Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

The Cleaner of Chartres

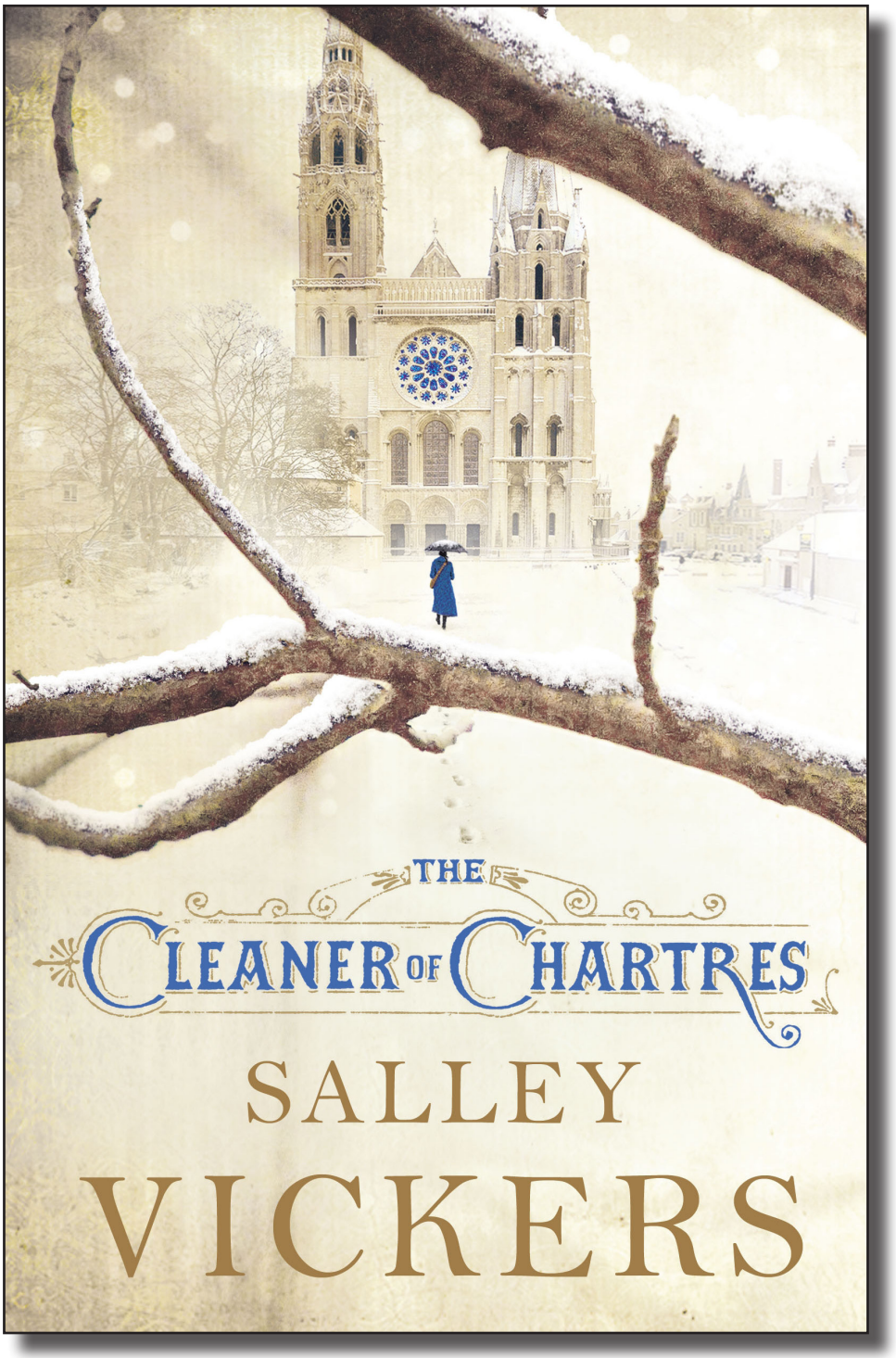
Written by Salley Vickers

Published by Penguin Books Ltd

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

Penguin Tasters



An extract from The Cleaner of Chartres by Salley Vickers
www.penguin.co.uk/tasters

The Cleaner of Chartres

by

Salley Vickers

Copyright Salley Vickers, 2012

All rights reserved



Penguin Books Ltd

www.penguin.co.uk/tasters

The Cleaner of Chartres
is available to buy from
Viking hardback | eBook

and is also available in the
Kindle Store and the iBookstore

1

Chartres

The old town of Chartres, around which the modern town unaesthetically sprawls, is built on a natural elevation that rises from a wide, wheat-growing plain in the region of Beauce in central France. Visitors and pilgrims, who since earliest times have made their ways to the ancient site, can see the cathedral of Notre-Dame from many miles off, the twin spires, like lofty beacons, encouraging them onwards.

Five successive cathedrals have stood on this site; all were burned to rubble save the present cathedral, which grew, phoenix-like, from the embers of the last devastating fire. On June 10th, 1194, flames sped through Chartres, destroying many of the domestic dwellings, crowded cheek by jowl in the narrow medieval streets, and all of the former cathedral save the Western Front with its twin towers and the much more ancient crypt.

As the fire took hold, the forest of roof timbers crashed burning to the ground amid frenzied clouds of burning cinders; the walls split, tumbled and collapsed while lead from the roof poured down in a molten stream, as if enacting a scene of eternal damnation in a Last Judgement.

The reaction among the citizens of Chartres was one of uniform horror. According to contemporary reports, they lamented the loss of their beloved cathedral even more than the loss of their own homes. Perhaps this was in part because, as today, their livelihoods depended on the many parties of

pilgrims visiting the town to pay reverence to its most venerated relic, the birthing gown of the Virgin Mary, a gift to the cathedral by the grandson of Charlemagne, Charles the Bald.

Three days after the fire was finally quenched, some priests emerged from the crypt with the marvellous cloth still intact. As the fire took hold, they had apparently snatched it from its hallowed place and retreated for safety into the most ancient part of the cathedral, the lower crypt, the province of Our Lady Under the Earth, incarcerating themselves behind a metal door which had held firm while the fire raged destruction outside. The missing men had been presumed dead. The holy relic presumed lost. When it was seen to have been restored, and its rescuers returned to safety, it was agreed that this was a miracle, a sign from Our Lady that the town should build in her honour an edifice even finer than before.

The new cathedral was completed within twenty-six years, thanks to the devotion and hard labour of the townspeople, who pulled together to create a building worthy of the Mother of God with whom their town had so fortunately found favour. The bishop and his canons agreed to donate the greater portion of their salaries to aid the cost of the building works. Sovereigns of the Western world were approached for funds, and many dug deep into their coffers to ensure that their names were attached to the noble enterprise, which would gain for them fitting rewards in the life to come. People from neighbouring dioceses brought cartloads of grain to feed the citizens of Chartres, who were giving their labours for nothing more than the love of God. The whole astonishing structure was conceived, designed and accomplished by a series of master builders, men of clear enterprise and shining genius.

But of them and their companies – the scores of talented sculptors, stonecutters, masons, carpenters, roofers, stained-glass

artists and manual labourers who implemented their plans – nothing is known.

Nor was anything known of Agnès Morel when she arrived in Chartres nearly eight hundred years after the building of the present cathedral commenced. Few, if asked, could have recalled when she first appeared. She must have seemed vaguely always to have been about. A tall, dark, slender woman – 'a touch of the tar brush there', Madame Beck, who had more than a passing sympathy for the Front National, chose to comment – with eyes that the local artist, Robert Clément, likened to washed topaz, though, as the same Madame Beck remarked to her friend Madame Picot, being an artist he was given to these fanciful notions.

As far back as Philippe Nevers could remember Agnès had been around. She had been an occasional babysitter for himself and his sister, Brigitte. Brigitte had once crept up with a pair of scissors behind the sofa, where their babysitter sat watching TV, and hacked an ugly chunk out of her long black hair. Philippe had pinched Brigitte's arm for this and they had got into a fight, in which Brigitte's new nightgown was ripped by the scissors, and when their mother came home Brigitte had cried and shown her both the nightgown and the pinch marks.

Although their mother had punished Philippe, the boy had not explained why he had set about his sister. Agnès was odd, with eyes, he might have suggested, had he overheard Robert Clément, more like those of the panther he had seen at the zoo, pacing up and down its cage in a manner the crowd found amusing. Philippe liked Agnès in the way he had liked the panther and had hoped that it might escape and get a bit of its own back on the laughing crowd. With the sensitivity which, even at age six, was a hallmark of his character, he knew their

mother would be quick to blame Agnès for the episode with the scissors. So he bore the unfair punishment in silence.

Professor Jones, had he been aware of it, would have been able to date Agnès' arrival quite precisely, since it was the same summer that his second wife left him. The weather had been uncharacteristically inclement, even for central France, which does not enjoy the dependable climate of the South. Professor Jones had taken a sabbatical year in order to embark on a long-cherished research project of documenting each of the supposedly four thousand, five hundred sculptures which embellish the nine great portals of Notre-Dame in Chartres. The work was to be definitive in the field and he had dared to hope that it would make his name. But the parochialism of the small town, the depressing steady drizzle and her husband's preoccupation with insensate figures of the long past had lowered Marion Jones's spirits, the very spirits which her husband had hoped to raise by bringing her to the famed medieval town.

This mismatch in taste and comprehension was only one of a long list of incompatibilities between Marion Jones and her husband. That summer, a renowned Japanese cellist visited from Paris to play Bach's Suites for unaccompanied cello at one of the cathedral's prestigious summer concerts. Marion, bored to tears by the life she was leading, wandered into the cathedral while the cellist was practising, and it was noted by Madame Beck that he was not unaccompanied when, a while later, he left the cathedral to return to his hotel. Not long after the concert, Marion took to making shopping trips to Paris, which is barely an hour's train ride from Chartres. The trips became longer, and more frequent; one day she left with a larger than usual bag and never returned.

Professor Jones waited mournfully, long after his sabbatical year had come to an end. Finally, giving in to despair, he resigned his university position and made a permanent home

in Chartres, but not before a small parcel containing a wedding ring had arrived with a note telling him where he could 'stick his bloody sculptures'.

The current dean, the Abbé Paul, might have remembered Agnès' arrival since he too, at that far date, had only lately come from his seminary to serve as a curate at the cathedral. He had found Agnès under a man's coat, asleep in a convenient niche in the North Porch. Although the dean at the time, Monsignor André, a stern administrator, had let it be known that tramps should not misconstrue the nature of Christian charity by taking the cathedral for 'a doss house', the young priest found himself turning a blind eye to the intruder.

Paul's father was a Highland Scot who could trace his family line directly back to Lord George Murray, the general who had led the ill-fated Jacobite rebellion against the English in the rising of 1745. The general's descendant had met his future wife when she had gone with a friend to visit the festival at Edinburgh, where he had held a research fellowship at the university. The marriage was a successful one: but Charles Murray had succumbed, after a short fight, to his French wife's pressure to return to her native land in search of the light she bitterly missed in the long Scottish winters.

The strain of rebellion in him succumbed to his greater fondness for his wife and concern for her happiness. He gave up his study of Ovid's metaphors and became a respected Classics master at a school in Toulon.

But a measure of his father's dissident heritage salted the young Paul's character. The sleeper in the cathedral porch was a young woman; she looked peaceful. For all Dean André's strictures the young Paul could not bear to awaken her to what he guessed was a grim reality.

Quite how Agnès had managed since those days was a subject of nobody's speculation. She had made herself useful

in the small ways that help to oil the wheels of daily life. She was an accomplished ironer, a reliable babysitter and was known to 'sit' naked for Robert Clément (the last activity making her less desirable to some in the first two capacities). She made a reputation as a conscientious cleaner, and Professor Jones, after a more than usually bad attack of moth had made lace of his slender wardrobe, discovered that she could also darn.

Agnès no longer had need of the shelter of the cathedral when the subject of her cleaning it came up. The weather, which twenty years ago had witnessed her arrival, was repeating itself. Streams of sodden visitors – in coach parties, families and couples, as well as those travelling by choice or necessity alone, not to mention the troupes of those seeking enlightenment, historical or spiritual – were playing havoc with the cathedral floor. The once pale paving stones, quarried from nearby Berchères-les-Pierres, after hundreds of years of footfalls had darkened and pitted, which made them, as the current cleaner Bernadette often remarked, 'hell to keep clean'.

Agnès was weeding the flower-beds before the Royal Portal when the Abbé Paul encountered her. A summer of steady rain had brought on both the weeds and Thomas the gardener's rheumatism. His wife had put her foot down and insisted he go to a spa for a cure. And, as was often the case when a temporary replacement was needed, it was Agnès who had come to mind.

Enclosed in wicker borders, which gave the impression of large square florist's panniers, the flowers, mainly white, had been chosen to enhance the summer evenings. Had Robert Clément been there, he might have observed that they also enhanced Agnès' dark skin as she bent to root out the weeds. But the Abbé Paul was a man of the cloth and no doubt it was simply friendly courtesy that made him stop to greet her.

'Good day, Agnès. I must say we are most grateful for your help.'

Agnès straightened a back blessedly free of Thomas's rheumatism. Although she was unaware that the Abbé had let her sleep undisturbed that first night she had come to Chartres, she nevertheless felt safe with him.

'I like them best at night.'

The Abbé Paul agreed. 'The scent is stronger then.'

'Yes, Father.'

'The weather has brought on the weeds, though?'

'Yes, Father.'

It was one of Agnès' virtues that she didn't say much. It made the Abbé Paul more inclined to be chatty himself though as a rule he was not a talkative man. 'I'm afraid it's making a filthy mess of the cathedral floor. All those wet muddy feet. And now, God help us, we seem to have lost our cleaner as well as our gardener. It's too much for Bernadette's knees, she says.'

Agnès stood, a trowel in one hand, an earthy-rooted dandelion, which she planned to add to her evening salad, dangling from the other. The green leaves against her long red skirt and her impassive brown oval face gave an impression, the Abbé Paul fleetingly thought, of a figure from a parable portrayed in one of the cathedral's stained-glass windows. A labourer in a vineyard, perhaps.

It seemed Agnès was pondering, for as Paul was about to utter further pleasantries and move on, she spoke. 'I will clean it if you like.'

'Oh, but I didn't mean . . .' Now he was concerned that she might imagine that he was approaching her as a skivvy rather than for the pleasure of conversation.

'I would like to, Father,' Agnès said.

The Abbé Paul paused. It would certainly help. The bishop

was exercised about the state of the cathedral, which meant that he was being harassed too. And Agnès was known to be reliable.

'I would like to,' she repeated, with emphasis.

'Well, if you felt you could . . .'

'I do,' Agnès said.

So it was agreed she should start that same week.

2
Evreux

Agnès Morel was born neither Agnès nor Morel. So far as names go she was not born anything at all. She was found wrapped in a white tablecloth in a straw shopping basket on January 21st, St Agnès' Day, with nothing to indicate her parentage except a single turquoise earring lying in the bottom of the basket, which might well have been dropped there by accident.

Agnès is the saint to whom young women pray for husbands, and, since Jean Dupère, who had found the baby, presumed the foundling's mother had none, he named the anonymous woman's daughter after the saint. In the way of those who unexpectedly find themselves doing a good turn, he felt a touch of pride in the poetry of his choice.

'Morel' was an afterthought – Jean's small way of passing on something of his own. He had a taste for morel mushrooms, and the child was discovered, a frozen scrap of a thing, in the logging area of the wood where he was gathering fuel for his fire and where in spring he was in the habit of going in search of this culinary prize.

Jean was a bachelor. His romantic propensities, though stimulated by this unusual event, stopped short of envisaging raising a girl child on his own. But he was a farmer and fairly practised at rearing blighted orphaned creatures. He took the baby home and fed her in the old shepherds' way, by dipping a knot of a boiled cloth in warm watered milk. When, the next day, he reported the find to the local police, they suggested that

the Sisters of Our Lady of Mercy at Evreux would no doubt care for the child while the necessary inquiries about her parentage were being made.

The inquiries came to nothing. No local midwife or hospital reported anything untoward. No lone young woman was believed to have lately been delivered of a child. Jean was no longer a practising Catholic but he had been brought up in the Church and nuns struck him as a better bet than a state orphanage.

A shared faith need not entail a uniform character. The Sisters of Our Lady of Mercy were, variously, strict, stupid, sadistic, well-meaning, intelligent and kindly – the three former traits slightly outweighing the latter qualities, as is generally the case in any human group. To be fair, as a community they were tolerant of illegitimacy. After all, the man whose life to which they had dedicated their own also came of ambiguous parentage.

As Agnès grew older, and teachable, Sister Laurence, who often regretted that she had not married her cousin and had a child herself (the parents were dead set against this for genetic reasons and in the end the young lovers lost heart and capitulated), enjoyed telling the young Agnès Bible stories. An alert listener might have noticed a slightly subversive note in Sister Laurence's voice when it came to the story of Moses found in a basket, a tone which hinted that his discovery by Pharaoh's daughter was not entirely an accident. But, for all Agnès' appetite for stories, she appeared quite incapable of mastering the ability to read or write.

The nuns were, on the whole, as tolerant of this as they were of her illegitimacy. Sister Laurence put Agnès' deficiency down to her unlucky start. It was Sister Véronique, who was writing a commentary on Dante, who tried her hardest to teach the girl, for, as she was fond of saying, 'She is plainly bright', adding somewhat tartly, 'She laps up those tales.' (Try

as she might, Sister Véronique had never been able to rid herself of a certain scepticism over the factual accuracy of biblical stories.) But, as for helping Agnès to read the tales herself, it seemed to be a hopeless task.

It was not that she was stubborn. She was an unusually industrious child and apparently willing to learn where she could. Everyone agreed she was first-rate at washing, ironing, embroidery and darning. The Sisters gave her their black woollen socks and stockings to darn with some relief. Sister Céleste, who had been in charge of the mending before, merely cobbled over the holes in their hosiery in an ugly mess.

In time, Agnès began to work in the orchards and in the vegetable garden, where a local boy helped out. And that was when her troubles began again.

3
Chartres

On the first Friday Agnès was due to clean the cathedral, Philippe Nevers met her on his way to the station. Time had changed Philippe from the tubby boy in short trousers who had quarrelled with his sister to a lean and lanky young man who wore the most up-to-the-minute fashion and jewellery in the contemporary taste. But he had retained his boyhood manners.

'Good morning, Agnès. That's a very pretty skirt. You're out early.'

'I'm cleaning the cathedral now.'

'So you're wearing blue to match? Tough work, isn't it, cleaning in this weather?'

Agnès smiled and agreed and continued up the hill.

Behind a wreathing veil of summer mist, incalculably different from the autumnal mists, the tops of the two cathedral spires were aiming at a heaven the whole edifice beneath them was there to invoke. She paused to catch her breath before the three grand bays of the Royal Portal.

The solemn elongated figures of the bearded prophets and patriarchs, the dead kings and braided queens who give the name of Royal to the doors, stared inscrutably down from their perilous pedestals, their hands – such as had been spared from the depredations of time and the ferocity of revolution – raised as if in formal greeting. Above them on the tympanum, Christ, in his aureole, awaiting the glory of his second coming – but

now so imprisoned behind scaffolding as to give an impression of some detained felon or caged wild animal – also raised an elegant right hand.

Agnès raised her hand of flesh and blood in an answering gesture. 'I hope, Lord, you have a better time this time around.'

She turned to walk along the north side of the building, to the porch where twenty years ago she had come to rest. Above her – now as then – Job lay on his comfortless bed of ashes, plagued by a grotesquely grimacing Satan.

Inside the cathedral, the musty air seemed to be perfused with a faint odour of onions. What caused that? Something to do with years of human sweat, she supposed. An alert sparrow took the opportunity to nip through the open door into the cathedral. It struck out across the empty nave chittering triumphantly as Agnès went round to the vestry, where the cleaning equipment was stored. She put on an orange overall and filled the bucket with hot water. Today was the labyrinth day.

Victor, the janitor, had already been in to see to the chairs that on most days obscured the famous labyrinth, which was set into the floor of the nave just inside the West Doors. Agnès stood looking at the pattern made by the path which, moving regularly forward and back on itself, traced eleven circles to frame an open corolla of petals at its centre. A cross was adumbrated by the bands of black marble that marked the turns in the path. It was clever, she reflected, the cross, being composed not of the stones that made the path but of those that marked its absence. Around the large circle of the whole, a pattern of cogs gave the impression of some mysterious clock.

The cathedral lay as if asleep, utterly quiet save for the sporadic pinking of the sparrow, which appeared to have found a convivial mate. Agnès took off her shoes. Moving to the entrance of the labyrinth, she began to tread the spiralling path.

*

Walking up the rue aux Herbes, Professor Jones witnessed the face of the upper part of the cathedral's South Transept lighting up to a pale honey. The sun, in a brave sortie, had made a bright gash in the clouds. The lower part of the transept, waiting its turn in the long programme of cleaning, was still grimy. Impervious to the dashing sunlight, the smoke-darkened stones made, with the paler ones above, for a strange piebald effect.

Really, the professor thought, taking a seat under the awning of his regular café, the weather this summer was almost as bad as that of his native Wales.

Without needing to be summoned, a waiter appeared with a small tray of café crème, a basket of fresh baguette, a slab of pale butter and a dish of apricot jam. *This* was not Pembrokeshire, the professor reflected. He had never got over his acute pleasure at taking his breakfast in France.

Opposite him, secure on a row of high niches well above the pedestrian world, weather-beaten bishops brandishing crosiers peered beakily down. Professor Jones stirred the coffee – to which, unmindful of his diabetes, he had added three lumps of sugar – and looked back up indifferently. He no longer cared a damn who they were. He had long ago lost interest in the majority of the four thousand, five hundred (if that was the true number) statues it had once been his ruling ambition to identify. Nowadays he cared for only a few familiar ones – the long elegant angel on the south-west corner, for example. It was a replica, of course. The original had grown too fragile to withstand the effects of the weather – a condition with which the professor, had he thought about it, might have sympathized.

When he had finished his breakfast, the professor left some euros on the table and moved across to one of the benches with the remains of the baguette. A former professional colleague from University College had recently visited and told him that the sparrow population in London was in decline. Something

to do with the noise of the metropolis's traffic drowning the mating call of the male birds, his colleague surmised. What a very good reason not to live there, the professor had retorted. With the loss of all human company, save the very rare visitor, he had become greatly attached to the friendly little birds.

The neat grey-headed chocolate-backed male sparrows and their modest brown-flecked mates bobbed about consuming crumbs at the professor's large sandalled feet as he studied the angel bearing a sundial. It seemed a prosaic gesture for a heavenly body and yet somehow, he reflected, maybe it was fitting that a messenger from God should act as an agent of time.

What did it say in the Book of Revelation? Professor Jones had abandoned his Christian faith with his short trousers but he had not forgotten the teaching of his chapel upbringing. 'There shall be time no longer,' the angel of Revelation said. Time no longer. Is that not what death is, thought Professor Jones. For since the world is known to us only through our experience of it, does its existence not, in some crucial way, come to an end when we do? And is not heaven, then, merely the fact of non-existence? The loss of the fear of loss, which haunts and casts its shadow over so much of human life.

Inside the cathedral, Agnès, now on her knees and assiduously cleaning the path of the labyrinth, heard the Abbé Bernard, one of the elderly canons, opening the great West Door. For some months now, he had elected to take on the task of personally opening the cathedral to the public. There was no call for this for a man in his position but he had been an integral part of the life of the cathedral for so long that no one liked to gainsay him. He marched in, gown flapping, and seeing Agnès stopped short, his old freckled hand reaching nervously for the rosary at his waist.

'Bernadette?'

'She's left, Father. Father Paul asked . . .'

'Yes, yes, I remember, of course.' The Abbé Bernard was growing more and more afraid that he might be losing his mind. 'So today is Friday?'

'Yes.'

'I know that. I speak rhetorically.'

Taking advantage of the open door, a swallow made a dramatic entry, skimming the ear of the Abbé, who cursed heartily and hurried to shut the door. 'God damn it, we are not an aviary.'

A hopeless war was constantly being waged by the cathedral staff against the regular influx of birds. In former times, families of swallows had been annually raised in a nest built beneath the lancet window of King David and the suicide of Saul. Finally, the bird droppings became so great a nuisance that the bishop ordered that the nest be destroyed.

Agnès, on hands and knees with a scrubbing brush, ignorant of all this, her cotton frock making a cornflower pool around her, watched the swallow cutting an oblique curve through to the choir. Birds, she had heard on the radio, were older than humankind, the oldest of any species – perhaps the only surviving version of the dinosaur.

Outside the sun was winning. The high banks of coiled cloud were attenuating to let in stretches of purest blue. Professor Jones had dropped into a morning doze. He was five years old again, sitting beneath the keys of an upright piano at his mother's feet, as she sang in the Welsh tongue that had long since left his waking mind. If he sat there long enough she would scoop him up in her soft white arms and carry him to bed. Nestling against his mother's warm bosom – made slightly uncomfortable by the spikes of Sunday brooches of jet, bought during her parents' honeymoon at Whitby – Professor Jones on his bench sighed in a peaceful contentment that he was unlikely ever to know so completely again.

PenguinTasters



READ IT

The Cleaner of Chartres is available to buy in Viking hardback and eBook, Kindle Edition and as an Apple iBook.

REVIEW IT

Find out more about Salley Vickers and The Cleaner of Chartres at www.penguin.co.uk and let know what you thought of the extract on the book page.

DISCUSS IT

Join thousands of booklovers at Penguin's dedicated readers' group site and find interviews, reviews, suggestions, discussions and more. Visit www.penguin.co.uk/readers to find out more.

SHARE IT

If you enjoyed this extract, tell your friends via Facebook and Twitter.

I'm reading the first chapters of The Cleaner of Chartres with Penguin Tasters. Download the extract here www.penguin.co.uk/tasters

Read them on screen... Download and print them... Put them on your smartphone... Email them to a friend... With Penguin Tasters, first chapters of ALL Penguin's latest titles are available to download for FREE!

Visit www.penguin.co.uk/tasters to find your next taster to read.