The Man with the Lead Stomach

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Extract

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They stopped outside the half-moon gateway of a small mansion. A large stone staircase opened on to a cobbled courtyard. Monsieur de Ruissec entrusted his distraught wife to a chambermaid. The comtesse protested and tried to hang on to her husband's arm but he freed himself firmly from her grasp. This scene was played out by the light of a candelabrum held by an elderly retainer, but Nicolas was unable to work out the layout of the broader premises, which were still cloaked in darkness. He could barely even make out the wings of the main building.

They climbed the steps leading into a flagstoned entrance hall with a staircase at the far end. The Comte de Ruissec staggered and had to lean against an upholstered armchair. Nicolas studied him. He was a tall, wiry man, somewhat stooped, despite his concerted efforts to stand straight. A broad scar, now red from emotion, ran across his left temple, probably the mark of a sabre. He was biting his inner lip, his mouth pursed. The austerity of his severe dark coat further emphasised by the cross of the Order of St Michael hanging from a black ribbon, contrasted with a single note of colour, the insignia of the Order of St Louis fastened to

a bright red sash, which hung over his left hip. The sword he wore to the side was no ceremonial weapon but a sturdy blade of tempered steel. Nicolas, well versed in such matters, remembered that the comte had been escorting Madame Adélaïde and might in certain circumstances have had to protect her. Monsieur de Ruissec straightened up and took a few steps. Whether it was the result of an old wound or the effect of age, he walked with a limp and sought to conceal this infirmity by raising and thrusting forward his whole body with every stride. He gave his old retainer an impatient look.

'We do not have a moment to lose. Take us to my son's bedroom and give me your account of events on the way.' The authoritative voice was still young, its tone almost aggressive. He led the small group, leaning heavily on the bronze handrail.

Wheezing, the major-domo began his story of the evening's events.

'Your lordship, around nine o'clock in the evening I had just taken some logs to your rooms and had gone back downstairs. I was reading my Book of Hours.'

Nicolas caught the wry look on Monsieur de Sartine's face.

'His lordship the vicomte arrived. He seemed in a great hurry and his cloak was wet. I went to take it from him but he brushed me aside. I asked him if he needed me. He shook his head. I heard his bedroom door slam, then nothing more.'

He stopped for a moment, short of breath.

'That wretched bullet again. Sorry, General. As I was saying, then nothing more until suddenly a shot was fired.'

The Lieutenant General intervened. 'A shot fired? Are you quite sure?'

'My major-domo is a former soldier,' said the comte. 'He served in my regiment. He knows what he's talking about. Carry on, Picard.'

'I rushed up but found the door shut. It was locked from the inside. There was not a sound or cry to be heard. I called out but there was no answer.'

Having gone down a corridor at the end of the landing, the procession was by now in front of a heavy oak door. Monsieur de Ruissec had suddenly become stooped.

'I was unable to force it open,' Picard went on, 'and even if I'd had an axe I would not have had sufficient strength. I went back downstairs and sent her ladyship's chambermaid off to the nearest guard post. An officer came running but despite my pleas he refused to do anything unless someone with greater authority was present. So I immediately sent for you at the Opéra.'

'Commissioner,' said Sartine, 'please find us something with which to open or knock down this door.'

Nicolas seemed in no hurry to obey. Eyes closed, he was carefully going through his coat pockets.

'We are waiting, Nicolas,' said his superior impatiently.

'To hear is to obey, sir, and I have the solution to hand. There is no need to go in search of tools to force an entry. This will do the job.'

He was holding a small, metallic object similar to a penknife, which, when opened, revealed a series of hooks of various sizes and designs. It had been a gift from Inspector Bourdeau, who already possessed one himself and had confiscated another from a bandit and given it to Nicolas.

Sartine raised his eyes to the heavens. 'The thieves' picklock

comes to the rescue of the police! The designs of the Great Architect often follow crooked paths,' he murmured.

Nicolas smiled inwardly at this Masonic parlance, knelt down and, after carefully deciding on the most suitable hook, inserted it into the lock. Immediately a key was heard to drop on to the wooden floor of the bedroom. He studied his hooks again, chose another and set to work. Only the wheezy breathing of the comte and of his major-domo, and the sputtering of the candles, disturbed the silence of the scene. After a moment the lock mechanism could be heard creaking and Nicolas was able to open the door. The Comte de Ruissec rushed forward but was just as swiftly stopped in his tracks by the Lieutenant General of Police.

'Sir,' the old man said indignantly, 'I will not allow this. I am in my own home and my son . . .'

'I beg you, your lordship, to permit the officers of the law to proceed. Once the initial observations have been made, I promise you that you will be able to go in and that nothing will be hidden from you.'

'Sir, have you forgotten what you promised Her Royal Highness? Who do you think you are to disobey her orders? Who are you to oppose me? A petty magistrate who has barely emerged from his ancestors' herring-barrels and whose name is still redolent of the grocer's shop . . .'

'I shall not tolerate anything that breaches the law and I take my orders from His Majesty alone,' replied Sartine. 'I vowed to deal with this matter with discretion and that is the only promise I made. As for what you have said to me, your lordship, were it not for the dignity of my office and royal condemnation of the practice, I would challenge you to a duel. The best thing you can

do is to proceed immediately to your apartments and wait for me to call for you. Or rather I shall come to fetch you myself.'

Eyes blazing, the elderly nobleman turned and left. Nicolas had never seen Monsieur de Sartine look so pale. Purplish rings had appeared under his eyes and he was furiously twisting one of the curls of his wig.

After taking a candle from the candelabrum Picard was carrying, the young man stepped cautiously into the room, followed by his superior. He would remember his first impressions for a very long time.

At first he could see nothing but immediately felt the chill in the bedroom, then detected the smell of brackish water mingled with the more irritant odour of gunpowder. The flickering flame shed a dim light on an enormous room decorated from floor to ceiling with pale wood panelling. As he moved forward he saw on his left a large, garnet-red marble fireplace topped by a pier glass. To the right an alcove hung with dark damask stood out from the gloom. A Persian carpet and two armchairs hid from view what seemed to be a desk, placed in the corner opposite the doorway. Here and there were chests covered with weapons. These and the disorderly state of the room showed that its occupant was a young man and a soldier.

It was when he neared the desk that Nicolas noticed a figure stretched out on the ground. A man lay face up, his feet pointing towards the window. His head seemed shrunken, as if out of proportion to his body. A large cavalry pistol lay beside him. Monsieur de Sartine moved closer and then recoiled. It was truly a sight to shock the most hardened individual.

Nicolas, who had not flinched when he leant over the body,

suddenly realised that his superior had had few opportunities to witness death in its more gruesome forms. He took him firmly by the arm and forced him to sit down on one of the armchairs. Monsieur de Sartine let himself be led like a child and did not utter a word; he took out a handkerchief and mopped his brow and temples whilst airing his wig, then slumped down, his chin drooping on to his chest. Nicolas was amused to note that Monsieur de Sartine's pale face had now turned a greenish colour. Having scored a point over his superior – he allowed himself such little victories – he resumed his examination of the scene.

What had horrified the Lieutenant General of Police was the dead man's face. The military wig had slipped down on to his forehead in the most grotesque fashion. It further emphasised the already glazed look in the eyes that seemed to be staring at death itself. But where a gaping mouth should have completed the expression of horror or pain, all that could be seen were sunken cheeks and a chin that almost touched the nose in a twisted grin. The face had been so disfigured that it immediately brought to mind an old man who had lost all his teeth or the contorted features of some sculpted monster. The wound that was the cause of death had not bled, but it was too soon to draw any conclusions from this. The bullet seemed to have struck the base of the neck at point-blank range and to have singed the fabric of the shirt and the muslin of the cravat.

Nicolas knelt down beside the body to look at the wound. It was black, and the tear in the skin, the width of the bullet, seemed already to have been closed over by the epidermis; a little congealed blood was visible but it had mainly spread out into the flesh. The young commissioner noted down his observations in a

small notebook. He described the way the body was lying and added that the victim was wearing civilian clothes. He was struck by the state of the hands and the fact that they were clenched. The fancy boots were muddy and all the lower part of the body was soaked with foul-smelling water as if the young man had crossed through a pond or an ornamental fountain before returning home to put an end to his life.

Nicolas walked over to the window and studied it carefully. The inner shutters of light oak were bolted. He undid them and noted that the window was also shut. He put everything back in place, picked up the candle and lit the hurricane lamp on the desk. The room suddenly emerged from the half-light. A voice behind him made him turn.

'May I be of assistance, sir?'

The door was still open and on the threshold stood a young man, wearing livery but wigless. Monsieur de Sartine had not detected his presence since the back of the armchair hid the stranger almost completely. His uniform was neat and buttoned up but Nicolas was surprised to see he was in stockinged feet.

'May I ask what you are doing here? I am Nicolas Le Floch, a commissioner of police from the Châtelet.'

'My name is Lambert and I am the manservant and factotum of Monsieur the Vicomte de Ruissec.'

Nicolas was shocked by his slightly provocative tone of voice. He did not admit to himself that he hated tow-coloured hair and eyes of differing colours: on his first day in Paris his watch had been stolen from him by a brigand with just such eyes.[8]

'And what are you doing here?'

'I was asleep in the servants' quarters when I heard Madame

the comtesse's cries and so I quickly dressed and hurried here. Please forgive me,' he said, nodding towards his feet. 'In my haste . . . my eagerness to be of assistance . . .'

'Why did you come here first?'

'I met old Picard in the entrance hall. He explained what had happened and his fears for my master.'

Nicolas rapidly made a note of everything he was told, registering the possible contradictions and the contrasting impressions that the valet's words had on him. The fellow's tone of voice held more than a hint of mocking sarcasm, something unusual for a person of his station when addressing his betters. The man was not as straightforward as he at first appeared. He claimed to have dressed in a hurry, whereas his uniform was immaculate down to his knotted cotton cravat, and yet he had failed to put on his shoes. Nicolas would need to check which way he had come and compare his statements with Picard's. Was it necessary to go outside and then through the courtyard to get to the vicomte's rooms or was there a secret passage via the staircases and corridors connecting all the buildings in the Ruissec mansion? Lastly, the man seemed quite unmoved, though admittedly he might not have seen the corpse as it was hidden by the armchairs and by Nicolas himself. As for Monsieur de Sartine, he remained impassive and silent, and was contemplating the back-plate of the fireplace. Nicolas decided to get straight to the point.

'Do you know that your master is dead?'

He had moved closer to the manservant, who screwed up his pockmarked face into an expression that could have been interpreted either as a fatalistic acceptance of the fact or as a sudden feeling of sorrow.

'My poor monsieur. So he finally kept his word!'

As Nicolas remained silent, he went on: 'Over the past few days he had become sick of life. He had stopped eating and was avoiding his friends. A disappointment in love or at cards, or both, if you ask me. All the same, who would have believed he would have done it so soon?'

'He kept his word, you said.'

'His promise, to be more precise. He kept saying that he would create a stir, one way or another. He had even mentioned the scaffold . . .'

'When did he make such a strange remark?'

'About three weeks ago at a rout with his friends in a tavern in Versailles. I was there to serve them and supply them with drink. It was quite a party!'

'Can you name these friends?'

'Not all of them. I only really know one of them: Truche de La Chaux, a Life Guard at the palace. He was a close friend, even though he is only gentry.'

Nicolas noted that failing common in footmen of adopting their masters' prejudices. In this way contempt for others was to be found at all levels of society, permeating the nobility and their servants alike.

'When did you see your master for the last time?'

'Only this evening.'

At his reply, the Lieutenant General of Police jumped out of his armchair; Lambert recoiled in surprise at this pale apparition, leaping up like a jack-in-the-box, with a ruffled, precariously perched wig on his head.

'Well, Monsieur, please tell me about this evening in detail.'

Lambert did not ask who he was dealing with and recounted his story.

'My master was on guard last night. The Queen and many of her entourage were at cards. After coming off duty he rested until midday. He then went for a walk around the park on his own, instructing me to be in the forecourt at four o'clock with a carriage. He wanted to spend the night in Paris, so he said. We arrived this evening at about nine o'clock, without incident. He then told me to leave as he no longer needed me. I was tired, so I went to bed.'

'You were due back on duty tomorrow morning, were you?'

'Yes, indeed. At seven o'clock I would have brought hot water up to his lordship.'

'Was the weather fine in Versailles?' Nicolas interrupted, to the evident annoyance of Monsieur de Sartine, who did not see the point of this digression.

'Misty and gloomy.'

'Was it raining?' He stared at the manservant.

'Not at all, sir. But perhaps this question relates to the state of my poor master's clothes. I suggested he change before leaving Versailles. Lost in melancholy thoughts, he had slipped during his walk and fallen into a small drainage canal. That was the explanation he gave me when I expressed my concern at the state of his clothes.'

Nicolas was trying hard not to give in to his instinctive mistrust of the manservant. He kept repeating to himself that to judge somebody on first impressions always carried the risk of serious error. He recalled Inspector Bourdeau's words. In his youth the inspector had usually trusted his initial judgements. He

had attempted to correct this tendency, but as he had grown older experience had taught him the value of his first reaction – when instinct alone had its say – and he had returned to the habits of his youth as a surer means of discovering the truth about a person.

Annoyed by this introspection the young man decided to wait until later to marshal his thoughts. At present it would not be justified to hound the manservant when the case seemed a clear-cut one of suicide. He merely needed to clarify the circumstances in order to understand what had led the unfortunate young man to commit the fateful act. So with Monsieur de Sartine's agreement Nicolas dismissed Lambert, advising him to remain in the corridor; he wanted first of all to question the major-domo.

At this point some police officers appeared. He asked them to wait until the initial investigations were complete and instructed them to keep an eye on Lambert and not allow him to speak to anyone.

When he went back into the room, Sartine was again slumped in the armchair, apparently grappling with his thoughts. Nicolas did not disturb him, but returned instead to the body.

Candlestick in hand, he examined the scene, starting with the wooden floor. He spotted a few recent scratch marks, which could have been caused either by gravel sticking to the sole of the boots or by something quite different.

His attention was then drawn to the desktop. Under the hurricane lamp in the middle of the desktop leather he found a sheet of paper and, scribbled in large capitals, the words: 'FORGIVE ME, FAREWELL'. To the left of this sheet lay a

quill next to an inkstand. The position of the armchair behind the desk indicated that the person who had written this message had then stood up, pushed the chair back and made off to the right towards the door, presumably to go round the front of the desk and to end up where the body now rested.

He looked at the corpse once more, paying special attention to the hands, and tried unsuccessfully to close the eyes. He then had a thorough look around the room and noticed to the left of the entrance a huge, elaborately carved wardrobe that almost reached the ceiling. Its doors were ajar. He pushed one open and looked inside; it was dark and cavernous, reminiscent of the box beds of his childhood in Brittany. A strong smell of leather and earth filled his nostrils. In the bottom part was a collection of boots, some in need of a good brushing. He pushed back the polished door of the wardrobe, then drew a plan of the apartment on a page of his notebook.

Continuing his inspection, Nicolas spotted a break in the moulding of the wainscoting. To the left of the alcove a door opened on to a dressing room with deal half-panelling and an adjacent water closet. The room was tiled in Lias[9] and black marble. The walls were hung with wallpaper depicting exotic birds. It was lit by a bull's-eye, which he checked was closed. He stood in thought for some time before the dressing table and its fine porcelain bowl, admiring the toilet case with its razors and mother-of-pearl and silver-gilt instruments carefully laid out on a white linen towel. He also subjected the brushes and combs to the same scrutiny, as if mesmerised by the sight of such splendours.

When Nicolas returned to his superior, Monsieur de Sartine was pacing to and fro in the bedroom, carefully avoiding the

corpse. His wig was straight again and the colour had returned to his bony cheeks.

'My dear Nicolas,' said Sartine, 'I am in the most terrible predicament. Like me, you are convinced that the young man took his own life, is that correct?'

Nicolas was careful not to answer and, taking his silence to be tantamount to assent, the Lieutenant General carried on, though not before checking in the pier glass that his wig was properly back in place.

'You know the procedure in such cases. The assumption is one of suicide, and the commissioner who has been informed goes to the scene without his gown and draws up a report without the least fuss or publicity. Then at the request of the grieving relatives, but equally to preserve the conventions, the magistrate requires the parish priest or requests him via his bishop to conduct the funeral service for the deceased and to bury him quietly. As you are also aware . . .'

'Until recently the bodies of those who committed suicide, since they were deemed to be their own murderers, were tried and sentenced to be dragged along on a large timber frame attached to a cart. I know that, sir.'

'Very good, very good. However, notwithstanding this appalling public ordeal on the hurdle, the body was hanged and denied burial in consecrated ground. Fortunately a more enlightened philosophy and our more compassionate times now spare the victim and the family such distressing and shocking excesses. However, we have just such a tragedy here. The elder son of a noble family with a promising future ahead of him has just died. His father is close to the King, or rather to the entourage

of the Dauphin. Foolishly – because one should not speak of death to royalty – Madame Adélaïde was informed of the vicomte's suicide and quickly gave in to the Comte de Ruissec's entreaties. Without weighing her words she gave me some recommendations, which I pretended to take as orders, though in fact she is not entitled to give me any. However, it is difficult to deny her wishes and I need to deal carefully with a family that has her support. Nevertheless . . .'

'Nevertheless, sir?'

'I'm thinking aloud here, Nicolas. Nevertheless . . .' The tone was again warm and frank, the Lieutenant General's usual way of speaking to Nicolas. 'Nevertheless, on behalf of the King, I am also responsible for law and order in Paris, which is no easy task. Too strict an application of the rules could lead to trouble. The wise thing to do would be to make the body presentable, send for a priest and a coffin, and spread the word that the young man mortally wounded himself while cleaning a firearm. The funeral Mass would take place, the princess be obeyed, the parents grief-stricken but their reputation intact, and I would have no more problems, having satisfied all concerned. Can I in all conscience act in such a way? What is your feeling? I trust your judgement, even if you are sometimes overhasty and your imagination runs away with you.'

'Sir, we must give the matter careful thought. We are accountable to both the ideal of law with justice and of wisdom with prudence.'

Sartine nodded approval of this carefully worded preamble.

'Since you do me the honour of asking my opinion I feel it appropriate, given the current state of the investigation, to sum

up our dilemma. We know that suicide is an act that offends against the divine order, a misfortune that visits opprobrium on an honourable family. The body we see before us is not that of a man of the people, not a pauper driven to this extreme by hardship. Here we have a gentleman, a young man of good education, who knows perfectly well what his actions will mean for his parents and close relatives, and who without further reflection performs the irrevocable deed without offering his family any means of escaping the shame. Do you not find it strange that he did not write to you, as many do, in order to avoid any difficulties after their death?[10] All he left was this.'

He picked up the sheet of paper on the desk and handed it to Sartine.

'Lastly, sir, I have to say that it will be very difficult to keep the news quiet. It has already spread to the Opéra and around town; it will soon reach the Court. The princess will certainly have mentioned it and everyone will repeat her words. A dozen or so people have already been informed: police officers, servants and neighbours. No one will be able to stop the rumour and uncertainty will only make it grow. It will be a godsend for the hawkers of handbills.'

Monsieur de Sartine was rhythmically tapping the wooden floor with his foot.

'Very well put, but where does it get us and how will all your meanderings extricate us from this maze? What do you suggest?'

'I think, sir, that without divulging any details and without dismissing the idea of an accident or a fit of madness, we should have the vicomte's body taken to the Basse-Geôle[11] in the

Châtelet to be opened up and examined in the greatest secrecy. That will in the first instance allow us to gain some time.'

'And in a few days we'll be back in the same position but with a scandal blown up out of all proportion. Not to mention the task you've presumably left me of informing the Comte de Ruissec that I'm going to hand over his son's body to the medics. For goodness' sake give me a more convincing argument.'

'Sir, I do not think you have taken in the full implications of my proposal. If I am suggesting that the Vicomte de Ruissec's body should be opened up it's precisely in order to preserve his memory and the honour of his family, because in my opinion the examination will show that he was murdered.'