

THE VATEL AFFAIR

Marie de Rabutin-Chantal (1626–1696), Marquise de Sévigné

to Françoise de Sévigné (1646–1705), her daughter

Louis (1621–1686), Prince de Condé—France’s most successful general, wealthiest individual, and highest-ranking nobleman—in 1651 led a rebellion against Louis XIV. The failure of this rising led to Condé’s exile to his estates at Chantilly, isolated from the King and court society. In 1671, Louis XIV signaled his willingness to forgive and rehabilitate Condé, agreeing to visit Chantilly. Anxious to make a good impression, Condé hired François Vatel (1631–1671) to supervise the preparations.

Château de Chantilly, 24 April 1671

I just returned here. My intention was to tell you that the King arrived yesterday evening at Chantilly. A stag was running in the moonlight, the lanterns were wonderful. The fireworks were a little obscured, but in the end the evening, the dinner, the amusements, everything went marvelously. The weather that we had today made us hope for a worthy continuation of such an agreeable beginning.

But here’s what I learned while arriving here, which I can’t get over, and I don’t know what else to do but to talk to you about it: in short, it’s that Vatel, the great Vatel, *maître d’hôtel* of Monsieur Fouquet¹, and currently that of the Prince, this man capable beyond all others, whose good sense was able to support all the care of a state, this man that I knew... you see at 8 o’clock this morning the fish delivery hadn’t arrived, he wasn’t able to endure the humiliation that he saw coming on himself, and to make a story short, he stabbed himself.

You can imagine the horrible disorder that such an accident caused to the festivities. And imagine that the fish delivery arrived, perhaps even while he was in the process of dying. I don’t know anything more at present; I think you will find that this is more than enough. I have no doubt that the confusion was huge; it’s a terrible thing to happen to a party costing 50.000 *écus*.

Monsieur de Menars² is going to marry Mademoiselle de La Grange Neuville.³ I don’t know if I have the heart to speak to you of anything but Vatel.

26 April 1671

It is Sunday, 26 April; this letter will not go till Wednesday. It is not really a letter, but an account, which Moreuil⁴ has just given me for your benefit, of what happened at Chantilly concerning Vatel. I wrote you on Friday that he had stabbed himself; here is the story in detail.

The King arrived Thursday evening. Hunting, lanterns, moonlight, a promenade, the meal in a place carpeted with jonquils—all was going to perfection. Supper came; the roast failed at one or two tables on account of a number of unexpected guests. This upset Vatel. He said several times, “My honor is lost; this is a humiliation that I cannot endure.” To Gourville⁵ he said, “My head is swimming; I have not slept for twelve nights; help me to give my orders.” Gourville consoled him as best he could, but the roast which had failed, not at the king’s, but at the twenty-fifth table, haunted his mind. Gourville told Monsieur le Prince about it, and Monsieur le Prince went up to Vatel in his own room and said to him, “Vatel, all goes well; there never was anything so beautiful as the king’s supper.” He answered: “Monseigneur, your goodness overwhelms me. I know that the roast failed at two tables.” “Nothing of the sort,” said Monsieur le Prince. “Do not disturb yourself—all is well.”

Night falls. The fireworks do not succeed on account of a cloud that overspreads them (they cost sixteen thousand francs). At four o’clock in the morning Vatel is wandering about all over the place; everything is asleep. He meets

¹ Nicolas Fouquet (1615–1680), Marquis de Belle-Isle, Viscomte de Melun et Vaux

² Jean-Jacques le Charron, Marquis de Menars (1643–1718), *Président à mortier* of the Parlement de Paris

³ Marie-Françoise de La Grange de Neuville

⁴ Alphonse, Comte de Moreuil

⁵ Jean Hérauld Gourville (1625–1703), Financial Director to the Prince of Condé

a small purveyor with two loads of fish and asks him, "Is this all?" "Yes, sir." The man did not know that Vatel had sent to all the seaport towns in France. Vatel waits some time, but the other purveyors do not arrive; he gets excited; he thinks that there will be no more fish. He finds Gourville and says to him, "Sir, I shall not be able to survive this disgrace." Gourville only laughs at him. Then Vatel goes up to his own room, puts his sword against the door, and runs it through his heart, but only at the third thrust, for he gave himself two wounds which were not mortal. He falls dead.

Meanwhile the fish is coming in from every side, and people are seeking for Vatel to distribute it. They go to his room, they knock, they burst open the door, they find him lying bathed in his blood. They send for Monsieur le Prince, who is in utter despair. Monsieur le Duc bursts into tears; it was upon Vatel that his whole journey to Burgundy depended. Monsieur le Prince informed the King, very sadly; they agreed that it all came from Vatel's having his own code of honor, and they praised his courage highly even while they blamed him. The King said that for five years he had delayed his coming because he knew the extreme trouble his visit would cause. He said to Monsieur le Prince that he ought to have but two tables and not burden himself with the responsibility for everybody, and that he would not permit Monsieur le Prince to do so again; but it was too late for poor Vatel.

Gourville, however, tried to repair the loss of Vatel, and did repair it. The dinner was excellent; so was the luncheon. They supped, they walked, they played, they hunted. The scent of jonquils was everywhere; it was all enchanting. Yesterday, which was Saturday, they did the same again; and in the evening the King went to Liancourt, where he ordered a midnight meal like the ones after fasts; he has to stay there today.

James Harvey Robinson and Charles A. Beard, *Readings in Modern European History* (New York: Ginn and Company, 1908), I:11–12.