

THE QUARTERED WOMAN OF MONTMARTRE

I. A Sensational Crime

On January 15, 1890, the popular and populous quarter of Montmartre was the theater of a monstrous crime that disturbed Paris and the whole of France.¹

One morning, at about 6 a.m.—which is to say, before daybreak—a female bread-porter named Louise Plache, who was going to deliver merchandise to clients in the Avenue de Clichy, made a terrifying discovery.

She was about to ring the bell of number 357, as she did every morning, when the door to the vestibule opened wide in front of her. An individual emerged, bumping into the porter on the sidewalk, and fled along the avenue, which was dark and deserted at that hour.

At the time, the woman did not think of pursuing the individual, even though she had a presentiment that he had just done something nasty. Perhaps he was a burglar, perhaps something worse. Overcoming her anxiety, she went into the house to call the concierge and make her party to her fears.

The vestibule was unlit. She went on, feeling her way as far the lodge and rapped on the window, calling: “Madame Gosselin! Madame Gosselin!” The concierge did not reply.

Louise Plache renewed her appeals, but they had no more success than before. Alarmed by the persistent silence, she ran outside to look for a *sergent de ville*. A few houses further on, she encountered agent 1654 of the 18th arrondissement. She asked him to follow her quickly. So far as she was concerned, there was no longer any doubt that Madame Gosselin, the concierge at number 357, had been murdered by the man who had bumped into her on the sidewalk a few minutes earlier.

Agent 1654 was unconvinced by the pessimistic suppositions of Louise Plache, and secretly thought them fanciful. Even so, he ran all the way, and on reaching number 357 he took an electric torch from his pocket, switched it on, and then went resolutely into the vestibule, followed by the bread-porter.

Simultaneous cries of horror escaped from both their mouths. By the feeble light of the torch, they had just perceived, at the end of the corridor, a woman in a night-dress attached by the wrists to the cage of an elevator, while her feet were secured lower down to the columns of the shaft.

The cage, suspended about two meters above the ground, had, in ascending to that height, literally torn the young unfortunate woman apart. Her limbs, atrociously stretched, were partly detached from her trunk, releasing streams of blood.

Agent 1654 and Louise Plache had barely glanced at the cadaver. The spectacle was so horrible that, in spite of his courage, even the *sergent de ville* could not help recoiling to the doorway. There, he recovered his self-composure somewhat.

As the victim was showing no sign of life, it seemed that the best thing to do was to return to the station to alert his superiors.

Half an hour later, the Commissaire, his secretary and several of agent 1654’s colleagues arrived on the scene. Until then, it was believed that the woman quartered by the lift was Madame Gosselin, the concierge. The woman in question, a childless widow, was the sole occupant of the lodge of number 357, and as she had not responded to the appeals of Louis Plache, the hypothesis appeared perfectly reasonable.

It was, however, mistaken.

The initial inquiries of the police established that the quartered woman was one of the house’s tenants. For about six months, she had occupied a small apartment on the ground floor.

As for poor Madame Gosselin, she was also found dead, but at home. The murderer had got into her lodge through a window to the courtyard and had stabbed her. Her bloody body was lying on the rug beside the bed-alcove in which she slept.

The tenant’s corpse was detached from the cage of the elevator, with great difficulty. It was observed that she had been gagged beforehand by the murderer. No trace was found on her body of any wounds other than those caused by the operation of the elevator. The unfortunate woman had evidently been torn apart while alive. That took to the horror to its limit.

The Sûreté, once alerted, opened an inquiry in collaboration with the Investigating Magistrate charged with the tragic affair. Certain details were obtained regarding the tenant.

Her name was Annie Stephenson—at least, that was the name under which she had rented a vacant apartment in number 357 six months before. She was apparently English, and had lost her parents shortly before.

¹ The term I have translated as “quartered woman,” *écartelée*, is normally used in heraldry, with reference to coats of arms that are divided into quarters, rather than to a “quartered” body (as in “hanged, drawn and quartered”) so there is a hint of *double entendre* about this title that does not translate.

The latter having left her a tidy sum, she had come to France to live on its income. She was a pretty blonde, whose black clothes heightened her rosy beauty.

Like the majority of Englishwomen living abroad, she had rather independent ways, but did not depart in any way from the rules of decorum. Her fellow tenants knew nothing to her detriment and held her in high esteem, in spite of her slightly haughty reserve. She was not married and contented herself with the services of a housemaid who came to her home every morning.

Her apartment consisted of four rooms: a drawing-room overlooking the Avenue de Clichy, a bedroom overlooking the house's interior courtyard; a large bathroom; and a small kitchen, which also served as a dining room. The apartment communicated directly with the large vestibule by means of a door that opened almost directly opposite that of the lodge. In order to go into her apartment Miss Stephenson was obliged to go past the lodge, but she had no need to use either the staircase or the elevator.

The drawing-room window was only about a meter and a half above the sidewalk. The murderer might, therefore, have slipped into the Englishwoman's apartment that way—but the solid shutters with which the window was fitted showed no trace of effraction. By contrast, the bedroom window—which, let us repeat, overlooked the courtyard, was found ajar, as was the entrance door to the vestibule.

From these various observations, it was concluded that the murderer must have got into the house from the rear, after climbing over a low wall, which bordered the courtyard on that side. Once in the courtyard, he had got into the lodge through the window and had stabbed the unfortunate Madame Gosselin. Then, after returning to the courtyard, he had been able to force Miss Stephenson's bedroom window and take her by surprise as she slept, without any fear that the noise would wake up the concierge.

Up to that pint, the inquiry furnished quite satisfactory elements of information. The Magistrate and the Sûreté inspectors were thus able to explain how, after gagging his victim, the guilty party has been able to drag her into the vestibule, attach her to the cage and the framework of the elevator, and set the apparatus in motion in such a fashion as to quarter the unfortunate woman, without fear of any troublesome interruption.

It even explained how the wretch had succeeded in taking flight so easily. Doubtless he had profited from this passage through the lodge to pull the cord and open the large door to the vestibule; in that way, if he were surprised, he could be outside with a single bound.

But what was the motive for the crime?

Why those monstrous refinements of cruelty toward one of the victims?

That was the enigma that remained insoluble.

There had been no theft. No object of value was missing from the concierge's lodge, and all the evidence suggested that the murder had only killed that poor woman in order to carry out his hideous crime at his ease. There was nothing suggestive of a burglary in Annie's apartment either. The young woman's money and jewelry were found in her writing-desk; the murderer had opened the drawer without emptying it. On the other hand, no papers belonging to the Englishwoman were found—not a letter, not a card, not the slightest personal document. Nothing!

The strangest thing of all was that in the kitchen, where Annie was in the habit of taking her meals, the preparations for an excellent dinner for two people were found. On the table, two places were already made up with plates of cold meat, a stuffed partridge, pastries, two bottles of fine wine, one of them champagne, a bottle of Chartreuse and—a heat-rending detail—a superb bouquet of white roses!

Who should the diners have been? Annie for one, undoubtedly—but the other? Had the young woman been expecting someone the evening before, who had not been able to come?

The housemaid was questioned. She did not know anything about it—and she was amazed to see the table set. Until then she had considered Miss Stephenson to be a very sober person, who never ate so well and only drank milk or tea. On the other hand, it was her job, as housemaid, to do the shopping for her employer, and she had not bought any partridge, pastries, wine or chartreuse—nor had she bought the bouquet placed on the table.

An impenetrable mystery, therefore, surrounded the tragedy in Montmartre.

Was it a passionate vendetta, or the work of some monomaniac?

To decide between the two hypotheses and find a solution, it would have been necessary to check and complete the meager information obtained in relation to Miss Annie Stephenson, the victim, at any rate, of one of the most barbaric murders that the judiciary annals had recorded for a long time. However, the young woman had no relatives or friends in Paris, and there was no means, in the absence of papers of any sort, of finding any that she might have had in England.

That same day, the bodies of the concierge and the Englishwoman were transported to the morgue for autopsy, and the evening newspapers began to spread the news of the crime in special editions. At the same time, they announced that the agents of the law would proceed the following day to autopsy the victims—an operation whose outcome was anxiously awaited, for it was important to know for sure which of the two women had been the first to die, even though there was every reason to believe that it had been Madame Gosselin.

Essentially, the agents of the law wanted first of all to reconstruct the scene of the crime, thus to follow the murderer, so to speak, step by step in his nocturnal comings and goings, and, by means of that imaginary and retrospective tracking, to try to discover the motive that had impelled him.

No one had any suspicion of the extraordinary events that were to unfold the following night, and would impede the action of the law completely.

II. The Amazing Adventure of the Night Watchman

Until recently, as our readers will know, it was customary to exhibit the cadavers of people whose identity had not been established in a vast glass cage in the morgue; the crowd filed in front of that cage and made its observations, of which professional ears carefully took note in order to make use of them—as was often appropriate—in the interests of justice.

Although there was no certainty of the identity of Miss Annie Stephenson, however, the authorities decided to make an exception to the rule in her case, in order to avoid an influx of curiosity-seekers. In order to shield them from public curiosity, the morgue supervisor had the bodies of the Englishwoman and the concierge deposited on a large slab in a refrigerated room. For decency's sake, if not for precautionary reasons, they were hidden beneath sheets, for they were frightful to behold—especially that of the unfortunate young woman whose limbs had been partly detached from her torso.

After the closure of the establishment, which took place at nightfall, the supervisor and his employees retired. Leaving the night-watchman, Père Berton, installed in what he called his “guardroom.” The man had long become used to the spectacle of death. He had, in fact, fought in the Crimean War and in Italy, taking part in the siege of Sebastopol and the battles of Magenta and Solferino, during which Russians, Englishmen, Italians, Austrians and Frenchmen had fallen in their thousands in glorious *mêlées*. The constant proximity of a few “maccabees,” as he called the cadavers in the morgue, was, therefore, nothing to frighten him, and he congratulated himself for having found an employment for his old age that doubled the income of his modest military pension.²

He had always considered this employment as a sinecure. “Nothing to do but fold my arms and smoke my pipe!” he was accustomed to telling his friends—and he indulged in wordplay of a rather dubious sort with regard to the good character of his “inmates,” who never importuned him with their recriminations or argued with him, sleeping soundly in their own icy room while he drowsed comfortably next to the nice fire that he took care to light in his “guardroom.”

“Berton,” the director had said to him, before leaving that evening, “I recommend that you maintain the most absolute discretion. All Paris has been upset by the news of the drama in the Avenue de Clichy, and a veritable army of reporters has already entered the campaign. Among these journalists, as you know, there are tactless individuals of the worst sort, who stick their noses in everywhere and too often meddle in things that don't concern them. Beware of them, Berton! I wouldn't be surprised if one of those fellows pays you a visit tonight. Today, I've already had to kick out a few today, who wanted to see the victims at any price and take photographs of them, in spite of the strict orders of the Prefecture—so you can expect them to return to the job, and must, in consequence, be prepared.”

“What shall I do?” asked the old veteran.

“It's quite simple. Barricade the door carefully and don't open up for anyone. Once inside, those fellows are certainly capable of violating the prohibition and taking flashlight photographs in spite of your presence.”

“I'd like to see them try!” muttered the ex-grenadier, putting on a terrible frown. “A thousand million bullets! Let them come—they'll get a nice welcome!”

“It's not a matter of renewing your exploits at Sebastopol, old man! Content yourself with playing the role of the besieged this time. Leave the journalists at the door, but don't tell them anything if they want to interview you.”

“Understood, Mon Capitaine... I mean, Monsieur. I'll crouch in my den and leave the journalists outside.”

Knowing that he could count on his night-watchman, the director did not labor the point, and Père Berton, left alone in the morgue, got ready to follow his superior's instructions to the letter. He carefully locked and bolted the door, made sure that the shutters over the windows were firmly closed, and then, having unhooked the muffled lantern that he used to make his rounds, retired to his “guardroom,” where a good fire was burning.

“Umph!” he said, slumping voluptuously into a wicker armchair, with his feet on the andirons and his pipe in his mouth. “This is very nice. I'd certainly have liked a fire like this in the trenches at Sebastopol. It was bitter

² The siege of Sebastopol took place in 1854-55, and the battles of Magenta and Solferino were both fought in 1859. The fact that “*macchabées*” [maccabees] is a slang term for dead bodies in French presumably derives from the story of the seven Maccabee martyrs recounted in the Biblical apocrypha.

by night at the bottom of those damned snow-filled holes! We had no need of refrigeration apparatus to preserve the maccabees! Believe me they were frozen before they were dead! It wasn't soldiers who fell but men of ice!" And he started laughing noisily, delighted with the macabre comparison that he had just drawn.

Several hours went by in the greatest tranquility. Contrary to what the supervisor had feared, no reporters came knocking on the door of the morgue in the course of the evening. Reassured on this point, Père Berton through a few logs into the fireplace and got ready to take a nap. His "inmates" has no need of him, he assumed, and he was not obliged to spend the entire night under arms. That had been necessary, of course, in 1855 or 1859, when the Russians and Austrians had taken pleasure in attacking the French lines under cover of darkness. A thousand million bullets! Woe betide the sentinel who fell asleep! If the cold didn't freeze him alive, he would have been woken up by some huge devil of a Slav or a Teuton, who would have reminded him of his duty, without saying a word, with a single thrust of a bayonet.

Here, though, Père Berton was safe. At least, that was what he firmly believed, and, once he had wrapped himself up in an old cape—a relic of his campaigns—it did not take him long to close his eyes and start snoring like an organ-pipe.

It might have been 1 a.m., and the watchman was sleeping like a baby, when a suspicious noise coming from the refrigerated room snatched him out of his rule-breaking slumber. One might have thought that the noise had been made by a corpse falling to the ground.

"What's that?" he asked himself, rubbing his eyes. "Am I dreaming, or has one of my inmates not felt secure on the slab and wanted to try out the floor?"

He cocked an ear and, still hearing the noise in the neighboring room without being able to make out exactly what it was, thought at first that the director's anticipation had been realized, and that an audacious journalist had taken advantage of his nap to force an entry into the morgue.

"A thousand million bullets!" he muttered, arming himself with a cudgel and his lantern. "If the journalists have taken the position by surprise, it's a matter of taking it back by force. Come on, grenadiers! Up and at 'em!"

Nevertheless, Père Berton thought it best to be prudent before engaging in hostilities. He was a good 65 years old and although he was singularly spry and determined for his age, he might perhaps have been the underdog in a hand-to-hand combat with a young and vigorous adversary. Hiding the light of his lantern under his cape, he gently cracked open the door of his room, which opened into a corridor. From there he darted a rapid glance at the entrance door. To his great surprise, he observed that it was shut. Had he been mistaken? Had no one come into the morgue?

The same noise, however, was still audible in the refrigerated room. One might have thought that someone was inspecting the cadavers, turning them over on their slabs.

Who was that sinister visitor? And how could he have got into the building?

In spite of his bravery, Père Berton began to be a little bit frightened. This was a puzzle to which he could not find the key, unless...

Ah! Yes, damn it, that's it! Why didn't I think of it sooner!

Often, in cold weather, in the middle of the night, legions of water-rats climbed out of the Seine and rushed to attack the morgue, attracted by the odor of the corpses. Père Berton had been obliged to repel assaults of that kind on more than one occasion. The rodents were so audacious that he had come to dread that he might not be able to put them to flight on his own, and he had asked the supervisor several times if he might have the collaboration of a cat or a fox-terrier—but the head of the establishment thought that the presence of a domestic animal in that funereal residence might perhaps give rise to criticism, justified or otherwise, and he had not wanted to grant the old warden's request. The latter, therefore, had nothing but his stick with which to defend himself against the rodents. That was little enough, given the number, boldness and ferocity of the assailants, driven to the hunt by hunger—but Père Bertron had seen many others. He always fell upon the enemy valiantly, and dispersed the vermin with cudgel-blows, kicks and thumps.

"Just you wait, you brigands!" he cried, hurling himself toward the door of the refrigerated room "I'll teach you to respect my inmates!"

He shoved the door open and lifted up his lantern to illuminate the room. Imagine how amazed and alarmed he was when, instead of a horde of rats, he saw a man in front of him, also carrying a hooded lantern and dragging a large canvas sack. So far as Père Breton could tell, in his disturbed state, the man was tall and broad-shouldered, dressed in a long black overcoat and a soft, broad-brimmed hat akin to a sombrero.

The rim of the sombrero was pulled down in front over a black velvet mask, which hid the man's face, only allowing the sight, through the eyeholes, of two gleaming quasi-feline pupils.

The strange nocturnal visitor was standing beside the slab on which the sad remains of Madame Gosselin and Annie Stephenson had been laid. On seeing the night-watchman come in, he turned round abruptly, and fixed Berton with a savage stare, which revealed even more anger than disappointment.

The night-watchman observed that one of the two bodies had fallen on to the floor—but that was nearly all he was able to observe, for he was immediately gripped by an indefinable anxiety: a sort of giddiness, which

became more intense the longer he looked at the individual standing in front of him. That man's two flamboyant pupils literally fascinated him; from then on he almost lost consciousness of what was happening, and sensed his will-power melting and slipping away...

He ought to have seized the intruder by the collar, or at least called for help, but, strangely enough, not a sound emerged from his throat and he felt incapable of taking a step forward. His club and his lantern slipped from his hands and rolled on the ground.

The masked man's sardonic laughter accompanied the commencement of his defeat. "Who are you?" he asked Berton, afterwards.

The latter immediately recovered the power of speech, but it was not to shout threats or imprecations, as one might have imagined. Meekly, he replied: "I'm the night-watchman, Monsieur."

"What are you doing in this room? Why have you disturbed me?"

"My duty..."

"Eh!" said the unknown. "I laugh at you duty! Come here."

Drawn and pale, Berton went toward the masked man with the jerky gait of an automaton.

"I could have made you regret your indiscretion bitterly," the enigmatic individual went on, his eyes continuing to emit rapid flashes through the holes of the mask, "but I'll take pity on your great age and content myself with obliging you to give me a hand." He pointed to the cadaver that had fallen on the floor. "That's the corpse of Miss Annie Stephenson, isn't it?" he asked.

"Yes," said the ex-grenadier, mechanically.

"Well, you're going to help me put it in this sack."

"Why?"

"No questions," said the unknown man, brutally, fixing his fascinating gaze upon the poor old man. "Obey me, or I'll be forced to resort to other methods."

The hero of Sebastopol and Solferino did not understand what was happening to him. In any other circumstances, he would have leapt at the throat of such a rogue and would rather have chopped him into little pieces than obey him—but he no longer felt that he was the same man. Since those eyes had taken him captive with the fire of their sharp gaze, it was as if all his energy had evaporated. He could not even think of rebelling, and murmured humbly: "I'm at your disposal, Monsieur."

Again the masked individual laughed in a sinister manner. "Very well! But let's make haste, for time's pressing." Having said that, he crouched down and, without taking his eyes off Berton, ordered him to put the unfortunate Annie's corpse into the sack, which he was holding open.

The night-watchman, completely subjugated by the unknown man's mysterious ascendancy, carried out the order without protest.

"Good!" said the man in the mask. "Tie up the sack now, then help me to load it on to my shoulders."

Berton hoisted the funereal parcel on to his interlocutor's robust shoulders. The latter did not give way under the heavy burden.

"Old man," that individual went on, "What's happened here remains between us, eh? Go and open the front door for me, for it's time to leave. Afterwards, close the door carefully, and the shutters on the rear window, through which I got in. Finally, return to the guard-room and don't budge again until tomorrow morning."

"Yes, Monsieur," the old watchman replied, with stupefying docility.

Immediately, the man headed for the door, which Berton had just opened by a crack. Before venturing outside, he started a suspicious glance through the crack. There was no one on the Pont Notre-Dame, where—as everyone knows—the morgue is situated. The nocturnal silence was only troubled by the distant rumble of an approaching fiacre.

The man went out under the establishment's peristyle and, hiding in the dense shadow of a column without setting down his burden, signaled to the watchman to go away. Immediately, Berton closed, locked and bolted the door, then secured the shutters on the window forced by the astonishing burglar, and went back to his guard-room.

He was just in time. A bizarre numbness overwhelmed the old man's limbs. His head became as heavy as a lump of lead and he tottered like a drunk. He experienced an irresistible desire to sleep, and was scarcely seated in his armchair than he fell into a profound slumber.