



Death in Saint-Chartier

IVO FORNESA

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THE VICARAGE

The rainy season was at its peak, and inside the vicarage logs blazed cosily in an oversized hearth, wrapping the sitting room in their warmth.

A bottle of chartreuse – the abbot’s grand reserve – stood on the desk as a bulwark against any rash or foolish urge to leave the house. Its green hue glowed brighter in the flickering light of the fireplace, as if to prove the wisdom of the motto of the Carthusian monks who make it: *nunquam reformata, quia nunquam deformata* – never reformed, because never deformed. Indeed, some things are so well made and reach such pinnacles of perfection that any attempt to alter them is doomed to failure.

I can't go out, I won't go out, I've got to get started on these memoirs. For Laurent de Rodergues, this line had become a mantra, one he'd repeated each day for the past eight months, ever since he moved to Saint-Chartier. Yet he still couldn't get beyond the first sentence. His writer's block surprised him, because he had a good memory and no lack

of material. No, that wasn't the problem. The reminiscences he wanted to set down on paper flowed in mighty torrents in his head, but he couldn't manage to channel them into a story. For several days now he'd noticed an undeniable whiff of failure in the air.

Two things were now abundantly clear: that his life had indeed been exhilarating and unconventional, with an unusually intense combination of adventure and romance; and that the only constant in his life was his inconstancy, which meant that the task he'd set for himself – to write it all down – simply exceeded his capabilities.

True, there were plenty of extenuating circumstances: a lack of inspiration, a location – the Berry region of France – that offered an endless number of attractions and scenic spots to explore, a sumptuous local cuisine that demanded considerable time to prepare and even longer to digest, and neighbours who often popped over for a visit . . . and add to that the card games he couldn't miss at the nearby tavern, the get-togethers and dinners his new friends held in their cosy homes, the pints he could never turn down, the occasional wooing and cooing (and everything that went with it), and perhaps his inability to write was understandable – justifiable, even.

Still, Laurent constantly agonised over his lack of willpower, and he was again reproaching himself when he saw through his window the headlights of a car stopping in front of his door. Cars rarely parked in the small church square in winter, especially so late in the afternoon on a day that would quickly give way to a bone-chilling night. No sooner had he noticed this unusual occurrence than he

heard steps on the gravel, followed by a sudden vigorous tapping on his window. The smiling face pressed up against the glass was unexpected, to say the least: it belonged to Monsieur Jablard, and he'd brought along his assistant.

Laurent had only a passing acquaintance with Jablard, a lawyer in Châteauroux whose portfolio of clients consisted mainly of foreigners with interests in France. He was a foul-tempered man whom Laurent, in a flight of mean-spirited literary fancy, had privately nicknamed 'Cocardasse', after the swordsman who takes Lagardère under his wing in the swashbuckling adventure *On Guard*. Ever since he was a child, Laurent had made a habit of finding fictional twins in books or films for people he knew in real life, and in this case, Jablard bore no small resemblance to the actor who played Cocardasse in the film version of the story. Not only did the lawyer seem aware of the likeness, he practically went out of his way to accentuate it.

A large man of around sixty, he had a face that had once been attractive but was now loose in the flesh, with a noticeable wattle hanging from his chin. He wore a spectacular mane of hair, probably his most remarkable trait, pulled back and tied with a tacky black velvet ribbon. On more than one occasion Laurent was tempted to ask about his peculiar appearance, which seemed even more flamboyant in such a conservative region, but he never quite dared, because he feared the answer would be interminable. Jablard had a theatrical demeanour to go along with his striking appearance, though for all that he wasn't a bad person: he had a certain sense of humour

and a notable bonhomie, traits that in times like these are nothing to sniff at.

Puzzled, Laurent went to open the door and invite his visitors in.

‘Well, this is a pleasant surprise,’ he said. ‘Please come in.’

As he and his assistant stepped inside, Jablard gave the bottle a look that Laurent couldn’t miss.

They made some superficial, practically British chit-chat about the lingering rains in the region, the most recent gossip and the local rugby results. Then Jablard smoothed his hair, looked Laurent squarely in the eye and finally got to the point.

‘I suppose you haven’t the slightest idea what brings us by today. No doubt from the moment we knocked on your window, you’ve been dying to know what we’re doing here. No, don’t pretend,’ he said with a sardonic smile, seeing Laurent’s reaction. ‘We hardly know each other, and here I show up out of the blue in the middle of this cold spell, and with my assistant to boot. It’s only natural that you should wonder why.’

‘As a matter of fact, I am curious,’ Laurent said, and then hurried to add, ‘but in any event I’m happy to have visitors on such a dreary afternoon. So tell me, Monsieur Jablard, to what do I owe the honour?’

‘A very curious matter, but one that’s good news for you, because unless I’m mistaken, you’re quite the equestrian.’

Jablard didn’t take his eyes off Laurent’s face, studying his reaction. As Laurent made no reply, he went on. ‘I suppose you haven’t forgotten about the tragic incident at the château that took place during that splendid party Shennan threw.’

‘Now you’ve got me intrigued. Why don’t you cut to the chase? And yes,’ he added, gesturing to the bottle, ‘be my guest.’

Jablard, always obedient when given such an order, proceeded to pour himself a drink with the touching generosity of a man who knows someone else is picking up the tab. Then, glass filled almost to the brim, he sat back down on the black leather armchair and gave a roguish smile, knowing his next words would unsettle his host.

‘As I was saying, I’m sure you haven’t forgotten that doleful day.’ He stopped again, perhaps hoping to catch a nervous twitch in Laurent. To no avail: Laurent had spent his childhood in Valparaíso under the care of an old Englishwoman who taught him the secrets of bridge, and his poker face could have got him a job on a Mississippi steamboat. ‘Nor have you forgotten who was there that day. In fact, I think you were rather good friends with Madame Shennan.’

Watch what you say, you smug, potbellied arse, or you’ll get a slap across the face, Laurent wanted to say. But he concealed his thoughts with an eloquent sarcasm.

‘How could I forget? It’s still the talk of the town. Saint-Chartier doesn’t exactly have the social life of Gstaad or Saint-Tropez, and Shennan’s untimely demise is probably the only thing of any note that’s happened here.’

He took a slow, deliberate sip from his glass, holding the lawyer’s gaze, and added calmly, ‘And yes, I was good friends with the couple. With *both* of them.’

Jablard might be many things, but he was no fool, and

he quickly saw his best move would be to gallop back to the pastures of discretion and verbal decorum. As a young man, he'd been involved in enough scuffles to guess that Laurent would be quick to raise his hand if he felt offended. So he backpedalled:

‘Of course, Monsieur de Rodergues. I didn’t mean to imply anything else. Magnificent liqueur, by the way.’

Laurent smiled. He had that rare talent of not attaching importance to what doesn’t deserve any, and he quickly put the incident behind him.

‘One of my cousins is a Carthusian monk in Slovenia, in the Charterhouse of Pleterje, and every year when I visit him, he gets me two bottles.’

The portly lawyer, a hedonist whose first reaction to the soggy notion of voluntary sacrifice was to reach for his raincoat, looked puzzled for a moment, and could only muster the words, ‘Ah – well, I suppose it takes all kinds.’

‘Yes,’ Laurent shot back, ‘even lawyers.’

Sensing that the conversation wasn’t going as well as planned, Jablard dispensed with the small talk and asked his assistant, who sat in the corner enjoying seeing his employer humiliated, for the documents that had brought them there.

‘Now give me the papers, if you will, Monsieur Devaux . . . but my God, man, why didn’t you get them ready earlier, instead of just sitting there like an angora cat?’ Clearly, thought Laurent, he wouldn’t be an easy man to work for.

Laurent waited with expectation. His alarm bells were ringing loud and clear, for deep down he always knew that

one way or another Shennan's death would come back to haunt him. And this visit was the first sign.

The assistant dug both hands into an oversized leather briefcase and with no small effort extracted a bulky dossier that he handed to his boss. Jablard, without so much as a thank you, proceeded to open it and flip through the contents, licking his thumb every few pages.

'Now, as I was saying, I have here the reason we've come by.' He waved some very official-looking papers plastered with signatures and seals in Laurent's face. Then he adjusted his reading glasses and read out in a formal voice: 'I, Madame Mayumi Sayotaki Oden, widow of Carlos Shennan, sound of mind and body . . . blah blah blah, as the sole heiress of the deceased, and in accordance with my late husband's wishes, do hereby give his entire collection of stirrups, spurs and riding gear to Monsieur Laurent de Rodergues, blah blah blah.'

He now understood why the lawyer had been giving him such sardonic looks. Laurent stopped listening and wondered why on earth he'd been given this inheritance. After all, his relationship to Shennan was cordial but entirely superficial, grounded more in neighbourly courtesy than actual friendship. Indeed, Carlos Shennan, though affable and pleasant in the extreme, was the kind of person who always kept the conversation limited to what he wanted to share and never revealed what his listener actually wanted to know.

Suddenly it occurred to Laurent that Shennan's life and mind were like the château he aspired to make his home: full of doorways, hidden passages, underground chambers

and tiny dungeons loaded with secrets. He had little time to reflect on all this, though, because his always practical mind had seized on something else the lawyer said: ‘his entire collection’. Laurent felt short of breath. He’d seen said collection in full, and it contained hundreds of pieces, perhaps more than a thousand: gleaming engraved silver spurs from Mexico, spurs from Chile with needles arranged in the shape of an enormous sun, gold-ring gaucho spurs from Argentina, thick-shanked spurs from Ecuador and Bolivia. The stirrups, too, came in all shapes and sizes: sets from Japan made of fine lacquerware; from China in coarse rattan or heavy bronze with dragons rampant on the straps; from Mongolia, Tibet and the Mughal Empire; leather stirrups in the Castilian style; and not a few of those impressive Peruvian extravagances that attest to that country’s past colonial riches. Without a doubt, it was a spectacular collection, but one he honestly couldn’t accept because it simply wouldn’t fit in his house. Nor did he want to waste a large portion of his life polishing it, no matter how much the childish side of his brain – the most creative half – yearned to make it his.

‘I’m speechless,’ said the newly named heir, giving a frown that many women would consider sexy and local men would mock as affected. ‘I never thought being written into a will would be an inconvenience, but honestly I don’t think I can accept it, even though its contents are entirely to my taste.’

‘If you’ll pardon me, Monsieur, that’s an unwise choice.’ The lawyer let his melodramatic side show. ‘It’s a magnificent collection, and I know you’re passionate about

riding. Besides, Madame Shennan hasn't the least interest in these things. Think it over, take your time. I'll leave you the inventory with photos of each item, so you can mull it over in peace.' And setting down before him a document that looked like *The Merck Manual*, he proceeded to stand up and shove poor Devaux toward the door. Laurent got up to see them out, and as the lawyer shook his hand, he whispered some parting words of advice.

'Take the collection, don't be a fool. I know an antiques dealer in Issoudun who can offer you a fantastic price should you decide not to keep it.'

As they drove off, Laurent stood there, hands on his hips, now understanding why the lawyer was so keen on him accepting the collection. He looked at the château walls, then went to sit on the church steps, which offered a better angle from which to view the towers and the walled grounds. A line from Tagore came to mind: 'the Taj Mahal is a teardrop on the cheek of time'. The same could be said, he thought, of the Château de Saint-Chartier, standing proudly in the very heart of France after centuries of upheaval.

The image of Shennan's lifeless body flashed through his mind. Laurent himself had found him in the search hastily arranged when some of the guests at the party noticed their host had gone missing. He remembered the scene as if it were a dream – or rather a nightmare. The circular stone tower with its enormous spiral staircases, the absolute silence, a cellar-like chill, and Shennan splayed out on his stomach with his head to one side, a permanent smile etched onto his face. Had it not been for the growing pool of blood, it would all have looked like another childish prank, like one of those

jokes that used to make him burst into contagious laughter.

There were no signs of violence, and even his suit remained unwrinkled and unsmudged, its starched shape unaltered. Thanks to some strange mechanism in Laurent's mind, his first thought was of his own tailor, who was always insistently recommending styles and fabrics that Laurent, just as insistently, would reject, explaining that such lavish expenditures lay neither within his budget nor within his means. No doubt that man would have cried for joy to see how well the deceased wore that cut, even in such gruesome circumstances. Shaking himself out of these frivolous thoughts, he detected something in the atmosphere around the body that defied explanation, a vague whiff of intent. Maybe Shennan, with that savage energy of his, managed in his last seconds to imbue the scene of his death with an air of suspicion, if only to play with everyone's minds, something he found endlessly entertaining.

In any event, in the days that followed, not a single piece of evidence turned up to lead the police to continue their investigation. The detectives and forensic experts unanimously agreed that Shennan had died in a tragic accident most likely caused by his habit of darting up and down stairs. In fact, Laurent recalled that on one occasion, after declining an invitation to play tennis, Shennan confided that he disliked sports but enjoyed going up and down stairs, especially after reading that it was the only physical exercise Cary Grant ever did to keep his figure. After the body was found, Laurent had run into some unpleasantness, but that was a whole different kettle of fish.

As he sat there enveloped in the smoke of the noxious cigars he liked to smoke – a blend of pungent Tuscan and reeking *caliqueño* tobaccos – Laurent de Rodergues let himself be carried away by his thoughts back to his first days in town, in the not yet distant past.