

THE
PHANTOM OF
RUE ROYALE

JEAN-FRANÇOIS PAROT
Translated from the French by Howard Curtis

GALLIC BOOKS
London

Ouvrage publié avec le concours du Ministère français chargé de la
culture – Centre national du livre.
This work is published with support from the French Ministry of
Culture/Centre national du livre.

A Gallic Book

First published in France as *Le fantôme de la rue Royale* by Éditions Jean-Claude Lattès

Copyright © Éditions Jean-Claude Lattès 2001
English translation copyright © Gallic Books 2008

First published in Great Britain in 2008 by Gallic Books, 134 Lots Road, London SW10 0RJ

This book is copyright under the Berne Convention
No reproduction without permission
All rights reserved

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-906040-15-4

Typeset in Fournier by SX Composing DTP, Rayleigh, Essex

Printed and bound by CPI Bookmarque, Croydon, CR04TD

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

I

PLACE LOUIS XV

What should have been a day so fair
Becomes a day of mourning.
The smell of death pervades the square
Before the next day's dawning
ANON. (1770)

Wednesday 30 May 1770

A sneering face topped by a red bonnet appeared at the door of the carriage, and hands with blackened nails clutched the lowered window. Beneath the grime, Nicolas recognized the already wizened face of a little boy. This sudden apparition took him back almost ten years to a certain Carnival night just before Monsieur de Sartine, the Lieutenant General of Police, had given him his first case. The masks that had surrounded him then had remained in his memory as death's heads. He dismissed these thoughts, which merely added to the gloom he had been feeling since the morning, and threw a handful of coins into the air. Delighted with the alms, the apparition disappeared: leaping backwards from the running board of the carriage, it landed on its feet and made its way through the crowd in search of the coins.

Nicolas shook himself like a weary animal and sighed, trying to shrug off his nagging sense of melancholy. It was clear that the

past two weeks had exhausted him: too many sleepless nights, constant watchfulness and the nagging fear that he might be caught unawares by some unforeseen incident. Since the assassination attempt by Damiens, security had been tightened around the King and his family. It was an endless struggle to remain vigilant, and for nearly ten years the young Châtelet commissioner had been in the front line of this struggle, closely involved with matters of state, often secret matters, on whose mysteries he had thrown light. Monsieur de Sartine had entrusted him with keeping a close watch on the royal family on the occasion of the wedding of the Dauphin and Marie-Antoinette, archduchess of Austria. Even Monsieur de Saint-Florentin, Minister of the King's Household, had urged him to give of his best, reminding him, affably, of his past successes.

Beyond the Vaugirard toll-gate, serried ranks of people filled the roadway, frequently impeding the disorderly stream of carriages. Nicolas's coachman kept yelling warnings, punctuated by sharp cracks of his whip. From time to time, the carriage came to a sudden halt and tipped forward, and Nicolas had to reach out a protective hand to stop his friend Semacgus from smashing his nose against the partition. He could not have said why, but nothing had ever caused him as much anxiety as this unruly multitude converging on Place Louis XV. A wave of impatience seemed to run through this great mass of people, like a nervous shudder through the flank of a horse, as they hurried towards the celebration, eager for the pleasure they had been promised: a great firework display organised by the city authorities in honour of the Dauphin's wedding. Rumours were rife, and Nicolas was listening out for what people around him were saying. The

provost of the merchants, who was providing the festivities, had announced that the boulevards would be lit up after the display. As if he had read his neighbour's thoughts, Semacgus belched a few times and woke up, then pointed at the crowd and shook his head.

'Look at them, so confident in their provost's generosity! Let's hope they're not disappointed!'

'What makes you think they might be?' Nicolas asked.

After all these days of anxiety, it had been a pleasure for him to go and fetch Dr Semacgus from the depths of Vaugirard. He knew that the doctor was fond of such great occasions, and had invited him along to Place Louis XV to watch the festivities from the colonnade of the new buildings on either side of Rue Royale. Sartine was expecting Nicolas to report on the event, even though, for once, the city authorities had not called on the services of the police.

'Jérôme Bignon is not known for caring much about the populace, and I fear these good people may be bitterly disappointed by the celebrations. How times change! You can't imagine the feasting when the father of our present Dauphin remarried. The provost at the time sent out wagons carrying horns of plenty overflowing with sausages, saveloys and spicy leeks, not to mention the drink . . . Damn it, people knew how to live in those days, and they really indulged themselves, I can tell you!'

Semacgus clicked his tongue at these pleasurable memories, and his face, already naturally ruddy, turned quite purple. He ought to be careful, Nicolas thought. The man was still true to form, still greedy for the pleasures of life, but he was becoming a

little fatter with every year that passed and tended to doze off more and more frequently. His friends were starting to worry about him, although they did not dare to offer him advice. In any case he would never have consented to lead a more careful life, a life more suited to his age. Nicolas measured his friendship for Semacgus by the degree of anxiety the old man caused him.

‘It’s very kind of you, Nicolas, to have come and fetched this old bear from his den . . .’ He raised his big, bushy eyebrows – increasingly white these days – in a gesture of interrogation or puzzlement. ‘But . . . you seem to be in a sombre mood for such a festive day. I’d wager you’re worried about something.’

Beneath his dissolute exterior, Semacgus concealed an acute sensitivity towards his fellows and a great concern for their welfare. He leaned towards Nicolas and placed a hand on his arm.

‘You mustn’t keep things to yourself,’ he said in a graver tone. ‘You seem to have something on your mind . . .’ Then, reverting to his usual manner, ‘Some pox-ridden beauty who left you a souvenir?’

Nicolas could not help smiling. ‘Alas, no, I leave that to my more boisterous friends. But you’re right, I am worried. Firstly, because I’m about to attend a great public gathering merely as an observer, with no mission to accomplish, and no means at my disposal, and secondly—’

‘What do you mean?’ Semacgus interrupted him. ‘Is the finest police force in Europe, held up as an example from Potsdam to Saint Petersburg, at a loss, with its hands tied, incapable of doing anything? Couldn’t Monsieur de Sartine have sent his best investigator – what am I saying, his extraordinary investigator – into action? I can’t believe it!’