

Murder at Cirey

A Victor Constant investigation

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DAY ONE

VICTOR CONSTANT AWOKE at cockcrow on the last day in May 1735, and cursed the rooster that roused him. It was two hours before he had to set off again on his patrol through this remote corner of the Champagne. Eyes closed, he listened perversely for the Paris street sounds that used to echo outside his window. The cries of pastry sellers, the lads who hawked kindling, the grind of carts as growers hauled their produce into the heart of the city, ready for sale near the church of Saint-Jacques. They all came from the countryside outside the gates of Paris. Now he was exiled far beyond even them, many days' ride away from home. All he could hear between the rooster's gasconades was an empty bucket knocking against stone and wood as the farmer's wife trudged through the yards to milk the cow.

Victor was billeted free in the country, whereas in Paris he had paid for his own lodging, but he would still rather be by the Seine, where he had grown up, within the sound of the bells of Saint-Jacques.

He recalled the verdict of his lieutenant of police. 'There's such a thing as zeal, which earns its own reward. There's such a man as the over-zealous, who is more trouble than he imagines he's worth. Until you understand the distinction, Cavalier Constant, your duty's in the Champagne—or nowhere.' Which meant: *Learn not to arrest gentlemen with friends in high places, or you'll be cashiered from the military police corps of France.*

Victor sat up on the straw pallet. There was no risk of being over-zealous in these parts, where the only villains were vagabonds who stole beans from the farmers' fields, grapes off the vines, or stray poultry. Pray God one of them would snatch the cock from his dunghill.

He threw the sheet off and went to the gap under the eaves that showed him an unpaved yard below. His eyelids were heavy. In Paris he slept well, even with the chance of being called out by neighbours to some affray—a fight, a

riot. Here, he was a stranger, with the meanest of tasks. A big man on a big horse, looming in the market squares or patrolling the roads to chase beggars across the border into the Lorraine.

He was trapped in a place where nothing was ever going to happen.

FRANÇOIS-MARIE AROUET DE VOLTAIRE stood in dappled sunlight, looking down at the body of a young man. His first clear thought was that Madame du Châtelet should not be told. Not today. Today she arrived from Paris to live with him, an event for which he had prepared in passionate detail. Tomorrow, which was surely time enough, since this man was surely dead, officials could be admitted to the scene.

The corpse lay beside a woodland path. Voltaire had seen bodies torn apart by war in the siege of Phillipsburg, but this violence was personal. Someone with a musket had confronted the victim and shot him in the face at close range. This was not a battlefield but the forest of Cirey, on the estate of the Marquis du Châtelet, secluded in the Champagne. The early light of a fine morning played on the slender trunk and limbs of the dead man, lending them an innocence that contrasted frightfully with the broken head, the blood congealed over torn flesh.

Voltaire knelt beside the body. It must be identified, and justice done. Elsewhere. The well-kept clothes were those of a man with a modest position—clerk, secretary, under-agent—which hardly explained why he was in the Cirey woods at seven in the morning. Not a nobleman out shooting, nor a gamekeeper like the servant Voltaire had sent back to the château half an hour since with a fowling piece and a brace of pheasants. He made himself examine the face.

Overcome, suddenly, by the blood, he averted his head. How loudly would this shot have rung out, as he walked

back alone? Since dawn, his mind had been preoccupied with his current play. The contrast between his woodland walk and this event was hideous. He shuddered at the thought of telling Émilie du Châtelet what had just happened in the place that they both saw as a sanctuary.

He assessed the facts. The white, outflung hands were empty, and there was no weapon amongst the low ferns nearby. He unbuttoned the coat to reveal a long waistcoat. In one pocket of the waistcoat, attached to a fob, was a silver watch. Voltaire sprang the back but could find no initials engraved inside. He replaced it in the pocket. The other yielded a lawn handkerchief folded around a piece of jewellery that caused his breath to falter. He sat down in last year's fallen leaves to consider it. Then he looked towards the young man's mangled face as though for an answer. His gaze reached only as far as the collar, still knotted firm around the neck but blotched with red. After some time, he got to his feet and walked away.

VOLTAIRE'S LIBRARY and study, which opened into his bedchamber, was reached through a small anteroom at the far end of a new wing built onto the Château de Cirey. The panelled walls were pale ivory and the furniture, except for the inlaid rosewood desk at which he sat writing, was finished in dark red Chinese lacquer. On the other side of the desk stood Albert Poirier, gamekeeper, of average height and solidly built. Being summoned to the master's study for the first time made him nervous.

Voltaire, who had an inquisitive mind and knew his servants and the Cirey staff backwards, was patient. 'By which way did you return?'

'Through the woods, monsieur.'

'I mean, did you take the river path, or go past the charcoal burners?'

'The charcoal burners, monsieur.'

'Did you see them?' When Poirier looked blank: 'Well,

more to the point, did they see you?’

‘No, monsieur.’

Voltaire wrote for a moment. So Poirier had had no witnesses to his movements until he had got back to Cirey with the pheasants and the gun.

Voltaire frowned down at the thin narrative. ‘Whom did you see when you got back?’

‘No one, monsieur.’

Voltaire looked up. ‘Not a soul? In farm, stable or yard? Ye Gods, this place is in a stupor when I’m not around! Blessings on him who invented sleep, the balance and weight that equalises the simpleton and the sage. You delivered the birds to the kitchen?’

‘Yes, monsieur.’

‘Who took them from you?’

‘No one did,’ said Poirier, at last understanding the virtues of being exact. ‘The door was open and I called out, and I heard a noise, but no one came.’

‘Marianne would have been there,’ Voltaire said. No doubt Marianne, his cook and housekeeper, had been busy in the scullery or the cellars beyond.

‘No one came, monsieur,’ Poirier said firmly. ‘I left the game on the table.’

‘She’d have thanked you for that!’

‘No, she didn’t.’

‘And then?’

‘I went back to the stable and hung up the gun.’

Voltaire dipped the pen in the inkwell given to him by a former lover, the Marquise de Bernières. ‘Did anyone see you there?’

‘Yes, monsieur. Maurice.’

Maurice, Voltaire recorded neatly in his impromptu deposition, was a son of the Marquis du Châtelet’s tenant farmer, whose house and barns were less than a hundred yards from the Cirey stables.

‘Have you ever caught sight of a young man, Damien Moiron, who used to be the secretary to the Comte de

Fronzac?’

‘No, monsieur.’

Voltaire wrote this down. ‘So you didn’t meet him alive in the woods this morning. But did you by chance see his dead body?’ He looked up to examine Poirier’s face.

‘*Dead*, monsieur?’

‘He was shot in the head with a gun very like the one we carried this morning. He’s easy to find. He lies by the river path in the Vallée des Bécassines, not far beyond the willow grove. I’m glad that this is news to you. I’ve said as much in my report.’ He put the papers and pen aside. ‘Thank you, Poirier. The gendarmes will be here tomorrow, asking questions. Tell them just what you told me, and you’ll have nothing to fear. However, it’s just as well if I show my trust in you at once. Maurice is ready with a pony and cart. You’ll guide him to the body, load it onto the cart, cover it up and take it to Joinville. Maurice knows where. They’ll be expecting it: my report goes to the magistrate now.’

Poirier’s normally ruddy complexion was pale green mottled with pink. ‘*Dead*, monsieur. In the woods. *Why?*’

‘Indeed. Why was Damien Moiron on the Cirey estate in the early hours of this morning? When that’s known, the identity of his murderer may be only a whisper away.’ Voltaire’s voice became soothing. ‘I want you for this task because you’ve seen many a dead creature before. But if you’re not feeling brave enough, tell me.’

Poirier drew himself up. ‘Whatever you ask me to do, Monsieur de Voltaire, I’m fit to do it, any day. And so I’ll tell the law.’

‘That’s quite unnecessary,’ Voltaire said, coming around the desk to give him a pat on the shoulder. ‘Go down and tell Marianne I want her to pour you a beer. Then you can join Maurice—he’s waiting for you at the farm gate.’

BY MIDDAY, Victor Constant was in the private chapel of a mansion called Mon Désir on the outskirts of Joinville,

waiting for Louis Tranchet de Sandre, magistrate.

Victor looked down at the step in front of the unadorned altar, where a slim body lay concealed inside a horse blanket. He frowned. Granted, he had wished something would happen—but not quite like this. Just after he had had breakfast, he had received a request not to leave town: the local magistrate had had news of a violent death and sent a message on to the police corps commander in Chaumont. Meanwhile Victor was begged to stay and escort the body to the magistrate's when it was brought in.

This was a dilemma. His brigade of the Maréchaussée, the military police corps, did not take orders from the municipalities they covered—they obeyed their superior officer in the provincial town of Chaumont, more than thirty miles away. Worse, Victor was on duty alone, because his usual partner had suddenly fallen ill just before they left on patrol. His orders were to finish his circuit and report to barracks tomorrow evening. If he delayed here on his own initiative, he would have to answer for it later. But to hell with it. This was murder, on his watch.

He had fetched his horse from the cow paddock, saddled up and ridden down to the spot where a country road winding in from the west met the outskirts of Joinville.

He had questioned the men with the cart when they turned up, but on the passage through town he had discouraged them from spreading the news.

Victor was not happy. Legal process had been flouted in a way that reminded him of undue aristocratic influence in Paris. A body had been found on the noble estate of Cirey, and should have been left there for examination. Instead, Monsieur Arouet de Voltaire, a guest at the estate, had dumped the corpse on a magistrate twelve miles distant, along with a letter stating that no one at Cirey would be available to give a statement until the next day! Sandre had sent the note on to the Prévôt-Général, commander of the Champagne Maréchaussée and head of the military court, who happened to be in Chaumont.

It was premature to shove this onto the military police. The brigade might be ordered to hunt down the killer and arrest him, supposing he was a vicious vagabond, a brigand or a poacher—but if the culprit proved to be a nobleman, the case must go to the local presidial or royal court, because no nobleman could be tried by the military.

Was the dead man indeed a commoner who had been killed by another? Victor shook his head. He did not like arrogant assumptions. He had got a name for the victim from the Cirey gamekeeper, but was it the right one?

He heard the scrape of a shoe behind him and turned towards the chapel entrance, only to see a triangle of fine blue cloth whisk away beyond the doorframe, betraying in that split second the shape of a neat heel under the skirt. A woman had been spying there.

Victor was about to stride over and take a look outside, when a gentleman entered from inside the building and took short steps through an archway and into the chapel. He moved as though any haste were beneath him, and looked at neither Victor nor the body. His gaze was directed over Victor's shoulder, towards the coat of arms painted on the wall.

Victor kept looking steadily at the magistrate. During his wait in the tiny chapel, he had examined everything apart from the body inside the horse blanket. The arms would be those of the family and looked recently repainted. Victor didn't much care what quality of gentleman he had to deal with: he was more curious about his ability to dispense justice. This one looked less than promising. When Sandre's light, cold eyes at last met his, Victor saw a disinterest verging on insult.

Victor bowed. '*Monsieur le juge*. With the greatest respect, I place myself at your service. Cavalier Constant.'

Sandre looked to be in his fifties, but age had already stiffened his joints, and his lean shoulders stooped. His frock coat, waistcoat and breeches were well cut, but the lace collar of his shirt was carelessly tied and the grey wig

was unpowdered. There was a negligence about him, as though the murdered man at his feet was an intrusion rather than a call to duty. His face, with its pale eyes and prominent cheekbones, looked almost hostile. 'You'll deal with the corpse immediately.'

'Certainly, monsieur le juge. A surgeon is on his way to examine it. Meanwhile, the Prévôt-Général will wish me to beg that you officially identify the young man.'

Sandre raised his eyebrows and stared at Victor as though a mere cavalier possessed no right to open his mouth in his presence, let alone speak for the Prévôt.

Victor's voice was deep, and it instinctively went deeper as he continued, 'The Prévôt will be much obliged to hear if the young man is known to you. Will you permit me to turn back the covering?'

He took two strides forward and Sandre teetered on his high-heeled shoes before stepping back. He gave a brief nod and turned away. Was he steeling himself for the sight beneath the blanket?

Victor had had years of confrontation with death—four of them in the army, and one in the Maréchaussée—so he knew that prior warning only helped to curb the grossest of reactions, for each corpse affected him in an unpredictable way. This one had lost a lot of blood, some of which stained the blanket. The well-shaped hands, the only uncovered parts of the body, were as white as new plaster. A few dark crumbs of earth or leaf mould adhered to the backs, but when Victor turned them he found the palms were clean. These hands had never done manual labour, and they had not been used in a struggle—the fingernails were unbroken and the fine skin intact. There were no rings or indentations.

He heard the magistrate's reedy voice behind him. 'It's a liberty to beg me to identify *that*.'

Victor considered the clothes, which were as well-tailored as the magistrate's, and newer. The buckles on the shoes were of polished steel, worth nabbing if the killer had been a brigand. He unbuttoned the waistcoat and searched

folds and pockets. ‘There may be something personal about him that will assist, monsieur le juge.’

Victor found and detached a watch, which he examined before handing it to the magistrate. Sandre took it and once more turned away.

Impatience gave an edge to Victor’s voice: ‘It’s time to examine the face, monsieur.’

Caught off guard, Sandre glanced over his shoulder.

Victor described it aloud. He would not yet touch the head or strip the body: the surgeon would be here soon enough. ‘One eye, half open: the iris is green. Fairish hair with copper lights, medium length, untied. The wounds were made by a volley of small lead shot, at close range. Some lodged in the flesh—the surgeon may find more in the brain cavity. He’s clean-shaven—though that’s just a guess, in his condition.’

Sandre reacted at last. ‘Enough! Stand up. You’ll inform the Prévôt that this is Damien Moiron, until recently the secretary to the Comte de Fronzac.’

Victor straightened, his eyes on the magistrate’s face. The expression was difficult to read. Distaste, as he said the young man’s name—but that could be caused by the whole gruesome encounter. And then a sudden authority: ‘I’ll keep the watch as evidence. You’ll now relieve me of the corpse.’

‘Monsieur le juge, I should remain here until the surgeon’s made his examination. Next I’ll report to the town clerk at Joinville, who must have Monsieur Moiron’s address on the local list. His death will be reported to his family, and his remains collected from the Dead House after their release for burial. Is Monsieur Moiron from the district?’

‘Who cares? God knows where he comes from. I’ve hardly met him. He showed up twice at the table of the Comte de Fronzac, where he should never have been invited, and then two weeks ago when he came here angling for a post as *my* secretary. An ambitious upstart. When Fronzac dismissed him, he began darting about the country

looking for a position. I'll be surprised if he hasn't tried the same ploy at Cirey. Ah yes, Arouet de Voltaire knows just whom he's palmed off on me!

The magistrate stopped abruptly. Victor knew that Voltaire's residence in this quiet district was ambiguous, and so were the attitudes of the local aristocracy towards him. Voltaire was not a nobleman, so if you were his superior by birth, like the Marquis du Châtelet or the Comte de Fronzac, you made up your own lordly mind about whether to associate with him or not. If your forebears were commoners, but you had acquired some kind of title, then you might choose to slight him—but that could be disastrous. Voltaire was vulnerable, having been thrown into prison more than once for writing against the government, but he still had connections in Paris and Versailles. If you bit Voltaire, he might find a clever way of biting back.

The gamekeeper had given the name of Damien Moiron to Victor, so it must have been in Voltaire's message to Sandre. Victor found it interesting to learn that the magistrate had all along been expecting to identify Moiron. And that he didn't like Voltaire—an opinion that he must share with most of the authorities in France.

When Sandre remained silent, Victor said, 'I'll ask the clerk in Joinville about Monsieur Moiron. I'll be recording this in the *journal de service*.'

Sandre sneered. 'All this reporting. You fellows should be patrolling the roads! This wretched body wouldn't be cluttering up my chapel if you did your job and arrested the robbers that roam through these parts at will.'

Victor glanced down. 'Ah, he was shot by the wayside? Odd that his watch wasn't taken. But perhaps the brigand ran off, afraid of discovery on a patrolled public road. The choice of weapon is also strange. The armed malefactors I normally have the pleasure of arresting tend to carry pistols or cudgels.'

Sandre snapped, 'He was found by a path in the Cirey

woods. The marquis has five thousand hectares of forest—ample cover for any number of robbers. There’s been quite enough delay. I’ll be writing to the Prévôt to recommend that your brigade get on your horses and go after them.’

At that moment there came the sound of hooves and the wheels of a light vehicle on the cobblestones outside, and Victor turned to see a manservant dart past the chapel doorway to take the horse’s head.

‘The surgeon. At last,’ the magistrate said with contempt. ‘Do your duty, cavalier.’ Without another word he left the chapel via the archway, and disappeared.

GABRIELLE-ÉMILIE DU CHÂTELET drove through the little village of Cirey that afternoon, having stayed in the not too distant town of Wassy overnight so that her children would be fresh and ready for this new phase in their lives. Émilie herself was trembling with anticipation.