

THE
NICOLAS LE
FLOCH AFFAIR

JEAN-FRANÇOIS PAROT
Translated from the French by Howard Curtis

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NEAP TIDE

The torch of discord lit by his own hand

Set off a hundred fires in the land.

The anger spread . . .

VOLTAIRE

Thursday 6 January 1774

The carriage narrowly missed him; leaping back, he landed with his feet together in a muddy, viscous puddle of melted snow. The splash sent a foul-smelling spray over him, which started dripping from the point of his tricorn. He cursed under his breath. Another good woollen cloak to take to the cleaner. Ever since his youth in Brittany, Nicolas Le Floch, police commissioner at the Châtelet, had liked to wear practical garments. These days, frock coats were all the rage in Paris, and the kind of warm, heavy cloak he liked was the preserve of cavalry soldiers and travelling merchants. Master Vachon, his regular tailor as well as Monsieur de Sartine's, despairing of his stubborn loyalty to old habits, had nevertheless managed to persuade him to accept a number of extravagances – a particular cut of the collar, buttons on the lower part, a wider flounce, no lining – hoping, without a great deal of conviction, that Nicolas, who was seen both in the city and at Court, would set the fashion.

Nicolas was sure that his low-fronted evening shoes were soaked, their fine gloss soiled, and that there were flecks of mud on his stockings. His cloak would have to suffer the outrage of an over-vigorous cleaning. That might not be too bad as long as the caustic mud did not leave indelible marks on the cloth; however, according to those in the know, it had an unparalleled ability to stick. Come to think of it, it might be better to leave the cloak to the meticulous, affectionate care of Catherine and Marion, the two guardian angels of Monsieur de Noblecourt's house. It was sad to think that Marion, her body twisted with rheumatism, now only presided in a symbolic manner over the household chores, although everyone strove to make her believe that her toil, however derisory, was as necessary as ever to the smooth running of the house.

This petty incident, so common in the streets of the capital, had briefly dispelled his unpleasant reflections. Now the reasons for his vexation, not to say his anger, came back into his mind. Better to think about it now than when he was trying to sleep. What a New Year season it had been! For days, he had been feeling a gnawing sense of anguish. He always dreaded, and never enjoyed, the transition from one year to the next, and should have become accustomed to it by now, but this year everything seemed to be conspiring to ruin it for him. Somehow, though, the old year had ended, and 1774 was here. Epiphany was being celebrated this Thursday, he recalled, but this detail merely increased his irritation.

A crisis in his relationship with Madame de Lastérieux had

been brewing for some time, but truth, like fruit, cannot be harvested until ripe. Anger welled up in him once more, and he stamped his right foot on the ground, again spattering himself with mud. His nose itched, a shiver ran down his spine, and he sneezed several times. That was all he needed: to catch his death of cold, running about like this in the melted snow! He remembered the evening's events . . . Everything pointed to the fact that this liaison had gone on for too long. The vessel of their passion had been drifting along, accompanied by all kinds of incompatibilities and irritations which for a long time had been overshadowed by their physical compatibility. It was a far cry from the harmony of their early days, when the woman had been transfigured in his eyes into an object of worship.

He remembered that evening in February 1773. He had been invited to dinner by Monsieur de Balbastre, the organist of Notre Dame, whom he had known for more than ten years via Monsieur de Noblecourt, a great music lover. Their first encounter, when Nicolas was a young man, had been a humiliating experience for him, but that had been followed by other occasions on which a love of music and a veneration for the great Rameau had drawn them together, despite the sarcastic tone the virtuoso loved to adopt. His drawing room was full of guests going into ecstasies over a Ruckers harpsichord, the pride of the host's collection. Every surface of the instrument, inside and out, had been painted, as meticulously as if it had been a coach, or a snuffbox belonging to a member of a royal household. The outside was decorated with the birth of Venus, and the interior of the lid depicted the story of Castor and Pollux, the subject of Rameau's best-known opera. Earth, hell and Elysium were all shown, and in the last of

these the illustrious composer sat enthroned on a bench, lyre in hand. Nicolas, who had seen Rameau in the Tuileries some time before his death, had judged the portrait a fine likeness.

Against one wall of the drawing room stood a large pedal organ, on which Balbastre performed a fugue, all the while deploring the piercing sound of the instrument and the frightful noise of its keys. He needed it for his exercises, he said, adding with a laugh that it drove his neighbours to despair. A young woman with red-tinged hair and a fine, expressive face, made all the more striking by the grey and black widow's clothes she was wearing, cried out in enthusiasm at the organist's virtuosity. As a regular visitor, she was invited to try the harpsichord. She performed a particularly difficult sonata with a great deal of feeling, after which the host took over and played an air by Grétry. The sound of the instrument struck Nicolas as delicate and somewhat lacking in power. He asked the young woman about this, and she explained that the touch was very light because of the use of plectra made from quills. They continued talking, and both left the house at the same time. Nicolas offered to see her home in his carriage. By the time they reached Rue de Verneuil, where she had a large house, Nicolas was already a happy man, having completed the preliminaries. The moments that followed, after she had invited him in to admire a pianoforte in her possession, sealed their alliance. The next few weeks were a whirl of embraces and kisses and languor, and, although they were followed by long periods of absence and impatience, it did not look as though anything would ever put an end to the insatiable hunger that united them.

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