

PANIC IN PARIS

PART ONE: IS COXWARD COXWARD?

I. The Obelisk Murder

One morning at the beginning of April—April 2, to be precise—at about 11 a.m., beneath a gentle spring Sun, howls suddenly burst forth in the Rue Montmartre, in the proximity of the boulevard. A crowd of rather inelegant individuals raced rapidly from the corner of the Rue de Croissant, some towards the crossroads, others in the direction of Les Halles, but all emitting incoherent high-pitched yelps, within which a keen ear was able to perceive sinister fragmentary phrases:

“Obelisk murder...”

“Get the *Nouvelliste*—special edition!”

“Horrible details.”

After some hesitation—how many times, after all, have we been cheated by the deceits of news-vendors?—a few people bought the paper, scanned it, then stopped dead, as if petrified, and began to read, suddenly surrounded by a group of increasingly anxious faces.

“Yes, yes... a crime!”

“A murder!”

“Whose?”

“No one knows!”

“Has the murderer been arrested?”

“Who cares?”

This was the short but sensational article that generated this emotion:

*This morning, at 4:30 a.m., an hour when deserted Paris belongs to the road-sweepers and the only traffic consists of water-carts, a laborer, Monsieur H***, was on his way to work. Coming from Grenelle and heading for the yards of the Madeleine with his tools on his shoulder, he was crossing the Place de la Concorde when, suddenly, from the sidewalk of the Tuileries, which he was just turning, it seemed to him that there was something out of place at the foot of the Obelisk, somewhat above ground level.*

He was passing by regardless, without taking any further notice, when—having looked back one last time “to take stock”—he began to suspect that the “something” was human in form. He decided then to cross over, and walked straight towards the monument—and imagine his surprise when, from no more than a few steps away, he recognized the object that had attracted his attention as a human body, suspended at an angle from the railings, whose feet were not touching the ground.

Alarmed, and afraid of getting mixed up in some nasty business, the workman had turned on his heels and was drawing away when he chanced to meet two policemen. The latter, noticing the anxiety in his face, questioned him. Bewildered, and having difficulty finding words, he told them about his strange discovery, and all three of them went back to the Obelisk.

He was not mistaken. It was definitely the body of a man, hanging down from the spikes of the railings, with his head inside the enclosure. At first, it was thought that it was a hanging, probably a suicide, but when the policemen tried to lift the man up in order to find the rope and cut it, they perceived that their supposition was unfounded. The body was suspended from two bronze spikes, which had penetrated the chest so profoundly that, despite their efforts, the three men could not succeeded in raising the cadaver up sufficiently to release it.

One of the two policemen leapt over the railings on to the granite pedestal, but in vain. He could see the man’s head, covered in coagulated blood, which formed a red mask over the face, but it was impossible for him to detach the torso from the transpiercing points.

As if by a miracle, passers-by had emerged from every direction and formed a crowd around the dead man. The policemen blew their whistles several times and two others soon arrived, pushing through the crowd. When they had been apprised of the facts, one of them went off to alert the commissariat. A quarter of an hour went by. Eventually, Monsieur Richaud, the popular Police Commissioner of that neighborhood, arrived, accompanied by yet another policeman and gendarmes from the guard-post. Joining forces, they finally succeeded in lifting of the body, which they laid down on the sidewalk.

It was apparent at first glance that it was not the body of a Frenchman. The cut of his clothing was undoubtedly English. The face, rapidly washed to get rid of the clotted blood that was hiding it, was broad and hairless, with a pre-eminent jaw that was certainly Anglo-Saxon in character. The frontal part of the skull bore a frightful wound, evidently caused by a blunt instrument. Pieces of brain-tissue were spurting from that wound.

The body has been transported to the commissariat and the authorities have been alerted. Monsieur Davaine, the head of the Sûreté, has arrived to carry out a preliminary enquiry. Monsieur Lépine, the Prefect of Police, is also expected imminently.

It is not for us to add fuel to the rumors that are spreading; our well-known discretion places a duty upon us not to anticipate the findings of justice. However, in consequence of the examination of the cadaver and a few clues already gathered, this is what seems to have been established thus far: the dead man belonged to the world of sport. Probably as a result of some quarrel, he must have been struck down with a hammer, or perhaps a monkey-wrench. His murderer, aided by several accomplices, must have transported their victim to the Place de la Concorde and attempted to throw the body into the Obelisk enclosure, but its weight must have retained it on the spikes of the railings, where it was abandoned.

Important information has been received, which will apparently put the police on the track of the guilty party or parties immediately. In our 5 p.m. edition we shall give the details of this horrible affair, which seems bound to produce a profound sensation in the public and will very probably lead to unexpected revelations.

The emotion that ran through Paris at the news of this mysterious crime is easily imaginable—but who could have suspected the astonishing and incredible consequences that the event would unleash?

II. In which we make the acquaintance of "Monsieur Bobby"

We are easily put off by empty promises. When we have learned that a police inquiry has been opened, we release a sigh of relief and already begin to experience a feeling of security. The police benefit greatly from the inventions of novelists, from Voltaire's *Zadig* to Edgar Poe's Dupin and the incomparable Sherlock Holmes; we gladly suppose that all these characters have been more-or-less attached to the service of the Sûreté and are on the payroll at the Quai des Orfèvres—and it is always surprising when, one after another, we are obliged to classify the most sensational crimes as insoluble mysteries. It is rather disturbing to think about the number of unknown murderers running around, with whom we are liable to rub elbows every day.

Would the Obelisk murder, as the present affair had been dubbed, swell the number of permanently unclosed files? People were beginning to ask whether it was really possible that such a crime could be committed in the middle of Paris, at the central point of the most luxurious quarters, without the police being able to discover the slightest clue.

All the surrounding bars had been searched, all the sportsmen of high and low rank interrogated, and the English ambassador questioned—for the sole established fact was that the victim was English—but no missing person had been reported, either by the hotels or business establishments. Briefly, it was thought that the police were on the track—boxing professionals had declared that the unknown man must be accustomed to bouts of that sort, by virtue of certain characteristic and invariably similar traces left by fists on certain parts of the body, notably a deformation of the jaws—but nothing came of it.

The head of the Sûreté, Monsieur Davaine, who had been put in rather awkward position by several recent failures, rebuked his agents roundly. At the Morgue, where the body had been taken, informers mingled with the crowd, interrogating the visitors' faces and provoking their confidences, in vain; the end-result of the enquiries was always the same: not known!

A rather singular rumor began to circulate. An autopsy had been carried out, it was said, and the illustrious medical examiner who had undertaken the operation had declared that the individual in question had not died from the wound on his skull, nor from the horrible injuries inflicted by that sort of impalement on the spikes of the railings, but that he had been dead already—which would seem to indicate that he had been murdered elsewhere and had been transported to the Place de la Concorde as a corpse. That was not the practitioner's conclusion, however; according to him, the unknown man had died of suffocation. The state of the lungs left no doubt in that regard—but the neck bore no trace of violence, no marks of strangulation. All that was established—at least according to a reporter from the *Nouvelliste*—was that the death could not be attributed in any fashion to the wounds to the head or torso, which had only been inflicted after death.

On the other hand, the place where the cadaver had been found, which was in the middle of an enormous empty space, made it difficult to accept the theory that the malefactors had chosen such an open spot to deposit the corpse of their victim. Even at the dead of night—given that the Moon was full and the sky clear—it was contrary to all credibility that they could have made such a long journey without being seen.

"And yet," cried Monsieur Lavaur, the deputy head of the Sûreté, in private conference with his superior, "the fellow can't have fallen out of the sky..."

"Be that as it may, Monsieur Lépine is furious, and I've just been subjected to a torrent of the most unpleasant reprimands... We must work harder, search, find..."

"Between the two of us," said the deputy head, "we know perfectly well that if chance doesn't throw something up, we'll flounder about in the dark without discovering anything..."

At that precise moment—as in fairy tales, when certain spoken words evoke the anticipated character or event—the office door opened and an inspector poked his head around it.

"Are you available, boss?"

"That depends... If it's not some time-waster..."

"It's an Englishman, who says he's a detective attached to the Prefecture over there, and who's asking to speak to you..."

The chief and his subordinate exchanged a rapid glance. An English detective—was chance, in fact, about to come to their aid?

“What’s his name?”

“He gave me this card.”

“Let’s see it.” Monsieur Davaine took the visiting-card and read it. “Bobby! That’s not a name—it’s a nickname! Show him in anyway.” Addressing himself to Monsieur Lavaur, he added: “That doesn’t commit us to anything.”

“Should I leave?”

“No, no, stay.”

The door opened again and the inspector reappeared, preceding the person he had announced. The latter came forward, bowler hat in hand. He was a man of about thirty, short, slim and spare, very correctly dressed, all in black, with a white collar that made a border above his tie. His face was clean-shaven, his short copper-colored hair neatly brushed. His face was thin and rather pale, his eyes small but very clear. His gloves and shoes were good quality. All in all, he looked like a protestant vicar.

“Monsieur Davaine?” he said, bowing at the question mark.

“That’s me. This gentleman is my deputy, Monsieur Lavaur. You can talk with complete confidence. One thing, first: your card bears the single word *Bobby*. I know enough English to know that that’s the popular nickname of all policemen... Will you please tell me your real name?”

“Monsieur,” said the man, with a strong British accent, “here is my official commission, signed by the Director of Scotland Yard. It is issued in the name of Bobby, which is my own... One can’t help one’s name...”

“That’s true,” said Monsieur Davaine, reading the piece of paper that had been handed to him. “In that case, Monsieur Bobby...”

“I will add, if you please, that the name has a certain—how do you say it in French?—celebrity in London, by virtue of certain important services that I have rendered... I’m the one who arrested the Greenwich forgers...”

“Ah!” said the French official, who had never heard of that affair.

“I’m the one who tracked down and arrested Lewis Bird, the parricide... who was hanged...”

“Ah!”

“I’m the one who...”

“Forgive me,” Monsieur Davaine interrupted, in a rather dry tone, “I don’t suppose that it was merely to list your exploits that you asked to see me...”

The Englishman stood up straight, with a slightly offended dignity. “I thought it best, before anything else, to make myself known... everyone has his own value...”

“Quite right! So, Monsieur Bobby, I hold you in the esteem you deserve. What do you want with me?”

“Permit me to take things in order. Let us first stipulate the principle that, as a member of the police force of His Majesty the King of England and Emperor of India, I am not bound by any obligation, of any nature whatsoever, to the police force of the French Republic.”

Very solemn, was Monsieur Bobby.

“That’s stipulated,” said Monsieur Davaine. “And?”

“Moreover,” Bobby went on, “the very particular situation in which I presently find myself militates absolutely against the step that I am taking at this moment... I am presently on leave and am not supposed to occupy myself with any event, even if it were in the interests of my own country...”

The head of the Sûreté, who was no more patient than he needed to be, felt an intense desire to throw this loquacious and inconvenient individual out of his office—but Monsieur Lavaur addressed a slight gesture to him. The man was an eccentric, but that did not prove that he could not be of service. This might be the chance—the fortunate chance!

“Continue, then, my dear Monsieur,” said Davaine, with his most gracious smile. “Anything that you care to communicate to me is of the greatest interest, and bodes well for the aftermath of your discourse. We are ready to give you our utmost attention...”

This academically formal speech pleased Bobby no end. He was finally being treated with the consideration he merited. With a gesture of his hand, Monsieur Davaine had invited him to sit down—but Monsieur Bobby preferred to remain standing so as not to sacrifice any of his height.

“I had to make you understand, Monsieur le Chef de la Sûreté, that if I introduced myself to you, it was by my own free will, without being constrained by any professional obligation. I’m simply a tourist, who has come to visit Paris, a truly beautiful city”—this interpolation was added in a

condescending tone—“and whom an entirely spontaneous impulse of generosity has led to render you a small favor...”

“Too generous, in truth—but would you be so good as to render me this... small favor... as soon as possible... I have so much on my plate at present that I’m rather busy...”

A shadow passed over Monsieur Bobby’s face. “If you would prefer,” he said, coldly, “I could come back at another time.”

“Oh, no! Of course not!” exclaimed Monsieur Davaine. “Monsieur Bobby, I can see that you’re a perfect gentleman... but quite honestly, I could not be more impatient to know the true reason for your visit... and if you could, in a few words, calm that impatience...” Privately, the policeman was beginning to ask himself quite seriously whether he ought not to throw the imbecile down the stairs.

As for Monsieur Bobby, he shrugged his shoulders slightly. The French—always the same! Light and frivolous! Then, as if a catch had been released, he pronounced these brief words: “You don’t know who the dead man at the Obelisk is?”

Lavour started.

“No,” said the head of the Sûreté.

“I know him...”

“Well, tell us, quickly.”

“A stroll took me to the Morgue. I saw...”

“And you recognized...?”

“A vulgar individual...”

“Whose name is?”

“Coxward, the pugilist—the boxer. There!”