

CITIZEN FONTAINE

*'Government must depend for its Efficiency either on Force or Opinion'.
The Colonist's Advocate, VII. (Feb 1. 1770).*

I am a complete fool.

Nobody had come to break down the door yet, but I was certain they would. I waited for them, curled up on the bed like a child awaiting punishment, sweating yet somehow shivering at the same time. Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *The Social Contract* lay open beside me.

'Whoever refuses to obey the General Will shall be compelled to do so by the entire body; this means nothing less than that he will be forced to be free.'

The year was 1793, the second year of the Republic. I vividly remember the excitement our Revolution brought. I was young and full of philosophical ambition then. After years of injustice, we had risen up. We seized the Bastille, a relic of the *ancien régime*, for this was a new era. By the General Will of the people, we would form a new government, a new society. A new France. There would be no going back. That was made quite clear when we executed our king. We made a new calendar, abolished royal institutions and titles. No more madame or monsieur – we were citizens of France now.

When we formed our government, we had two choices: either we address the wrongdoings of our predecessors and move forward, welcoming opinion and making a society that was freer than the last, or we follow Rousseau's social contract and force authority to ensure that the government would last and remain unthreatened. We chose the latter. I did not, but for the sake of survival, I kept quiet. Anyone

who was deemed an enemy of the Republic, whether through their opinions or their actions, risked execution. It was better to remain silent, which is easier said than done when the tyranny of one's government needs addressing.

I knew this all too well. It began when I was on my way home after a day of legal business. As the carriage passed through the streets of Paris, I heard someone calling my name. I poked my head out of the window, cautiously placing my hand on the butt of my pistol. It was Citizen Benoit, a boyhood friend and a fellow lawyer with a well-known position in the government. I thumped the roof of the carriage to stop it.

He invited me to the tavern to drink. In truth, I needed the escape. Benoit was always good, loyal company. He found us a table, ordered our drinks and, as always, started the conversation. I snatched the drink when the barmaid arrived. I had not realised how thirsty I was.

It was not long before our conversation moved onto our usual realm of politics, Benoit praising the ruling Jacobins and me offering my commentary on Rousseau's model society which was Scripture to them. Benoit raised an eyebrow when I mentioned escaping this mess and going home to Brittany, but he did not comment. He was a Jacobin republican who saw no fault in our government, but I thought he believed so because it kept him alive.

I should not have accepted another drink: it made my tongue loose. That was when Benoit asked for my view on the Republic. I should have kept my mouth shut, but I was too giddy to think straight. I downed my drink to prepare for this oration and let it all slip: how we became narrow-minded and acted too quickly, failing to address long-term consequences. How the Revolution should have resulted in the free government that Europe aspired to, but instead we resorted to

force. How we claimed to be free, yet we silenced opposition. Were these the rights of man that we declared back in '89?

Benoit leaned close as if he was about to pick something up from the floor. "There is freedom, Citizen, and then there is survival. It is dangerous to doubt the Republic."

"That's the problem!" I shouted, slamming my fist on the table.

People stared. The tavern went quiet, save my racing heart. Benoit leaned back, surprised, and was about to open his mouth when I shot to my feet and walked out of the tavern, eyes following me. I had said too much.

Head spinning with drink, without looking back, I retreated home to my bed.

This government was, I had to admit, efficient. It kept those with the dominant view in power. Benoit was right: it *was* survival. Would it have killed us to welcome debate, to share our knowledge and listen respectfully to weigh out right and wrong? The more I thought about it, the more I knew that France was beyond saving, because if anyone wanted to save it, they would fall victim to it.

I could leave. I had my papers and I was a frequent traveller. Yes, I would leave Paris at dawn to avoid questions, travel to Brittany where royalists lurked in their secret circles, and get the first ship to....where would I go? I could think about that later.

Breaking from my curled position which I held for I don't know how long, I pulled out my trunk and packed everything, just as I had done when I first left for Paris. I stuffed my papers into my leather satchel, emptied my wardrobe and scooped up my books. When I took up the last book, I stopped for a moment. I had given up much to get here. I was a bookbinder's son, I had laboured night and day to afford the University fees, I had climbed the unforgiving ladder that was the

Bar, I had fought for liberty and my toils had been rewarded with a seat of influence. I was throwing it all away if I left. Yet, when I left Brittany, I had not wanted this. Between opinion and force, we chose force, and I would not sit here and give the illusion that I tolerated it.

I put the final book in my trunk and slammed it shut.

There had been no knocks or voices throughout the night. When morning came, I hailed a carriage. I paid the coachman well and when I said I was with the government, he smiled, delighted to be assisting the Republic. He lifted and strapped my trunk onto the roof while I locked my door.

The click of a cocked pistol. My stomach churned, and I knew at once that I was done.

“On your knees, Citizen,” a voice said.

Trembling, I obeyed. I raised my hands and closed my eyes. The cobbles were hard against my knees. With a puff and a flash of white, the pistol fired.

I opened my eyes. I was still alive. I turned around to find a cloud of smoke. When it cleared, Benoit stood over the dead man with his pistol out. When he stepped over the body, I took his offered hand and pulled him into embrace. As I clung to him, he fumbled about my satchel and hurriedly stuffed papers inside. He told me they were instructions for when I got to Brittany and that I was not to read them until I passed through the gates. As he walked me to the carriage, I pleaded with him to come with me, but he would not listen. I then protested about the body.

“For God’s sake, I’ll deal with it,” he hissed before calling to the coachman, “Drive!”

I watched Benoit disappear from view and composed myself as the carriage came to the gates of Paris.

“Papers, please, Citizens,” a soldier said tonelessly.

The coachman and I mechanically handed them to him, all too used to this procedure. I was sick at the thought of people already knowing of my crime against the Republic. I could picture it all: the march to the Temple Prison, the trial, the execution.

Except, that didn’t happen. The soldier smiled warmly and returned my papers. “Safe journey, Citizen Benoit. Open the gates!”

Thinking I had misheard, I blinked as the gates creaked open. The coachman cracked the whip and the horses galloped out of the city. I looked down at my papers and saw that they were not mine.

They were Benoit’s.

Shaking, I searched the satchel for my identification papers, but they were gone. I fell back into the seat and nearly cried out. With pale hands, I slowly pulled out Benoit’s instructions. He finished them with a short note.

You were always braver than me. America had a revolution like us, yet our governments are different. Opinion or force, Fontaine? When you get there, you can decide.

Enclosed was a single passage to New York.