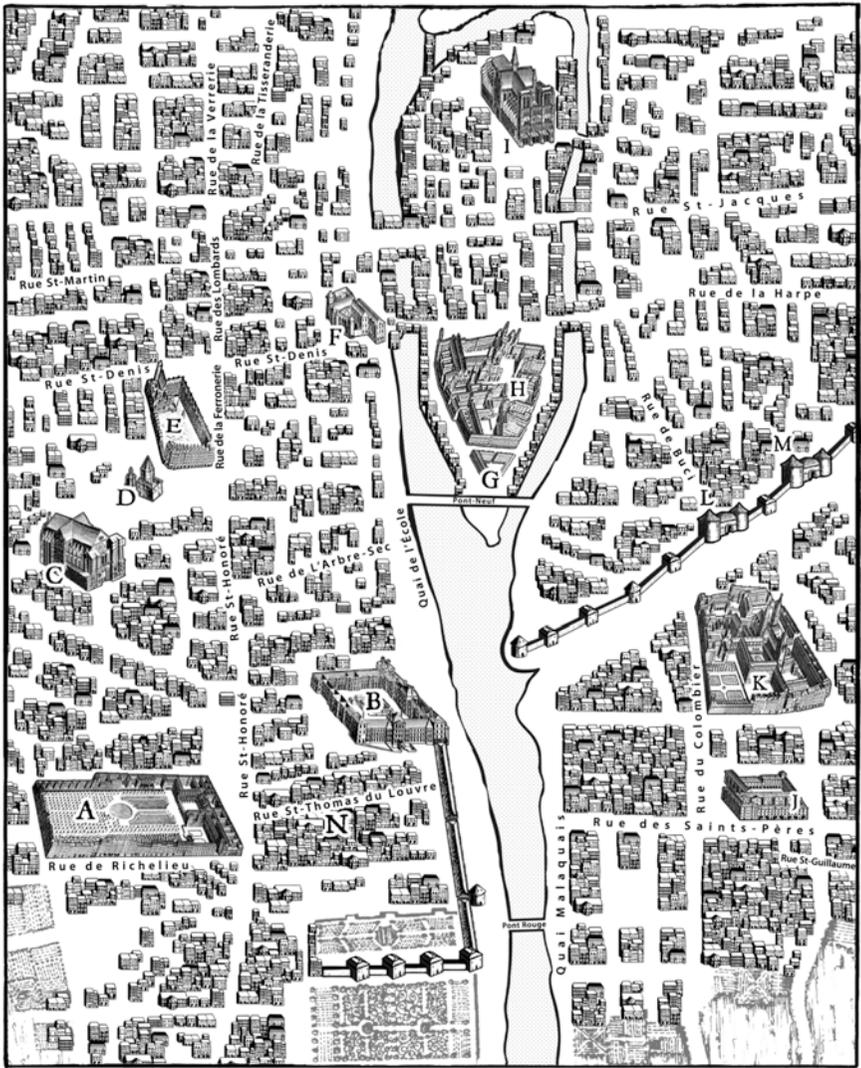
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*This book is dedicated to Jean-Philippe,
my brother who fled too soon.*





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|---------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| A - Palais-Cardinal | E - Cimetière des Saints-Innocents | H - Palais | K - Abbaye de Saint-Germain-des-Prés |
| B - Louvre | F - Châtelet | I - Notre-Dame | L - Porte de Bucy |
| C - Église Saint-Eustache | G - Place Dauphine | J - Hôpital de la Charité | M - Porte Saint-Germain |
| D - Halles | | | N - Hôtel de Chevreuse |



A CALL TO ARMS

Long and high-ceilinged, the room was lined with elegantly gilded and bound books which shone with a russet gleam in the half-light of the candle flames. Outside, beyond the thick red velvet curtains, Paris slept beneath a starry sky and a deep tranquillity had settled on the dusky streets which penetrated even here, where the scratching of a quill barely troubled the silence. Thin, bony and pale, the hand which held the quill traced fine, tight writing, delicate yet steady, making neither mistakes nor blots. The quill paused regularly to take a fresh load from the inkwell. It was guided with precision and, as soon as it returned to the paper, continued to scratch out an unhesitating thread of thought. Nothing else moved. Not even the scarlet dragonnet which, curled in a ball, its muzzle tucked under its wing, slept peacefully by the thick leather blotter.

Someone knocked at the door.

The hand wrote on without pause but the dragonnet, disturbed, opened one emerald eye. A man entered wearing a sword and a fitted cape of red silk blazoned, on each of its four panels, with a white cross. His head was respectfully uncovered.

“Yes?” said Cardinal Richelieu, continuing to write.

“He is here, Your Eminence.”

“Alone?”

“As you instructed.”

“Good. Send him in.”

Master Saint-Georges, Captain of His Eminence’s Guards, bowed. He was about to withdraw when the cardinal added: “And spare him the guards.”

Saint-Georges understood, bowed again, and took care to close the door silently as he left.

Before being received in the cardinal’s apartment visitors normally had to pass through five rooms throughout which guards were stationed on continuous watch, day and night. All carried a sword at their side and pistol in their belt, remaining alert to the slightest hint of danger and refusing to let anyone pass without a direct order to that effect. Nothing escaped their scrutiny, which could shift at a moment’s notice from merely probing to actively threatening. Wearing their celebrated capes, these men belonged to

the company of His Eminence's Guards. They escorted him everywhere he went, and wherever he resided there were never less than sixty men to accompany him. Those not on duty in the corridors and antechambers killed time between their rounds, their short muskets always near to hand. And the Guards were not the only troops detailed to protect Richelieu: while they ensured his safety inside, a company of musketeers patrolled outside.

This constant vigilance was not a simple, ostentatious show of force. They had good reason to guard him; even here in the heart of Paris, in the ornamental palace the cardinal had built just a few steps from the Louvre.

At forty-eight years old, Armand-Jean du Plessis, Cardinal de Richelieu was one of the most powerful men, and one of the most threatened, of his time. A duke and peer of the realm, member of the Council, and principal minister to His Majesty; he had the ear of Louis XIII—with whom he had ruled France for a decade. That alone accounted for the numerous adversaries he reckoned with, the least of whom only plotted to disgrace him, while others made detailed plans for his assassination—for if the cardinal were forced into exile he could still act from abroad, and if imprisoned there was always the possibility of his escape. Such plots had come close to succeeding in the past, and new ones were no doubt being prepared. Richelieu had to guard himself against all those who hated him out of jealousy, because of his influence over the king. But he also had to be wary of attacks orchestrated by the enemies of France, the first and foremost being Spain, and her Court of Dragons.

It was about to strike midnight.

The sleepy dragonnet heaved a tired sigh.

"It's very late, isn't it?" the cardinal said, addressing the small winged reptile with an affectionate smile.

He looked drawn himself, both from fatigue and illness, on this spring night in 1633.

Normally he would have been in bed soon. He would sleep a little if his insomnia, his migraines, and the pain in his limbs allowed it. And especially if no one woke him with urgent news requiring orders to be drawn up hastily, or worse still, a meeting in the dead of night. No matter what occurred, he rose at two in the morning and was promptly surrounded by his secretaries. After quick ablutions, he would eat a few mouthfuls of broth and then work until six o'clock. Then perhaps he would allow himself one or two hours of additional sleep, before beginning the most challenging part of the day—the rounds of ministers and secretaries of state, ambassadors and courtiers. But tonight, Cardinal Richelieu had not yet finished with the affairs of France.

Hinges squeaked at the other end of the library, then a firm step sounded against the parquet floor, followed by a clatter of spurs, as Cardinal Richelieu reread the report he intended to present to the king concerning the proposed policies against Lorraine. Incongruous at this hour and echoing loudly beneath the library's painted ceiling, the growing noise woke the dragonnet. Unlike its master, it raised its head to see who had arrived.

It was a gentleman, his features marked by long service in times of war.

Large, energetic, still strong despite his years, he had high boots on his feet, and carried his hat in his hand and his rapier at his side. He wore a grey doublet slashed with red and matching hose the cut of which was as austere as the fabric itself. His closely trimmed beard was the same silver-grey as his hair. It covered much of his severe-looking face, rendered gaunt by battle and long hours of riding, and perhaps also by old regrets and sadness. His bearing was martial, assured, proud, almost provocative. His gaze was that of a man who would never look away first. And he wore a tarnished steel ring on his left hand.

Letting a silence settle, Richelieu finished his perusal of the report while his visitor waited. He initialled the last page, sanded it to help the ink dry, and then blew the grains away. They rose into the air, tickling the dragonnet's nostrils. The little reptile sneezed, raising a smile on the cardinal's thin lips.

"Apologies, Petit-Ami," he murmured to it.

And finally acknowledging the man, he said: "A moment, if you will?"

He rang a small bell.

The chimes summoned the faithful and indefatigable Charpentier, who had served His Eminence in the capacity of private secretary for twenty-five years. Richelieu gave him the initialled report.

"Before I present it before His Majesty tomorrow, I want Père Joseph to read it and add those biblical references which His Majesty likes so much and serve the cause of France so well."

Charpentier bowed and departed.

"The King is very pious," the cardinal explained.

Then, speaking as if his guest had only just arrived: "Welcome, Captain La Fargue."

"Captain?"

"That's your rank, isn't it?"

"It was, before my commission was taken from me."

“We wish that you return to service.”

“As of now?”

“Yes. Did you have something better to do?”

It was an opening sally, and Richelieu predicted that there would be more to follow.

“A captain must command a company,” said La Fargue.

“Or a troop, at the very least, which may be more modest in size. You shall reclaim yours.”

“It was dispersed, thanks to the good care and attention of Your Eminence.”

That comment raised a spark in the cardinal’s eye.

“Find your men. These letters, intended for them, are ready to be sent.”

“They may not all answer the call.”

“Those who respond will suffice. They were the best, and they should still be. It has not been so long . . .”

“Five years.”

“. . . and you are free to recruit others,” Richelieu continued without permitting an interruption. “Besides, my reports indicate that, despite my orders, you have not severed all of your connections with them.”

The old gentleman blinked.

“I see that the competence of Your Eminence’s spies has not faltered in the least.”

“I believe there are few things concerning you of which I am unaware, captain.”

His hand poised on the pommel of his sword, Captain Etienne-Louis de La Fargue took a moment to think. He stared straight ahead, over the cardinal’s head who, from his armchair, observed him with patient interest.

“So, captain, you accept?”

“It depends.”

Fearful because he was influential and all the more influential because he was feared, Cardinal Richelieu could ruin a destiny with a stroke of his quill or, just as easily, propel a career toward greatness. He was believed to be a man who would crush all those who opposed him. It was a significant exaggeration but as he himself was fond of saying, “His Eminence has no enemies other than those of the State. But toward them, he is utterly without mercy.”

Cold as marble, the cardinal hardened his tone.

“Is it not enough for you, captain, to know that your king recalls you to his service?”

The man unflinchingly found and held the cardinal's gaze.

"No, monseigneur, it is not enough."

After a pause, he added: "Or rather, it's not enough anymore."

For a long moment, nothing but the hissing breathing of the dragonnet could be heard beneath the rich panelling of the Palais-Cardinal's great library. The conversation between the two men had taken a bad turn, with one of them still seated and the other standing, each taking the measure of the other, until La Fargue gave in. But he did not lower his gaze. Instead he lifted it, looking straight ahead again and focusing on a precious tapestry behind the cardinal.

"Are you demanding guarantees, captain?"

"No."

"In that case, I'm afraid I do not understand you."

"I want to say, monseigneur, that I demand nothing. One does not demand that which one is due."

"Ah."

La Fargue was playing a dangerous game, opposing the man said to be in greater command of France than the king himself. His Eminence knew that not all battles were won by force of arms. As the old soldier stood at unwavering attention, no doubt ready to be incarcerated in the deepest, grimmest prison for the remainder of his days, or swiftly dispatched to fight savages in the West Indies, Richelieu leaned on the table and, with a gnarled index finger, scratched the dragonnet's head.

The reptile closed its eyes and sighed with pleasure.

"Petit-Ami was given to me by His Majesty," said the cardinal in a conversational tone. "It was he who named it, and it seems these creatures become accustomed very quickly to their nicknames. . . . In any case, it expects me to feed it and care for it. And I have never failed in that, just as I have never failed to serve the interests of France. Nevertheless, if I suddenly deprived it of my care, it would not take Petit-Ami long to bite me. And this, without any consideration for the kindnesses I had lavished upon it previously. . . . There's a lesson to remember here, don't you think?"

The question was rhetorical. Leaving the dragonnet to its slumber, Richelieu sank back into the cushions of his armchair, cushions which he piled on in a vain attempt to ease the pangs of his rheumatism.

He grimaced, waiting until the pain lessened before continuing.

"I know, captain, that not so long ago I let you down. You and your men served me well. In view of your previous successes and your value, was your

disgrace justified? Of course not. It was a political necessity. I grant you that your efforts were not entirely unworthy and that the failure of your delicate mission during the siege of La Rochelle was in no way your fault. But considering the tragic turn taken by the events in which you were involved, the French Crown could do nothing but disown you. It was necessary to save face and condemn you for what you had done, secretly, by our order. You had to be sacrificed, even if it heaped dishonour upon the death of one of your men.”

La Fargue agreed, but it cost him to do so.

“Political necessity,” he said in a resigned tone while his thumb rubbed the steel signet ring against the inside of his fist.

Suddenly seeming very tired, the cardinal sighed.

“Europe is at war, captain. The Holy Roman Empire has known nothing but fire and blood for the last fifteen years, and France will no doubt soon be drawn into the fighting there. The English threaten our coasts and the Spanish our borders. When she is not taking up arms against us, Lorraine welcomes all the seditious elements in the kingdom with open arms while the queen mother plots against the king from Brussels. Revolts blossom in our provinces and those who foment and lead them are often placed at the highest levels of the State. I shall not even mention the secret factions, often funded from abroad, whose intrigues extend all the way into the Louvre.”

Richelieu looked La Fargue firmly in the eye.

“I cannot always choose the weapons I employ, captain.”

There was a long silence, and then the cardinal spoke again: “You seek neither fortune nor glory. And in truth, I can promise you neither. You can rest assured that I am as ready now as yesterday to sacrifice your honour or your life if reasons of State demand it. . . .”

This frank admission surprised the captain, who raised a skeptical eyebrow and returned Richelieu’s gaze.

“But do not refuse the hand I extend to you, captain. You are not one of those who shirk their duty, and soon the kingdom will have great need of a man like you. A man capable of gathering together and commanding honest, courageous, and expert swordsmen, adept at acting swiftly and secretly, and above all, who will kill without remorse and die without regret in the service of the king. Captain, would you still be wearing your signet ring if you were not the man I believe you to be?”

La Fargue could not answer, but for the cardinal the business had been settled.

“You and your men liked to call yourselves the ‘Cardinal’s Blades,’ I seem

to recall. The name was never whispered lightly amongst the enemies of France. For that reason, among others, it pleased me. Keep it.”

“With all the respect that I owe you, monseigneur, I have not yet said yes.”

Richelieu stared at the old man for a long time, his thin angular face expressing only coldness. Then he rose from his armchair, opened a curtain a little to look outside and said carelessly: “And if I said it could affect your daughter?”

Suddenly growing pale, and visibly shaken, La Fargue turned his head toward the cardinal who seemed absorbed in the contemplation of the night-time garden.

“My . . . daughter? . . . But I don’t have a daughter, monseigneur—”

“You know very well that you do. And I know it as well. . . . But don’t be alarmed. The secret of her existence is one guarded by a few trustworthy people. I believe that even your Blades are unaware of the truth, is that not so?”

The captain surrendered, abandoning a battle he had already lost.

“Is she . . . in danger?” he asked him.

At that moment Richelieu knew he had won. His back still turned to La Fargue, he hid a smile.

“You shall understand soon,” he said. “For now, gather your Blades in preparation to receive the details of your first mission. I promise you that these shall not be long in coming.”

And at last rewarding La Fargue with a glance over his shoulder, he added: “Good night, captain.”