



THE MAZE

A Thomas Pichon Novel
A.J.B. Johnston



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by A. J. B. Johnston

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Excerpt

Part II

Escape

Château Le Mesnil, Brittany
June 1727

It's a rush, a hurry of hand and eye. Thomas silently thanks Madame Dufour's staff for lighting the candles in the sconces of his room while he was downstairs. What he has to do would not be easily done in the darkness.

He flings open the double doors of the wardrobe and grabs his dark brown cloak from its hook. For an instant he recalls the kindly Russian tailor, Pierre, saying as he handed over the prized cloak, "This will keep you warm, mark my words, warm and safe." It had better, thinks Thomas.

Thomas spreads the great cloak on the floor beside his trunk. Only a day or two has passed since the elderly servant and a much younger one carefully placed this trunk in Thomas's room. It brings a trace of a smile to think how those servants would disapprove of Thomas's burrowing unceremoniously through the layers of carefully packed breeches, chemises, cravats and socks. He pulls out two of each and tosses them on to the outspread cloak. He spots a white silk mouchoir and takes that as well.

Down at the bottom of the trunk Thomas grasps a well-worn pair of shoes. Thrusting two fingers into the toe spaces, he pulls from each a small leather sack of coins. He brought the stash along on the journey into the hinterland just in case. Just in case.

Thomas was thinking of highwaymen, but look. The unexpected happens much more often than people allow. Not in his wildest imaginings could he conceive of what has happened over the past day and a half. One cannot take precautions enough against the many risks and dangers in life. Thomas tosses the shoes in the trunk and thrusts the sacks of coins into the pockets of his veston.

He removes his silver-grey wig and places it atop the pile of clothes, and then, going back to the wardrobe, he pulls down his two best hats. Stacking one inside the other as best he can, he stuffs the wig into the cavity, grabs opposite sides of his cloak and closes them over to make a great sack.

With the giant dark brown shape pressed to his chest with his left arm, Thomas goes to the closest sconce and pulls out a lit candle with his right hand. He's going to need some light. Using his foot to prop open the door, Thomas peeks out into the hall. He cannot go in the direction of the grand stone staircase, where he might encounter his wife, Marguerite, or their hostess, Madame Dufour, so he sets off the other way. He'd noticed servants coming and going through a slim door in the middle of the hall that must contain a set of stairs connecting all levels of the château.

Facing that door Thomas puts the candle between his teeth, its melting wax spills onto his veston and the outside of the bundled cloak. The droppings matter not. What matters is that he keep the candle from going out. He tilts his head upward as best he can, to keep the flame from guttering out, a trickle of burning wax scorching his lower lip. He clenches his eyes and mutters a moan, but manages to open the door with his free hand and kick it wide with his foot. He grabs the candle out of his teeth. He spits, trying to rid his mouth of the taste of wax.

Yes, there are narrow stairs as he guessed. Both up and down. He lets drop his lump of clothes on the narrow landing and shuts the door behind him. He kicks off his shoes and leaves them beside the lump. Candle in hand Thomas pads down the wooden steps, his socked feet barely make a sound. He's sure no one knows where he is or what he is up to, but timing is everything and he has no idea how much time he is going to need.

At the bottom of the stairs the narrow door opens into a dimly lit corridor. The only light beyond the candle he is holding is a flickering glow at the far end of the hall. Thomas advances toward that other light. He finds a cul-de-sac. There, slouched on a wooden chair sipping a bottle of wine, is the wide-eyed servant from the salon. He no longer has on his livery coat. He has a blanket pulled up to his chin and appears to be half asleep.

"There you are." Thomas strikes a masterly tone of voice.

"Great God," the servant cries. "Why are you here?" He looks down at Thomas's socked feet. His eyes go even wider than they usually are.

"Up and about, come now. Let's go. Chore for you."

The servant looks Thomas up and down. He puckers his lips then shakes his head. He defiantly takes a nip from the bottle. "Don't think so. My day's done. Madame Dufour said as much not a quarter hour ago." The man allows his chair to come down slowly upon all four legs. The blanket falls off his chest, down to his lap. He has a firm grip on the bottle of wine.

"And does Madame Dufour know that you're hiding down here drinking her good wine? Which you have stolen from her cellar holdings?"

The domestic's eyes narrow. He takes a hurried sip.

"I thought not. Up you get. I'm in the law in Paris. I know a sly fellow when I see him."

The servant appraises Thomas from head to foot. The absence of shoes makes him tilt his head.

"Hear me out, my friend." Thomas lowers his voice. "You do something for me and I'll do something for you. How about it?"

The servant is impassive. That tells Thomas he is at least open to hearing what the proposition is.

"I'll give you a coin, a full écu."

The man puts down the bottle and stands his height. Out comes the hand, palm side up. "Let's see the coin. I don't trust your type."

Thomas shakes his head. "When you're done. Then it's yours."

"Done what?"

Thomas pulls the man close. Though they are the only ones in the dimly lit space, he will make sure no one else could possibly hear what he has to say.

"I'm not sure," says the servant, recoiling the instant Thomas's whispering is done. "It's not.... I'm not supposed...."

"I'll double it. Two écus."

"It'll take me a few minutes."

"Be off then. I'll be there as soon as I can. Have it ready, do you understand?"

The man nods.

"Tell no one. Understood?"

The servant takes his time but nods again. He turns and hurries away.

—

Thomas retraces his steps back along the corridor. His candle is well melted down. The flame is only a couple of inches above his hand, but the wax is no longer burning him when it drops. What now spills builds up on the base of wax already laid down.

So far, so good. Things are in motion, yet there remains much to be done. Thomas climbs the servants' stairwell two steps at a time.

On the landing he has to take the candle between his teeth again, the flame now close to his nose. Yet what else can he do? He needs the cloak-wrapped bundle of clothes and requires both hands to get them up to his chest. It takes two tries but then he has everything in his arms and is off, climbing the next flight of stairs.

Ten steps up and he can see no landing or door looming above. Where the stairs come to an end is nothing but wide open, dark space. Oh, but now he can make out a dim flickering glow. Some of the beams that hold up the roof of the château are faintly visible way up overhead.

Thomas cannot risk giving away his advance. He has no idea who or how many might be up here in what he assumes is the servants' sleeping quarters. He places his bundle into the recess be-

tween two separate stairs and pushes hard. The bulky shape holds fast. He takes the candle out of his mouth. It takes two puffs to blow it out. He'll relight it or get a larger one from the quarters above. Thomas stretches out like a salamander might. Slowly, he peeks above the level of what he assumes is the attic floor.

A girl with upraised brows stares back. Thomas vaguely recalls her face. He saw her somewhere in the château, maybe this evening or yesterday. He sees the needle and thread in her hands. She's making repairs to a chemise, the lamp on the candle stand beside her wooden chair her source of light.

"Not supposed to be up here. This attic is just for us women and girls."

"Maybe so." Thomas clambers up to stand on the attic floor. He now towers over the seated girl. She shrugs. Thomas isn't sure if the shrug is meant for him or for the rules of the château.

He hears a tumbling on the dark stairwell from which he has just come. He cannot see but knows that his cloak and enclosed bundle of clothes must have taken off down the steps. He'll collect his things on his way down. Thomas turns back to the girl seated in the chair, who has gone back to repairing the chemise.

"Hélène." Thomas makes a questioning gesture with his hands.

The girl seems to think it over, then tilts her head sharply toward the darkness. Thomas squints to where she indicates; the other end of the servants' quarters is all black. He cannot see a thing down there.

"You're sure?"

"She is there."

"Thank you." He turns to head that way, then stops. "Take your lamp?"

"You have to bring it back."

"I shall."

Into the gloom of the far end Thomas goes, the lamp lighting the way. With each step the wobbling glow allows him to make out empty beds left and right. Yes, this is where the female staff of the château bed down for the night, after their chores are done.

The surrounds of the first few beds are tied back. There is no one in any of those beds. He continues on.

“Hélène?”

Thomas peers toward the bed on the left. His outstretched lamp reveals no one there. But he hears a low moan and the sound of fabric stirring from the other side.

“Hélène?” Thomas says softly as he goes to the bed on the right.

He sees a shape, a pale form. Lowering the lamp to waist high, he stretches out his hand. There is a woman lying on top, not beneath, the cover. She’s dressed in a dark blue skirt and just a chemise. Her knees are pulled up, curled like a little girl. Thomas holds the candle closer to her face. She blinks at the light. He recognizes those eyes, but, uncharacteristically, there are tracks of tears on her cheeks.

“Come on, get up, we have to go.” He sets down the lamp on the floor. He takes both her hands in a single clasp.

“What are you doing here?” Hélène’s voice is distant and throaty. She is stirring out of sleep, or deep sadness.

“Come on.” He pulls her up. She doesn’t resist, but she doesn’t help. It’s a strain to get her to her feet.

Hélène reclaims her hands. “I’m ruined because of you. Because of that.” She points at his groin as he bends down to get the lamp.

Thomas has to smile. “Just get your things.”

Hélène shakes her head like she disagrees. But then she runs her fingers through her hair and adjusts the waist of her skirt. She slips on the shoes her feet find beneath the bed. She starts to set off toward the steps. Thomas lays a hand on her shoulder.

“Your things.”

“This ... this is all I own. Marguerite took back everything I had.”

“Oh.” Thomas puts an arm round her waist and presses her to his side. They come to the servant girl seated in the dark. In the light of the lamp he carries Thomas sees she is still waiting where

she was, needle and thread in her hands, chemise across her lap, waiting for the return of the light.

Thomas sets the lamp back on her table. "Thank you."

The girl looks at the lamp, then at Thomas and Hélène. "Need it more than me." She hands the lamp to Hélène. "I can finish this tomorrow."

"Thank you Suzette." Hélène blinks at the girl. "It's Suzette, isn't it?"

"It is. I won't tell anyone you've left. I won't. But where do you go? It's night and we're in the woods."

Hélène shrugs. She is tugged along by Thomas who is already one step down.

"The lamp," he says.

"You carry it then."

The couple halts at the bottom of the steps and Thomas hands the lamp back to Hélène. He bends to rebundle his strewn clothes inside his great Parisian cape.

Lamp extinguished and set down on the wooden floor beside the doorway, Thomas and Hélène peek out. They can see that there's a bit of light from the moon overhead, even though it's behind a giant cloud. The darker the better at this point. All that's illuminating the brick courtyard are two torches in their brackets. They make the bricks appear orange in their dim, flickering light.

The flight across the courtyard is a soft slap of hurrying shoes, two bodies trying to run as one. Between them both sets of arms hold up the bundle of Thomas's things.

"Where to?" she whispers close to his ear.

"Shush."

A small door beside the large double stable doors opens a crack. A hand beckons Thomas and Hélène. The wide-eyed servant is holding a beaming lantern aloft. The man shakes his head as he quickly closes the door. He takes a step toward Thomas and presents an angry face. "You didn't say anything about her."

"Be silent." Thomas snaps his fingers. "Is it ready or not?"

"What's this about? I cannot—"

"Not your worry. Where is it?"

"Through there." The servant points at an interior wooden door. "I'm taking a big risk. I want my money. Now."

"What's he saying, Thomas?"

Thomas gives H       a tiny shake of his head. He turns to the servant. "Show us first. Nothing until we're set."

The servant strikes a pose, chin upraised, a hand on each hip. "I'll not be taken."

"Enough!" Thomas shouts. "Bastard," he mutters under his breath.

"Here," he says to H      , pressing the bundle against her chest. She's startled, but gets her arms around it.

Thomas goes to the servant, whose wide eyes narrow to a squint when Thomas places a single finger only inches from his face.

"First, we make sure there really *is* a carriage waiting."

A second finger shoots up. "She and I get in."

A third finger. "*You* open the stable doors."

The fourth finger. "That's when you get your coin."

"*Coinssss*. You promised two   cus."

"Yes, two. It will be two."

The servant hesitates before he makes a quick nod. His expression suggests he's been duped before. He leads Thomas and H       over to the door that connects with the main part of the stables. He pulls it open and stands back. Thomas takes the lantern from the man's hand as he steps by.

The smell of hay and horses is strong. The animals are clearly disturbed by the coming of people and the light. There are four wooden stalls, with horses standing and craning over their gates in two of them. They are whinnying and tossing their long necks up and down in the excitement.

Thomas hoists the lantern high to see what else is in this structure. It's a building of rustic stone, not smooth-cut limestone like the main part of the ch  teau. Wooden pillars support the upper

level, which is overflowing with hay. A dropped lantern, or an errant flame of any kind, would send the whole thing up. Thomas casts a glance at the candle burning inside the lantern's glass. He goes to the nearest post and hangs the lantern on a hook.

There are three coaches in the stables. It's the farthest one, a small, open, two-wheeled black carriage that has a horse harnessed up, a single horse. The horse is chestnut brown. It's pawing the ground, sniffing the air.

"It'll do."

"Do? That's a fine calèche. Do you understand the risk I'm taking here?"

"Not really." Thomas puts a hand on the servant's chest and gives him a light push out of the way, then takes the cloaked bundle from Hélène. He pulls down the little iron step for her. "Up you get."

Hélène puts a foot on the step and pulls herself up by grasping the side of the calèche. Thomas tosses the bundle up to her. She wedges it into the narrow space behind the bench seat. Thomas climbs up and reaches for the reins. He shakes them up and down. He's not sure what comes next. He's never in his life ridden a horse, let alone been a coachman handling reins.

"You don't know horses, do you?" Hélène is shaking her head.

"Not yet."

"Not yet?" Hélène grins and laughs. She takes the lines out of Thomas's hands and at once tightens the tension between her and the horse. The harnessed horse whinnies at the tightening. Hélène utters soothing coos and chucks. The horse settles down. "I grew up in a coaching inn, remember?"

"I do." Thomas winks at her. He feels better without the responsibility of the reins. He taps the pockets of his veston just to reassure himself that he still has the leather pouches of coins. "We're set."

The ancient servant steps up on the iron foothold. He's seen Thomas tap his pockets. "I'll have my due."

"Doors first." Thomas points at the two wide doors beyond the horse's snorting nose.

"And watch you take off? No. The money now or I'll wake the night."

"Give it to him." Hélène gives Thomas a push. "We have to go."

"Step off," Thomas directs.

The man does as he is told. Thomas brings out one pouch and searches its coins with his longest fingers. He pulls out a single one. "Your écu." He tosses it through the air.

The servant catches it and studies it in the dim light. "And the other?"

"When the doors are opened and we roll."

"Your word?"

"Of course." Under his breath, Thomas mutters, "And what word is that?"

This time, Hélène elbows Thomas in the ribs. "Give it to him. We have to go."

"All right." Thomas feels for another écu. "Here." He throws it to the servant. "The doors." Thomas makes a widening movement with his two hands.

"If you're caught, I did not help at all. Agreed?"

"Agreed," Thomas says.

"Agreed," Hélène repeats.

The man goes to the double doors. He shows his age, for the opening of the doors proves to be not a simple task. He lifts the long plank that bars both doors from the inside. He carries it with wavering difficulty over to the wall on the left. Hobbled now he retraces his steps and lifts the iron latch.

"Hurry up," Thomas calls out.

"Hold on. Nearly done."

The servant pulls the first door open wide, and pushes it all the way to the left. He trudges back to pull and push the other one. Thomas measures the half-opening with his eyes. He compares it to the width of the calèche they're in.

"That's enough," he whispers to Hélène.

"Not yet," she says.

The servant jerks the second door partway open. He bends and puts his shoulder to it. The opening widens with each staggered step, though there are still a half dozen more feet until the second door is pushed as far as it could go.

"Now," says Thomas.

Hélène cracks the reins and yells. The horse startles and rears. Hélène snaps the reins again and gives a whistle. The carriage jerks and starts to roll. The aged servant leaps out of the way. "Hey!" he shouts.

The calèche jumps into the opened space. The horse strides out of the stables with ease, but the coach does not. It catches on both sides. There's an awful scraping sound. The little carriage wedges to a halt.

"You've wrecked Madame's calèche," the servant shouts. He tries to grab Thomas.

Thomas thrusts out a leg. He kicks at the servant to move him back. "Away," he yells. The old man grabs hold of Thomas's leg.

Hélène cracks the whip and screams some new guttural sound at the horse. The horse whinnies as it rears. There's a loud creak, a metallic scrape. Then a crack. But the calèche begins to move. Thomas reaches out and undoes the servant's grip upon his leg. The old man tumbles to the ground.

The carriage is all the way through. With building speed the horse's hooves hit the bricks of the courtyard. It's a clattering, swelling sound. Hélène holds the reins taut to steer the horse on a sweeping turn. The calèche straightens out. They are heading for the portcullised gate.

Behind them the servant cries out, "Thieves! Stop, thieves!"

Thomas glances back. The old fellow is now standing in the centre of the brick courtyard brandishing an upraised fist. He's yelling at the top of his voice.

"Have to give him his due," Thomas says to Hélène. "He earned his coins."

"Him? What about me?" She makes as if to hand the reins over to Thomas.

“Maybe later.” He half stands and grabs her by the shoulders.
He kisses her hard on the mouth.

“Can’t see.” She pushes him away.

Thomas beams back. Always a surprise, is she not?

Praise for *Thomas, A Secret Life*

"This is a fine novel. The blending of history and fiction is exceptionally well handled."

The Antigoniish Review

"Johnston deftly presents an unrepentant, unsavoury and unreliable [character] in an even-handed manner."

Atlantic Books Today

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The Maze ~ A Thomas Pichon Novel

Getting what he wants turns Thomas's world upside down, forcing him to start over – again.

Like the streets of his 18th-century Paris home, Thomas Pichon's life is full of twists and turns. Despite winning his wife's forgiveness for an extramarital affair, Thomas and his lover, Hélène, are caught a second time, and decide that it's time for new beginnings – in London. As a writer, Thomas tries to make literary sense of the chaos of the life and language of a city teeming with excitement and danger. Hélène finds her own way out of the maze.

After thirty-plus years studying and writing about 18th-century French colonial history in Acadia – for which he was invested by France with the title Chevalier of the Ordre des Palmes Académiques – A.J.B. Johnston has turned his hand to fiction. For *The Maze*, Johnston did extensive research on 18th-century London.



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