



In the Name of Liberty

Owen Johnson

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IN SEARCH OF THE REVOLUTION

In the month of August of the year 1792 the Rue Maugout was a distorted cleft in the gray mass of the Faubourg St. Antoine, apart from the ceaseless cry of life of the thoroughfare, but animated by a sprinkling of shops and taverns. No. 38, like its neighbors, was a twisted, settled mass of stone and timber that had somehow held together from the time of Henry II. The entrance was low, pinched, and dank. On one side a twisted staircase zig-zagged into the gloom. On the other a squat door with a grating in the center, like a blind eye, led into the cellar which la Mère Corniche, the concierge, let out at two sous a night to travelers in search of an economical resting-place. Beyond this rat-hole a murky glass served as a peep-hole, whence her flattened nose and little eyes could dimly be distinguished at all hours of the day. This tenebrous entrance, after plunging onward some forty feet, fell against a wall of gray light, where the visitor, making an abrupt angle, passed into the purer air of a narrow court. Opposite, the passage took up its interrupted way to a farther court, more spacious, where a dirt-colored maple offered a ragged shelter and a few parched vines gripped the yellow walls. The tiled roofs were shrunk, the ridges warped, the walls cracking and bulging about the distorted windows. Along the roofs the dust and dirt had gradually accumulated and given birth to a few blades of gray-green plants. Nature had slipped in and assimilated the work of man, until the building, yielding to the weight of time and the elements, appeared as a hollow sunk in fantastic cliffs, where, from narrow, misshapen slits, the dwellers peered forth. About the maple swarmed a troop of children, grimy, bare, and voluble. In the branches and in the ivy a horde of sparrows shrilled and fought, keeping warily out of reach of the lank cats that slunk in ambush.



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