

PART I: THE MYSTERY OF THE LOUVRE

1. *The Room of the Barbarian Gods*

There is a phantom haunting the Louvre!

That was the strange rumor which, on the morning of the May 17, 1925, circulated throughout Paris about its great museum.

Everywhere—in the streets, in the public gardens, on the boulevards—one saw people gathered together, some frightened, others incredulous, all commenting on the strange and fantastic news.

In the room known at the Louvre as “David’s room,” because it contained many paintings by that celebrated artist, just in front of his *Coronation of Napoleon*, two watchmen were talking animatedly about the phantom.

Soon, the cleaners who, on this day, went about their business in a rather distracted manner, approached them in order to listen to their conversation which could not fail to interest them.

“I tell you, there is a phantom!” said one of the watchmen.

The other watchman burst out laughing, and shrugged.

“Gautrais saw it!” repeated the first watchman with conviction and undisguised emotion. “And he is neither a prankster nor a coward! Right now, he’s gone to make a report to the Director.”

That was, indeed, the truth.

In the Director’s office, Pierre Gautrais, a robust fellow with square shoulders and an honest face, was reporting the incident to his superior, Monsieur Lavergne. The latter sat behind his desk, flanked by his assistant and his secretary, and listened to the watchman in a friendly but rather skeptical manner.

“I saw him as clearly as I see you now!” said Gautrais. “I would cut off my head rather than deny it.”

“Tell me, Gautrais, are you sure you didn’t have a little too much to drink?” remarked Lavergne.

“Oh, Monsieur!” protested Gautrais. “You know very well that I never get tipsy during my shift!”

“Then maybe you dozed off and it was just a dream?”

“No, Monsieur! I was very much awake, and quite in control of myself. I was a soldier during the War and I can say without bragging that I’ve never been afraid, not even at Verdun when the Boche rained shells on us. Despite that, I can tell you that when I think about what I saw last night in the *Room of the Barbarian Gods*, I still feel chills down my spine and my hair stands on end!”

“At what time did the, er, phenomenon show itself?” asked the Assistant Director.

“One a.m., Monsieur Rabusson,” replied the watchman. “I was just finishing my round of the ground floor rooms, where the windows overlook the Seine, when, all of a sudden, just as I arrived in the Room of the Barbarian Gods, I saw a human form, cloaked in a black shroud, with a hood. He had his back to me and stood near to the statue of Belphegor.

“I walked towards him, projecting the light of my lantern and shouting ‘Who goes there?’ But with a prodigious leap, the Phantom—I can’t call him anything else—jumped out of my beam to hide in the darkness. However, thanks to the moonlight through the windows, I saw him slink towards the rows of statues and run towards the corridor that leads to the grand staircase of the *Winged Victory of Samothrace*.

“Seizing my revolver, I ran after him and spotted him again when, after climbing the stairs, he’d reached the landing. I leveled my weapon at him and shouted: ‘Halt or I’ll shoot!’ But scarcely was my finger on the trigger when the Phantom jumped sideways and vanished, just as if he had melted into the darkness.

“Panicked, I rushed up the stairs while firing several shots at the spot where he had disappeared. When I got to the landing, I searched the area thoroughly with my lantern, but found nothing—not a trace! I looked at the floor; I checked the walls, where I found the bullets I’d shot—but nothing else! It was as if he had walked through the very walls. That, Monsieur le Directeur, is the truth and nothing but—I swear it!”

Visibly impressed by the sincerity of the watchman, whom everyone respected highly for his honesty and courage, Lavergne looked from one to the other of his two colleagues who appeared as troubled as he by the story they had just heard.

Getting up, he said:

“Well! Let’s go and take a look for ourselves. Come with us, Gautrais.”

They quickly reached the Room of the Barbarian Gods, where a group of employees was talking in front of the statue of Belphegor. As soon as they saw the new arrivals, they hurriedly moved away, with the exception of the chief watchman, Jean Sabarat, a tall, athletic man who was known to be strong, calm and brave.

Respectfully taking off his cap, Sabarat turned towards the Director and said:

“Monsieur, we have found some suspicious marks...”

He pointed at the statue of the god Belphegor, once worshiped by the Moabites, whose grimacing and enigmatic face seemed to be mocking the foolish mortals who surrounded him.

Lavergne approached and examined the statue closely. On its pedestal, he saw several deep scratches, which looked as if they had been made recently with a tool not unlike a chisel.

Troubled by this discovery, the Director said:

“This is rather unusual. Is it possible that a burglar gained access to the building?”

“Since the theft of the *Mona Lisa*,¹” said Rabusson, “we’ve taken so many precautions that it’s virtually impossible to enter the Museum at night without authorization.”

“And the same is true for attempting to stay behind and hide until closing time,” added the secretary.

After giving some thought to the problem, Lavergne said:

“I don’t think I have any choice; I must inform the police.”

As he was walking away with his colleagues, Sabarat had an idea and ran after them.

“Monsieur le Directeur,” he said, “if we bring the police into this, the Phantom—if Phantom there is—won’t show himself again.”

“Quite true,” said Lavergne thinking. “Go on.”

“So I ask your permission to hide here tonight, and I promise you that if that prankster returns, I’ll take care of him!”

“Hmm. What do you think, gentlemen?” asked Lavergne.

“Sabarat is right,” said Rabusson.

“I trust him entirely,” said the secretary.

“Well, then, you won the argument, my dear Sabarat,” said the Director. “Tonight, you shall be our guard!”

The three men left the room.

As soon as they had gone, Gautrais approached Sabarat and asked:

“Boss, would you like me to stay with you tonight?”

“Thanks, pal, but you don’t have to!”

“Still, I could come in handy.”

“I’d rather be alone.”

Gautrais knew that Sabarat, with a Basque father and a Briton mother, was stubborn as a mule, so he did not insist.

“All right then! Good luck, boss!” he said, shaking his superior’s hand.

Still not being able to shake the events of the previous night from his mind, he rejoined his wife, a hearty good woman with a jolly round face, who was anxiously waiting for him in the courtyard of the Louvre.

“Any news?” she asked.

In a somber voice, Gautrais replied:

“Nothing, Marie-Jeanne! That is to say, yes, there’s something... Sabarat has asked the permission to spend the night alone in the Room of the Barbarian Gods. I wanted to stay with him, but he told me to go home...”

“I’m glad he did.”

¹ The *Mona Lisa* was stolen on August 21, 1911, by Louvre employee Vincenzo Peruggia and eventually found and returned in 1913.

“Why? “

“Because I’ve got a bad feeling that anyone who gets mixed up in this Phantom business will meet a sorry end.”

“Don’t be silly! That’s nonsense!”

“You’ll see. My presentiments are always right.”

Madame Gautrais was right. The hide and seek farce of the previous night was soon to turn into one of the most mysterious and frightening dramas that Paris had ever known.

The next day, just after dawn, Gautrais, who had barely slept during the night, was the first one to rush to the Room of the Barbarian Gods.

There, he discovered, next to the statue of the god Belphegor, Sabarat’s body.

Stifling a cry of terror, almost overwhelmed with grief, Gautrais leaned towards his unfortunate colleague. Although the body showed no visible signs of any wound, it looked lifeless. Sabarat’s gun was still clenched in the chief watchman’s icy grip.

On the verge of panic, Gautrais rushed into the next gallery and called in a thunderous voice:

“Help! Help!”

Two watchmen, who were also coming to check on Sabarat, heard the call, rushed in and gathered around Sabarat’s body. Then, one of them heard a very faint moan escape from the chief watchman’s lips.

“He’s alive!” exclaimed Gautrais.

One of his colleagues, who had just raised Sabarat up, pointed to the back of the chief watchman’s head and said:

“Look here!”

They saw a bad bruise, which could only have been made by a violent blow with a hammer or a club, at the base of Sabarat’s skull.

Gautrais, who had picked up the revolver, opened the cylinder—the six cartridges were intact. Showing the revolver to his companions, he said:

“He must have been caught by surprise. He didn’t even have time to defend himself.”

Scarcely had he said these words than Sabarat half- opened his eyes; his hand, which seemed to have gained a little strength, caught hold of the arm of the man who supported him. His lips moved; a deep, hoarse sigh escaped him and, in a very faint voice, with the death-rattle in his throat, he cried:

“The Phantom! The Phantom!”

Then his limbs went into terrible contortions; his head fell onto his shoulders; and a pinkish froth came from his half- opened mouth.

This time, chief watchman Sabarat was truly dead!

II. Jacques Bellegarde

Later that same day, around 5 p.m., Monsieur Ferval, Director of the Police Judiciaire, met Monsieur Lavergne and his assistant in his office at Police Headquarters. The subject of the meeting was, of course, the drama which had taken place at the Louvre the previous night.

While waiting outside for official news, the journalists from the Parisian, as well as other regional newspapers, exchanged varied and often contradictory opinions.

Their exchange soon became so heated that, several times, the Director's clerk was forced to ask them to be quiet, an observation which they blatantly ignored.

Seated a little apart from his colleagues was a young man in his early 30s, with an energetic face, thoughtful and intelligent eyes and a sportive, yet elegant manner. He appeared to pay little attention to the brouhaha around him.

Jacques Bellegarde was a brilliant reporter for *Le Petit Parisien*, made famous by several outstanding articles which he had written on various French, as well as foreign, matters. He spoke little, did much, and thought even more.

Bellegarde had learned not to trust his vivid imagination; he relied entirely on careful analysis and step by step synthesis of all the available information; he was cautious in his deductions and always displayed the utmost common sense in the difficult practice of his work; finally, he never let his enthusiasm get the best of him and always studied every aspect of each affair.

An aficionado of mysteries, he was already captivated by the Affair of the Phantom of the Louvre, although he knew no more about it than any of his colleagues and competitors.

He had guessed right away—and accurately, as we will see—that this would be one of those strange and astounding cases that would make any journalist capable of untangling its web immediately famous. He had therefore decided to solve the mystery ahead of the Police.

Before starting on his investigation, however, Bellegarde wanted to hear what the authorities had to say, and was waiting patiently for the official report about the previous night's murder.

A big, broad-shouldered fellow, with a rubicund face and a foul temper, nicknamed "Bittermint" by his colleagues, tapped on his shoulder and said:

"Hey! I see our Ace Reporter is here! What do you think about this story, Ace?"

"Nothing yet," replied Bellegarde.

"Come on!"

"And what do *you* think?"

"Me? I think it's a pain in the neck!" declared Bittermint. "I hate crimes! First, it's always about morbid stuff. Then, I'm forced to go to awful places at all hours of the day or night and even risk catching my death—sometimes, literally! I much prefer a presidential visit or a first-class exhibit. It's a lot more relaxing!"

"To each his own," replied Bellegarde, smiling.

"You mean that you like these complicated stories?"

"Sure. What's not to like?"

"Pah!" spay Bittermint contemptuously. "You'll end up a *feuilletoniste*!"

Bellegarde was about to reply when a door opened and Lavergne and Rabusson came out.

All the reporters immediately surrounded the two Museum officials, battering them with a barrage of questions.

"Gentlemen! Please! I beg you!" pleaded Lavergne, trying to disengage himself.

The Museum Director referred the crowd of reporters to an inspector who had followed them—a tall man with piercing eyes and a moustache trimmed in the American style, who was glaring at the journalists with undisguised hostility.

"This is Monsieur Ménardier, one of our top inspectors," said Lavergne. "He's going to investigate the unfortunate murder of chief watchman Sabarat. No doubt, he will be able to give you more information than I can."

The throng of reporters immediately left Lavergne and fell upon Ménardier. Their notebooks were already out, prepared to record the inspector's words. But, in a firm tone that left no room for ambiguity, Ménardier declared:

"Gentlemen, I have nothing to tell you."

A collective murmur of protest rose up but Ménardier silenced it with sharp a gesture of his hand, and, turning to the Director and his assistant, he added:

“And I should be glad if you two were to adopt the same attitude.”

More protests ensued, but Jacques Bellegarde stood and addressed the inspector:

“You’re not being very helpful to the Press, Inspector Ménardier,” he said in a reproachful, yet polite tone.

“In this business, more than any other, absolute discretion is a must,” the policeman replied defensively.

“But...”

“Excuse me, Monsieur. I’m only doing my job.”

Whereupon Bellegarde replied with a smile:

“And I likewise am going to do mine.”

Ménardier left with Lavergne and his assistant. Bellegarde rushed after them, leaving his colleagues to complain, and overtook them on the sidewalk outside, just as the policeman was again impressing upon Lavergne the importance of not divulging any details regarding the case.

Ménardier frowned when he saw the journalist.

“Rest assured, Inspector,” said Bellegarde, “that I have no intention of following you.” And he added in a sarcastic voice: “I can even predict that I’m going in a direction quite different from yours.”

He went away after having politely tipped his hat to the three men.

“I wish that muckraker would go to the Devil instead,” grumbled Ménardier in a foul mood.

“I understand,” said Lavergne. “You’re concerned that he might reveal some confidential information and alert the perpetrator?”

“Not at all,” said Ménardier with disarming frankness and a little worry. “I’m concerned that he’s going to beat me to the post!”

Bellegarde, after having tried in vain to get into the Louvre, which was temporarily closed to the public, had decided to walk back to his office at *Le Petit Parisien*.

It was his habit, when he was confronted with a challenging case, to not stay locked up in his office, but on the contrary, to stroll through the busy streets of Paris. Unlike many other investigators, Bellegarde felt that the noises of the streets, instead of breaking his concentration, helped him focus, enabling his fertile brain to sort out the jumble of facts that he had already gathered.

While walking along the Rue de Rivoli, then Boulevard Sebastopol, he mentally reviewed what he knew:

I’m like a novelist in front of a blank sheet of paper. I have the beginning of the story, and it’s a good one, but I don’t know where it’s going to take me next.

It starts very promisingly with a watchman spotting a phantomish figure in the Louvre at night. He gives chase, shoots at it, but the so-called phantom manages to vanish in the darkness... It’s not a bad start, but there’s more to come!

The following night, the chief watchman, who had decided to spend the night alone in the Room of the Barbarian Gods, is found clobbered to death near the statue of Belphegor... the pedestal of which, if I understood correctly, bore strange markings...

Who is the mysterious and murderous phantom? How and why did he break into the Louvre? Why did he vandalize the statue of Belphegor? Was he trying to steal it? Nah, it’s far too difficult and therefore unlikely...

What will happen next? How about a cigarette?

As Bellegarde pulled his silver cigarette case from the inside pocket of his jacket, he heard the newspaper boys calling out the third edition of an evening paper.

Everybody was buying a paper—evidently to read the latest news regarding the Louvre incident, eager interest displayed on everyone’s face.

Bellegarde, too, bought a paper and perused it quickly, but it contained nothing new that he didn’t already know. So he kept walking, continuing his interior monologue, until he reached the Grands Boulevards.

There, he was stopped by a small throng of people gathered outside a café, listening to a loudspeaker above the door which carried the news broadcast from the radio.

Everyone was listening to the tragic report of the murder of Sabarat when, suddenly, a rotund woman carrying a bag full of groceries, her face sweaty and fearful, pointed a finger in the air in the direction of the loudspeaker, and screamed:

“The Phantom! There! I saw him!”

The crowd laughed, so obvious was it that the woman had fallen victim to the hysteria created by the overly dramatic radio broadcast. But as he scanned the crowd, he noticed a pretty young woman, blonde and delicate, full of grace and gaiety, the very portrait of a Parisienne.

Meanwhile, a joker in the crowd was making fun of the hapless, overwrought woman.

“I saw the Phantom too!” said a teenager. “He’s a ghooooost!”

“It’s not a phantom, you nincompoop, it’s just a common thief!” said an old man, irritatedly.

Phantom? Or Thief? An argument began between those who believed in ghosts, and the skeptics who didn’t.

Bellegarde saw an opportunity to address the young woman whom he continued to watch the entire time.

“What about you, Mademoiselle?” he asked. “What do you believe?”

“You are much too curious, Monsieur Bellegarde,” she replied.

The journalist was taken aback. He flattered himself that he had an excellent memory and recalled the faces of everyone he’d met, and yet he didn’t remember having ever crossed paths with that young woman. So how could she know his name?

His desire to know the answer to that question compelled him to follow her. Even though she had walked away and was already quite ahead of him, he quickly caught up with her.

He was about to accost her, tip his hat, and ask more questions, when, suddenly, she turned around and stared at him. Her face showed no anger or indignation at having been followed, but was so discreet and reserved that Bellegarde felt that, if he spoke to her, he would be committing some unforgivable transgression. So he merely tipped his hat and nodded, and let her walk away until she was lost in the crowd.

Still thinking about this chance encounter with the beautiful but unknown girl, Bellegarde walked down the Boulevard de Strasbourg, turned into the Rue d’Enghien and finally arrived at the offices of *Le Petit Journal*.

He quickly climbed up the stairs to the entrance, crossed the hall, took the elevator the editorial floor and went into his office.

After having read his mail, he sat at his desk in thought for a few moments, and then, in penmanship as legible as it if had been printed, wrote an article which ended as follows:

Is the murder of chief watchman Sabarat the act of an isolated criminal, or a new feat by an international gang like the Vampires, which have recently been spotted operating in an Italian museum? We shall soon discover the truth. In the meantime, we feel safe enough in stating that there is no phantom at the Louvre—only a thief and a murderer

As he was putting his signature at the end, somebody knocked on his door. It was an office boy who brought in a message which Bellegarde hurriedly opened.

To his surprise, he found in it a piece of blue paper on which was written:

I warn you that if you persist in investigating the Affair of the Louvre, I will not hesitate to dispatch you to the same place I sent Sabarat.

Belphegor.

“Belphegor!” said Bellegarde, surprised. “Ah! What does it all mean? “

Scarcely had he pronounced these words than his telephone rang. Bellegarde lifted the receiver and heard the vibrating and impatient voice of a woman.

“Is that you, Jacques? This is Simone.”

“How are you today, my darling?” said the reporter with a marked lack of enthusiasm.

“I wanted to remind you that I’m having some friends in tonight. I can count on you being there, can’t I?”

“I am very busy with this Louvre business,” replied Bellegarde, visibly irritated.

“What Louvre business?”

“Ah! You haven’t heard? Well, you’ll read about it in *Le Petit Parisien* tomorrow.”

“But you will come tonight?” she begged.

“If I can, yes,” replied the reporter.

“You could—if you wanted to.”

“I might be late.”

“That’s all right, as long as you’re there. I’ll see you soon, darling!”

“Yes, darling.”

Bellegarde hung up the telephone. He suddenly appeared tired and concerned. He shook his head as if trying to rid himself of an invisible weight. Then, nervously, he reread the strange message which he had just received, repeating the words aloud:

“I will not hesitate to dispatch you to the same place I sent Sabarat. Belphegor.”

Then, with a determined look in his eyes, the young journalist exclaimed:

“Well, Belphegor, I accept your challenge! We will see which of us is stronger!”