

Extract from:

NICOLAS LE FLOCH AFFAIR
JEAN-FRANÇOIS PAROT

Nicolas regained consciousness, and the sight of the familiar setting brought him back to reality. Monsieur de Noblecourt's grave countenance told him that something was wrong. He remembered the expression on Canon Le Floch's face when he had announced to him, many years earlier, his final departure from Guérande, and saw the same worried expression, the same affectionate thoughtfulness on the familiar features bending over him.

'Hello, Nicolas.'

'Have I been sleeping long?'

'Longer than you may think. It's Friday now, and nearly two o'clock in the afternoon. You lost consciousness last night at the door of my library. My friends found you bathing in Tokay. I can think of better uses for a wine like that.'

'It was meant as a gift for you, to beg forgiveness for deserting the party. I know how ungrateful you must have thought me.'

'No such feeling could ever exist between us. You are at home here. The wind of Rue Montmartre liberates. I remember saying to you, when you first came to this house, that it was an annexe of the abbey of Thélème, where freedom and independence were revered.'

He underlined these words with a nod of the head. He gave a slight smile, and his large red nose wrinkled in satisfaction.

'What happened to you?' he went on. 'Your coat stank of cheap brandy, and was as dirty and as muddy as a stray puppy on Quai Pelletier. You must have been moving about a lot, to get yourself in a state so contrary to your habits and the dignity of your office.'

'Alas, you are only too right,' said Nicolas, feeling like a pupil before his master, 'and I shan't weary you with an account of my evening.'

Monsieur de Noblecourt was looking at him with eyes as sharp as they had been in the old days, when he was involved in a criminal investigation.

'To cut a long story short,' said Nicolas in a faint voice, 'I went to Madame de Lastérieux's house in Rue de Verneuil, where I was supposed to be having dinner. She showed me a lack of consideration, and I left. I went to the Théâtre-Français, where I watched the first act of *Athalie*. Having calmed down, I decided to go back to Julie's, but the party was in full swing and I realised I had made a mistake. Feeling angry and offended, I wandered around Paris a little before returning here, like the prodigal son.'

'For a man of your maturity and experience, you behaved like a child. Did you see anyone you knew at the theatre?'

'Yes, my colleague Commissioner Chorrey was on duty.'

Nicolas had replied without thinking, but it suddenly occurred to him that Monsieur de Noblecourt was asking him to account for his movements, as if questioning a suspect.

'May I enquire, Monsieur, why you asked me that question?'

The procurator stroked his mottled jowls with a hand as white as a priest's. 'I see you're getting your senses back, Nicolas. I'm afraid I have some bad news to tell you. I will understand if it distresses you, but I ask you to stay calm. You may have the most pressing need to keep your composure in the hours to come.'

'What is the meaning of these words, Monsieur?'

'Their meaning, my boy, is that this morning, at the stroke of ten, an envoy from Monsieur de Sartine came to fetch you. The Lieutenant General of Police wants to see you immediately.'

Bourdeau was here – he 'd come to find out how you were – and he managed to worm it out of him. Be brave! This morning, at first light, Madame de Lastérieux's servants found her dead. According to an initial examination by a local doctor, it seems she may have been poisoned.'

Long afterwards, Nicolas would remember that his first reaction, fleeting as it was – well before the grief went through him like a knife, a grief made all the more intense by the images of their passion that flashed through his mind – had been one of relief, almost of liberation. For a moment he was speechless, and so pale and haggard that Noblecourt grew worried at his silence.

'Poisoned!' Nicolas said. 'Was it some rotting food? Mushrooms?'

'Alas, no. From what we know, there is every sign that she was poisoned by malicious intent.'

'Isn't it possible that she killed herself?'

'If you have any evidence suggesting she was in such despair that she may have wanted to take her own life, you must reveal it as soon as possible to those whose task it will be to hear your testimony.'

Nicolas shook his head and said in a barely audible voice, 'The last time – oh, my God! – the last time I heard her voice – I didn't even see her, just heard her voice – she was laughing uproariously and there was nothing to indicate that she wanted to die.'

'You will have to say all that. Everything will require an explanation. Take this calmly, and confront one at a time the unpleasant ordeals which, I fear, await you . . . Now go and talk to Monsieur de Sartine, and give him my regards.'

Monsieur de Noblecourt adjusted the velvet skullcap covering his balding cranium, an occupation which seemed intended to conceal a growing embarrassment. Nicolas felt sick at heart: it was as if, behind his friend's outward affirmations, an unformulated question were being asked. No, he had nothing to reproach himself with. He realised at that moment that he had entered unknown and dangerous territory, full of obstacles and concealed traps. The slightest word, the most innocuous remark, a look, an expression of simple concern from a friend could cause him terrible pain, and he would not know if it was merely the result of his own imagination.

The former procurator, angry with himself, tried to make amends. 'Don't misunderstand me. You have to see things as they are. Put yourself in the position of an outside spectator, a commissioner at the Châtelet embarking upon an investigation. You will be expected to give a precise account of an evening which you yourself say was full of incident. Make a commitment to explain everything in detail. Monsieur de Sartine knows you too well to have any doubts about your loyalty or your innocence in this tragedy about which we know nothing as yet. And when I say Monsieur de Sartine, I also mean your friends. Don't think we are indifferent to your grief; it touches us more than you can imagine and from now on our only concern is to assure you of our support, have no fear of that . . .'

Monsieur de Noblecourt's voice was at once so tremulous and yet so full of warmth that it chased away any doubts Nicolas might have been harbouring about his mentor's feelings, even though he still shuddered at the mere mention of the word 'innocence'. But it made him all the more aware of the risks he would have to face from interrogators, adversaries, accusers, witnesses and judges less well disposed towards him. The horrifying thought struck him that not only had he lost someone dear to him, but that until this affair was resolved he would also have to endure being placed in the position of those who, in the course of his twelve years in the police force, had borne the brunt of his unrelenting determination as an investigator.