Envoy to the Terror

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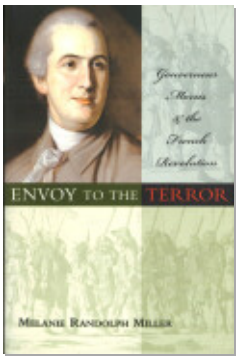

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Chapter Fourteen

Departure

Morris, though he was well aware of the animosity against him, apparently knew nothing of Cusack's letter and the resulting demand for recall. A few days after it was sent, he wrote a memo on the need to import war materiel and the problem of exportation of specie. It was cordially received by Deforgues, who promised to send it to the Committee of Public Safety.[1] For the next several months, matters remained essentially the same between Morris and the government, or even improved, for, as he told Washington, as long as they believed Morris would be recalled, they treated his communications "with Indifference and Contempt." When time elapsed with no word from America, however, they made "Overtures for Conciliation."[2]

It was not until July 29 that Morris received firm word of his replacement, from Livingston, who read it in a New York paper. There had been rumors, including a recurring story that Jefferson was en route to replace him; in May, Swan wrote Morris that Jefferson had been spotted in Paris.[3]

Meanwhile, the Great Terror had reached its bloody culmination. On July 23, Morris wrote Randolph that there was a "considerable ferment of parties, whose object on the one hand is to overturn, and on the other to preserve the colossal Power of the two great Committees," and "[s]ooner or later that ferment must lead to an Explosion."[4] The explosion occurred six days later on July 27: the next day, Livingston scrawled a breathless message to Morris in Seine-Port:

> Dear Sir, The barriers being shut this letter will perhaps not reach you ere you have been informed of the Great Events which took place yesterday & last night. Robespierre, Couthon, Ste. Just & the younger Robespierre were arrested by order of the Convention. . . . They endeavored to cause an insurrection of the people in their favor but did not succeed, the alarm however was great & every body under

> arms during the whole of the night. St. Just has killed himself—Robespierre the elder attempted to kill himself & is now half dead from his wounds—Couthon is also dangerously wounded—they are all to be guillotined today being near 80 in number.[5]

The tenuous cohesion of the Committee of Public Safety had disintegrated after the Law of 22 Prairial (June 10), which dispensed entirely with due process. On July 27, Barère, Billaud-Varenne, and Collot d'Herbois, fearing their own denunciation, turned on the Robespierrists and obtained their arrest in a wild session of the National Convention. Later that day Livingston reported to Morris that "Paris is quiet & every Body rejoiced at the downfall of Robespierre." Within a week of their execution, more than four hundred "suspects" were released from prisons in Paris. The Terror was over, and the Reaction began. On August 2, four days after Robespierre's death, James Monroe arrived in Paris.

Morris later commented to Washington that the eager new minister was lucky he had not arrived while Robespierre was still in power, "for, if I may judge by what fell within my observation he would have been a little too well with that party to be viewed in a neutral light by their opponents." As it turned out, Monroe was soon persuaded by his acquaintances in France that "Robespierre and his associates merited their fate." Morris had a different, and in the view of historian Henry Bertram Hill, a more "balanced judgment" about Robespierre; Hill notes the irony that it came from "a man whom Monroe considered too much in sympathy with the conservatives to be a worthy representative of the United States in France."[6] In January 1795, Morris wrote to Washington that Robespierre could, if more courageous, have been the "master of France" and could have placed Louis's son on the throne. He also noted that while Robespierre was charged with the "many shocking murders" of the Revolutionary Tribunal, he had actually been absent from the committee during the period "most deeply marked by the blood of the innocent."

Morris continued:

> [T] here was throughout the Convention such a complicity in crime that the greater Culprits found protection in the fears of the lesser. A day of final reckoning must come and as the French people enjoy more pleasure at the execution of a Conventionalist than from any other festival it is to be hoped that they will at length be offered up as expiatory sacrifices to justice and humanity.

It is yet another thread of irony in this story that just a few months after this letter, Jefferson wrote of the "atrocities of Robespierre" as a "tremendous obstacle to future attempts at liberty."[7]

Morris was gracious to the new minister. Monroe took over his lease on rue de la Planche, and Morris invited the Monroes to dinner for his last night at Seine-Port.[8] Although Morris presented him to the commissioners of foreign relations on August 8, it was some time before Monroe could get anyone's attention in the turmoil following Thermidor, and no one would receive his credentials. He finally presented them to the National Convention, where he was greeted with great acclaim.[9]

To the extent Morris knew of Monroe's vituperative attacks on him in the United States, his cordiality must have been a little forced. "Before I left Paris Mr. Monroe called on me and explained his conduct and his views," he wrote in one of the first entries in a new diary volume. "He begins to find out that fine words are of little value and his letters from America shew me that something more is expected (and justly expected) there for the many violences committed against our merchants."[10]

Shortly after Monroe arrived, Morris was called on by a person "in the habit of telling me what passed." The visitor told Morris

> "This new Minister you have sent us will never do here." "Why?" "He is either a blockhead himself or thinks that we are so." "I can't suppose either to be the case, as I knew him to be strongly attached to your Revolution. I should think he would succeed very well." "No, it is impossible. Only think of a man's throwing himself into the arms of the first person he met on his arrival and telling him he had no doubt but that if they would do what was proper here, he and his friends in America would *turn out Washington*." "I cannot believe the fact." "You may rely on it. 'Tis true."[11]

Morris's skepticism that Monroe's arrival would improve matters was justified; they got worse. This was because the tensions in French-American relations had everything to do with the war and with the situation in France and nothing to do with the political views of the American minister. Morris would hear in London that "that Mr. Monroe found it difficult to change principles fast enough to keep pace with the changes in the French Government."[12] Two years and four months after his triumphant reception, an angry and bitter Monroe would be recalled from France.

As for himself, "I of course thank God am quit," Morris wrote Short.[13] But despite his professions of relief, he confessed to his diary that he was not at peace:

> [S]o far as I am personally concerned at least I have the Consolation to have made no Sacrifice either of personal or national Dignity and I believe I should have obtain'd every Thing if the American Government had refused to recall me. I rejoice that I am no longer in the pitiful situation which I have so long endured. For the rest Experience must decide and I hope that events will be favorable to America.[14]

Morris's time before departure was occupied with arrangements for shipping his belongings to America. When the furnishings of the wealthy had been put on the auction block over the preceding years, he had invested a great deal of money in paintings, furniture, art objects, telescopes, wine, and more.[15] Jefferson shipped eighty-six cases of French furnishings back to America; "by comparison Gouverneur Morris brought back much less," according to a paper presented in 1996 at a forum on French influence in American arts, "but the quality of his acquisitions is much superior."[16]

The extent of these purchases—according to Fiechter, he spent $41,000, twice his living costs for the same period—indicates that sometime between 1791 and 1794, Morris's financial situation improved considerably.[17] Untangling the complexities of his financial ventures is fodder for another book, but it is likely that land sales had a lot to do with it. While minister, he had worked with Chaumont and the Belgian banker DeWolf to sell tracts of lands near the St. Lawrence owned by the American entrepreneur Alexander Macomb. Morris was not a partner, but probably received commissions, and they would have been sizable.[18]

After his recall, Morris resumed business dealings with Swan, who had managed the remarkable feat of sustaining a commercial relationship with each succeeding regime, and seems to have prospered from the Terror. "[T]here is immense sums to be made," he had written happily from Paris to Morris in 1793, explaining why he was too busy to accept an invitation to dine at Seine-Port.[19] Swan obtained a provisioning contract in late 1791, and in early 1794 the French used his company to deal with neutral countries.[20] If Morris was involved in these contracts, they certainly would have made sure that his name was not used, and it is therefore difficult to be certain of the extent of their business together after Morris left France, though it clearly did exist.[21]

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By early October 1794, Morris, suffering from an attack of gout, was finally ready to depart. He endured one final delay, an insulting one in his view, in obtaining his passport. "I am sure that a french Minister in america would not be thus treated," he wrote stiffly to Monroe.[22] The delay was intentional: Morris planned to go to Switzerland before returning through France to embark for America. Buchot, who had retained his place after Thermidor, suggested to the Committee of Public Safety that in view of Morris's "well-known political principles" he should not be allowed to return to France at all. Apparently Morris was so advised, for he renounced his intention to embark at Le Havre, and his passport was granted immediately.[23]

His first entry in his diary after a gap of nearly two years began with a look back:

> Sunday, 12 Octr 1794. Left Paris at ten o'clock. . . . In how many ways Reflection and Experience inculcate the important Maxim not to govern too much! . . . Constantly successful in the field [France] is running to Ruin with a Rapidity that is as yet unknown in the History of human Affairs.[24]

He spent the next two nights at Seine-Port. Mme de Damas was there, and on the last evening, another woman friend joined them. He departed the next day; the parting was "marked by strong Emotion." Mme de Damas was "in agony which affects me much."[25]

He would never return to France. Nor did he, as originally intended, return immediately to America, but stayed four more years in Europe. Despite telling Randolph that the "history you give of my recall is perfectly satisfactory," he was stung by it, and perhaps he did not relish returning in what may have felt like dishonor. In this regard, Washington's letters of support may have helped, or he may have thought they signaled the degree to which others saw him as disgraced.[26]

He indirectly indicated his feelings to Randolph in late August 1794, suggesting that the United States should not have allowed itself to be "insulted" by acceding to a recall request on the basis of reciprocity, and made a "kind of Testamentary request" on Monroe's behalf that speaks eloquently of his own sense of injury. "[S]hould any of the Factions or parties which may prevail in this Country solicit his recall supposing

always that his Conduct be proper in Regard to the United States"—a pointed remark—"I ask then for him (under that restriction) the Confidence and protection of the American Government to the End that it may be felt and known here. I hope," he reiterated, "a thorough Conviction may be made to exist that he is unmovable."[27]

If he delayed returning because of a sense of humiliation, however, he said nothing. He told his brother-in-law in 1796 that he needed to settle some affairs in which "Reputation as well as Property are concerned," and added,

> I had Reason to apprehend being called again in to public Life were I in America, but so long as I continue abroad, I can trust to the Industry of my Enemies for keeping me in a private Station.[28]

The "affairs" included continuing to work for Lafayette's release. A factor of probably greater importance was Adèle, whose story has been neglected for some time.

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On June 20, 1793, Morris wrote to Angelica Church, thanking her for her kindness to a "deserving Woman of my Acquaintance whose Heart has been much bruis'd by Misfortune and who merits a better Fate than she has hitherto experienced."[29] The woman was Adèle. She was living in a London apartment paid for by Lord Wycombe, and she saw Talleyrand regularly until his departure for America.[30] Morris also provided funds for her, but though Adèle de Flahaut may have been sickly, she clearly had inner strength. She soon found another resource besides her lovers, which was her pen: she spent much of her time in London using the literary skills Morris had so admired to write romantic novels, and achieved a striking success.[31]

Her husband was not with her. The pitiful but gallant M. de Flahaut had been arrested in connection with an ill-advised effort by Bertrand de Moleville to send *assignats,* which apparently proved to be fraudulent, to a friend in France. Flahaut managed to escape in 1793—his family bribed the jailers—but while waiting to cross the Channel, he heard that his attorney had been arrested in reprisal. He turned himself in, hoping to act as an exchange for the release of the attorney; he was executed.[32] A handwritten memoire of his trial is in Morris's papers, indicating that Morris

may have tried to help him. His death, so often desired by Morris in the carefree early days of his affair with Adèle, probably sobered them both, and may well have tainted the relationship from then on.

It is uncertain how often Adèle and Morris wrote each other. His papers contain few letters from her, and it is possible that letters on both sides were never received. On December 24, 1793, she sent him a letter that said, "Not a line from you and yet I write, and will even always write." She planned to return to France, she told him. "I don't feel guilty in the least for having abandoned you so long . . . [I]t seems to me there can be no question of excuses between us because, on my side at least, there can be no wrongs."[33] Her protest that she had written frequently without response is open to doubt. This was above all a pragmatic woman with a child to support, and it seems highly coincidental that her first letter in perhaps a year to get through to Morris was one written when Talleyrand was leaving England, and that two more letters, which she wrote Morris in the next two weeks, were received.[34]

In any event, though Morris clearly missed her, and later events demonstrated that she was still his strongest attachment, he too consoled himself in her absence. He carried on a flirtation with Élise de Foucault, Chaumont's sister, and invited her to Seine-Port. He was also sexually involved with a woman named Mme de Simon. There is very little information about her, but she visited him at Seine-Port in early 1794, and she was there again on his last night in France, though she disappointed him by wishing to be *sage.*[35] Though they parted with "strong Emotion," the tie was weak, for he was uninterested in resuming the affair when she appeared in Germany.[36]

Perhaps Adèle learned of these liaisons, but it is unlikely that they figured in her eventual decision to break with Morris. They met again in March 1795 in Altona, near Hamburg, after a two-and-a-half year interval that had been grueling for them both. Morris had spent a lonely winter after leaving France, ill and clearly heartsick. "Another Year is added to the many which have been lost in the abyss of eternal Duration," he wrote on December 31, 1794, in Hamburg. A week later he went to a play to "drown in my Tears all Thought of my own Situation," and added, "Oh God I humbly thank thee for that Sensibility which thus opens my Heart to fancied Joy and Woe. Sweet Sensibility how gently dost thou lead us along the Road of Life which but for thee would be a cold and barren Desert."[37]

Adèle had briefly taken charge of the young duc d'Orléans, and Morris agreed to act as surety for money for him. She wanted to return to France,

something Morris could not offer her; they apparently quarreled, and he left Germany abruptly for London in the late spring. When he heard a rumor that she was engaged to the Portuguese ambassador de Souza, he had been away nearly a year, but he rushed back to Altona. They resolved nothing, and over the next year he went on forays throughout Europe, compulsively returning at intervals, having brief affairs in the meantime. On one visit he ran into Wycombe who told him that Adèle had tried to trap him into marriage. "She had nearly caught him and he seems to be very angry at it." As Swiggett points out, the conversation reflected badly on both men, but wounded pride undoubtedly had much to do with it.[38] Whether Morris wanted to renew his long-ago promise of marriage is uncertain. It does seem certain that despite his enduring attraction to her they were no longer at ease together.

By the end of September 1797, after a summer back in Altona, during which matters remained open and Morris was uncharacteristically aimless, Adèle could stand her exile no longer and decided to risk returning to France. Talleyrand was there and in a strong position with the new Directory and this undoubtedly influenced her decision. On September 21, 1797, Morris called on her, and in what appears to have been a conversation in which he tried to convince her not to leave, he recorded stiffly that she assured him that the Directory was not enforcing the decrees against the émigrés. Perhaps she left that day or the next. The brevity of the next few diary entries is eloquent of his distress, and he spent the days on long, lonely walks. He would never see her again.

De Souza, probably put off by the appearance of Morris and Wycombe, had broken off with Adèle, but in 1802 they met again in Paris and married.[39] Morris continued as a bachelor until 1809. While he was certainly not celibate during the many years before he married Anne Randolph, it is unlikely that he ever loved another woman as he had loved Adèle de Flahaut.