

PROLOGUE

I. The Invisible Ones

During the year 1819, a crime, accompanied by very extraordinary circumstances, was committed in Paris. A magistrate, enjoying esteem and general consideration was found one morning murdered in his bed. The weapon the murderer used was a dagger. The hand of a clever artist, whose imagination seemed to take pleasure in the horrible, must have made the design and fashioned the weapon. The handle was formed by a long, half naked, partially draped skeletal figure. On the blade, a horrible joke, in wavy letters could be read: *La lame donne le manche*.¹

An ebony tag on a little bronze steel chain was hung on the instrument of the murder, still planted in the heart of the victim. On the black background, standing out in red letters was this single word: LIAR. At the same time a red stamp bearing the number 4 in the middle of a shield had been stuck on the dead man's forehead. It was as if it was the first number which seemed to announce a horrible series of murders.

That setting of circumstances had at first seemed very striking to the police. Working together with the family of the magistrate, whose private life the murderer was accusing in this way, the most absolute secrecy was kept concerning the circumstances of the unfortunate man's death. Another concern, that of forestalling the fear of the public, who might have believed they were menaced by a band of invisible hired assassins, brought about mysterious instructions. In addition, no indiscretion must be committed by the newspapers, then censured, and the *Gazette des Tribunaux*² didn't exist.

Several weeks passed, during which all the police investigations had been fruitless and there was a new crime and a new victim, a woman, highly renowned for religious devotion and virtue and who, recently widowed, had shown inconsolable sorrow at the loss of her husband. It had never occurred to anyone to suspect her sincerity. She was found dead in her bedroom, struck down while kneeling on her prayer stool. The same wound to the heart, the same dagger left in the wound, the same ebony wood tag on the murder weapon carrying the double accusation: ADULTERESS AND POISONER. Last of all, on the dead woman's forehead, the same red stamp and in the middle of the shield the number two.

The reasons that had advised secrecy about the first crime determined, a fortiori, the most complete discretion about the second. But a great complication was encountered in this affair. Alerted by the accusation cast on the memory of the victim, the police pushed their investigations in several directions. While it remained without any clue as to the audacious murderer who numbered his crimes, it acquired posthumous certainty that the woman society held to be the model of wives, had, in fact, stirred by an adulterous passion, been led to get rid of her husband by means of poison.

It's not necessary to say what doubling of zeal that discovery gave the police inquiries. To the exploration of their duty and their conscience, they had already added their ego. Was this not in fact for them an unwonted defiance, the existence of a kind of secret tribunal having its police and its executioners and allowing itself to know and to punish crimes which remained unpunished and ignored in public prosecution?

One evening, scarcely a month after this new drama, at a rather early hour, in the middle of a street and some feet from one of the great centers of Parisian traffic, an old man was struck dead. It was as if the murderers had wanted to gain public recognition from authority, which had until then been missing from their crimes. It was more than a reputation for honesty, it was a dazzling philanthropic renown that the murderers had given themselves in the task of stamping out in blood. Number three, as the red stamp on the victim's forehead named him, would have been, according to the tag appended to the dagger, an

¹ The blade brings death.

² Journal of jurisprudence and judicial debates.

INCORRIGIBLE USURER. That accusation was in fact justified by the accounts revealed in his estate. However, the publicity that hidden justice seemed to want at any price for its executions failed it again this time. No newspaper was authorized to speak of the event, and as for some oral details which could have been put into circulation by the small number of persons present when the cadaver was taken away, they were dismissed and treated as ridiculous fables by the official newspaper, the *Moniteur*.³ It's known that the government, the proprietors of a newspaper, make it an instrument of lying as often as an instrument of truth.

At the end of the same year, a last adventure which was stranger than all the unusual events which have just been reported to the reader closed this series of obscure attacks.

To the west of the Hell barrier, the entrée to a vast subterranean ossuary called the catacombs have galleries which extend under several Paris neighborhoods. On December 24th the wife of the guardian of this funereal warehouse had invited some friends to celebrate Christmas Eve with her. The meal was very lively, noting that in general the professions that live on death aren't usually given to melancholy. Wine and happy conversations were making the rounds when, in the somber empire of which he was the watchdog, the catacomb's custodian thought he could make out some subterranean noises resembling loud voices. Superstitious terror immediately spread among the guests. Since the guardian's dwelling was the only entrance into the mortuary galleries, the guardian thought that he was certain no one had been able to enter without his consent or to remain there unknown to him after having been let in. A former military man and scrupulously exact in fulfilling his duties, in spite of his wife's entreaties wanted to investigate the strange noises that he had heard. Since no one having dinner with him had the courage to accompany him, armed with two pistols and a lantern, he resolutely went down into the subterranean passages to explore what was happening.

Sometime later, his prudent dinner companions heard the sound of two detonations. That was all. Many hours passed without that kind of Aeneas who had descended into Hell reappearing. Night was falling; the police were then called. After arming themselves with torches, a large squad of officers began to search through the passages trying to find the cause of the noises that were said to have been heard and to confirm the fate of the man who had begun that exploration before them.

The result of these searches was horrifying. After a quarter of an hour, they stumbled on the cadaver of the unfortunate custodian. His two discharged pistols were at his side near his still burning lantern, placed on his stomach like a guiding light. There again appeared, with the eternal dagger, the red stamp which this time marked the number four with the label PRESUMPTUOUS CURIOSITY brazenly giving that as the reason for the murder. It was supposed that the unfortunate guardian had the misfortune to disturb and surprise some terrible mysteries.

As for the trace of the invisible murderers, it remained, as always, elusive. Everything in the profaned asylum of the dead remained silent and in its habitual order. Despite the minutest searches, the way through which the bloody men had entered the passages could not be found. Vainly, for several weeks there were daily and nightly rounds to aid the law's natural passion to penetrate the dark secret, but an inextricable obscurity continued to protect it. In addition, it, more than anything that had preceded it, was carefully kept from the public. Never had the powerlessness of the police against the dark scoundrels they were supposed to find been more scandalously demonstrated.

II. More Mysteries

About the time these black attacks were taking place, an event of a very different nature had caused some sensation in the Faubourg St. Germain. The Marquise de Camembert, one of the most elegant women of the Parisian aristocracy, had suddenly announced the intention of withdrawing from the world and entering the Ladies of the Sacred Heart of Turin as a nun. That resolution had appeared strange in every way. It was difficult to explain why a twenty-five year-old woman, endowed with gifts of the mind,

³ Propaganda tool of the French Government created on November 24, 1789, by Charles Panckouke. It ceased publication on June 30, 1901.

face, and fortune and recently widowed by a seventy year-old man, had not found another way to use her youth and liberty.

However, a supposition had occurred to some clever people. They recalled that in the salons where she had had great success in conversations and in beauty, Madame de Camembert was at least as feared as she was welcomed and sought after. Having a reputation for loving intrigue, she was found to have such personal knowledge about the intimate life and secrets of a number of people, that there remained truly great doubt as to how this enlightenment was gathered. Such complete and so unusual scandalous gossip had even been about to give her the opportunity and the foundation for a great fortune. Admitted to an audience with Louis XVIII, who had a particular taste for gossip and slander, she had amused him in that meeting with so many racy revelations about Parisian society that he had immediately developed a sort of passion for her. It would also have taken very little for that grandson of Henri IV to have put her in possession of the role of favorite. Considering his obesity and his age, that was not exactly the sinecure that his infirmities would have indicated. However, supported by the congregation and by the Marsan Pavilion,⁴ another influence had prevailed. In the opinion of the onlookers, the Marquise' project of retirement had to be attributed to the miscalculation that royal kindness nipped in the bud.

However that may be, when seeing the beautiful penitent distribute liberalities to her servants and to her friends, and get rid of or set aside all her fortune, absolutely as if she were at death's door, inflexibility and persistence couldn't be doubted. As to her entry into monastic life, she seemed to want it to be particularly rigorous and austere. In leaving for her pious exile, she informed all those who might have claimed some place in her life that she would receive no correspondence or visit. Her personality would be so completely absorbed in her monastic name that henceforth she must be considered as having never existed.

Before leaving France, Madame de Camembert finalized her ties to France by selling, among her properties, a magnificent town house she occupied on the Rue Notre-Dame-des-Champs, in the Luxembourg quarter. It had formerly belonged to a famous Controller General, Abbé Terray.⁵

The man who was to acquire that splendid dwelling was a very remarkable personage. In the future of this story, he is to play a considerable role, allowing us to give some explanations concerning him. Calling himself the Marquis de Lupiano, he fell to Paris from the skies one fine day without anyone being able to find out anything about his background, his country, his family, or, as some people went so far as to say, of his sex. It must be admitted that he was to reach the ultimate possible limits to eccentricity and incognito. The fact is, apart from the mystery with which he appeared to want to surround himself, that man, was quite bizarre in his outward appearance. With a forest of gray hair, a sparse and thin beard, his face, with unusual paleness and delicacy, showed that deep, multiple crossing of wrinkles which is the particular trait of the old age of women. At the same time, because of the thin, high-pitched timber of his voice he managed to suggest the strangest interpretations. But on the other hand, the regard of this old man had something quite penetrating. His movements, despite his apparently weak constitution, were very commanding and strong. In short, at the time of a still famous duel with pistols, a fortunate winner in that encounter, he had demonstrated such prodigious courage and cool-headedness that stupid conjectures, confronted with such powerful moral attributes, could, after that, no longer be risked.

For a while, in order to reconcile everything, they claimed to see in this living problem a continuation of the famous androgyny that, under successive names of Chevalier and of Chevalière of Éon,⁶ attracted so much attention at the end of the last century. But, examined more closely, that version wasn't for a moment sustainable. Born in 1728, the Chevalier d'Éon would have been, in 1820, more than

⁴ The section of the Louvre that ties together the Palais du Louvre and the Palais des Tuileries—here, meaning the occupants.

⁵ Joseph Marie Terray (1715-1778), Controller-General of Finances during the reign of Louis XV and agent of fiscal reform.

⁶ Charles-Geneviève-Louis-Auguste-André-Timothée d'Éon de Beaumont (1728-1810), French diplomat, spy, soldier, who lived his last thirty-three years as a woman, claiming to be anatomically female. Doctors, after his death, verified that he was anatomically male.

ninety-two years old. Obviously, the Marquis de Lupiano hadn't reached that advanced age. In addition, settling everything, was the fact that, ten years earlier, May 21, 1810, the Chevalier d'Éon had died in London in the arms of Father Élisée,⁷ Louis XVIII's principal surgeon, who did the autopsy.

It must be admitted that at the period this story began it would have been rather difficult to see him walk about the streets of Paris. In the meantime, let us sweep aside the cloudy atmosphere in which the bizarre Marquis seemed to take pleasure. Let us note another peculiarity in his existence which, at least, was not problematic. Established in a rented house with a magnificent retinue, leading a truly princely existence, even before he had acquired the Hôtel Camembert at the cost of half a million pounds, he justified that prodigious expense by the very useful possession of enormous funds deposited in London, Paris and Vienna banks. In addition, he made an honorable as well as an intelligent use of that opulence. As often as he wasted considerable sums on the strangest fantasies, he also spent a great deal of money encouraging literature and the arts, of which he was an excellent judge. And numerous charitable acts were attributed to him, although, on the other hand, he was reproached for imperious, haughty behavior and for losing his temper. In a word, he showed all the signs of a profound estimation of himself, combined with a not less profound contempt for the rest of humanity. Appealing to general curiosity in so many ways, the Marquis asked for even more by attaching his name to a peculiarity which, in the time we're talking about, was very popular in Paris, without anyone ever having known the name for it.

All the contemporaries of that time can recall having heard the famous girl with the death's head talked about. According to public gossip, she was a rich heiress who could put her hand on an immense fortune at the disposal of the man courageous enough to look at her without trembling when she had taken off her mask in front of him. Now that unusual marriageable girl, whose existence, as we will see, was less fabulous than many had thought, was simply the Marquis de Lupiano's daughter. Accompanying her father into public places and into salons, she never showed herself without a wax mask on her face. But the cruel caprice of nature of which she was the victim, seems only to have reached the charms of her face. She had a tall, slim and admirably proportioned figure, beautiful, thick blonde hair, a perfect neck, and white hands of admirable shape. However, when she began to speak, there was a surprising exterior revelation of her infirmity. Even with care, there was mixed something sepulchral and cavernous

Taking seriously the offer of her hand that strange fiancée was supposed to make to the first suitor, several naïve suitors presented themselves at the Marquis' townhouse, and depending on the mood of the Marquis they were either pleasantly hoodwinked or harshly dismissed. Nevertheless, M. de Lupiano didn't claim to deny the hideous deformity of his daughter. On the contrary he was the first to confirm the belief by the explanation that he himself gave for it. According to that explanation, the Marquise, his pregnant wife, helping him with some archeological excavations, was suddenly startled by the sight of a human skull which had rolled under the picks of the workers. And because of the shock the sight caused the mother, the unborn child contracted the terrible resemblance that disfigured her. But, that sad creature whom wicked fate had disinherited from all beauty, was certainly not reduced to spinsterhood, the only choice that ridiculous gossip had spread about this matrimonial auction. With the superb dowry that she could dangle before the eyes of the suitors and the intellectual superiority which showed in her conversation, she was still an easily marriageable girl which more than one great name of the upper aristocracy would willingly arrange.

*III. The Bloodied Girl*⁸

The Marquis de Lupiano and his daughter had already lived in Paris for more than a year when one afternoon during the month of January 1820, we saw him walking through that dark lateral passage which, entered from the Rue Saint-Marc, had no other exit but the Panoramas Grand Gallery. He was at that moment accompanied by a man remarkable for his confident bearing and for his strong, resolute air.

⁷ Père Élisée, real name Marie-Vincent Talochon (1753-1817) was a famous master-surgeon of the time.

⁸ This title will reappear and eventually be reused by Rabou (or his publisher) as the title of the third volume in the series.

That man's name as well as swarthy complexion indicated a southern origin, but that was the only information which to that point could be obtained about him. Count Montalvi was one of those foreigners of doubtful background who led a most elegant lifestyle in Paris without anyone really knowing anything about either the source of the fortune that he dispensed, the names of the decorations that he wore, or the country from which he came.

To tell the truth, with his frail nature and his puny appearance, clinging to the arm of his imposing companion, to whom he was speaking animatedly, the Marquis de Lupiano formed a rather grotesque contrast. However, with the deferential and approving attitude with which the Count was listening to him, it could be suspected that he recognized great moral superiority in the spindly man speaking to him. A great nephew, an officer of the Italian police, is not more obsequiously attentive to every word of a little old uncle, from whom he expects to inherit.

At that time, the boutique of a toilette articles merchant named Madame Constantin was situated in the isolated passageway where the conversation of the two strollers was taking place. The usual various functions of that type of commerce is well known. Having kept girls as most of her clientele, whether she bought from them or sold to them, the retail merchant is always somewhat obliged to enter into the business of these Madeleine's⁹ whom she frequently helps with her advice. The toilette article merchant, in general, has known a little about love and knows how to sympathize with it. She would therefore already know about those small kindnesses from the goodness of her heart and her inclination, when she doesn't already know, most of all, by her self-interest.

"On my word, a beautiful creature," the Marquis suddenly said, seeing, in fact, a remarkably beautiful woman who had crossed his path leaving Madame Constantin's shop.

"Something slightly risky in the plan," the Count remarked.

"Exactly what we need," Lupiano answered, "since, decidedly, we can't count on the help of our beautiful friend."

"By the way," Montalvi continued, "Providence is great, and, who knows? Just at the moment when we were least thinking about it, she's sending us the guiding Angel we were lacking." Saying this, he dropped the Marquis' arm and was about to hurry after the charming apparition, who was already almost out of sight.

"Oh! No! No!" said the Marquis, holding back his impetuous friend. "You're not going to act like a student or a law clerk and dog the heels of a woman. That merchant," he added, pointing to Madame Constantin's shop, "will certainly tell us everything we want to know."

And a minute afterward, followed by Montalvi, he entered the merchant's shop. Upon entering, appearing to be a serious buyer, the Marquis said:

"Madame, we would like to see some lace."

"English? Malines? Alençon?" the merchant asked, as much to show off the variety of her assortment as to know what they wanted.

"Whatever you choose, provided it's beautiful, however," Lupiano answered.

"Monsieur, here's a magnificent article, and what's more a very good buy," said the saleswoman, beginning to unroll several yards of Brussels lace wrapped around a cardboard holder.

Nothing is impossible to find in the shop of a toilette article vender. And everything can be found there by chance, from the dress worn by a young girl for her first communion even to dueling pistols. It wasn't astonishing, therefore, to see the Marquis brusquely interrupt the Brussels lace sale to enquire the price of a savage's bow and arrows that he had suddenly noticed in a corner.

"That, sir, that's Indian," the sales woman answered in a capable low voice, which meant that between the question and the answer the object that had so unexpectedly attracted the buyer's attention, had at least just doubled in price.

"No," answered Lupiano, who had traveled a great deal and was a connoisseur. "That's Hottentot and it's from the Cape of Good Hope. But it's not a question of where it comes from. I'm asking you what you

⁹ Biblical character sometimes portrayed as a prostitute, witness of Christ's crucifixion, and first at his tomb of his resurrection.

want for it.”

The merchant named an exorbitant price, which the Marquis, without bargaining, paid in gold. At the same time he asked that his purchase be held. He would have one of his servants come for it. A reason for his curiosity thus established, he asked:

“A very remarkable woman was in here a while ago. Do you know her?”

“A very remarkable woman?” the resale woman repeated, without seeming to know what was asked. That is inevitably the beginning of those kinds of conversations.

“Yes, a tall, pretty young woman who just left your shop, apparently one of your clients.”

“Ah! Yes,” said Madame Constantin, finding her memory again. “A brunette wearing green cashmere. The gentleman is certainly right. In my opinion, she’s one of the most attractive women in Paris. And it can really be said that she’s not where she should be, the poor child!”

“What do you call ‘not where she should be?’” Montalvi asked.

“That is to say a woman who has no good luck. The gentleman knows there are some like that.”

“But,” the Marquis continued, “what does that ‘no good fortune’ consist of? It’s already something to be beautiful and in Paris. A pretty woman is never unhappy except when she really wants to be.”

“Damn, if the gentleman believes that losing a rich protector, when it’s not your fault and seeing your furniture seized is something to be glad about!”

“One protector lost, another found,” Montalvi remarked.

“Hum! For Georgiana, that’s already not so easy,” answered the sales woman. “There are words that kill, you know!”

“What words that kill? You like to speak in word games, my dear Madame Constantin.”

“Yes, sir, that’s how men are, and very often it takes only a bad nickname to spoil you in their mind.”

“Ah, well,” said the Marquis, “to be labeled in that way by bad nicknames, that young girl Georgiana is therefore, consequently, a loose woman?”

“As to that, sir, you are very mistaken! Georgiana is a nice girl, gentle as a lamb, liking only to stay at home, incapable of deception and of arguing with anyone. But it’s just her fate, that’s all.”

“That is to lose all her protectors?”

“Yes, sir, to see them all taken away, one after the other, but not in the way you would think, and not a long story of their leaving her. The way that came about was seeing death do away with them, and always by terrible deaths. So, for example, she would have one of them today killed in a duel; tomorrow, another one, while riding with her in the Bois du Boulogne, take a fall from a horse and not get up; the next week it’s an English lord who, without rhyme or reason, committed suicide in her boudoir and caused her to lose a Persian rug worth at least fifty louis. There was also one in politics whose end came about through a conspiracy.”

“The Devil! But that is in fact being born under an unlucky star,” Montalvi remarked.

“And so, following all these disasters, what is the unfortunate name that she’s been given?” the Marquis asked.

“Some young men began to call her,” the resale shop keeper answered mysteriously, ‘the bloodied girl.’ You know, sir, after that famous novel where there’s the nun? The name stuck and I’m not exaggerating. I today know some very sensible men, magistrates, peers of France, bankers, people with education and ability, who, fearing for their life, wouldn’t even greet Georgiana in the street.”

“Ah! So you say, ‘the bloodied girl,’” said the Marquis, looking at Montalvi.

“Oh, certainly,” said Montalvi in his turn, appearing to hit on an idea. Then speaking to the shop owner:

“Well! Tell us a little more,” he added gaily. “Where does that murderous beauty live? Because we really wouldn’t want to meet her in the street.”

Madame Constantin appeared to take the question as a joke and, instead of answering it, asked the Marquis sweetly:

“So, Monsieur doesn’t want to buy my Brussels lace?”

“On the contrary! On the contrary!” Lupiano said quickly. “It’s you my dear lady, who hasn’t yet told me the price.”

The Marquis then having once more paid a very expensive price without bargaining, the resale shop owner said:

“Pardon, gentlemen, I have forgotten a very pressing appointment,” moving at the same time to the door at the back of her shop. “Ernestine,” she shouted to her shop assistant, “here is a shawl that must be taken immediately to Mademoiselle Georgiana, still at 31, Rue Roquépine. She isn’t moving until the day after tomorrow.”

Having innocently and ingeniously been given the fact he wanted to know, the Marquis, moving toward the door with Montalvi, said:

“Honored to have met you, Madame.”

“You don’t want me to have these articles sent to you?”

“No, that’s not necessary. As I told you, someone will come to pick them up.”

And the two friends left the shop.

Two days later a servant appeared at Madame Constantin’s shop, coming to pick up the Marquis’ purchases. The merchant was very charming toward that servant, and did her best to make him chat, but she couldn’t have had worse luck. The only thing he knew how to say in French was ‘Bonjour, Madame.’ What’s more, speaking Portuguese, he couldn’t communicate with the shop owner except by means of a piece of paper he was carrying on which someone had written: ‘Give to the bearer the bow and arrows and the lace bought by Monsieur Hernandez.’”

The servant, on leaving, left the paper in Madame Constantin’s hands. She didn’t waste any time examining it with extreme attention, and noted that it was the back side of a letter’s envelope. On the front was written: *Monsieur de Hernandez, Wholesale Merchant, Cambridge Hôtel, Rue de Rivoli, Paris* and the stamp indicated that the letter came from Brazil.

As soon as the two strangers had left, the officious merchant had hurried to let Mademoiselle Georgiana know by means of a note the curiosity and the questions of which she had been the object. But the curious thing was that during the two days which had just passed, the carefree beauty had given no signs of her existence. And instead of coming to get news, which would have been quite natural, she had left Madame Constantin, whom she knew to be a very inquisitive person, in the most complete ignorance of the result of the excellent information given about her. Finally, not able to wait any longer, the resale merchant decided to go to the Rue Roquépine, to the lodging where we have seen her, with such perfect propriety, give the indirect location. But there, a first disappointment. The evening before that visit, Mademoiselle Georgiana, all her creditors paid, her chamber maid, a female confidant she was much attached to, suddenly dismissed, had let it be known that she was leaving for Italy. The concierge, charged with paying Madame Constantin the balance of a small bill, was left without any information about when his beautiful renter could be expected to return. In addition, he had been given the job of selling her furniture.

Seeing enlightenment thus escape her, exasperated, the toilette articles merchant immediately decided on a bold step. Presenting herself resolutely at the Cambridge Hotel, she asked to speak to Monsieur de Hernandez, not being at a loss, when she reached him, to find whatever pretext for her bold visit.

Introduced without any great difficulty, a new and more serious setback awaited Madame Constantin. Monsieur de Hernandez was a gigantic Brazilian with a swarthy complexion, an exuberant frizzy head of hair, in which there was not the least resemblance to the two strangers who had used his name. It’s not necessary to add that the bow, the arrows, and the Brussels lace were totally without meaning to him. Finally, bored by the persistence of his visitor’s many questions, the merchant remembered that at the time this scene took place, people coming from Brazil were honored with very special attention by the police. He therefore suggested to the virtuous lady that he was inclined to consider her as having some mission to him for those vigilant eyes. He brusquely broke off that encounter with the questioner in a manner infinitely less polite. To her great despair, Madame Constantin had to stop the course of her investigations at that spot.