

The House at 12 Washington Street

by Denise R. Larson

The large white house sat on its tiny lot on Washington Street like a bulky ocean liner in a crowded harbor. Narrow sidewalks were its piers, staircases its gangplanks, and the lilac shrubs flowering around its base were fragrant waves curling out from its prow. The house's front balcony was the bridge and crow's nest from which to keep an eye on the neighborhood for passersby and sounds of trouble, as sailors watched for ships passing or storms brewing. She was the flagship in a neighborhood of not insubstantial multiple-family homes.

A just-about middle-age woman, dressed in a light-weight coat, matching cloche hat, and sensible shoes, turned the corner at the top of the street and started down towards the distinctive house at 12 Washington Street. She saw a slender girl break away from a gaggle of laughing schoolmates and walk toward the back of the large white house. Three drably dressed men approached the street from another direction. The men's steps were slow. The woman knew they were tired from a long day of work at the mill or factory but admitted that this was the best time to catch them at home to ask her questions. The men nodded their goodbyes to each other without a pause in their steps as they parted ways, went into their homes, and disappeared from view.

The properly dressed woman approached the house at 12 Washington and followed the path the girl had taken.

The woman was not unfamiliar with multi-family apartment houses. She knew that only salesmen and solicitors knocked at the front door and that they were greeted with both politeness and suspicion. She hoped for a friendlier welcome.

Midway along the side of the house was a gray-and-white wooden staircase that rose to a broad landing on the second floor. A rusty clothesline reel squeaked overhead. The sound of laundry being snapped and folded and dropped into a creaking wicker basket followed each squeak like an echo. The woman looked up and called out the name of the man she was seeking.

"Nicolas Jardinier?"

A teenager with chestnut brown curly hair—the woman recognized the girl she had followed—looked down from the landing then stepped back out of sight, reappearing a moment later to wave her hand and point upward to the second floor.

The practical woman in her sensible shoes held her handbag and satchel in one hand and grasped the painted handrail with the other. She had a sense of being watched as she mounted the wooden stairs, each footstep echoing against the house, and mentally pictured neighbors standing behind light sheer curtains, wondering who she was and what she wanted. There would be talk at their dinner tables tonight about who was visiting the Jardinier family.

I was met at the door of the second-floor rear apartment, 12-D, by a gray-haired man who was built like a brick wall—square shoulders and chin, long arms that he held at his side, and large hands clenched below them. He obviously was of Norman stock and as squared and solid as the house in which we stood. I spoke the name of the man I was looking for, “Nicolas Jardinier,” and waited for confirmation. He nodded. “Your business?” he asked.

“Census,” I said. “The official 1940 federal census. I—”

“Nicolas, *qui est la?*” said a gentle but firm voice from behind the man, whose strong build blocked my view of the interior. He stepped aside, and I entered.

“*Bonjour, bonjour,*” said a petite woman sitting in a small but well-upholstered chair to the left of the door. “Please, sit down,” she said with a heavy French accent, indicating a chair to her right, at the head of the dining room table. I pulled it out and sat.

The wide windows to the lady’s left were aglow with the late afternoon sun, so I could not see her distinctly until I was seated. My hostess was elderly and fine boned. She wore a simple black headband to contain wisps of white hair. A soft cardigan was draped over the shoulders of her floral-print housedress. In her hands was a small crochet hook. A ball of pure white cotton thread was in her lap, as was the starting round of the fine lace she was making. I noted that her chair was cleverly positioned so that the light was on her work, but she could also watch the comings and goings in the apartment and in the side and back yards as well.

In a quick glance around the room I recognized bits of dried fronds from some past Palm Sunday service tucked behind a religious picture on the wall, a print of a bucolic country scene, and several family photos.

At the center of the dining room table was a vase of lilacs, obviously cut from the bushes that ringed the house. Their fragrance was light but pervasive and triggered a wave of nostalgia in me. I nodded towards them. “My *gra ’mère’s* favorite *fleur*,” I said, giving the French word for flower its proper pronunciation.

“Your *gra ’mère*? Her name, madame?” The woman’s eyes were bright.

I was touched by her interest and replied, “Rivière, but Dulac by birth, née Marie-Anne Dulac. My mother’s mother. My French is sketchy,” I was quick to add, “but some of what my *gra ’mère* said to me when my mother and I visited has stayed with me.”

At times to my detriment. My father had said “No French at home” to my mother, who had obeyed his wishes. He didn’t want his children to endure the prejudice he had, so he anglicized his surname—Vertchamp to Greenfield—and told his children to speak English, only English, and blend in. Dutiful daughter that I was, I blended, but once in a while, especially when saying French surnames, I was caught off guard and my *gra ’mère’s* influence showed. My boss eventually picked up on it and questioned me—a local Greenfield girl speaking French? I admitted that I could understand a little but spoke even less. He immediately seized on the idea that I could do interviews in Little Canada and get information where the other enumerators had failed. No one was willing to talk to the male enumerators—or couldn’t, at least not in English. And that was it. My boss agreed to give me a chance—and more hours—and assigned me to the French-Canadian neighborhoods. What would my dad say? But times were tough. The past few years had been so hard. So many people out of work. The kids finally had a chance to go to college.

My mind returned to the business at hand. My boss kept harping that the deadline for completing the census returns was tight. Twelve Washington was a large house with four apartments. My hope was to fill in the census form for everyone who lived there, and do it in one afternoon.

“Dulac!” From Sorel?” The elderly woman asked as she put down her crochet hook.

I nodded. “Yes, I think so, but I’m not sure.”

She looked hard at me with her unblinking eyes. “Dulac, yes,” she said, then looked up to see who had entered the room. It was the teenager who had brought in the laundry from the clothesline. Her name was Louise. The old woman spoke in rapid French to her.

Louise looked at me. “My great-grandmother understands English but does not speak much. She says they, the Dulacs, were island people. They had a farm on Lac St. Pierre but were flooded out when the river rose too high in the spring. It wasn’t a real lake, just a wide part of the river, the St. Laurent.”

“Interesting,” I said. “My *gra’mère* died when I was young. I remember a few stories that she told me, but nothing about that. My mother did not say much about her family’s history. My father said we are Americans now and not to live in the past. Neither of them told me about our families in Canada.”

The woman and Louise chatted again. “My great-grandmother said that is a shame. To retell the stories is the same as to reread a favorite book so we can enjoy it once more.”

No one spoke for a moment as Madame Jardinier gazed out the window, perhaps seeing the green islands of her youth instead of the tall houses and backyards that crowded her old age.

“Ah, speaking of *books*,” I said, emphasizing the word while opening my satchel and bringing out the census return form, “I have to complete the page for this household.” I was eager to start, so I spread the broad sheet across the end of the table, thankful that I didn’t have to juggle it on my lap as I did on some house calls. “Do you rent?” I put the question out, not sure who would answer.

“Oh, no.” The man who had let me in had stayed in the room with us but had said little since I sat down, but now he spoke. “I *own* this house,” he said in a slow, precise voice of surprising intensity and pride—justifiable, given the fact that so few owned a home in these hard times, and here he owned one that held so many.

“Your full name, please?”

“Nicolas Joseph Jardinier.” His voice moderated. “My mother,” he nodded towards the elderly lady in the corner chair, “lives in this apartment. The apartments downstairs I rent to family.”

“Your age at your last birthday?”

“Sixty-eight.”

“What year of school was the last one you completed? I know it is an odd question, but we have to ask it, for the records.” The personal questions were awkward for me to ask. I kept my eyes on the form, holding my finger on the line so as not to lose my place and to give the respondent a moment to think.

But when I heard no reply, I looked up. Mr. Jardinier shifted in his seat but kept his dark blue eyes fixed on me. “And why does the government want to know that?” he asked. “We are a hardworking family. What we do is our business, our private business. We are quiet people. We do not go out and make noise or trouble. The government should not pry.”

“And the government’s business is to know its residents,” I said. “As you might have seen in the theater or heard on the radio, the census is America’s roll call. It is mandatory, but your privacy is guaranteed. I can’t talk to anyone about what I put down on this paper, not even my husband.” I gave a shrug, then lifted my hands, palms up, over the wide census form, hoping it was a good rendition of “ours is not to reason why”—a reference my father would have praised me for knowing. Mr. Jardinier was not a man with whom I wanted to debate statistics and economics and how the country was doing, especially now. With war in Europe, he might be concerned that some of the young men of the family could be called up, and I wasn’t so sure they wouldn’t be.

“I am an educated man, a businessman. I read and write and speak French and English. I owe nobody nothing.” He said the last with a quick rap on the table with his knuckles, perhaps for good luck or so as not to jinx the luck he had.

“But what grade should I put down?” I asked.

“I was fourteen when I went to work with my father on the docks in Montréal.” The large man sat with his hands resting on the table. They might once have done the work of a longshoreman but were now gnarled and wrinkled like tree roots. I put down eighth grade.

“Your place of birth, Sir?”

“Sir?” he repeated and laughed. “Yes, you might say I am a *seignior* and this my *seigniorie* and all my family my *habitants*—renters.” He seemed pleased, and I hoped we were establishing a rapport so that he would be more amenable to answering the questions I had yet to pose.

“Place of birth?” I repeated.

“I grew up in Montréal, but—

There was a quick knock at the door and a sturdily built man, about forty years old came in. He nodded to me then spoke quietly to Mr. Jardinier.

“I have to go to the shop with Charles, my son,” Nicolas Jardinier said as he rose and took his hat from the rack near the door. “An old customer is having problems.” The younger man, Charles Jardinier, nodded again to me then followed Mr. Jardinier out.

Mme Jardinier turned to nod to Louise, who scooted out of the room.

I rose, thinking I had been dismissed. I’ll have to come back, I thought.

“*Non*,” Madame said, firmly grasping my arm with her bony fingers. Louise returned, followed by two women. She introduced me to her grandmother Simone, tall and angular, like her husband, Nicolas; and to her mother, Celeste, a big-boned woman who carried her weight well.

I was pleased. I knew that women were usually more apt than men to talk to me about their families and give me what I needed for the census return. “I was just about to ask Mr. Jardinier where he was born when he had to leave,” I said.

“My father-in-law is a bit touchy about where he was born,” Celeste said. “He is a Montréaler but was actually born on the family farm in Sorel.”

“And that is nothing to be ashamed of,” Simone said. “Sometimes he is putting on airs, but he has earned what we have. When we first came, we lived in a cold-water flat. In the ’20s,

everybody had an automobile. People bought them on credit. Nicolas fell in love with cars, learned to fix them, opened his own shop, and eventually bought this house. Not bad for a farm boy.”

“Sorel,” Madame Jardinier said. “Our families farmed for two hundred years in the parish of Sorel,” she said with Louise doing the translating, “but, when Nicolas was a boy, we moved to Montréal to find work, and then to here after the Great War for the same reason. Not all agreed with that decision.”

Madame Jardinier toyed with her thread. “*Tout ensemble*,” she whispered. *All together*.. For good or bad, they were all together.

“Anything else on that form of yours?” Simone asked.

“Citizenship?” I asked.

“No, but he has his papers,” Celeste said.

“As do all who were not born here.” Simone made the point clear.

“And those not born in the U.S. were all born in Canada?” I hoped to cull that much information so that I could fill in the citizenship column for everyone.

“Yes,” Celeste said. “I am 45. My husband is 47. I was born in New Brunswick, which is part of Canada, though there are those”—here she glanced at Simone’s back—“who would say Acadia, but that was too long ago. It is Canada now.”

“If you,” I said to all in the room, “could tell me who lives in each apartment, then I can figure out how many lines on the census page to leave for each unit.” I put my left index finger on the next line. Step by step. “Who lives at 12A?” I started off.

“That’s us—Charles, my husband, who just left with my father-in-law, myself, and Louise,” Celeste said. I left three lines.

“And 12-B?” I asked, hoping to quickly finish the sketch of the residents of the house before going to see them. I still had hopes of completing the entire building in one visit. Time was growing short to finish the census, and my boss was pressuring me to do this neighborhood quickly.

“That’s Laine, my cousin,” Louise said. “Marie-Madeleine Vallon, but she likes to be called Laine. She says it sounds more American and is faster and easier to say.”

“My older sister’s daughter,” Celeste added. “Age 26. She works in a department store. Not married. Marie-Madeleine’s youngest sister, Hélène-Soulange, lives with her. Hélène-Soulange Vallon, age 18, two years older than Louise. She’s on the assembly line at the metal works factory and is not married but better be careful or she might have to be.” Celeste looked pointedly at Louise, who blushed and looked away.

“Simone and Nicolas are 12-C. And, of course, this, 12-D, is Madame Geneviève.”

“*J’ai quatre-vingt quinze ans*,” Madame Jardinier said. “95?” I guessed.

“Yes!” Louise was happy that I had understood.

Madame Jardinier smiled and winked at me as she tapped her temple. “Still good...*bon*.”

I laughed. Somehow this frail old woman with a glint in her eye had become friends with me. A faint memory of my own *grà ’mère* sitting at a table flashed in my mind.

Simone looked out the side window and said, “It’s late enough. Laine might be home. Let’s go now. You can talk to her.”

I would have liked to sit there in the bright room with these ladies for the rest of the fading afternoon, but I knew I could not. I shoved the census form into my satchel, grabbed my handbag, and rushed along behind Simone, with Louise tagging along.

Simone knocked at the door of 12B. A slender young woman answered the door. I was struck by the color of her hair. It was bleached blonde. Not so common in this neighborhood. She wore heavy makeup, rouge, red lipstick, nylon stockings, and a dress that I suspected was much shorter than what her mother would approve of.

Simone introduced me to Hélène-Soulange, younger sister of Marie-Madeleine and niece of Celeste Jardinier.

“Laine—that’s what my sister Madeleine likes to be called—is coming home late from work,” Hélène explained as she showed us to the parlor. “Do you like ginger ale?” she asked me.

“Yes, thank you.”

Hélène went to the kitchen, humming a Bing Crosby tune as she fixed our drinks. I could hear the ice clink. She came back carrying a tray of tall glasses and put it on the coffee table, handing me a drink. I took a sip then stared at the ice cubes floating in the amber liquid, my head down but my eyes wide. It was a highball with whiskey. I put the glass on a coaster on the coffee table in front of me. I glanced up.

Louise sat in a straight chair near her grandmother and sipped what appeared to be plain ginger ale. Hélène came to sit beside me on the sofa. Her dress was a little snug at the hemline and wrapped above her knees when she sat.

As I brought out the census form and searched for the line for the household, Hélène said, “My name is Helen, emphasis on the “Hel.” She grinned. Her meaning, of course, was that I should pronounce it the English way, with emphasis on the first syllable. HEL-en.

“But what is your full, legal name?” I asked.

“Well, if you must know, it’s Hélène-Soulange Vallon. Why they had to call me something so foreign is beyond me. I was born in the States.”

“Heritage. Family,” Simone interjected. “You were named for your mother’s mother. Do you remember her?”

Helen—I felt as though I should recognize her preference—grimaced. “A little. We used to go visit her on the farm in the summer. But she’s dead now.”

“All the more reason to honor her name,” Simone said. “And she would not approve of so much makeup. Neither would the nuns, if you were still going to school.”

“Well, I’m not. But I *am* going out tonight.” Helen looked down at the census form in my lap.

“You put ‘A’ down for my Aunt Celeste,” Helen said. “That’s not ‘A’ for aunt is it?”

“It’s short for ‘Alien,’” I said. “I’ll put the rest, the ‘lien,’ in later.”

“Why ‘Alien’? She’s not from Mars. She has her papers, doesn’t she?”

“Yes, but they’re papers for residency, not citizenship,” I explained. “‘Alien’ is an unfortunate term that means not born in-country and not a naturalized citizen, that’s all.” I thought of the part after the “A,” the “lien.” Did immigrants take out a promise loan for a place to live in

exchange for making a better life for themselves? The mannerisms of the women of this family did not seem odd or alien in any way to me. They could be my own cousins from generations back.

“Employment,” I said, my voice squeaking. I cleared my throat. “Helen,” I said, “have you ever—”

“You ask so many questions of us,” Helen said, interrupting, “What about you? Do you enjoy your work, asking so many questions about everybody? I bet you hear some juicy stories!”

“Oh, I do,” I admitted, “but everything that anyone says is strictly confidential. I can’t repeat a word of it, not to my boss, not even to my husband.”

“Ah, so you are married.” Helen grinned like a cat who just caught a mouse. “And do you have children? I don’t want children. They’re so messy and smelly.”

She was toying with me like a cat with a mouse. I needed to turn this around.

“So, Helen,” I said, “what do you do? Go to school? Work? Do you work after school? Some girls are lucky enough to have a little job for extra money for themselves.”

“Oh, I have a little money. A girl has to have nice clothes if she wants to have a good time.” Helen was playing coy. I felt sorry for her, a girl caught between a strict family and all the bright lights and good times of the city. Someone should tell her about dark alleys, the danger that’s out there, away from her safe home. But it was not my place to do it.

“But do you work?” I pressed.

“Yes, I do work. In a clock factory. I sit there all day and put tiny little springs in tiny little places with tiny little tweezers. Very dull. And the women I work with are dull, too. I’m going to get another job. Maybe at the store where Laine works. All those lovely things. I could sell dresses. So many ladies are so frumpy. I could tell them what looks good and what doesn’t.”

“People are looking to put food on the table, not looking for high fashion, Hélène,” Simone said quietly. “We have been fortunate. At least you have a job.”

I observed that all this time Louise had been silently sipping her ginger ale. From the way she glanced at Helen, I guessed that the two of them, though cousins and close in age, were not the best of friends. I wondered what Louise thought of Helen's style and manners.

"Did you finish high school, Helen?" I asked.

"My mother wanted me to," she replied, "but Laine was coming down here and I wanted to come along, so I did."

The sound of someone coming up the steps and across the landing caused Helen to jump up from her seat. But she sat down again, deflated, when her sister opened the door and stepped in.

Helen's older sister took off her coat and joined us in the parlor. Unlike Helen, Marie-Madeleine, who asked that I call her Laine, was dressed conservatively. The hem of her dark gray dress fell to mid-calf and the bodice wrapped softly around her torso. A modest pin with a pearl center was attached to its collar.

I found my place on the census form, but before I could start asking questions, Laine, with a note of pride and a bit of defensiveness, said, "I am American, even if my name belies the fact. I was born in northern Maine, the County, if you need that," she added. In Northern Maine, people referred to Aroostook County simply as "the County."

Just then, Laine noticed the drinks on the coffee table. She picked up and sniffed the drink in front of her younger sister. "Hélène, what is this?"

"A highball. People go home and relax after a hard day. They have highballs and cocktails."

"We are not *those* people," Laine said, the sternness in her voice edged with fatigue. "We come home and start supper and do what needs be done around here. And *you* certainly should not be serving this to a government official." Her face flushed as she realized she was making a scene in front of me, the government official. I shifted a bit in my seat.

"I'm with the census bureau, not the police," I reassured her.

“I’m so sorry,” Laine stammered. “It’s just that... something happened at work, at the store.”

“And I’m sorry, but that brings us back to why I am here,” I said quickly.. “What is your position, your title at the store?”

“Assistant manager,” Laine said. “And there’s the rub. The men don’t like taking direction from me. They just stop listening and then claim I never told them what to do.”

“Send a memo,” Helen said coolly. “Put it in writing. Post it on the board. That’s what Alan the manager does at the factory. He posts everyone’s line number and quota. He got tired of all those old women going up to him all day to ‘check’ how many units they had to do. Just an excuse to talk to him. But he doesn’t mind talking to *me*. He even took me off the line to show me a new job I might be getting.”

“Hélène-Soulange Vallon,” Laine said. “You watch yourself in that place or I’ll send you another place—home!” Laine seemed to be a good sister. Laine rubbed her hand across her forehead and tugged the bangs of her long-cut bob away from her face.

“This *is* home, Laine. If I go back to the County, what would I do? Marry a farmer and have a dozen kids like Mama wants you to do with Luc? Not me.” She grabbed her drink and took a large gulp, barely managing not to choke as it went down. She was putting on a show for me. How could she handle a highball?

Laine looked startled. “You need to mind your own business,” she said as she glared at her sister.

“I’m no Shirley Temple,” Helen retorted. “More of an Amelia Earhart.”

I could see this girl flying off to who knows where. Without her mother here, it was good that her sister keep a close eye on her. I worried about my own daughter, away at college, but was thankful she was able to go, thanks to both my husband and I working. But for how much longer would I have a job?

We sat in embarrassed silence for a moment. Clearing my throat, I said, “So, Helen, I need your age and place of birth, please.” I smoothed the census form with my hand and placed

my left index finger at the row with her name on it. I held my pen poised over the line, ready to move from column to column.

“I’m eighteen,” she said to me. “And, as I said, I’m a U.S. citizen, born in this country. One of the few of this bunch,” meaning everyone living in the apartment house, I guessed.

“Hélène!” Simone gasped at her rudeness.

“I am happy to be here,” Helen said in her defense. “In those farm towns there are no theaters, no nice stores, no place to eat and no place to have fun.”

“Having fun. That’s all you’re looking for,” Simone said. Her forehead was wrinkled and her lips pinched. She would have gone on but for a knock at the door.

“Yes, and here’s some fun now,” Helen said as she stood and rushed towards the door. “It’s Johnny, Johnny Caruso,” she called back to us. “We’re going out for burgers and a movie. And maybe dancing,” she added, with a wink at Louise. She grabbed her coat from the back of a chair and bolted out, not bothering to ask her date to come in.

“Caruso.” Simone repeated the name with a surprising touch of disdain. “Italian. But at least Catholic.” She shrugged, obviously resigned to it. Lesser of two evils, apparently.

“Things are different here,” Laine said quickly, “and what Hélène said is true. There is nothing back there for any of us. I am thankful to have a job, and I do love working in the department store—so many beautiful things.”

“You are a woman working in a man’s world,” Laine said, looking directly at me. “You know how it is and how that makes us work even harder to succeed.”

I had to nod and shake my head at the same time, making my head feel wobbly. “I don’t know why that is. We do the same job and sometimes do it better, but here we are. And,” I said with a sigh that I knew would resonate with her, “I must finish filling out the form for this house today.”

“Yes,” Simone said. “And I must go check on Madame Geneviève and start supper.”

The mention of the evening meal spurred me on. I made a few quick entries onto the census form and then stood. Louise took this as her cue to say a quick goodbye and left before I could express my thanks. I envied her hearing Madame Geneviève tell old-time stories.

As Simone and I crossed the verandah, we heard slow, heavy footsteps on the stairs. Nicolas Jardinier had come home from having to deal with the old customer who had problems. The poor man looked tired.

“The old ones, they are hard to deal with,” Nicolas said on seeing us standing together on the veranda. “They expect to get more than what they pay for.”

He looked at me with watery eyes sunk in his deeply wrinkled face. “And why are you still here? Is this what the government pays you for? Snooping around? Are you content with delaying a man’s supper? Do you want to count the potatoes in the stew?”

Simone caught her breath, obviously taken aback by her husband’s rudeness. “You’ll be confessing to the priest on Saturday, Nicolas,” she said.

“I confess to no one but God,” the man replied, his abrupt words ending the conversation.

Charles, who had come back from the shop with Nicolas, put a hand on his father’s shoulder.

“Papa, why don’t you go with Mama and have your supper.” Nicolas turned and went to the flight of stairs, Simone following, the thud of their steps echoing against the side of the house. On the top step, Nicolas held tight to the balustrade and turned, looking down at me. “*Bon soir*,” he said. “*J’ai le regret, Madame*.” I nodded. He finished his ascent and went inside.

“I’m sorry, ma’am,” Charles said to me. “He’s not usually like that. He had a difficult argument with a very stubborn customer who thinks once a car is fixed it should stay fixed.”

“The government—my boss—can be a tough customer as well.”

Charles smiled. As we walked across the landing, he started telling me a story about his father and his family.

“They were recruited in Canada, you see, to come here, the men *and* the women, to work in the mills and factories of this city. He started out as a line worker, using his hands, which he liked, but terrible work. Monotonous work. He liked cars, seeing them on the road, looking under the hood. He’s always been good with his hands from fixing machinery on the farm, so he learned to fix cars. The rest, well, he worked in a repair shop and opened his own as soon as he could.

“And now it is my business, more or less,” Charles said. “And I’m afraid I have to go off again, but before I do, I have supper to eat.”

I felt the day growing short. When he opened the door to 12-A, the aroma of something cooking came out. Not an odor, not a smell. It tickled my memory until I once again was sitting in my *gra-mère*’s lap, my pudgy little finger counting the red and pink rosebuds on the snow-white tablecloth. *Un, deux, trois.*

“Tell me,” I said quickly, “what is that wonderful aroma? I don’t know it.”

Charles raised his head and sniffed. “Oh, that. It’s summer savory, an herb Celeste’s grandmother in Canada used.”

Celeste came to the door. She had heard us. “There’s a little left from last year. I’ll give you some so that you can try it—goes best with chicken.” She went to the kitchen and quickly returned.

“This is quite the houseful.” I accepted the herb packet. “A village, in a way, or an island. Madame Geneviève spoke of Sorel and Montréal, both islands. And this is another of sorts, in the city.”

“Yes, a gossip little village,” Charles said.

I left. I had completed the census form and there was no reason to linger. Along the sidewalk, the heady fragrance from the lilacs perfumed the air. I walked quickly up the street, knowing that my own dinner would be late. I had much to think about the Jardinier family, much more than the census data, but that would have to wait. Dinner must be started, the table set, the usual queries about the day asked and answered.

Street lights and front room lamps were coming on, the brightness making the dusk all the darker. I continued, unobserved, up the steep hill, but stopped midway and turned to look at 12 Washington. The light streaming through the fine sheers in the dining room windows of 12-D was glowing brightly against the evening sky. I could imagine Madame Geneviève bent over her crocheting or dozing before dinner and had an inkling of the warmth of her family that wrapped around her like one of the afghans she might make.

Fingering the little envelope of dried summer savory that Celeste had pressed into my hand, I continued on my way. When the children came home, I would tell them of their great gra-mère and Sorel and the Dulacs.

Reluctantly I set my feet moving again, up Washington Street. Pausing at the top, I looked back once more to Number 12, but the young green leaves of the tall maple trees blocked the view except for a glimpse of shadowy whiteness—a broad ship at anchor in the dark.