The Céleste Paone affair

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Deborah Jervis remembered very clearly the day Céleste Paone first came to the library at the 'Lit and Phil' in Newcastle, for it was her wedding anniversary. Her husband was taking her to dinner and she must leave on time to pick up her little black number from the dry-cleaners. She had worn it on their first anniversary and was perhaps excessively proud of the fact that, fifteen years later, it still fitted her.

It was a hazy Friday afternoon in June. One or two regulars dozed in their armchairs. The library would shut at five, giving Deborah fifteen minutes to get to Clayton Street and collect the dress. She must have looked at her watch at least half a dozen times while she tidied the loans desk again, changed the stamp to tomorrow's date and arranged every pencil, pen and elastic band on the counter in a display of asymmetrical perfection.

At precisely six minutes to five an elegant lady of a certain age appeared in the doorway above the main staircase and, fanning her carefully made-up face with an exquisite pair of white kid gloves, peered diffidently in. She wore a grey, expensively-cut suit, her still-dark hair tied in a neat bun. She approached the desk, all the while casting her brown eyes around at the sober dignity of the library. A shaft of sunlight, filtered through indolent motes of dust, drew her eye down from the magnificent glass ceiling to the shelves stacked with volume upon volume of apparently immutable scholarship. Deborah Jervis's heart sank to the soles of her sensible shoes.

'My name,' said the lady, in that perfect English inflexion which only very rich French women can afford, 'is Céleste Paone.' Instantly prepared to resent this

certain ruination of her evening, Deborah looked almost involuntarily at her watch before replying, 'Can I help you?' – and then adding, because she could not resist it, 'I'm afraid we are about to close.'

'I had supposed that the library closed at seven o'clock in the evening.' Madame Paone allowed a faint, well-bred sigh to escape her lips.

'Except on Fridays, I'm afraid.' Deborah was tempted, very sorely tempted, to invoke the woman's right of confidence and admit that she simply must dash if she were to collect her dress. Any woman would understand. But then, there was something in Céleste Paone's manner that did not encourage intimacy. So she said, 'Was there anything in particular you were looking for?' knowing full-well that she thus condemned her little black number to the fatal overnight custody of the dry-cleaners.

'One of my ancestors spent some little time in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. For my researches I wish to discover if any of your provincial newspapers may have made mention of him.' And then, as if perhaps sensing Deborah's increasing discomfort, Céleste Paone added, 'It is of no matter. I can return tomorrow. I shall be staying in Newcastle some days.'

Deborah could have kissed her. Instead, she smiled winningly, wished Madame Paone a very good night and assured her that the library would open at nine-thirty the following morning. She was just in time, that balmy Friday evening, to rescue both her dress and her anniversary.

At nine-thirty the following morning Deborah Jervis was again stationed at the loans and returns desk. She had a slight headache. Mr Carpenter, who always came in on Saturdays, was laying out the morning newspapers on the large table in the Reading Room. He was not a member of staff and no-one had ever thought to ask how he had arrogated this responsibility. He was a 'Lit and Phil' tradition, like the hatch through which coffee and biscuits were served, or those loud open debates on the fortunes of Newcastle United Football Club (which took place generally on a Monday afternoon) that seemed somehow right and proper.

Madame Paone, dressed now in a paler but no less expensive suit than previously, entered the library at twenty minutes to ten. This time she carried a very smart thin black leather briefcase. Placing it on the floor and laying her gloves on the counter she offered a compressed sort of smile to Deborah, wished her a good morning, and said, 'Marat.'

Deborah was rarely disconcerted by such directness. The 'Lit and Phil' boasted any number of eccentric members and Deborah had cultivated, during her twelve years there, a more or less imperturbable manner. She also knew a great deal about the library's collections and about the city's history. Marat, like Daniel Defoe and Celia Fiennes, was one of those illustrious visitors to the North-east whom pilgrims often asked about. Marat was easy.

'Marat? You mean Jean-Paul Marat, the Jacobin journalist and regicide who was murdered in his bathtub by Charlotte Corday…?'

'Bien sûr. My ancestor: L'ami du peuple.'

'Goodness!' Deborah flushed. 'How wonderful to have such a fascinating character in the family.'

'Fascinating, perhaps. Perhaps also embarrassing. He was not an attractive man. A fanatic, and most unhygienic in his personal habits. As a woman, I am inclined to admire Charlotte Corday for killing him. As a Marat…' She shrugged. 'But I think his early career here is of interest?'

'Oh yes. He came to Newcastle in about 1770 and practised as a doctor. He is said to have helped in the aftermath of the Great Flood of 1771. Some say he was offered the Freedom of the City for treating the victims of an epidemic. And of course while he was here he wrote *The Chains of Slavery,* the work that set him on the path to revolution.'

'Indeed. This much I know.' Madame Paone picked her gloves up from the counter and smoothed them between her hands. It was, thought Deborah, a slightly impatient gesture. 'Please tell me which newspapers you have in this period.

I wish to find out where he lived and with whom he associated in these years.'

It must have been close to eleven when Deborah left Céleste Paone in the small Music Room downstairs. She was more than ready for her coffee break: it had been a long morning. First, she had had to get Mrs Nixon to take over at the desk while she went to the Reserve Store for three large volumes of the *Newcastle Courant,* a weekly newspaper dating from the 1770s. She laid them out for Madame Paone on the largest table in the Reading Room but this, it seemed, was unsatisfactory. Was there anywhere quieter? Perhaps the Reference Room downstairs? Perhaps. Mrs Nixon helped Deborah carry the volumes while Mr Carpenter very kindly kept an eye on the desk.

The Reference Room also proved unsatisfactory: it smelled, Madame Paone said, of cigar smoke and old men. This was perfectly true. The small Music Room across the hall seemed the only other solution and this, at last, had proved satisfactory. Madame Paone even played a few soft gloved notes on the piano before addressing herself to the task of leafing through five years' worth of miniscule newsprint. She took a pair of glasses from the pocket of her jacket, retrieved a moleskin notebook from the briefcase, and sat down. Just as Deborah reached the door she turned and said, 'I am so sorry, just one more thing…?'

'Of course. How can we help?' Deborah had had more awkward customers by far than Madame Paone. Despite, or perhaps because of her headache, she now felt effortlessly patient.

'Do you perhaps keep a copy of *The Chains of Slavery*?'

'I will bring it you.'

The library closed at one on a Saturday. At a quarter-to, Deborah asked Mrs Nixon if she would remind Madame Paone of the time. In the circumstances they might leave the *Courant* volumes in the Music Room in case she required them again on Monday, but Mrs Nixon should retrieve *The Chains of Slavery,* since it belonged to the special collection and would have to be locked away.

Mrs Nixon had been gone for less than a minute before she reappeared, breathless, at the top of the rear stairs. 'Mrs Jervis!' she cried, shattering the cosy somnambulance of the Reading Room. 'Call an ambulance! The French lady has been attacked! Oh, do please call for an ambulance!'

Several gentlemen looked up from their newspapers in tones of mild irritation. Miss Dunn poked her silver-blue head through the coffee hatch and shouted, 'What?' at the top of her voice. Mr Carpenter, who had taken it upon himself to restore a number of stray items to their proper places in the gallery high above this scene of mild panic, dropped a heavy volume of Ralph Waldo Emerson's letters with a sound not unlike a gunshot. This contributed to a sort of slow-motion pandemonium during which Deborah, in her sensible shoes, ran from the desk past Mrs Nixon and down the stairs to establish for herself exactly what state Madame Paone was in.

Mrs Nixon had not, indeed, over-dramatised the need for help. Céleste Paone lay slumped forward in her chair, her head lying at an unpleasantly awkward angle on the volume which she had been reading. Her face was covered by a dishevelled mass of hair. Her glasses lay broken on the carpet beside her, next to the heavy gilt candlestick which had formerly stood on top of the piano.

As Deborah moved closer to see if the victim was still breathing, a sound from behind caused her to turn. It was one of the members; she did not recollect his name: a man in his sixties who came in once or twice a month. 'Retired doctor,' he said by way of explanation. With great relief, for the idea of touching a dead body was not attractive to her, Deborah stood aside while he felt for a pulse with one hand and gently probed Madame Paone's head with the other.

'Breathing,' he said calmly. 'Can't feel anything untoward on the skull, but there is swelling on the back of the neck. Heavy blow. Will you help me, please?' Together, Deborah and the doctor lowered Madame Paone from the chair onto the floor, where he arranged her limp form in the recovery position and performed a series of very expert-looking checks: opening her eyes, feeling her limbs for further signs of injury and listening to her breathing. It cannot have been more than five minutes before two green-clad paramedics arrived. Briefed by the doctor, they

placed an oxygen mask upon Madame Paone's deathly pale face and whisked her away on a stretcher. Only now did Deborah notice the small crowd of people that had gathered behind her. 'I think,' announced Miss Dunn in her unnaturally loud voice (she was quite deaf) 'I had better make a large pot of tea.'

On the Monday morning following this extraordinary event the usual post-mortem on the weekend's football results was quite overshadowed by speculation over what was already being called 'the Céleste Paone affair'. In the absence of Deborah Jervis's definitive testimony, for it was her day off, Mrs Nixon and Miss Dunn were the only witnesses who could be summoned. In truth, neither was very satisfactory. Miss Dunn stated that Céleste Paone had been hit over the head by a man in a dark jacket with a beard; that her wedding ring had been stolen; and that she was to sue the 'Lit and Phil' for something or other. Mrs Nixon was sure that the attacker had made off with several hundred pounds in cash, that the wedding ring had been worth thousands of pounds, and that a man dressed in a tracksuit and cap had been seen running towards the station. Madame Paone had suffered brain damage and might never speak again.

It was only when the doctor, Dr Daniels, appeared in the library and was subpoenaed by popular demand, that any semblance of the truth emerged. Céleste Paone had been struck on the back of the neck by a blunt object, probably the candlestick. Her purse and wedding ring had indeed been stolen, though it was not clear how much the missing valuables amounted to. The lady was recovering in hospital from concussion and would make a full recovery. She hoped that, after a short recuperation in France, she would return to complete her researches into Jean-Paul Marat. There was no question at all of her suing the 'Lit and Phil' and not the slightest trace of her attacker who, so far as the Doctor knew, had been seen by no-one.

The Doctor's admirably succinct account of the facts in the Céleste Paone affair, far from deflating the mood in the Reading Room that Monday, merely inflamed speculation about the identity of the attacker. Was he a member? Had he followed her from France? Was it someone who had just walked in off the street? If so, there must be questions regarding security at the 'Lit and Phil', which a number of members recollected to have complained about before.

The local police, following a similar train of thought, had already interviewed the most important witness. On Sunday they had visited Deborah at home in the hope that she might remember any unusual persons entering the library the previous morning. She did not. But she pointed out to the officers that she had been absent for crucial periods, searching for the very volumes which had drawn the victim to the library. Perhaps Mr Carpenter...? But no, Mr Carpenter had already yielded as much information as he could. He had seen nothing, being up in the gallery. And so the identity of Céleste Paone's attacker remained a mystery. At least, it remained so for some time.

On a cool, bright Thursday morning a few weeks later, by extraordinary coincidence a man came to the desk where Deborah was cancelling returned books and asked if he might look at the library's copy of Marat's *Chains of Slavery.* A vivid image of Céleste Paone slumped in her chair suddenly came to Deborah's mind and she shuddered. She knew precisely where the volume was, for after the attack she had replaced the box in which it was kept it in the locked room where the special collection lived. She asked the man to take a seat (almost unconsciously she chose one where she would be able to watch him) and went off with her set of keys. Returning, she placed the box in which the pamphlet was kept beside the man and went back to the counter where a member was waiting for someone to swipe a book and stamp it.

She took her eye off the man at the table just long enough to be surprised when he appeared in front of her. 'What now?' she wondered.

'There seems to be a bit of a problem with your *Chains of Slavery,* said the man apologetically, holding up a copy of *Paris-Match* magazine for Deborah's scrutiny.

Naturally enough, on receiving this intelligence the police abandoned their already tepid search for Madame Paone's attacker, for it was now clear that there had never been one. Céleste Paone had expertly mugged herself, having secreted Marat's revolutionary pamphlet in a concealed compartment of her briefcase. No-one had ever thought to check the contents of the box. Why should they?

Why should they indeed? After the fuss died down Deborah took it upon herself

to phone an old friend with whom she had been at university many years before. Guy Seznec had worked at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris for as long as Deborah had been at the 'Lit and Phil'. So old was their friendship that his was the first name under 'S' in her address book. One quiet afternoon she called him.

After the usual felicitations Deborah asked Guy what he knew about *The Chains of Slavery.* He gave her a minute history of its publication and then, 'But you yourself have a copy at the 'Lit and Phil', I think?'

'We did. It has been stolen.'

'Oh? Tell me, which edition did you have?'

'First. 1774. Signed 'Marat'.'

'Dieu!'

'Guy, tell me it isn't worth a fortune, please tell me.'

'A fortune? No… some thousands of pounds, but still…. And tell me, do you know who has taken it?'

'As a matter of fact we do. It was an elderly French woman, apparently wealthy, by the name of Céleste Paone. We thought she had been attacked with a candle-stick, and so of course…'

At the other end of the line there was silence, then a howl of laughter which the gentlemen at the other end of the Reading Room treated to deprecating glances. 'Guy? Is something funny?'

'Mais oui, Deborah, very funny, if you will excuse my finding anything so serious funny. Your Madame Paone is an old adversary of mine. A kleptomaniac. Her real name is Héloise Paradis. Did she by any chance pass herself off as a descendant of Marat's? Yes, that is her. She is descended also from Voltaire, Henri

Quatre and Baudelaire. The police know her, but they never find the books. Sometimes she telephones to me and we talk about some rare volume or other. All that scholarship, perdu! I almost admire her.'

'I don't.'

'Of course, Deborah, you are upset, but you must admit she has a wonderful grasp of Anglo-Saxon humour.'

'Please explain, Guy, before I get cross.'

'Alors, Deborah, don't you see? Madame Paone! Mrs Peacock… in the library… with a candlestick. It is too good!'

Deborah Jervis began to feel slightly sick. She rather wished she had not called her friend Guy. But she had one last question for him. 'Tell me, Guy, how do you think your Mrs Peacock came to hear about our copy of *The Chains of Slavery*?'

'Eh bien… I… err… that is to say …'

Deborah Jervis put the telephone down and proceeded to tidy the pens, pencils and elastic bands on her counter with elaborate precision. She looked at her watch. It was almost five o'clock.