Opening Extract from...

The Saint-Florentin Murders

Written by Jean-Francois-Parot

Translated from the French by Howard Curtis

Published by Gallic Books

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For Arlette and Richard Benais

Background to *The Saint-Florentin Murders*

For those readers coming to the adventures of Nicolas Le Floch for the first time, it is useful to know that in the first book in the series, *The Châtelet Apprentice*, the hero, a foundling raised by Canon Le Floch in Guérande, is sent away from his native Brittany by his godfather, the Marquis de Ranreuil, who is concerned about his daughter Isabelle's growing fondness for the young man.

On arrival in Paris he is taken in by Père Grégoire at the Monastery of the Decalced Carmelites and on the recommendation of the marquis soon finds himself in the service of Monsieur de Sartine, Lieutenant General of Police in Paris. Under his tutelage, Nicolas is quick to learn and is soon familiar with the mysterious working methods of the highest ranks of the police service. At the end of his year's apprenticeship, he is entrusted with a confidential mission, one that will result in him rendering a signal service to Louis XV and the Marquise de Pompadour.

Aided by his deputy and mentor, Inspector Bourdeau, and putting his own life at risk on several occasions, he successfully unravels a complicated plot. Received at court by the King, he is rewarded with the post of commissioner of police at the Châtelet and, under the direct authority of Monsieur de Sartine, continues to be assigned to special investigations.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Nicolas Le Floch: a police commissioner at the Châtelet
Louis Le Floch: his son, a schoolboy
Monsieur de Sartine: Secretary of State for the Navy
Monsieur Lenoir: Lieutenant General of Police in Paris
Monsieur de Saint-Florentin, Duc de La Vrillière: Minister of the King's Household
Duchesse de La Vrillière: his wife
Pierre Bourdeau: a police inspector
Old Marie: an usher at the Châtelet
Tirepot: a police spy
Rabouine: a police spy
Aimé de Noblecourt: a former procurator
Marion: his cook
Poitevin: his servant
Catherine Gauss: a former canteen-keeper, Nicolas Le Floch's maid
Guillaume Semacgus: a navy surgeon
Thierry de Ville d'Avray: First Groom of the King's Bedchamber
Monsieur de La Borde: his predecessor
Charles Henri Sanson: the public executioner
La Satin: Louis Le Floch's mother
La Paulet: a former brothel-keeper
Monsieur de Gévigland: a doctor

Madame de Cusacque: the Duc de La Vrillière's mistress
Monsieur de Chambonas: her son-in-law
Monsieur Bourdier: an engineer
Monsieur d'Arranet: Lieutenant General of the Naval Forces
Aimée d'Arranet: his daughter
Monsieur Testard du Lys: Criminal Lieutenant of Police
Anselme Vitry: a gardener
Marguerite Pindron: the Duchesse de La Vrillière's chambermaid
Jean Missery: major-domo to the Duc de La Vrillière
Eugénie Gouet: first chambermaid to the Duchesse de La Vrillière
Jeanne Le Bas, known as Jeannette: second chambermaid to the Duchesse de La Vrillière
Charles Bibard, known as Provence: a valet
Pierre Miquete: a Swiss Guard at the La Vrillière mansion
Jacques Blain: a caretaker
Jacques Despiard: a kitchen boy
Gilles Duchamplan: the late Madame Missery's elder brother
Nicole Duchamplan: his wife
Hélène Duchamplan: the late Madame Missery's elder sister, a nun with the Daughters of Saint Michel
Eudes Duchamplan: the late Madame Missery's younger brother
Restif de la Bretonne: a writer and pamphleteer
Old Longères: a cattle farmer
Lord Ashbury: an English spy
Richard: a gardener at Trianon

I

PROLOGUE

The dark night drained things of all their colour.
MAURICE SCÈVE

Sunday 2 October 1774

What was the meaning of this unusual rendezvous? She should have been able to wean him off such whims by now. The idea of it! The servants' floor offered sufficient opportunities, so there was no real need for him to force her into these pointless nocturnal escapades. It was a good thing her chores in Madame's apartments kept her away from her fine suitor for much of the day. He often took advantage of her slightest foray into the common parts of the La Vrillière mansion to . . . He was insatiable. But how could she refuse him? She owed him her position, and a kind of security. Still she waited, and the piece of candle, which cast a parsimonious light on the roasting room, would not last much longer. It was a large, dark room, with chimneys of blackened stone looming over the spits, trammels and dripping-pans.

She laughed at her own cleverness: every day she filched pieces of candle from the apartments on the upper floors to replenish her stock. Several times, she had come close to being caught. She had to beware, not only of her mistress's constant

vigilance, but also that of the other servants, her competitors in this pilfering: they, too, were always on the lookout for anything to feed this lucrative trade in candle wax.

A metallic clinking broke the silence. Her heart pounded so hard it hurt. She held her breath, waiting for what was to follow, but nothing came. Another of those rats, she thought – impossible to get rid of them. One of those fat grey moth-eaten rats that fed on scraps from the kitchen, and from what had been left in the big adjacent larder. The best pieces from the larder were also regularly resold to a few taverns, and as for the scraps, they ended up in a soup which, sold for a few coins from a steaming carriage in the streets, provided momentary sustenance to the poorest of the poor. She had tried it herself, not so long ago, after fleeing her father's house, and still had the bitter rotten taste of it, which no seasoning could ever mask, in her mouth. Just the thought of it made her retch.

She was still listening hard, hoping to hear her lover's heavy steps. But all she heard was a distant miaow. She laughed: cats were no use here – they were too well fed on the leftovers from a rich table. Only their eyes, gleaming in the darkness whenever a ray of light struck them, scared off the most faint-hearted. Sometimes, you would see a big rat, in the peak of condition, rise up and bare its yellow teeth, defying a cat, which would slink off without a fight. As for her, she was not afraid of cats. She had seen some really formidable cats in the cowsheds belonging to her father, who raised cattle for milk in Faubourg Saint-Antoine, where they were attracted by the mice hiding in the straw and grain.

She preferred not to think about that. Better to wipe out the

past. But she couldn't help remembering those last days spent with her family. Her father had been adamant that she marry a neighbour's son, a gardener in the *faubourg*. The boy was well enough built, but he had bulging eyes and did not appeal to her. His method of courtship involved listing the different kinds of lettuce, as well as the rules for cultivating plants under cold frames, the whole lecture embellished with observations on the best way to line paths with quickset hedges, trellises or picket fences. The preliminary visit she had made to the Vitry household had confirmed her in her rejection.

Their house had one room on the ground floor, looking out on the marsh. It was here that the family lived and ate. The floor was of beaten earth, a long way from the waxed tiles of her own house. Straw chairs, a large, worn wooden table, a porcelain stove, a copper fountain and an ugly dresser were the only decoration. On the first floor, two bedrooms, with straw mattresses and bunks, one of which was the son's and would be the young couple's when they married. Old Madame Vitry, a tall, thin, dark woman with soiled, worn-down nails, listed for her, in a severe tone, the duties of a gardener's wife. She would have to get up at five in the morning, in all weathers and all seasons, and work until eight in the evening, pausing only briefly for a little soup or a crust of bread. She would have to obey her in-laws as if they were her own family.

Her revulsion increased when they started discussing the marriage contract and the contributions of the bride and groom. Hers consisted, apart from a silver dowry large enough to bring a gleam to the old woman's eyes, of a supply of fresh manure for the Vitry family's gardens, to be provided in instalments spread

out over several months. When the day came for the engagement to be certified before a notary, appalled by the prospect of a life with this oaf, she had yielded to a sudden impulse and decamped, leaving behind calves, cows, oxen, manure and lettuces, a stunned fiancé and two disappointed families. Fearing that they would search for her, she plunged into the great city, hoping to lose herself in an ocean of people. Appalled at his daughter's actions, old Pindron made no attempt to search for her. She had dishonoured the family, she was no longer of any account, and he immediately disowned her. He took to his bed and died four days later, leaving a widow who retired to her native Burgundy after selling off the farm for a good price to an important family who raised cattle in the *faubourg*, and who committed themselves before a notary to pay her an annuity until she died.

For months, Marguerite Pindron roamed the streets of Paris, sleeping on the *quais*, finding hiding places in the pyramids of the Port au Bois on Quai Saint-Paul or amid the casks on Quai de la Rapée. It was here that the wood carried on the river accumulated in piles as high as houses. Some were well organised into pyramids, but most were heaped up haphazardly, creating a kind of mysterious city made of detours and alleys, underground passages and inner rooms from which, early in the morning, there emerged, wild-eyed, a strange and varied collection of human beings. The few *louis* she had stolen from her father did not last long, but, being able to read and write, she used this skill among the poorest of the poor, and managed to hold out until winter. It was then, one desperate evening when she could no longer bear the hunger and cold, that she met a well-dressed young man who took her to his dwelling, washed her, and made her an object of

his pleasure. He dressed her and fed her, then introduced her to his brother-in-law, who was the major-domo in the mansion of the Duc de La Vrillière. Her joy at finding a position was short-lived. She was only the latest in an army of servant girls who emptied the pots and buckets, doomed to the most repulsive chores and the harshest reprimands.

It did not take her long to realise that the brother-in-law also expected to have his way with her. The man had been a widower for two years, could not bear the solitude, and chased anything wearing skirts in the Saint-Florentin mansion. At first, she resisted his advances, but she was desperately afraid of finding herself back on the streets. She opened her heart to her original benefactor, who laughed in her face and urged her to yield: he had started making her small loans, to be repaid when she was able. Her new lover immediately conceived a genuine passion for her beauty and youth. She found it increasingly difficult to escape a bond that was proving burdensome and the constant attentions of a greybeard to whom she had been forced to yield out of necessity alone. She tried every stratagem she could think of, including brief dalliances with other, younger servants, in the hope of putting him off. The only result was to strengthen his desire for her. He was obsessively jealous, and some terrible scenes ensued.

Tears welled in her eyes. All that was nothing compared with what had happened three days earlier, which she could not get out of her mind. Her young benefactor had come looking for her in the evening after she came off duty, and had made her leave the building through a concealed door and join him in a cab. After a long journey, he had led her into an unknown house and made her put on a highly indecent costume. Why had she agreed to it?

She tried to dismiss the images of what had followed. How had she come to this? She had not protested, as if the frenzy and outrageousness of all that was happening had left her too stunned to react. Her 'friend' had appeared to her in such an ambiguous light that she found it impossible to regard him again as part of the natural order of things.

The candle flame suddenly flickered in a draught of air, sputtered a moment, then went out, giving off an acrid odour. That was all she needed! She had nothing with which to relight it. She felt suddenly anxious at being alone in this deserted place. She imagined presences around her. It was early autumn, a time when animals and insects often sought warmth in the kitchens of houses. Something creaked behind her, and she was aware of a furtive movement. She forced herself to turn round, but could see nothing. She was finding it hard to breathe: it seemed to her that there was not enough air in here. She was starting to panic. She was just about to rush madly to the staircase leading to the upper floors when she felt herself seized firmly by an unseen arm and pressed against someone's body. A terrible pain went through the base of her neck, and she collapsed without even realising that she was dying, in a stream of blood.

Early the next morning, a kitchen boy discovered two bodies. One was Marguerite Pindron, whose throat had been cut, and the other Jean Missery, the major-domo, lying unconscious and wounded. A knife lay on the tiled floor beside him, in the middle of a scarlet pool.

I

THE PASSING OF THE DAYS

Time uncovers secrets; time creates opportunities;
time confirms good counsel.
BOSSUET

Sunday 2 October 1774

Nicolas was surreptitiously looking at his son's face. He was the spitting image of how he himself had been when he was young, with that dashing air his grandfather, the Marquis de Ranreuil, had had whenever he rose to his full height and looked his interlocutor in the eye. As for La Satin, her presence was felt in the gentleness diffused through his fine, if not entirely formed features. The boy's noble but casual bearing showed none of the awkwardness common to his age. He was talking to Monsieur de Noblecourt, and his conversation was full of Greek and Latin quotations: from time to time, with a smile, the former procurator would correct his mistakes and solecisms. The presentation dinner for Louis Le Floch at Noblecourt's house in Rue Montmartre was at its height. Nicolas was happy and relieved to feel the warmth emanating from his friends, Semacgus, Bourdeau and La Borde. He himself did not take part in the discussion, wanting Louis, who in fact seemed quite at ease, to find his place here naturally. The role of father, which filled him with both joy

and anguish, was still new to him, and he had to learn it step by step.

The year was ending better than it had begun. The rumours circulating about the plots and criminal investigations that had followed the death of his mistress, Madame de Lastérieux, were gradually dying down. He still carried his grief for the late King in his heart, muted but painful. This troubled period of his life had had one fortunate consequence: he had discovered the existence of a child born of his liaison with La Satin fifteen years earlier. La Paulet, alerted by a first encounter and the impression of a conspicuous resemblance, had decided to intervene. Leaving her house in Auteuil, where she led a comfortably devout life, she had come running to see Monsieur de Noblecourt to plead La Satin's case and the importance of giving Louis a father he had never known. The former procurator had taken the matter very seriously and had agreed to intercede and advise both parents.

There had been misgivings, however, on both sides. La Satin feared Nicolas's reaction, recalling that he had once questioned her as to the father of her child and had declared himself ready, if need be, to assume responsibility. Being a sensible woman, well aware of the demeaning nature of her situation, she dreaded the consequences that might ensue, for both father and son, of recognising Nicolas's paternity and thus bringing this dubious lineage out into the open. At the same time, Nicolas, who still felt a great deal of tenderness for a woman he had known when he first arrived in Paris, was fearful of hurting the new mistress of the Dauphin Couronné by taking steps to remove their child from a pernicious, corrupting environment. Nor had he any desire to loosen the natural ties binding a son to his mother.

It was left to Monsieur de Noblecourt to resolve this thorny issue. He took up his pen and, as if setting out the points for a closing statement in court, undertook to bring the interests and feelings in question, delicate as they were, into alignment. La Satin was to readopt her birth name of Antoinette Godelet and abandon her present occupation. With Nicolas's help, she would buy a shop selling fashion and toilet articles in Rue du Bac from a couple who wished to retire. The hardest part was to convince La Paulet, who, seeing her carefully laid plans for the succession of the brothel collapse, raged and cursed like a fishwife in a manner with which Nicolas had been familiar in the past. Monsieur de Noblecourt waited for the storm to pass and, making full use of his mollifying influence on the good lady, dispensed so many compliments and displayed such a benevolent ear that his intervention worked wonders, and she gradually calmed down. The unexpected arrival of La Présidente, whose English adventure had ended in disaster,[1] made it possible to overcome the last objections. La Satin's friend jumped for joy at the idea of resuming her duties at the Dauphin Couronné, but this time as mistress and manager. Grudgingly, La Paulet agreed to everything. Indeed, she went even further. Her establishment had prospered, acquiring an elegant tone that belied its reputation. In order to show her gratitude to La Satin, she decided to complement her move to Rue du Bac by buying for her the little mezzanine apartment attached to it.

For his part, Nicolas recognised his son before a notary – the boy immediately took his name – and used his influence to make sure that anything relating to La Satin's former activities went missing from the police archives. All that remained was to inform

Louis of these events which would have such consequences for his future: a delicate operation which might well distress the young man. Monsieur de Noblecourt offered to take care of it, but Nicolas wanted to begin his career as a father by being completely open and telling the whole truth. In any case, he had nothing with which to reproach himself, having been unaware of his son's existence until quite recently. But the question remained as to what the young man would think of these decisions about which he had not been consulted.

Nicolas thought about how he himself had been at that age. Whenever he talked to Louis, it was indeed that distant image of himself that he strove to convince. Their first encounter reassured him. Under the trees in the garden of La Paulet's house in Auteuil, he told the boy his life story, omitting nothing, and taking care not to offend the love the child bore his mother. Louis listened seriously and naturally, and immediately launched into a long series of questions. Their encounters continued through the summer, mostly at Dr Semacgus's house in Vaugirard, and before long their relationship blossomed into affection. Having gained some idea of his son's knowledge, Nicolas decided to have him admitted to the College of the Oratorians at Juilly: he regretted that his Jesuit masters had been expelled from the kingdom, but the education, both classical and modern, provided at the college corresponded to the ideas the Marquis de Ranreuil had drummed into Nicolas throughout his adolescence at Guérande, with modern literature and foreign languages being particularly prominent. Louis would come back and spend his holidays in Paris, sharing them equally between Rue Montmartre and Rue du Bac.

'When will I see the King, Father?'

Nicolas gave a start, and again became conscious of his surroundings. The meal was starting. Marion and Catherine had just brought in a piping hot calf's-kidney omelette.

'I'll take you to Versailles one Sunday,' he replied. 'We'll attend Mass and you'll be able to observe His Majesty at your leisure, and then at even closer quarters in the great gallery.'

Louis smiled. His expression brought a pang to Nicolas's heart: for a moment, he had been reminded of his half-sister Isabelle.

'How is Monsieur Lenoir?' La Borde asked.

'From what I see, the Lieutenant General is doing well.'

Those present noticed the bitterness of his reply.

'If truth be told,' La Borde resumed, 'he's a man extremely well disposed to everything concerning opera.'

'I fear,' Semacgus said ironically, 'that our friend's desire to be noticed has influenced his support for the successor of the late lamented Sartine.'

Nicolas shook his head.

'It's one of those phrases,' Noblecourt said, 'that suggests too much or too little. I find it a somewhat laconic remark to make about someone in such an important position. Sartine actually increased the powers of the office. What will this man do with them?'

'Oh,' said Bourdeau, 'he's become as important as a minister, even though he doesn't have the title of minister. You know how much influence he has behind the scenes. He strikes down or he saves. He spreads darkness or light. His authority is as tactful as it is extensive. He elevates and humiliates as he pleases.'

Nicolas shook his head. 'The last one liked wigs, this one richly bound books.'

'Which suggests,' said Louis timidly, 'that neither one of them can entirely cover up his own emptiness!'

They all applauded. Nicolas smiled.

'As our late King used to say,' observed La Borde, 'like father like son.'

'He gets it from his grandfather,' said Nicolas. 'The marquis was never at a loss for a witty remark.'

'Gentlemen,' resumed La Borde, 'allow me to abandon you to the aromas of this delicious omelette. I salute in passing the tenderness of these kidneys. In honour of young Louis, I lent a hand myself, as I used to at Trianon. Catherine and I are about to put the finishing touches to my surprise. Semacgus, prepare our host to resist temptation! Louis, come with me, I need a kitchen boy.'

The boy stood up, already tall for his age. How many things there were to teach him! thought Nicolas. Riding, hunting, fencing . . . He was a Ranreuil, after all. He resumed his reflections. Naturally, the new Lieutenant General of Police had received him quite promptly. Following Sartine's counsel, he had asked for an audience as early as possible. He had found Lenoir standing behind the desk where, so often, his predecessor had played with his wigs. The man was tall, with a full figure and a distinct paunch. He had a strong nose above a mouth with a fleshy lower lip which, when it moved to express dismissal or disdain, drew the eye to his double chin. His own eyes were lively and penetrating, with a hint of arrogance, a marked scepticism, and an undisguised self-satisfaction. A powdered wig with ringlets

added to the magnificence of cambric bands falling in a dazzling stream over an unadorned silk gown. The interview, cut short by the arrival of a visitor, could hardly have been classed as a genuine meeting of minds.

'Commissioner,' Lenoir had said, 'my predecessor recommended you. I myself, Monsieur, had the opportunity to assess the skill and expertise with which you handled a delicate case. On the other hand, experience has taught me that personal methods, however useful and effective they may be, tend to get out of control and become a burden to those in authority. You cannot play with me the same role you played with Monsieur de Sartine. I intend to revise the rules and bring a new order to our methods, one more in keeping with my own conceptions.'

'I am at the King's service, Monseigneur.'

'He appreciates you, Monsieur,' retorted Lenoir, somewhat ill-temperedly. 'We know he appreciates you. But the rules must be the same for everyone. Some older commissioners might be offended . . .'

They probably hadn't held back, thought Nicolas.

'. . . that one of their younger colleagues should get all the attention and be allowed such independence. Can we entrust you with a district? That would hardly be appropriate. You have treated your colleagues very badly—'

'Monseigneur!'

'I know what I'm saying, don't interrupt me. Many complaints and grievances have reached my ear. The sensible thing, Monsieur, would be to take things easy, relax, go hunting, and wait for more auspicious times to return. A position as police commissioner at the Châtelet can be sold at a good price and with

excellent interest. There is no shortage of candidates, as you can imagine. I have the honour to bid you good day, Commissioner.'

Nicolas made no effort to counter this fall from favour. His upright nature balked at doing so, and he was unable to feign submission. Absorbed as he was by his discovery of Louis, he was more worried about what would happen to his deputy, Bourdeau, who had been dragged into the same storm and who, with children still young enough to require support, now found himself reduced to his basic allowance without the profitable extras to which his position usually gave rise. Nicolas took steps to have substantial sums passed on to his friend, justifying them, in order not to offend the man, as payments of long-forgotten debts, expenses incurred during past missions. As far as his own condition was concerned, he approached it with an almost religious fatalism: his future would be what it would be. The only people in whom he confided unreservedly were Monsieur de Noblecourt and La Borde.

The former approved of his determination to rise above the temporary vicissitudes that marked any career devoted to the King's service. Time was a great master which arranged things well, and, in these circumstances, the only obligation that imposed itself upon an honest man was to keep up appearances. In this way, he would show that he regarded as of little account what most men would have taken for a catastrophe. Monsieur de Noblecourt, with his experience of the century and of the ways of men, was convinced that Lenoir would overcome his initial prejudices. His first reaction had been perfectly understandable, the action of someone who wished to impress others and himself. Nicolas should not forget that Lenoir was the protégé

and friend of Monsieur de Sartine, who had intrigued to have him appointed in his place, hoping thereby to keep some control over this important cog in the machinery of State, this privileged instrument of influence with the monarch. The talk that had reached Monsieur de Noblecourt's ears about the new Lieutenant General of Police painted quite a different picture. He was said to be clear-headed, a good conversationalist, a man of lively perception and exquisite judgement. He had studied long and hard, but this had not, it was said, in any way blunted the graces and ornaments of an amiable wit. He was, in addition, a discriminating lover of the arts and letters. In short, the most sensible thing, for the moment, was to wait, for it sometimes happens that our salvation comes from the very same sources from which we expect our ruin.

Monsieur de La Borde's argument, although different, pointed in the same direction. He had, immediately after the King's death, decided to forget a past that had been happy but was now over and done with. They had to accept it: they were both 'old Court', and would stay that way for a long time, if not for ever. He himself had resumed a number of activities which his duties to the monarch had caused him to neglect. Swearing Nicolas to secrecy, he confessed that the late King had promised to compensate him for a financial sacrifice to which he had once consented in order to enter his service. He also revealed, much to Nicolas's surprise, that he had decided to turn over a new leaf after a life of superficiality and dissipation. He had recently married Adélaïde-Suzanne de Vismes, nineteen years his junior. The ceremony had originally been set for 1 July, but, because of the public mourning, had been postponed to September and celebrated

discreetly. His wife, sorely tried by these events and the dashing of their expectations, had fallen into a terrible state of languor, inflammation and weeping. Still in the mood for confession, and no doubt inspired by Nicolas's recent fatherhood, La Borde revealed to him that he himself had legitimised, four years earlier, a daughter born of his liaison with La Guimard, the famous actress. Saying all this seemed to relieve him of a burden and, putting his own troubles aside for the moment, he returned to those of his friend.[2]

He tried fervently to make Nicolas forget his gloom. After all, he had been granted leisure. By God, he should make use of it and devote himself to his son! A man who had studied the world knew when to wait and when to take advantage of opportunities. He had to adapt his means and make his thoughts serve his loyalties. His counsel could be summed up in the Italian phrase *Volto sciolto e pensieri stretti*: Open face and secret thoughts. Dissimulation and secrecy were to be cultivated: the commissioner should stand aside for a while in favour of the Marquis de Ranreuil. He should use the disadvantages of an apparent fall from favour, don them like a suit of armour in a society where the slightest weakness was noticed and provided ammunition to those who wished to mock or crush you. He should be seen in all the right places and make sure that the King, who already knew him, noted his regular attendance and expertise on hunts and at shooting parties, to which he had free access thanks to the favour of Louis XV. That would give others nothing to seize on as evidence that Monsieur Lenoir was keeping him on the sidelines. Nothing would be gained by arguing. La Borde noted sadly that times had indeed changed: a witty remark by Monsieur de Maurepas was

considered of greater import in royal circles than protecting a good servant.

Nicolas was inspired by his friends' good counsel. He judged that salvation lay in the deliberate ambiguity of his conduct, which would lead commentary in different directions and, in the long run, drain it of all meaning. Despite the rumours, the cold hearts and false minds of the city and the Court would struggle in vain to spread gossip about him. Everyone might well have his own opinion about the case of 'young Ranneuil', but it wouldn't matter. All that remained to complete the picture were a few touches intended for the chroniclers, who were always on the lookout for things that might convince the less credulous: a gratifying flirtation with an indiscreet lady, a touch of condescension in his courtesy, and, most important of all, being noticed by the King. He had the opportunity to note, with some amusement, how he excelled in the career of courtier. In August, when the Court was at Compiègne, he had several times found himself in at the kill just after the King, and had benefited from his master's simple good humour. Subsequently, they had conversed merrily about the qualities of the animal or the episodes of the hunt. At shooting, he deliberately missed, much to the satisfaction of Louis XVI, who, as a mark of his esteem, resolved to present him with the rifles which the late King had lent to Nicolas on one of his last excursions, just before his illness.

All this caused much comment at Court, his supposedly fallen star suddenly shone again as brightly as ever, and the very people who, a few days earlier, had looked at him without seeing him now came running to compliment him. He had no doubt that news of his renewed success would reach the ears of Monsieur

Lenoir, who was informed by his spies of the smallest details of life at Court. When all was said and done, he realised, the last few months had passed quickly, with a great deal of agitation and a flood of impressions and feelings. A great cry drew him from his reflections.

'*Gigot farci à la royale* accompanied by mushroom rissoles!' roared La Borde, who was carrying a silver tray from which fragrant wreaths of steam were rising.

'Doesn't he look like the herald of arms?' exclaimed Noblecourt, his eyes already gleaming greedily. 'All he needs is the tabard.'[3]

'What do you think this is, then?' asked La Borde, indicating the white apron with which he was draped.

Now it was Louis's turn to appear, his face red from the heat of the ovens, carrying a porcelain dish filled with a pyramid of rissoles arranged on a cloth.

Nicolas decided to join in the mounting gaiety. 'And what are we going to drink with all that?'

Bourdeau produced two bottles from under the table. 'A plum-coloured Saint Nicolas de Bourgueil!'

'Gentlemen, gentlemen,' said Noblecourt, 'while Poitevin carves, I propose that Monsieur de La Borde gives us the usual descriptive and appetite-whetting speech.'

'May I enquire, Monsieur,' said Louis, 'as to the reason for this custom?'

'Young man, ever since your father brought joy back to this house, a joy made all the greater today by your presence among us, it has been a tradition which I would not dream of not respecting on this feast day. The delicious dishes concocted under this roof should be tasted not only by the palate but also by the ear.'

'And the eyes!' exclaimed Semacgus. 'In any case, that is the one sense I allow myself to indulge.'

'Well,' retorted Noblecourt, 'I'm going to disobey my doctor this evening. I shall satisfy those three senses to the full!'

'Gentlemen,' said La Borde, 'may I first point out to you that I had the honour to make this dish for the late King, and that Madame de Pompadour was very fond of it in spite of a weak stomach?'

'The good lady was quite lenient,' said Semacgus.

'On the contrary, she asked for more.'

'Gentlemen, stop this foolery,' begged Noblecourt. 'It's going to get cold.'

'Imagine a fine leg of lamb,' continued La Borde emphatically, 'kept cool for several days until it's nicely tender. First you must break the knuckle to get inside and take out the meat while keeping the outside intact. To do this, I called on the skills of a master!'

'A meat roaster from Rue Saint-Honoré?' Nicolas asked.

'Not at all. A naval surgeon, adept at cutting and digging.'

'It's true,' said Semacgus, closing his eyes with a show of solemnity. 'My knives proved very useful.'

'Good heavens!' cried Nicolas. 'Do you mean to say you used the instruments that are normally for—'

'I'd like to have you believe it, just to take away your appetite!'

'I'll never finish if you keep interrupting me,' moaned La Borde. 'The meat that's been taken out has to be chopped up very small with a little bacon, marrow, fine calf's-kidney fat, mushrooms, eggs, salt, pepper and spices. Keep kneading it all, making sure that each part absorbs the taste and seasoning of the others. Then fill the

skin with it so that the leg reappears in its natural form and tie it all the way round with string, in order to maintain its consistency. Let it get nicely golden, then cook it in a pot with a good thick stock and a thin piece of beef, half roasted, which will fill it with its juices and give it more taste. Add onions stuck with cloves and herbs. A good hour later, turn it in the pot until it's baked. Check it with your fingertips, to make sure the flesh is soft. As the sauce is now reduced, add some sweetbread, and, once you've carved the leg, pour this succulence over it.'

Cheers punctuated Monsieur de La Borde's recitation. Everyone proceeded to savour a dish that required a spoon rather than a knife and fork. Nicolas watched his son out of the corner of his eye, happy to see that he was eating with that nimble elegance which, once again, recalled not only the bearing of the Marquis de Ranreuil, but also his mother's innate grace.

'Now there's a dish,' said Noblecourt, 'that's well suited to my old teeth.'

'The crustiness of the wrapping and the softness of the filling go together perfectly,' said Semacgus. 'And how well this purple beverage matches the lamb!'

'Doesn't it?' said Bourdeau, delighted. 'I find that the mushrooms in this fine mixture retain their softness and all the flavours of the forest.'

Noblecourt turned to Louis. 'This is a dinner you'll remember when you're at school, one with which you'll be able to enliven your dreams.'

'I shall think of it with gratitude, Monsieur,' the boy replied, 'when I'm eating hard-boiled meat and worm-eaten herring. It will strengthen my resolve.'

They all laughed. Catherine placed a dish of crystallised quince fritters sprinkled with sugar on the table. Noblecourt smiled and made a sign to Poitevin, who went out and immediately returned with two small packages.

'Young man,' said the former procurator, opening the more voluminous of the two, 'I was a schoolboy once, and had to suffer, like you, both harsh discipline and hunger. My mother took pity on me and made sure I had a supply of quince jelly, which I sucked every evening to calm my hunger pangs.'

He took from the packet a series of small round, flat deal boxes.

'These objects, which are called *friponnes*, contain quince jelly with a little added white wine. Not only will they assuage your hunger, but they are an excellent remedy for stomach aches. They will also help to combat whatever harmful effects the school food has on your health. You will just have to conceal them carefully, as theft is all too common in schools. You have enough here to last you until Christmas.'

The conversation then turned to more general matters.

'Are they still wearing mourning for our king at Versailles?' La Borde asked with that feigned indifference that ill concealed his sadness at being separated from the centre of the world.

'The recommended attire,' said Nicolas, 'is a cloth or silk coat, depending on the weather, black silk stockings, swords and silver buckles, with a single diamond ring. Last but not least, braided cuffs on the shirt. That's all until 1 November; after that everything will be simpler as Christmas approaches.'

'For someone who is out of favour at Court,' observed La Borde, 'you seem to be well informed!'