

# *The Empress of Ice Cream*

*Anthony Capella*

*Let be be finale of seem.*

*The only emperor is the emperor of ice cream.*

Wallace Stevens, 'The Emperor of Ice Cream'

*Editor's note*

For many decades the sheaf of seventeenth-century papers discovered in the Great Library at Ditchley Park, which subsequently came to be known as the Ditchley Bundle, remained largely ignored by scholars. Like many texts of that turbulent period it was written in code, one apparently even more impenetrable than that employed by Samuel Pepys. It was not until the sale of the Bundle, along with dozens of other old manuscripts, to America in the late 1990s that an archivist – actually a bright young intern from Wellesley – wondered what might happen if the source material were written, not in English but in French, and the hitherto-private journal of Louise de Keroualle, mistress to King Charles II, was revealed to the world.

It seems that at some point during her time in England Louise began to write in her native tongue an encrypted account of her life at the English court. Whether this was to alleviate homesickness, as an insurance policy in case of arrest, or, as has most recently been suggested, as a kind of substitute for the confession she could no longer make to a priest – being by now, of course, in a state of unrepentant mortal sin – we cannot know. Nor do such speculations arise naturally from the manuscript itself, which in places reads more like a modern political strategy document or manifesto for a united Europe than a memoir; and which, despite her ostensible position in the royal household, actually contains far less in the way of salacious detail than, for example, Pepys' diary does. In making these extracts I have concentrated on Louise's personal experiences of the court and her circle, rather than on her involvement in the grand intrigues and plots that preoccupied much of Europe at the time, which are already ably described elsewhere.

Carlo Demirco's treatise – if that is not too grand a word for the preface to a practical book of recipes – needs far less introduction. Food historians have long been fascinated by the history of ice cream, and in particular by the fact that the first recorded mention of it anywhere in the world comes in England, on the menu of a ceremonial feast given by King Charles II for the Knights of the Garter in 1671 – the same year, incidentally, that Louise became his mistress. Carlo Demirco is not the only person who can claim to be ice cream's progenitor – one must also consider rival accounts such as Lucian Audiger's *La Maison Réglée*, published in Paris in 1692 – but it is the only one which explains all the known circumstances, such as the fact that at the Garter Feast the royal confectioner served only a single bowl of ice cream, for

the king's table alone; and which contains recipes to back up his assertions: recipes, moreover, many of which are still in use today.

Demirco's book – first printed in 1678, translated into five languages by the end of the century, republished during the great ice cream craze of the Georgian era as *The Book of Ices*, and only forgotten once modern refrigeration methods finally made his techniques outdated – may seem an odd companion piece to the secret, encrypted memoir of a royal courtesan, particularly one as generally unpopular as Louise, whom both the public of her own day and modern historians alike tend to view as an unprincipled representative of a particularly avaricious age. Perhaps the publication, finally, of these parts of her journal may go some way to presenting her in a different light. Intriguingly, there is good evidence that the two documents – the recipes and the diary – once lay side by side together in the Bundle during its long sojourn in the library cupboard: the kitchen stains which adorn the pages of *The Book of Ices* suggest that, at some stage in the intervening three hundred years, the Bundle was discovered and only Demirco's volume removed, being subsequently put to a use of which its author would surely have approved.

Carlo

*To chill wine: take a block of ice or snow well pressed; split it and crack it and crush it to powder, as fine as you like; place it in a silver bucket, and push your flagon deep within.*

– The Book of Ices

It is the custom, in such writings as I now embark on, to begin by describing the circumstances of the author's birth, and thus by what genuine authority he may claim to address the reader (his position in life, what he has achieved, and so forth, naturally being determined by his place in society).

Alas! I can make no such claim, my birth being humble and my upbringing mean.

I was, I believe, no more than seven or eight years old when the Persian, Ahmad, took me from my family. All I can now recall of the island where my parents lived was how the groves of almond trees turned white in the spring, like the snow on top of the great volcano which looked down on them, and the greenness of the sea on which my father fished. This same sea brought us ships such as the one on which Ahmad had come, seeking a child to take into his employ. Seeing my father and I mending nets together, he spoke to my parents of the great life that I would follow, of the grandeurs of Florence and the marvellous court in which I would be placed. From that day on I found myself in the service of a cruel and capricious master. Not Ahmad – although he was stern, he was no worse than many others. No, the master who treated me so harshly was ice itself.

Once we had arrived in Florence, one of my first tasks was to transport the heavy blocks from the ice house in the Boboli gardens to the palace kitchens. The first time I did this, the curiosity of playing with the frozen slabs – of seeing how they slid away from me like eels, how I could sit astride them and ride them like trolley-carts down the grassy parts of the slope, or shoot them at the kitchen wall from a distance and watch them shatter into dozens of jewel-like shards – enchanted me so much that, in a state of childish enthusiasm, I neglected my other duties.

When Ahmad found me in the courtyard, surrounded by dozens of ruined, glittering ice blocks, he did not at first show the displeasure which my ill-discipline

warranted. "Come with me," he said. He took me to the ice house, ushered me in, and locked the door.

Inside, in contrast to the heat of Florence, it was as cold as the temperature at which water becomes ice. I was wearing only a thin hose and shirt, together with the blue apron all apprentices wore. After a few minutes I began to shake. The cold felt like a flame, or a knife that was being dragged through my skin. After half an hour I was shivering with so much violence I drew blood from my own tongue.

Not long after that, I felt the shivering stop. At last I am getting used to it, I thought. A great tiredness was seeping through me. I was, I realised, drifting off to sleep. I could still feel the searing cold, but my body was no longer capable of fighting it. I felt my defences crumbling; felt it entering the innermost recesses of my flesh. It was not exhaustion I experienced now so much as an inner numbness, as if my limbs themselves were hardening, one by one, turning me into a statue, as cold and lifeless as the David of Florence itself. I tried to cry out, but my scream was somehow also frozen within me, and I found I could not so much as open my mouth.

The next thing I remember I was being carried into the kitchens. I woke up looking into my master's dark eyes, before the Persian dropped me unceremoniously to the floor.

"You won't do that again," he said as he turned to go.

I never again played with the ice. But something else had changed too. It was not just that I no longer trusted my master. The cold I had felt never seemed to completely leave my body, so that there was always a sliver or two of ice deep within my bones, and – perhaps – even within my soul.

A few days after my incarceration in the ice house, the middle finger of my right hand began to turn black. Ahmad inspected it without remark, then summoned two of his brothers to hold my arm down on a block of ice while he amputated the finger at the knuckle with a cleaver. Warm blood spurted onto the ice, turning to pink crystals as it froze.

"It won't affect your work," he said when I stopped screaming.

Each night, as tired as a dog and half frozen to death, I crawled into the palace kitchen to sleep next to one of the big, open fireplaces on which meat was roasted *alla brace*, over embers. The kitchen workers grew used to me, and no longer chased me out with brooms and knives. I began to watch the cooks as they went about their work;

observing how they pureed fruits to intensify their flavours; how they extracted the perfumes of violets and orange flowers to flavour creams and liqueurs; how they made a verjuice from grapes and quinces to set the lighter fruits. But when I tried to suggest to Ahmad that these techniques could be of use in our own work, my master was scornful.

“We are engineers, not cooks,” he liked to say. “Cooking is women’s business. We know the secrets of ice.”

Indeed, these were ancient secrets, a body of knowledge which had been passed down from father to son within a few Persian families, suppliers of sherbets to the court of Shah Abbas in Ishfahan. Some of this knowledge was contained in stained leather-bound notebooks, their pages covered in diagrams and spidery Arabic writing. But most was kept only in Ahmad’s head, in a set of rules and maxims he followed as blindly as any ignorant country priest reciting a Latin liturgy he does not truly understand.

“To five measures of crushed ice, add three measures of saltpetre,” he would intone.

“Why?” I would say.

“Why what?”

“Why must the ice be crushed? And what difference does saltpetre make?”

“What does it matter? Now stir the mixture clockwise, twenty seven times.”

“Perhaps the humour of saltpetre is heat, and the humour of ice is cold, and so adding the one to the other means that –”

“And perhaps I may beat you with the paddle, if you do not use it to stir the ice.”

I had been working for the Persian almost two years before I dared to ask what the ices we made tasted like.

“Taste? What does the taste matter to you, child?” Ahmad said scornfully.

I knew that I had to be careful how I answered if I was to avoid yet another beating. “Sir, I have seen how the cooks try their dishes as they make them. I think I will understand better how to make these ices if I know how they are meant to taste.”

We were making an ice flavoured with a syrup of the small sweet oranges that some call china oranges, and some Mandarins. The syrup was thickened further with orange pulp, and scented with the aromatic oils extracted from the rind, before being poured over a pile of grated ice. “Very well,” Ahmad said, gesturing at the pot with a

shrug. “Try some, if that is what you wish.” Before he could change his mind I took a spoon, scooped out a little of the confection, and put it to my lips.

Ice crystals cracked and crunched against my teeth. I felt them dissolving on my tongue – a cold, sparkling sensation as they shrivelled away to nothing – then the syrup ran down my throat, cold and thick and sugary. The taste swelled in my mouth like the sudden ripening of the orange fruit itself. I gasped with pleasure: then, a moment later, a terrible pain shot up inside my head as the cold gripped my throat, choking me, and I spluttered.

Ahmad’s lip curled with amusement. “Now, perhaps, you understand that it is not a dish for children. Or for the general populace, there being no nourishment in it. We are here to entertain, boy, not to feed. We are like singers, or actors, or painters, makers of fine meaningless baubles for the wealthy and the great: that is to say, kings, courtiers, cardinals and their courtesans. No one but them will ever be able to waste so much expense on something that melts to nothing on their lips even faster than a song melts on the evening air.”

But, once I had got over the initial strangeness, I found that the taste was one I could not forget. It had not simply been that extraordinary flavour of sweet, concentrated oranges; it was the ice itself, its cold, frozen grittiness, calling to me. From then on, without Ahmad knowing, I made sure I tasted every confection we made. And I never again spluttered when I felt the coldness grip my throat.

One night I found the whole kitchen smelling dark and pungent, as if livers were being cooked in a sauce of fortified wine; but this smell had a richness to it that was like no offal I had ever known. It was coming from a small saucepan on the range, where something thick and brown spat like hot lava as the cook stirred it with a wooden spoon. “Xocalatl,” the cook said, as he poured the contents of the pan into a small cup for the Grand Duke’s nightcap: then, seeing my incomprehension, he offered me the end of the spoon to taste.

That is another memory I have never forgotten, one of a different kind: a heat that filled my mouth and coated my palate, leaving it full of the same rich taste for hours afterwards; bitter and thick, yet strangely warming, like the very opposite of ice.



Carlo

*To make a sorbet of apricots: stone and scald twelve apricots in season, and pass them through a sieve: take six ounces of soft moscado sugar, and beat the mixture with a little cream of lemonade. Simmer altogether, then put it in the freezing pot and work it very fine.*

– The Book of Ices

It was my great good fortune that there was among the Medici princesses at this time a lady called Cosima di Medici, who never married. Instead she dedicated her life, and the considerable portion of Medici wealth entailed on her, to good works, of which just one was to establish a kind of schoolhouse for urchins, orphans and the children of her servants, under the tutelage of two or three great men of learning. I was fortunate enough to join this group, my master being too fearful of his own position to pretend that he was anything other than delighted with the plan. I cannot now imagine what those eminent thinkers and scholars thought about having to teach the rudiments of book-learning to a collection of *ragazzi* like us, but such is the power of wealth that three times a week we all trooped into the great *biblioteca* above the Canon's Cloister and parsed our first letters from the priceless manuscripts it contained. Princessa Cosima was criticised for this scheme, I believe, most particularly by churchmen, for it was said that nothing but ill would come of spreading learning outside the Church, or of confusing poor ignorant children such as ourselves about our place in the natural order of things. But my education was not only of benefit to me in the matter of book-learning. I did not purposefully study those around me and try to copy their manners, but just as a child will learn to speak the language of his parents simply by hearing it, so growing up in that court I acquired without realising it something of the manners and easy demeanour of a gentleman. I believe, too, that it was being tutored in Latin from such an early age that was responsible for my fluency with languages – a skill that has been almost as useful to me as my abilities with ice.

As the years passed, I gradually came to despise my master. For all that he took great care to ensure that I remained in mortal fear of him, he was a man in fear himself; and what he was principally afraid of was that someone would steal his

secrets. He often told the story of the famous cook, *chef d'equipe* to a great nobleman, who was so proud of his creations that he decided to write his recipes down and publish them in a book. The book was a great success, widely copied and republished (with, of course, no further payment to the author); meanwhile, other cooks seized on the recipes and improved them, or simply served the dishes as if they were their own. The result was that the chef was dismissed, his position taken by a younger rival, and he died famous but destitute. It was, Ahmad said, an illustration of the folly of seeking acclaim instead of riches in this world.

I sometimes wondered why Ahmad was prepared to share his own knowledge so readily with me; but I soon decided that, so far as he was concerned, I was simply a workhorse, a creature incapable of reason. He taught me what he knew, not because he wanted to share his secrets, but because he wanted to share the labour. And so I learnt the difference between the four kinds of ice that could be made: *cordiale* or liquors, into which crushed snow was stirred to chill them; *granite*, shavings of frozen water over which were poured syrups made from rosewater or oranges; *sorbetti*, more complex water ices, in which it was the syrups themselves that were frozen, the mixture paddled as it hardened so that the fragments lay in the pot like a glittering mound of sapphires; and finally sherbets, the most difficult of all, made with milk that had been infused with mastic or cardamom, so that they resembled snow that had refrozen overnight. I learned how to construct chilled obelisks of jelly; how to use silversmiths' moulds to cast fantastic frozen plates and bowls, and how to carve the ice into extravagant table decorations. I mastered the spectacular entertainments of the great engineer Buontalenti, who had constructed fountains, tables, and even whole grottos out of ice. But I knew that if I so much as breathed a word of these techniques to anyone else, Ahmad would have me blinded and my tongue put out with one of the red-hot irons we used to carve ice sculptures. He hinted, too, that there were still secrets that I was not yet privy to: special ingredients and gums described in the notebooks which he was keeping to himself, to ensure that I would always know less than he did.

And yet the learning, I noticed, was all one way. As I have said, I often observed the cooks around us as they worked, and it sometimes seemed to me that the confections they came up with would make good syrups with which to flavour our ices. A summer *dolci* of lemon froth and dessert wine, for example, or slices of muskmelon whose natural sweetness was offset with a sprinkling of ground ginger –

these, surely, were tastes which would provide us with welcome variety. But if I suggested we try such a thing, even as an experiment, Ahmad would look at me as if I were mad.

“It is not one of the four flavours. If you don’t believe me, look in the book.”

He was taunting me, of course: he knew I could not read the Arabic in his notebooks. Nor did I need to read them to know the handful of flavours – rosewater, orange, mastic and cardamom – which were all that the ancient vellum pages permitted.

It seemed to me, too, that if our ices had a drawback, it was that shooting pain which had gripped my throat as I crunched the orange-scented crystals between my teeth. It appeared to come from the action of biting down on the ice, and was thus presumably impossible to eradicate. We tried to make the crystals as small as possible, grating the ice from the blocks with a kind of chain-mail gauntlet until they were as tiny as chips of salt or sugar: but once you went below a certain size the ice would melt away to water, and all that you had in your goblet or glass after that was a kind of orange- or rosewater-flavoured slush. I longed to make an ice that was as smooth and thick and soft as that chocolate the cook had offered me to taste; an ice that contained the cold of ice, without its harshness.

One day Ahmad was away from the kitchens with a toothache. He left me with strict instructions as to how I was to occupy my time, but evidently the tooth-pulling was more painful than he had anticipated, since he failed to return when he had said he would. At last I saw my chance.

Apricots were in season just then. The cooks served them to the Medici peeled and quartered, with the juice of melons and some cream. Taking a bowl that had already been prepared for the Grand Duke’s table, I mashed it up, tipped the mixture into the *sabotiere*, the freezing pot, and waited eagerly for it to congeal, stirring it in the usual way.

It was not a success. The mixture froze, certainly, but the different parts had frozen in different ways – that is to say, there were rock-hard pieces of apricot, and crystals of frozen melon juice, but the cream had turned powdery, like curdled egg, and far from combining, the various elements appeared to have become more separate. When I tried to eat a spoonful of this granular mixture, the different parts did not even melt in the same way on my tongue, so that it was like chewing frozen gravel. But even so, there was something about the freshness of the fruit, and the

sweetness of the melon juice, that was a refreshing change from the heavily-perfumed flavours Ahmad insisted on.

A better solution, I realised, would be to make a simple apricot cordial or syrup and then freeze it – a *sorbetto*, in fact. The smoothness would have to wait for another time: it was the flavour of the fruit that was important here. I went to get another dish of apricots, and witnessed a violent altercation between the cook who had prepared the previous one and a servant he was accusing of having stolen it. It was not the time to try to filch another. Besides, Ahmad might return at any moment, and I had to clean all the utensils before he realised what I had been up to.

And so I began a period in which I lived a double life. With Ahmad, during the day, I was a servant, following his instructions dutifully and without complaint. But by night I was a kind of alchemist, the kitchen my laboratory as I experimented with different combinations of flavour and ingredient. Nothing was too outlandish or ridiculous for me to try. I froze soft cheeses, *digestifs*, vegetable juices and even soups. I made ices from wine, from *pesto Genovese*, from almond milk, from crushed fennel, and from every different kind of cream. I experimented wildly, blindly, without method or purpose, hoping to chance on something – some method, some key – which I was sure existed somewhere: something that could unlock the deepest, frozen secrets of ice. It was as if the ice itself was calling to me, enticing me on: and, although I cannot claim that I ever truly got to the bottom of what would or would not work, just as a painter by practising at his palette will gain an understanding of what colours he must mix to achieve a given effect, so I gradually became more fluent in the language of tastes. Ahmad, I am sure, noted my increasing confidence, but doubtless put it down to the fact that I was becoming older in years.

There were other changes too. I was aware that I was becoming a man, from the fire igniting in my veins; and a reasonably good-looking man at that, from the admiring glances I received from the girls who worked in the kitchens, not to mention the ribald comments passed by their older, married colleagues. Then there was Emilia Grandinetti... Like me, she was fifteen. Apprenticed to one of the seamstresses who made dresses for the court, she was the sweetest thing I had ever seen. Her skin was the colour of butter when it was heated in a pan: her teeth, and the whites of her eyes, were as clear and bright as snow in that dark, laughing face. Soon the glances between the two of us became smiles; flirtations became conversations; laughter turned to

love. *I am the luckiest prince in all Florence*, I thought proudly. We spent stolen hours sitting on the roof of the palace where no one could see us, dizzy with love, holding hands and talking about our dreams.

“I’m going to be the greatest confectioner in the world,” I told her.

“Really? And how will you do that?” she teased.

“I’m going to make ices in a thousand flavours. The smoothest, richest ices that have ever been made.”

But when I told her I would make an ice especially for her and smuggle it out of the kitchen, she shook her head.

“I don’t want to get you into trouble.”

I asked her about her hopes for the future too, but these were all about me: she wanted us to be together, to have a family; perhaps, if we were very fortunate, to see our children one day become servants of the Medici in their turn.

Marriage was forbidden to apprentices, but those who had their master’s permission might become betrothed, and an apprentices’ betrothal was considered almost the same as a marriage, if not quite in the eyes of God, then certainly in the eyes of those immediately below Him. So I waited for the most auspicious moment, and broached the matter with Ahmad.

We were working on a magnificent ice-sculpture of a soaring eagle, the centrepiece of a table of iced jellies. I did most of the carving now, my hands wrapped in rags against the cold. Not only was my touch surer than my master’s, and my eye truer, but I could bear the work for longer – almost as if the cold that had claimed my finger had at the same time numbed the rest of me against its effects. Or perhaps, I thought, as I polished the ice until the sculpture seemed to glow from within, my master was simply getting old and lazy. I knew that on this occasion at least Ahmad was pleased with my work: when I had finished the Persian gave a nod and a grudging “Not bad”.

“Master, I have been thinking....” I began.

“Yes? What is it?”

“There is a girl I have become attached to. I was wondering if I could have your permission to become betrothed to her.”

Ahmad busied himself wiping down the table on which we had been working. “What makes you think my permission will make any difference?”

“Those are the apprentice’s rules, sir,” I reminded him. “I may not marry without my master’s consent.”

Ahmad shot me an amused glance. “You see yourself as my apprentice, do you?”

“Of course,” I answered, surprised. “What else?” For one delirious moment I wondered if he was about to say that he considered me no apprentice but his equal; perhaps even, one day, his partner.

“An apprenticeship is purchased,” he said briefly. “Your parents were poor.”

“I don’t understand. So poor that they could not afford to buy me an apprenticeship?”

“Poorer even than that. So poor that they were happy to sell you. You are no apprentice, boy, and never will be. You are my possession, and you will not be at liberty in your lifetime to become betrothed to any girl, let alone to marry.” He threw the handful of soaked rags to one side. “Now take these outside and rinse them.”

It was the sliver of ice in my heart that saved me. But for that, I might have killed the Persian there and then, and to hell with the consequences.

Not to marry. That was bad enough, but if I was not at liberty to marry it also meant that I was not at liberty to become a craftsman in my own right. I would be Ahmad’s chattel until the day I died. I would never get the opportunity to create anything of my own: I would go to my grave still churning out the four flavours of his damned notebooks. My life would have been wasted, my flesh and blood melting into the grave as surely as a block of ice left on a table melts away to nothing. At the thought of it a mute, terrible fury throbbed in my veins. But like a bulb in frozen ground I waited, my anger contained, until an opportunity presented itself.

The opportunity was a Frenchman called Lucian Audiger. I never discovered how he found me: presumably he bribed someone for information about the Persian ice makers and was told about an Italian youth who might be a weak link. Amassing information, truly, was Audiger’s great skill, although he himself believed that he was driven only by a burning desire to become a great confectioner. That was why he had travelled – first to Spain, where he learnt the art of making seed waters such as pine-kernel, coriander, pistachio and anis; then to Holland, where he studied distillation, both of flowers and fruits; and from there to Germany, where he mastered the skill of making syrups. It was inevitable that he would eventually come to Italy, where both

the Hapsburgs in Naples and the Medici in Florence were famous for mixing snow and ice into their wines and desserts.

He came to me in the middle of the night and shook me awake. The person who had brought him through the warren of service rooms slipped away, unseen, and by the time I was fully awake Audiger was already talking of Paris, of the glorious court that the young Louis XIV was constructing, the new palaces at Marly and Versailles; wealth to dwarf even the Medici's, and a city filled with fashionable men and women eager for new delights. Coffee and chocolate houses were opening all over Paris: those who could make iced drinks and chilled confections would never starve, and as a partnership – two young men who between us could create every kind of confection or novelty – we would surely enter the service of the king himself... By this time I was barely listening. I had heard all I needed to hear. If you were going to run away from the court of the Medici with a Persian's trade secrets in your head, you needed just two things: a patron at least the equal of the Medici, so that they could not simply demand your return, and for it to be somewhere a long, long way from the reach of a Persian's dagger.

"I have two conditions," I said, when Audiger finally paused for breath.

"Name them."

"Never to call anyone master. And twenty four hours to convince Emilia to come too."

"Done," Audiger said, holding out his hand. "I'll meet you by the Porta San Miniato at midnight tomorrow."

Next morning I found Emilia outside the seamstresses' room. Drawing her aside, I told her of my plan.

"But..." she said. Her voice faltered. "If you run away, you'll be caught. And then you'll be put in prison. Hanged, even."

"It's the only way, now. Don't you see? There's nothing for us here. If we leave, at least we have a chance."

She glanced around. "I can't talk now. My mistress..."

"Emilia!" I hissed. "I have to know. Are you coming or not?"

"I – I –" she said, glancing nervously at the door, and in that moment I saw that she was too afraid.

I said desperately, “Look, I understand, *caro*. You loved me because you thought it was allowed. Now that you know it might get you into trouble, you’re frightened. But this is the only opportunity either of us is going to get. I have to take it. The question is, will you come?”

“I will always love you,” she whispered.

I felt a great heaviness descending on me. “That means no.”

“Please, Carlo. It’s too risky –”

That night I was waiting by the Porta San Miniato long before the church bells struck midnight. By my side was a chest containing a sizeable haul of Ahmad’s ice-making equipment.

We stopped the *diligence*, the high-speed mail coach drawn by six horses that went from Rome to Paris in long, non-stop stages. It did not usually take passengers; once again, Audiger seemed to have both the confidence and the money to bribe his way on board.

As we travelled north I looked out of the window. I had never before been further than Pisa, and I was thinking with an ache in my heart how each mile we covered was taking me further from Emilia.

“I have been thinking,” Audiger said.

I dragged my attention back inside the carriage. “Yes?”

“Before we get to Paris we must get you some proper clothes.” The Frenchman indicated his own fashionable garb. “It is important we do not look like tradesmen. At the French court, appearances are everything.”

I shrugged. “Very well.”

“And we must think how best to approach the king. I know one of his valets: we can bribe our way into the royal presence, but it will be a waste of time unless we can present the king with a gift – something special, something which will make him talk about us to all the men and women of his court.”

“Very well.” I yawned. Now that the tension of our escape was behind us, I felt exhausted. “We will make him an ice.”

Audiger shook his head. “More special even than that.”

“I’ll think on it.” It amazed me, this ability Audiger had to worry, not just about the next twenty four hours, but about events that would not happen for days or weeks yet.



“There’s something else.” Audiger hesitated. “You said you would not have any man as your master. That is fair enough. But I think, nevertheless, that you should address me as your master when we are with others.”

I was fully awake now. “Why?”

“It is simply that I am older than you. People will expect me to be in charge. And besides, I already have a certain reputation in Paris. It will seem strange if I turn up with an Italian ragamuffin in tow and treat him as an equal. Not that you are a ragamuffin, of course,” he said quickly. “But that is how people may see it.”

Once again it was only the sliver of ice in my heart that made me restrain my anger. “I said I would have no master.”

“And you will not have one. We will split our profits between us, that is completely understood. I will not *be* your master; it is simply that you will *call* me master. You see the distinction, do you not?”

A little reluctantly, I nodded. “Very well.”

“Good.” Audiger looked out of the window. “But what to give the king,” he said, almost to himself. “Now *that* is a worry.”

It was only as I drifted off to sleep that I realised Audiger had misunderstood what I had said, back in Florence. He had thought I said I would have no master; but what I had actually said was that I would *call* no man master; I was quite sure of it. And yet here I was, agreeing to do just that. But perhaps Audiger had forgotten the exact words of our agreement.

“Could one make an ice from peas?”

I jolted awake. The *diligence* had stopped, but only so the drivers could relieve themselves. Audiger stood by the side of the road, just beyond the open door, pissing into the field beyond.

“What?”

“I said, could one make an ice from peas?” Audiger called over his shoulder. “Look, I am watering some right now.”

I looked out of the carriage. In the brilliant, flat light of a full moon I saw a field of peas, their plump green pods swinging in the breeze. The aroma of fresh legumes was, mercifully, more powerful than that of my companion’s piss.

“The king has a strange passion for vegetables of all kinds,” Audiger said. “Especially for peas. Each year his courtiers compete to bring him the first crop from

their estates – it is the sort of contest he enjoys. And these are weeks earlier than any peas in France. I am wondering if we could make an ice from them.”

“But if you want to give the king peas, why not simply pick him some?”

“They will be withered long before we reach Paris. Even the *diligence* takes a fortnight.”

“But you could freeze them.”

Audiger’s head appeared at the carriage door. “What?”

“Freeze them,” I repeated. “Preserve them in ice.”

Audiger stared at me. “Such a thing is possible?”

“It is not just possible: it is simple. The Persians have long known that ice preserves fruit from corruption. Peas are surely no different.”

“Yes? Brilliant! What would you need? Ice?” Audiger gazed around the moonlit field. “But of course, we have no ice,” he said dejectedly. “A couple of ice makers, with no ice.”

“Audiger – where are we headed?”

The Frenchman looked nonplussed. “Paris?”

“Via the Alps,” I reminded him. “And although I have never been there, even I know that the Alps are—”

“Full of ice! Stuffed with ice! Ice and snow everywhere you look! Yes!”

Audiger tossed his hat into the air, then caught it again. “But first we have to get our peas to the Alps,” he said, more glumly.

“How long before the coach gets there?”

“Two days, perhaps three.”

“My chest of equipment will still be cold; the pewter buckets and so on came straight from the Boboli ice house. If we put the peas in there.....”

“Yes! Yes!” Audiger threw his hat up once more. “Of course! With my vision, Demirco, and your expertise, we shall be the king’s confectioners in no time!”

Two days later, in an inn high on the mountain pass that led to France, Audiger watched me prepare the peas.

“Packed snow is even colder than ice, and lasts longer,” I explained. “Why, I do not know. But I intend to find out, one day.”

Audiger was staring at the *sabotiere* like a man awaiting a conjuring trick. Very well, I thought: I will show you some magic.

“Now I add saltpetre to the snow. That makes it much, much colder. Again, I do not know why, exactly.”

“Go on,” Audiger breathed.

“Then I put the peas into the inner pot, like so.” I poured the peas in and placed the lid on top.

“Now what?”

“Now we leave them. It is no different from leaving a cake in the oven – if you open the door too often to check it, the heat will escape and the cake will never get baked. Only in our case, it is the cold which must be kept safe.”

Audiger pulled out a pocket watch. “How long?”

“The length of time between matins and mass, according to the bells of Santa Maria.”

“What?”

“Say half an hour.”

Audiger spent the next thirty minutes pacing up and down. When we finally opened the *sabotiere* he looked inside and drew in his breath.

The peas had drawn together into a ball, a silvery-green cluster flecked with ice. Audiger reached in and pulled it out. “Remarkable!” he breathed.

“Careful,” I warned. “Your hands will warm them, and they will not taste so fresh if they have to be frozen a second time.”

“They’re stuck!” Peas were dotted on Audiger’s fingers, clinging to his skin like burrs on cloth mittens. He tried to flick them off, but they would not budge.

“Here, let me.” I pulled the frozen peas off one by one. They did not stick to my fingers as they did to Audiger’s, I noticed. “We should put them away now. And we must take a chest of pressed snow with us in the coach, so that we can keep them like this.”

Carlo

*To make a ratafia of green walnuts: take your walnuts, not quite ripe; chop them into quarters, husks and all, then infuse them for a month in a gallon of aqua vitae, with a lemon and some leaves of the sweet lime bush. This cordial in France is known as liqueur de noix, and freezes pleasingly, though not hard.*

– The Book of Ices

In Paris we had to move quickly to get an audience with the king before our peas unfroze. Luckily Monsieur Bontemps, the king's valet, proved just as corruptible as Audiger had predicted, and within a few days we were shown into the presence of Louis XIV, his brother and several other members of the nobility. Audiger was so greatly in awe of them he could hardly speak. Fortunately our gift required little introduction, and Audiger's stammering oratory was soon ignored as the aristocrats crowded round the box of peas, trying them.

The king asked his valet to take what was left to the Controller of the Mouth to have them divided: one part for the Queen, one for the Queen Mother, one for the Cardinal, and the last one for himself. "As for these intrepid gentlemen, Bontemps," he said, gesturing at us, "please reward them for their trouble."

I looked at Audiger. This was the point at which he should, according to our plan, have uttered the speech he had prepared. But my companion, unusually for him, seemed to be struck dumb, and was now staring at the king with an expression of wide-eyed adoration.

"If it may please Your Majesty," I said with a bow, "we wish no reward, save only the privilege to make ices and other chilled confections, for the royal pleasure."

Louis raised his eyebrows. "Ices?"

Audiger found his voice. "My assistant, sir, was lately at the court of the Medici, and is greatly accomplished in this art."

The king's gaze scrutinised my face. "What is your name, signor?"

"Demirco, sir."

"And how old are you?"

"Eighteen," I lied.

“Hmm. A good age – the same age at which I took on the government of France. I look forward to trying your confections. Cardinal Mazarin has long had the services of an Italian *limonadier*, and on several occasions I have had cause to admire his handiwork. His name is Morelli – perhaps you are acquainted with him?”

I shook my head. “No, sir.”

“He is a most inventive man. But perhaps –” I felt the king scrutinising me even more closely – “you will prove his equal. I certainly hope so. It would give me great pleasure to outdo the Cardinal at table.”

I had a glimpse then into the character of this king. Rivalry – that was what drove him. Everything he did, or had, or patronised, must be the best, and any courtier or statesman who offered him anything – even so insubstantial a morsel as a flavoured ice – was only stoking Louis’s insatiable appetite to outdo him.

I bowed again. “I shall try, Your Majesty.”

Beside me, Audiger added, “A task sir, which would certainly be easier if we were able to establish a guild – a guild of confectioners – with a royal patent, and a council, and a right of issuing masterships –”

“Yes, yes. Make an ice and send it to me this evening at dinner time. If I find it acceptable, the honour is yours.” The king swept out, followed by the rest.

Audiger stared at the empty doorway, then caught at my sleeve. “Tonight!” he hissed. “We must send him an ice tonight!”

“It is no matter,” I said confidently. “Get me green walnuts from the market, then find a cordial shop and buy some *liqueur de noix*. The liquor maker will have done most of the hard work for us.” I had no intention, now that I had finally got to France, of restricting myself to Ahmad’s four flavours ever again.

It was the beginning of a remarkable period. In Florence I had been less than a servant: here in Paris, I was almost a courtier. Audiger arranged for me to be dressed in the style of a dancing teacher or a painter of portraits, my frock coat resplendent with twenty-four never-used buttons, my white breeches tight enough to show off my calves, my hat three-cornered, my wig – the first I had ever owned – long and liberally powdered with chalk. The latter itched abominably. After I had worn it for a week I realised that I was either going to have to shave my head, as Audiger did, or get rid of the wig. I got rid of the wig. But the rest of my clothes, I thought, suited me

rather well, and when I caught sight of myself in one of the full-length mirrors with which the king's new salons were panelled, I could not help being impressed.

The two of us were given a cellar at the king's country residence of Marly, and in Paris we took premises in Saint-Germain-de-Pres, convenient for the Louvre. The labour I had been obliged to do in Florence, dragging blocks of ice from the ice house to the palace, here was done by others – Paris already had a thriving trade in ice and pressed snow to cool the nobility's wine, and good quality supplies could be obtained all year round. Even the work of chipping and grating was done by apprentices, of whom Audiger engaged no less than four.

But it was at the king's new palace of Versailles that we spent most of our time. Audiger had not been lying when he spoke of its magnificence. Although the building work was by no means finished – indeed, it was not finished all the time I was there: as soon as one project was complete, Louis immediately embarked on another, his ambition always outstripping his architects' abilities to fulfil it – the old house had already been enveloped in a grand new *façade*, the symmetrical regular windows grander than anything I had come across even in Florence, at that time widely regarded as the most beautiful city in the world. Versailles – or 'the new palace', as it was usually referred to – had the elegant proportions of the Uffizi or the Pitti, yet it was surrounded by open parkland, like a country estate; it was the size of a castle, yet was entirely, confidently, without fortifications of any kind; it fulfilled the functions of a court, yet contained no mean little offices or functionaries' chambers, only gorgeous salons and sumptuous galleries. In short, it was a completely new kind of palace, and in it Louis carried out a completely new kind of government – one in which no distinction was made between matters of state and matters of fashion; where ministers were respected for the urbanity of their address or the elegance of their clothes as much as for the wisdom of their counsel; and where everything, from the length of a fingernail to matters of war, revolved around the impeccable person of the king himself: his moods, his manners, and above all, his tastes.

For Louis was a gourmet – some said, a glutton. Over three hundred people worked in his kitchens, which occupied a whole building adjacent to the palace, and sixty of those prepared nothing but desserts. There was a team of nine who made macarons, plump meringue-like biscuits filled with brightly-coloured pastes of pistachio, liquorice, blackcurrant, or almond. There were confectioners who specialised in subtleties of spun sugar, or who made confits from sugared seeds, or

who prepared orgeat, a paste of scalded almonds, orange-blossom and coriander of which the king was especially fond. I made sure to spend time in the kitchens of these specialists, ostensibly to warm hands frozen from working ice, but actually to see how they worked. Soon, to the king's great satisfaction, I was producing ices of a kind that had never been made before – chilled cordials flavoured with orgeat, or milk ices sandwiched between layers of meringue that looked like macarons, or *sorbetti* that could be held in the hand within a little lattice goblet made of spun sugar, so that they did not drip on your fine court clothes as they melted.

There was no one now to tell me what I could not do: indeed, it soon became clear that novelty was an essential part of the service that Audiger and I provided. Every time the king hosted a collation, or picnic, one table would be set aside for us to fill. Around a centrepiece of carved ice, or a clockwork fountain of fruit cordial, we would arrange a *tableau* of jellies, sorbets, sherbets, chilled liqueurs, perfumed waters, fruits encased in ice, and other frozen delights. And then – perhaps a few hours later, perhaps the following week, depending on the whim of the court, which was to say, the whim of His Most Christian Majesty – we would do it all again, *with not a single repetition of a recipe or flavour*. If an ice of candied flowers was one of the dishes we offered on a Tuesday, at least a fortnight would pass before it graced the king's table again. If slices of peach fashioned into the shape of the sun's rays and flavoured with galingale dazzled the court on a Wednesday, then at least another Wednesday would go by before it shone for a second time. An *eaux glacé* of cubebs and long pepper, or a sorbet of musk-melon cordial sharpened with cassia, might divert the courtiers and their ladies today, but tomorrow it would no longer be a novelty, and the day after that it would bore them.

After I had been at the court a few months, I was summoned to the king's presence. At first I assumed I was to take him an ice: but when I asked how many guests he had with him, I was told there was only one, and that on this occasion no ices were required. I immediately concluded that my last offering – a milk sherbet flavoured with grains of paradise – had in some way been unacceptable. My heart thudding, certain that I was about to be disgraced, I followed the footman through the endless corridors to the presence chamber.

I found the king in conversation with a man whose court coat was dusted with green lichen, his white stockings and the linen buckles of his shoes splashed with

mud. But the king was conversing with him as easily as with any courtier I had ever seen.

“Ah, Dimerco!” Louis exclaimed. I saw that he was holding in his hand a small fruit knife and a pear. “Have you met Monsieur La Quintinie?”

I had heard of the man, a lawyer by training, who supervised the king’s vegetable gardens, but I had not yet met him. We bowed to each other.

“Smell this,” the king instructed, passing me a slice of the pear from his own hand. “Go on – smell it!”

I sniffed deeply, allowing the pear’s aroma to fill my nostrils. It was very good, with a fresh, floral perfume which put me in mind of Muscat grapes. The crescent-shaped slice which the king had cut from the fruit revealed that the skin was rough, almost warty, and tinged with a blush of red like an apple; but the flesh was white and crisp, like a block of marble before it is carved.

“Now try it,” he instructed.

I slipped the slice of pear into my mouth. The fragrance became liquid, filling my palate: the flesh crunched beneath my teeth, releasing more of those wonderful juices.

“Sir, that is magnificent,” I said truthfully, when I had swallowed.

He nodded. “A new variety. Monsieur La Quintinie’s gardeners have been nurturing it for three years, and this is the first time it has fruited.” He was silent a moment. “Truly God is the greatest cook of all, and we can only honour his recipes with as much humility as we can muster.”

“Indeed, sir,” I said, unsure where this was leading.

“Perfection is simplicity, Demirco.”

I bowed my agreement.

“You have a great fondness for snuff and spices and so on, and that is all very well. But the productions of the pottager, plain and unadorned, teach us the glory of God. Could you capture such flavours in an ice?”

“I believe so, Your Majesty,” I said cautiously. “Whether it would retain the aroma that, for example, this pear has, I am not sure. But I would be honoured to try.”

The king spread his hands to indicate the two of us. “La Quintinie and Demirco. Talk to each other. I look forward to tasting the fruits of your pollination.”



And so I learnt the virtue of simplicity, and sent to the king iced *sorbetti* of whatever fruit was most recently in season, adorned with nothing except a little sugar. I discovered that, although the process of freezing might indeed rob fruit of some of its scent, it also had the effect of concentrating the flavour, capturing its essence in a few sweet crystals on the end of a spoon. This was before La Quintinie had completed the vast *potager du roi*, the largest in Europe, which Louis himself considered the most beautiful part of his estate. But the orchards, kitchen gardens and glasshouses he already had at his disposal were producing extraordinary results. Louis loved pears, for example, more than any other fruit, and so La Quintinie set himself to growing the best varieties in France, as well as creating new ones for the king's pleasure. Globular, round, pendant, slender; green, yellow, russet, red; rough-skinned or smooth; with fancy names such as Bon Chretien d'Hiver, Petit Blanquet, Sucree Verte, or the king's absolute favourite, the sweet, highly perfumed Rousselet de Reims – he grew them all, and I was given the precious fruits to do with as I pleased. Once, when I sent the king a simple wooden board containing nothing but half-a-dozen sorbets, each made from a different variety of pear, culminating in a bright pink *sanguinello* or blood pear which had been gently roasted so as to caramelize its flesh, he was so delighted that court business was put aside, Audiger and I were summoned into the royal presence, and the whole court was made to give us an ovation for our achievements. On another occasion I made him a bowl of cherries which, when examined closely, turned out to be twenty individual cherry cream ices which I had frozen one by one in a mould; while my mandarin sorbets – each one served inside the skin of a recently-picked mandarin, the peel apparently unbroken, like a toy ship inside a bottle – were a wonder that the court discussed for days.

Sometimes the king hosted great *divertissements* for up to a thousand guests, when theatres and grottos almost as large as the palace itself were constructed out of papier-mâché for the premieres of specially-commissioned masques and *comédies - ballets*. The fact that these elaborate buildings were to be destroyed after a single night's entertainment was simply another aspect of their magnificence. On these occasions we would create never-to-be-repeated ices in honour of a special guest, in the same way that a chef might name a new sauce after the patron who inspired it. Audiger took seriously the king's implicit command to outdo Cardinal Mazarin's *limonadier*, and even bribed servants in the households of the other great nobles to tell us what their confectioners were up to. It was a happy day, indeed, when we heard

that the famous Signor Morelli had been reduced to copying our own idea of a bitter redcurrant sherbet served on a glistening silver spoon which, when placed in the mouth, turned out to be made of sugar.

For Audiger, though, our success was always mingled with frustration. The foundation of the Guild – his great dream – was bogged down in bureaucracy, and at each step required another bribe to ease it on its way. The king’s steward, Monsieur Le Tellier, saw no difficulty, but referred the matter to the Privy Council. The Council could not consider it without a report from the Principal Clerk. The Principal Clerk referred the issue to the Chancellor. The Chancellor would only become involved if the measure was sponsored by some nobleman. The nobleman Audiger chose, unfortunately, turned out to be sleeping with a lady who was not his wife: hardly an unusual occurrence, but his wife happened to be the granddaughter of the Chancellor... And so it went on, around and around, with no one eager to grant the patent which would create the guild until every last opportunity for profit, advancement, intrigue and corruption had been wrung from its passage.

“But why do you care?” I said at last, when Audiger was ranting yet again about the latest setback. “Why is a Guild so important, if we are making the ices we want to?”

“Have you understood nothing?” Audiger demanded. He strode abruptly to where I was pouring clove-scented milk into a pewter mould. “Who do you think pays for this equipment?” he said furiously. “For your clothes? Your fine hat? These premises? Who feeds our apprentices? Who pays our bribes? Who buys these expensive ingredients you use so liberally?” He dug his fingers into a box of cloves and flung the whole handful into the air. “Do you never even ask yourself such things?”

I stared at him, dumbfounded, as the cloves pattered to the floor. What he had said was absolutely true. I never so much as considered the financial aspect of what we did. It was the one freedom which the slave shares with the gentleman; not to care about money.

“But... does the king not reward us?”

Audiger laughed scornfully. “Sometimes. But never on time, and never enough. He knows that the coin in which he pays us is patronage, not gold. I’ve laid out nearly a thousand *livres* already on this venture – everything I had. And unless we

get the guild – unless we have other men paying us for the right to join; unless we can charge people to take on their sons as apprentices, and then sell them the right to become masters in their turn – I’ll be bankrupt within six months.”

“Audiger, I am so sorry. I had no idea. You are quite right – I have been thoughtless.”

“Well,” Audiger said, his temper vanishing as quickly as it had come, “it does not matter. I have let you concentrate on the ices, rather than on business, since that is clearly where your true skill lies. But if I am a little quarrelsome sometimes, now you know why. If we fail at this, I lose everything.”

It was a small argument, soon forgotten. But it had an important consequence. From then on, I started to take an interest in the financial aspect of our enterprise. I began to understand the curious economics of our trade, in which it was not the ingredients that were costly, or the ice itself, but the accoutrements that went with it: our court clothes, our uniformed staff, the beautiful goblets and gold spoons with which a king or noble might enjoy our work. Ahmad had been right about this, at least: it was our *expertise* that made us worth the exorbitant sums we charged, just as a singer is paid for the beauty of his voice, or a painter for his skill rather than the cost of his paint. And that, of course, was why we must always keep our knowledge secret: once it was shared by others, it would no longer have any value. With this in mind, I persuaded Audiger that we should charge even more for our creations. The king encouraged extravagance in his courtiers: if Louis praised a sorbet, or an ice made with some fashionable new ingredient such as jasmine, mulberry or mint, then sooner or later every courtier worthy of the name would have to grit his teeth and pay through his nose, in order that he might have the pleasure, eventually, of agreeing with his monarch that, yes, it was indeed very fine. By following this plan we gradually accumulated wealth as well as privilege, our coats ever richer, our buttons made of pearl instead of horn – although that did not stop Audiger from hankering after his Guild even so.

But if Audiger had his own private frustration, I also had mine. In Florence I had always imagined that, once I was free to combine flavours and textures as I wished, I would eventually come across a substance which, when frozen, had the smooth richness of cream or melted chocolate, so that my confections would dissolve sweetly and quickly on the tongue like chantilly cream or the paste in the centre of a macaroon, without the tell-tale crunch of frozen ice. But, although I tried freezing

each of those mixtures, and a dozen others besides, the answer always eluded me. There simply seemed to be no way to produce an ice that was truly smooth.

There was one thing, though, at which I did become more proficient. Where the Medici had tended to strictness in moral matters, as befitted Europe's bankers, the court of Louis XIV was more sophisticated. The French nobility married for financial and political reasons: their ardour they reserved for their affairs. Even at the lower levels of the court, no one saw any reason not to indulge in *liaisons*. A talented young Italian – who, if I may say so, looked rather fine in a three-cornered hat – was not going to be ignored for very long.

One day I was preparing iced cordials for the king's guests when a lady of the court paused to watch me at work.

“You are the one who is my countryman,” she said in Italian.

I glanced up, surprised at hearing my native tongue. She was short, plump-faced and dark-eyed, and the expression in her eyes was one of lazy mischief.

“I grew up in Rome,” she explained. “My uncle brought me to Paris to find a husband.”

“And did you?” I said boldly.

She nodded. “Several, as it happens. One of my own, and some who already belonged to others.” She glanced over at where the king stood, surrounded by a group of courtiers.

Now I realised who I was talking to. Even I had heard of Olympe de Soissons, the Italian beauty who counted the king himself among her conquests. She and her four sisters were known as the Mazarinettes, after their uncle, the powerful Cardinal Mazarin.

“What are you making?” she asked, watching me strain the liquid through a muslin.

“A cordial. Muscat pears and ginger, with a little –”

“Make one for me,” she interrupted. “But not that one. I never like to have what everyone else is having.” She wandered off to join the others, but as she did so she gave me a brief, bold, backward glance.

When I had distributed the ginger cordials I made something else, and took it to her.

“What is it?” she asked prettily.

“A chilled tisane of green tea leaves from China, with essence of lime and some seeds,” I said with a bow.

Nodding, she took a sip. It was a recipe I had been working on for a few days, something a little out of the ordinary, using the newest and most fashionable of ingredients. The taste started with a sharp, clean punch of lime, followed by a little rush of smoky green tea leaves. Then there was a suggestion of jasmine, and a faint, warm aftertaste of spicy cardamom.

“Interesting,” was all she said. And then, as I turned away: “And surprisingly refreshing. Thank you.”

The next day I was ordered to prepare enough cordial to make five gallons.

“Five gallons?” I repeated to the footman who brought the order. “Are you sure? That would be enough for the whole court.”

“This is for Madame la Comtesse alone. She desires the one you made her yesterday. Take the ingredients direct to her apartments.”

It was easy to get lost in the sprawling palace, and several times I had to ask directions from one of the periwigged footmen who were standing on duty along the endless corridors. Eventually I found the right door. It was opened by a maid, who ushered me inside. Even by the standards of Versailles, the apartment was sumptuous. Wallpapers of red silk were in turn covered with works of art, the centrepiece of which was a painting of Olympe herself, wearing little more than a few velvet drapes.

The maid showed me into an antechamber containing a bath and a row of steaming ewers. There was nothing else except a screen made of embroidered silk, a chair, and a chaise-longue upholstered in red velvet, on which had been placed a pile of thick linen towels.

“Madame, the confectioner is here,” the maid said, curtsying to the empty room.

“Thank you, Cecile.”

Olympe’s head appeared over the top of the screen. She was unpinning her hair with one hand, shaking out the elaborate curls. “Your cordial was so delicious, I decided I would like to bathe in it,” she said simply. “Would you prepare it for me, please?”

I did as I was bidden. Rather than fill the bath with tea leaves and pieces of lime I set the muslin bags containing the ingredients directly in the water, and allowed

them to steep. The water was quite hot – I would have altered the proportions slightly if I had known; the warmth would bring out more of the flavour of the tea leaves, whereas ice favoured the lime...

“Is it ready?” her voice called.

“It should infuse a little longer.”

“Then I shall infuse with it.” Olympe stepped from behind the screen. She was in her *déshabillé* – a chignon of gossamer-thin lace, loosely tied at the front, hardly reaching the knee. If she noticed my reaction, she gave no sign of it.

“Madame,” I said, bowing my head and preparing to withdraw.

“Wait,” she commanded imperiously, putting one leg into the bath to test the temperature. “I may wish to alter the amounts, and besides, I like to speak Italian when I bathe. Sit in the chair and talk to me.”

I went to the chair and sat down, a little awkwardly. The screen, I now realised, had been positioned so that from where I was sitting it obscured a little – a very little – of the bath; although not, it transpired, the glimpse of Olympe’s naked back as she disrobed and settled into the water with a sigh.

“What is your name?” she asked in Italian.

“Demirco, Madame.”

“I know that. I meant your other name.”

“Carlo.”

There was a long pause, during which I heard a series of quiet splashes as Olympe spooned the water over herself with her hands. The aroma of lime, green tea and jasmine wafted over me. For my own part, I stayed very still.

Eventually she said, “I find I do not want to talk after all, Carlo. Today it seems I am as tongue-tied as you are. You may come and join me.”

“Madame?”

“Join me,” she repeated. “In the bath.”

Later she said, “So. Was that as pleasant as you hoped?”

“Indeed. But you need more lime.”

“I need more love-making.” Like a cat she stretched voluptuously, as easy under my gaze as if we were both still fully clothed. We were on the chaise longue now: I had soon realised that, like the bath and the screen, it had not been placed there by accident.

I reached for her.

“Wait,” she said, putting a hand on my chest. “That was quite good, for a first attempt. But the next time, you need to go more slowly. And to be a little more inventive.”

“Inventive!” I repeated, stung.

She laughed. “Don't be offended. I've done this rather more than you, that's all, and like any other skill it is something you have to practice. Besides, there are fashions in love-making just as in anything else, and national specialities as well. The French are rather good at this; almost as good as they are at making pastries and desserts.”

“What can a Frenchman know that an Italian doesn't?” I said curtly.

She smiled. “That's what I'm about to show you.”

When she had done showing me, and I was finally taking my leave, she added, “Next time, when you come, you must bring some ices, and I will show you a use for those as well that perhaps has not occurred to you.”

Audiger was furious. “You were seen leaving her apartment. Do you want to get us both banished from the court?”

“They're all doing it,” I said. “Why shouldn't I?”

Audiger threw up his hands. “Because their positions are secure, and ours is not.”

“I don't care,” I said. “I'm not going to stop visiting her just in case somebody objects. I can't live like that.”

“Then you're a fool,” Audiger said shortly. “A court is no place to fall in love.”

“Who said anything about love?” I said it without thought, as any young man might, but I also knew that it was true: the sliver of ice was too deeply embedded in me for that.

“Very well,” Audiger said reluctantly. “But be careful not to lose your heart. Or you might end up losing another part of you as well – your head, which unlike that other organ cannot be mended.”

I nodded. I had known that Audiger would not be able to forbid me this. The balance between us had changed during these years at court. I had everything I

wanted now – wealth, position, my bodily appetites sated by one of the greatest lovers of the age, the patronage of the most powerful king in Europe.

The next time I visited Olympe I strode confidently to her door, bearing a tray on which were arranged four glass goblets containing sorbets. Each was a different colour, and a different flavour: persimmon, pistachio, white peach, and golden honey. There were no spoons.

I raised my hand to knock, but as I did so a footman appeared as if from nowhere and inserted himself between me and the wood.

“Madame la Comtesse is not to be disturbed.”

I indicated the ices. “I have brought her these.”

“And I will see that she gets them,” he said, deftly removing the tray. I did not protest. I recognised the man now: he was one of the king’s personal servants. As I walked away I heard the door open as he slipped inside with the ices.

I waited nearby. Sure enough, after half an hour or so I saw the king walking away from Olympe’s rooms, down the vast staircase that led to his own apartments. He was tugging at a shirt cuff, as if the garment had only recently been put on.

I went to retrieve the tray. Olympe was in her bath, but her maid said she would talk to me.

“The king was impressed with your ices today,” Olympe said without preamble when she saw me. “Indeed, they were just the refreshment he required. It’s rare these days he manages a second bout of love-making: he’s pleased with himself, and that means he’s pleased with me. Thank you.”

I stared at her, taken aback by her matter-of-fact tone. “You are his lover still? But I thought – ”

“That he lay in the arms of Madame de la Valliere? He does – mostly. But there are times when she is indisposed, or when he is disposed to variety. Or sometimes he flirts with a new lady-in-waiting and finds himself rebuffed: then he brings his wounded vanity to me to be restored. There are many reasons why a man may choose to lie with a woman, and not all of them are straightforward. At the moment the king finds that he has a certain nostalgia for my company.”

“Then – you will not want me to come back?” I said, my own vanity a little pricked.



Olympe laughed. “Not at all. With you, Carlo, the arrangement is completely straightforward, and therein lies its charm. I am tired today, and I hope that the king may return to me tomorrow, but come back in a few days’ time and we will see how things stand.” She cast a mischievous look at my breeches. “As it were. But in any case, it isn’t fair that I keep you all to myself.”

“What do you mean?”

“Simply that you lack experience. No, don’t look crestfallen – we were all in the same boat once, and besides, for someone like you the problem is easily addressed. The palace is full of women who would be happy to be your tutors in this.”

“It is?” I said, astounded.

“Of course. Why do you think Madame de Corneil sends for your cordials every evening? Why do you think Madame Rossoulet is always inviting you to cards? And why do you think I made it my business to seduce you before any of them?”

“You mean... you were proving a point?”

Olympe smiled. “Amongst other things.” She spooned water over herself.

“And you would not be jealous if I slept with other women?”

“Jealousy is for the common people,” she said matter-of-factly. “The people whose crumbs of pleasure are so few and so infrequent that they must squabble over them like beggars fighting over a crust of bread. Here at the court, where we are surfeited with the possibility of pleasant sensations, we can afford to be rather more discerning.” She glanced at me, amused. “But if you are sensible, you will allow me to guide you in this. Just as your choice of a cologne or your appreciation of a *sarabande* speaks volumes about whether you are a true connoisseur, so your choice of lovers will indicate to those around you whether you are a person of refined tastes or an imposter.”

“An imposter?” I said uneasily. I was, I suppose, still a little fearful that I might betray my origins by a false step.

She nodded. “No one but a brute, for example, would ever seduce a servant. To lie with someone coarse, however willing they are, is to risk coarsening yourself. And whatever happens, you must never allow yourself to get carried away. Love is all very well, but just as hunger does not excuse bad manners at table, so passion does not excuse behaving like an oaf in bed. An excess of emotion in a love affair is just as ugly as an excess of rosemary in a dish, or an excess of violence in a piece of music.

It is possible – indeed, it is necessary – to display elegance in one’s *amours*, just as in the rest of one’s affairs.”

She spoke all this in a light, indolent voice, as if the subject were one which she had considered on so many occasions previously that there was nothing more to say on the matter. It was the way they spoke around the court, particularly the women: I had heard it described as *préciosité*, and the women who cultivated it in the salons and drawing rooms of fashionable Paris were known as *les précieuses*. But the glint of mischief in her eyes indicated that this was a project that she actually took very seriously indeed.

I bowed ironically. “I would be most grateful for any instruction you can give me in this matter, madame.”

“Good,” she said. “Then that’s settled. Bring me an ice in two days’ time, and in the meantime I will give some thought as to who your next conquest should be.”

And so began the next stage of my education. Just as in Florence I had experimented with different flavours and techniques of ice, so here in Versailles I sampled the different tastes and flavours of love. Olympe was right: I soon discovered that there were many women at court who were only too pleased to be my accompanists. I discovered something else as well, which was that I liked women, and that they generally liked me in return. That may sound a curious statement, but it was by no means self-evident: many of the court’s most renowned lovers seemed almost weary of their affairs, as if falling in love were a duty as arduous and as inevitable as attending yet another ball or dance. Occasionally Olympe had to caution me against overenthusiasm – “If you go around with a grin on your face like that people will think you are a simpleton” – but in general she treated me with an amused indulgence, and for my own part I soon learned how to present to the world that air of amused, lofty cynicism which was the great fashion of the age.

I found, too, that if a woman needed to be wooed, I had the perfect means at my disposal. There was nothing so persuasive, it seemed, as announcing that I was trying to perfect a new flavour or combination of ices, so far untasted, and that I needed the help of the lady in question to sample my work and give me her opinion. There was a certain skill, and a pleasure, too, in matching the sorbet to the woman: the younger, more innocent types – not that there was any such thing as true

innocence, in that court – could be tempted with more sophisticated tastes, while older women preferred the innocence and youth of simple flavours.

As I became more accomplished, so I became even more inventive, both in the ices I made for the king and those I produced for my lovers. I still produced the single-fruit sorbets of which the king was so fond, of course. But once I had plucked every fruit that existed in nature, I proceeded to create new, imaginary orchards and pottagers of my own, wherein grew such extravagances as a tree that was half lemon and half lime, or a bush that fruited with rye-bread, or a plant whose pollen was the eggs of the Aquitaine sturgeon-fish. Even the flowerbeds gave up their blossoms for sorbets of scented geranium leaf or lavender, or lent their aromas to perfumed *granites* of lemon balm, violet or rose. That these tastes could exist at all, let alone locked within the frozen crystals of my *eaux glacées*, never ceased to amaze the king's guests: my star rose ever higher, and my name became known even beyond the confines of the court.

And then one day I took a dish of strawberry ice flavoured with white pepper to the king, and although I did not realise it at first, my life was changed completely.



