

Names changed to protect original manuscript.

Chapter Nine

Charles Wellington

Amelia was quick to display her fascination with Charles' historical knowledge, especially since she hadn't realized his depth of research into her family heritage. She had been looking forward to dinner with Charles at Marchand's, thinking she would remain unnoticed by local friends or relatives unlikely to be dining outside of Charleston on a Tuesday night. She would finally have an evening with Charles alone.

Maurice Lalique and his French Huguenot background captivated their dinner conversation over a plate of Oysters Rockefeller. Amelia gained more understanding about her great-great-great grandfather, Maurice Lalique, from Charles' dinner conversation than she had ever learned from her own family. Her education in history had only scratched the surface about the persecution of the French compared to what Charles told her

"I remember studying about this in college, in one of my religion classes at Yale. Actually, I had to do a research paper on "religious persecution," so I was in up to my elbows with French Huguenot stuff. You know, I had to research the subject from various perspectives," Charles said. "The rise of Protestantism in the 1500's aroused the enmity of the Roman Catholic Church, the patriarch of Europe at the time. Those who broke away from Catholicism to follow the teachings of John Calvin or Martin Luther, radical church reformers in their day, were deemed 'heretics.' Did you know the word 'Huguenots' developed from 'heretics' as a profanity? Protestantism attracted nobility, powerful merchants, and working

industrialists of the time. They all took issue with the domination of the state by The Vatican.”

Amelia wondered about her French ancestors, and whether upstanding families like the Laliques had been adversaries with the Catholics. Charles continued. “Meanwhile, the Protestants and the Catholics forged ahead in the name of God, committing atrocities to each other, ironically, each forgetting the one Advocate who should have been held in common to keep the body of ‘believers’ united.”

“When did all this happen?” Amelia asked.

Charles didn’t hesitate to think about history dates. “Well, these religious battles went on for about two hundred years. There was an exile of refugees for over 150 years during the 16th and 17th centuries, when most of France had been laid to waste. The French people lived a nightmare of ongoing destruction. I don’t believe the wars were really about religion. The premise of my paper was the greed and power of families who wanted to be in control. They just used religion as their justification for murder to bring each other off the throne.”

“I wonder just how much my Lalique ancestors were involved. I really want to find out.”

“You’ll probably stumble across the information somewhere, maybe in some of the journals and diaries you’ve got now from the museum,” Charles replied. “The worst part of those battles culminated in a tragic loss of life. It’s pathetic how wars were fought over religious beliefs, with mind-boggling destruction. One massacre took place in Vassy, France in the late 1500’s that resulted in thousands of deaths and hundreds of Huguenots emigrating to America. In fact, they formed the first Huguenot colony right here in South Carolina.”

Amelia heard Charles' words, but was deep in thought about her great-great-great grandfather. She realized that her ancestors had fled religious persecution in their homeland, and came to America seeking freedom. How ironic that they became slave owners. She wondered how they ever justified that.

"I'm not going to tell you much more after this, but I'll end with this part of the story. The Queen Mother, Regent Catherine de Medici, was concerned about the potential loss of her Catholic family's royal power to the threatening Huguenots. She attempted to arrange a compromise to enable the Catholics and Protestants to practice their faith unrestricted.

"To make a long story short, she tried to arrange a marriage between Duke Henry of Navarre to her daughter Marguerite de Valois, since Henry had a claim to the throne after her children. At this wedding 'celebration,' the worst of all wars in those dark times happened--the St. Bartholomew Day Massacre. It was in 1572. Literally thousands of unsuspecting Huguenots converged on Paris for the wedding celebration of Henry the Huguenot to Catherine de Medici's daughter. Charles IX, Catherine de Medici's timid son, was coerced by his mother to 'eliminate the plague of the Huguenots in Paris.' Prince Charles was ordered to use his troops to slaughter Protestants at the wedding. On Henry's wedding day, the queen's troops slaughtered nearly twenty thousand Huguenots on the streets of Paris, some in their homes. Catherine de Medici personally inspected the carnage the next morning as she walked through the streets of her city to see what had been accomplished."

"Let's not talk about this any more over dinner." Amelia shuttered. "I really do want to know about it. I just think about what my ancestors went through, and how they must have fled for their lives..." She started thinking about Namu's journal, and his feelings about his life having been seized in his African homeland.

“You know, Charles, it’s as if my family shared a common bond with Namu’s family. I really want to get to know more about grandfather Maurice, and find out how he treated his ‘slaves.’ If he had buried three of them within his own family cemetery, he must have been a different kind of slave owner than one would otherwise think.”

“Amelia, I don’t doubt that. I’m really curious to find out what you discover about him in your research project. I’m sure your findings will be fascinating” Amelia appreciated Charles’ sincere interest; it was an uncommon trait compared to past men in her life.

Charles pursued her research project. “You might run across some interesting things that happened after the slaughters in Paris. I read that Pope Gregory III was so jubilant when the news reached the Vatican about the lives of over 20,000 Huguenots purged from Paris, he announced to his people, “God had been pleased to be merciful.” The Pope even ordered the people of Rome to pray that God would rid the Huguenot plague from his entire kingdom of France. He even held a thanksgiving procession for what had been accomplished by Catherine de Medici, and he thanked God for ‘granting the Catholic people a glorious triumph over a perfidious race.’ “

Amelia burst out. “My ancestors were considered a treacherous race? French blood against French blood, although we were all of the same bloodline! What sense does that make?”

“Of course it made no sense. That massacre of the Protestants was such a triumph that Pope Gregory III ordered scenes painted in the Vatican showing the victory over the Huguenots. He even made a special coin commemorating it. It was a medal, stamped with a scene carrying a symbolic spiritual message of the Huguenots’ downfall.”

“A coin? What kind of medal?” Amelia’s interest piqued as she remembered something on the list Lawrence had given her from the museum collections. She was sure she had seen a French coin on the list, and thought she had even seen a photo of the coin in one of the museum files.

“Apparently the coin has an impression of an ‘exterminating angel’ piercing a Huguenot with his sword.”

“It’s incredible that you remember studying all this, Charles, especially that coin. I’m going to look in the files Lawrence gave me from the museum. I do believe there is something in there about a French coin. I’m going to see if these are one and the same.”

“That would be amazing. You have to let me know what you find.” Charles reached over and touched her hand. “Enough of all this history talk. Did you enjoy your dinner?” Marchand’s was famous for their signature shrimp and crab dishes, which they had both devoured over talk of the Huguenots with not even a word about the food.

“Charles, it was delicious. But I was so engrossed in everything you’ve been telling me; I have to say that I enjoyed our conversation even more so.” Amelia smiled. “Thanks to your knowledge about all this, I believe you’ve given me greater insight into my family. I imagine that Maurice Lalique was infinitely thankful that in this new world, he could practice his faith without fear of being imprisoned in dungeons, sent to the galleys, or being burned at the stake for his religious beliefs.” She paused. “I don’t think my ancestor could have believed that people should be in perpetual bondage to another. However, I can also imagine that he did not deny contradictions in his own life as a slave owner.”

Amelia remembered one of the letters she had read from Jean Lalique to his father Maurice. “In fact, Jean even wrote his father to say that he felt Namu should be a freed man,

and he looked forward to that day. Maurice replied in another letter that Namu's education was very important, which was why he provided it to him, and that he was trying to help Namu build a future. I have no doubt that Maurice struggled with his own issues of needing laborers as his reason for owning slaves, but also wanting to help create a good life for them. But to me, that still doesn't justify slavery." She grimaced at the thought, wondering if she was the first in her family to think this way about her family's history in slavery.

"Isn't it ironic how the immigrants who came to America under circumstances like that contributed to making Charleston the city it has become? Here I lived in France for fifteen years, with no real knowledge of my family's background. I do believe that the loss of France from religious wars became the gain of America. So, even though it was horrific at the time, something great has come from it."

"Oh, I agree." Charles looked at Amelia again. "Looking at that thought from another perspective, I think about Africa. Think of all the people who were brought to America by forced migration. The loss of Africa definitely became the gain of America."

"Ever since I've read Namu's journal, it's as if my conscience has been choked on behalf of my own ancestors. That's one of the reasons I am so interested in this new African project you presented to me. I feel like I want to contribute to their growth, to help compensate for their losses."

"In some ways, the persecution of your ancestors has similarities to the enslavement of Africans. Both resulted in loss of freedom, and both denied a basic human dignity that is inherent in a free man's life, to be in control of his own existence."

Charles and Amelia sat for another hour, slowly sipping their coffee, enjoying their time together. They discussed other details about the new African project, which led Amelia

to conclude that she was definitely going to make an official commitment. Charles told her he would take care of the paperwork and would let her know exactly what would be required once he heard back from the foundation.

It had been years since Amelia felt fulfilled through conversation, or since she had shared any intellectual thought with a man, since Joseph passed away. She actually cherished the fact that she could communicate with Charles, and exchange views. She had come to realize that she could trust him.

Amelia looked up at Charles and saw his eyes were on her.

“Are you ready to go?” Charles asked her softly.

Charles and Amelia thanked the maitre d’ as they left Marchand’s, and strolled toward his BMW. A pleasant breeze swept up from Charleston Harbor. The intoxicating fragrance of summer flowers and salt air mixed with Charles’ easy presence assuaged Amelia in a way she hadn’t experienced since she lost Joseph.

Charles’ sunroof slid open revealing a million twinkling stars while he put in a CD of Amelia’s favorite classical music. Charles was in no hurry to end the evening, and drove an unusual leisurely speed back to Lalique Plantation.

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