

Also on the eve of WWII, but taking place on the other side of the globe, this confrontation between heroes and villains (and that ultimately depends on which side of the political chessboard one stands) pits the mysterious Ghost of the Louvre against the French King of Detectives (both creations of Arthur Bernède) and one American Super-Detective...

Joshua Reynolds: *The Carolingian Stone*

Paris, 1940

It was 1940 and night spread across the City of Lights like a shroud. Only the gentle murmur of the Seine broke the quiet of the Rue d'Auteuil, where the growl of motor cars had been banned by government edict. Even the bright lights that set the rest of Paris awash in a fairy-tale glow were absent here, leaving the entire street dark and uninviting.

Bare feet padded across the tiles of the rooftops, their path unhampered by either the darkness or the quiet. With a grunt, their owner sprang across the gap between two buildings in a display of almost simian agility. A bronze hand shot out, latching onto the brick of a chimney and the roof-runner swung about to face his pursuers.

Clad in black, their faces hidden behind grotesque masks, the three hunters would not have been out of place at the Grand Guignol. But the weapons they carried were anything but harmless props and their wary movements bespoke trained killers rather than mummies. Clinging to the chimney, almost invisible in the darkness, their prey watched them, his dark eyes taking in their every twitch and gesture and filing it away for future investigation. As they passed near him, he slunk around and up onto the chimney and sprang off with a predatory grace, tackling the closest of them. A powerful fist cracked a false face and bruised the flesh behind, sending one would-be assassin rolling limply down the slope of the roof.

His two companions spun, raising their weapons. But their target was already up and moving, the downed man's weapon slung over his shoulder. They hesitated for a moment, suddenly uncertain. Then one cursed and descended carefully towards their unconscious compatriot. The other wavered, and then followed.

Their prey crouched not far away on the peaked roof of a garret apartment, watching them. He moved not a muscle until they had departed, their dazed burden in tow. He allowed himself the briefest of smiles and then looked down at the roof. Noiselessly, he scampered down the peak and, clinging upside down to the wainscoting, he picked the lock on the window. Then he slithered inside, landing on the carpet in a crouch.

A light snapped on, nearly blinding him. The click of a pistol being cocked froze him in place. As his vision cleared, he saw an older man, spare of frame with a lupine leanness and clad in a dressing gown sitting in a battered chesterfield armchair in the corner of the attic room. The old man held a pistol in one unshaking hand, and the look in his eyes said that he would not hesitate to put it to use. "I am disappointed," he said. "Is my word not enough? Do you have so little faith in the power of your threat?"

"That's a Galand, isn't it?" the intruder said, relaxing slightly. "1870, I believe? Double action, nine millimeter. The loading mechanism is a bit complicated, but otherwise a fine weapon. A bit out of date, though, for my taste."

The old man's eyebrow shot up. "I am comfortable with its function," he said. "More so, I dare say, than you are with that cumbersome tool you carry. Drop it, if you please."

"Gladly," the other man said, unslinging the weapon he'd taken from his attacker and letting it thump onto the thick Persian carpet that covered the floor. The old man peered at it curiously, and then directed his hawk-like gaze back up at his uninvited guest. He was younger than his host by two decades and tall and broad with an athlete's build and he was clad in loose linen trousers and a baggy sweater of the type often worn by merchant seamen. His feet were bare, but he showed no sign of being uncomfortable.

After a moment, Chantecoq sniffed. "American. You spent some time in the Southwest of that

country. The weapon isn't yours as your hands are too large for it. Who are you?"

"Anthony." The man smiled, his sun-bronzed face splitting in a white grin. "Jim Anthony. It's a pleasure to meet you, Monsieur Chantecoq."

The old man blinked. "You recognize me?"

"A man in my trade wouldn't be worth much if he didn't recognize the King of Detectives," Anthony said, dropping onto his haunches with an ease that the old man found slightly off-putting. Hands dangling between his knees, he looked around the apartment, taking in the overstuffed bookshelves and sloppy paper piles. It looked like the residence of a scholar or academic, until you realized that most of the reading material was devoted to identifying types of cigarette ash and bullet calibers, as well as a dozen other topics more suited to a criminalist than to a forgetful professor.

"Anthony, you said?" Chantecoq peered at him and gave a grunt. "Hmm. James Anthony, heir to the Anthony fortune; philanthropist, amateur journalist and murderist of international repute. They call you the—ah, what is it?—the Super-Detective?" Chantecoq's lips quirked in a smile.

Anthony grimaced. "That's the tag they hung on me, yes. And I hardly think owning a newspaper makes me an amateur journalist."

"I was referring to the series of articles you wrote pseudonymously for the *London Times* in which you decry the current political tolerance extended to Germany. Very well reasoned, I thought, without being altogether jingoistic." Chantecoq leaned back in his chair and uncocked the pistol. "Please have a seat."

"I'm quite comfortable, thank you," Anthony said. "I won't ask how you knew that was me."

"Then I won't bother explaining. The rifle is German-made, I notice." Chantecoq gestured with the pistol. "Some type of carbine... a Mauser, I think."

"It's a modified Kar-98k," Anthony said. He tapped the barrel, which had been seemingly replaced with what looked like a thick length of smooth-cut pipe. "A noise suppression system, to go with a barrel altered to allow for a different type of ammunition."

"What kind?" Chantecoq said. He reached into his dressing gown and pulled out a cigarette case. Popping it open, he extracted one and popped it between his lips.

"I was hoping you could tell me, actually. It's why I came to see you." Anthony frowned. "I would have been here earlier, and by a more civilized route, but I was followed."

"Followed? By whom?" Chantecoq said, a lit match held inches from the tip of his cigarette.

Anthony tapped the gun again. "Three men, carrying these. And wearing masks. I think I convinced them to give up the chase though."

"Masks?" Chantecoq said, slowly lighting his cigarette. He puffed quietly for a moment and then said, "Where were you coming from?"

"The Louvre."

Chantecoq froze. "Why?"

"A series of unusual events, why else?" Anthony shrugged. "I'm not surprised you haven't heard. The police have been keeping quite a tight lid on things. Four nights ago, a night-watchman died in the museum. The cause was apparently shock." Anthony made a face. "The other watchmen reported seeing a mysterious figure when they responded to his scream... a figure that vanished in a flash of light. The night after that, they saw the figure again, only this time, they saw it in three different places in the Louvre." Anthony held up three fingers. "All at the same time. The night before last, another guard died, again supposedly of shock. A fellow named de Filipone, the current Director of the Louvre, called for me then, knowing I was in Paris and that this sort of thing is my line. Ostensibly, I'm investigating the haunting, but since it's connected to the deaths..." He looked at Chantecoq. "And I wondered why they hadn't called for you."

Chantecoq was silent. Anthony leaned forward, his eyes narrowing. "They did, didn't they?" he said.

"Get out please." Chantecoq settled back in his chair. "And take that rifle with you. Go as you came in. Like as not, they haven't seen you yet."

"What? Who? Monsieur, I..." Anthony began. He rose to his feet and the pistol in Chantecoq's hand rose with him. The elderly detective cocked the weapon.

"Get out, please," he said quietly.

"I came to get your help, Monsieur."

"Then you have failed, through no fault of your own. I am sorry, but I cannot take the risk."

“Risk what?” Anthony said.

“Risk *who*,” Chantecoq corrected. “In my desk is an envelope. Get it.”

Anthony did so with haste, Chantecoq’s pistol tracking him the entire time. He found the envelope and opened it, extracting the handful of photographs that were inside. A woman and a man, both middle-aged, sat outside a café. In another picture, the same couple was window-shopping in the Rue de Rivoli. He looked at Chantecoq. Before he could ask the obvious question, the other man said, “My daughter Colette and her husband. Someone sent these pictures to me as a warning. They wanted me to know that they can get to her—at any time.”

“Who?”

“Turn the envelope over.” Anthony did so and grunted as he saw the strange image stamped on the torn flap. In almost every way, it was an exact two-dimensional reproduction of the grotesque masks worn by his attackers earlier in the evening. He looked at Chantecoq. The old detective said, simply, “Belphegor.”

“*Gesundheit*,” Anthony said.

Chantecoq glared at the younger man. “It is not a joke,” he snapped.

“Sorry. Who—or what—is Belphegor?”

“A curse.” Chantecoq looked away. “One I thought had claimed its final victim 13 years ago, almost to the day.”

“The Simone Desroches case,” Anthony said. “That’s why I wanted your help though... There are similarities...”

“Of course there are.” Chantecoq made a sharp gesture. “It is Belphegor. Go. Now.”

“I don’t think so. Who were those men following me?”

“I have no idea,” Chantecoq said bitterly. “I do not want to know.”

“We can protect your daughter,” Anthony said.

“I am protecting her,” Chantecoq snarled. “Now, will you go? Or must I force you?”

In reply, Anthony lunged towards the older man like a tiger. As he tackled him to the floor, chair and all, the space that Chantecoq’s head had occupied was split by the passage of something solid and deadly. The plaster on the wall cracked and dust drifted down. Anthony sprang to his feet, Chantecoq’s pistol in hand, and raced to the open window.

The full Moon had turned the rooftops silver and Anthony caught sight of a tall, thin figure as it raced away, a black cloak flaring around it like the wings of some great bat. He took aim, but resisted the urge to fire. He stepped back from the window, eyes blazing with frustration. “I guess they didn’t give up after all,” he said, his tone half-apologetic. “And I’ll bet they haven’t now either.” He moved quickly to the closest bookshelf and toppled it in front of the window, effectively blocking it.

Chantecoq pounded the floor with a fist. “My daughter! You have doomed her!” he snarled, scrambling to his feet. Anthony stepped back, his hands raised. Old, the King of Detectives might have been, but he was still intimidating, even to a man of Anthony’s size.

“Monsieur, we can have someone protecting her within minutes, if you’ll just let me borrow your phone!”

Chantecoq swiped a hand towards a cabinet. Anthony hurried to it and pulled out a phone. Swiftly, he rang the hotel he was staying at and rattled off instructions to the voice which answered. Then he hung up and turned back to Chantecoq. The old man had gotten dressed while his back had been turned, and his lean frame was clad in an immaculate suit of expensive, if slightly out of fashion, cut. “Who did you call?” he said, his voice now composed.

“My hotel. I have a friend staying in a room near mine, a fellow named Tom Gentry. An excellent man in a tight spot. When he rings back, I’ll have him see to your daughter’s safety.”

“I trust her husband, Jack, immensely,” Chantecoq said. “He is a good man. Strong. And Colette is stronger still, in her way.” He took a deep breath. “But I could not risk them.” He bent over the desk and scrawled out an address on a loose sheet of paper. “This is their address.”

“I understand,” Anthony said. “More than you know.”

“Yes. How is Senator Colquitt’s daughter, by the by?” Chantecoq said, straightening his tie. Anthony blinked and Chantecoq smiled crookedly. “I am not a hermit, Monsieur Anthony. Merely old.”

Anthony chuckled and extended the butt of the Galand to its owner. “Isolation has its advantages.”

“And disadvantages.” Chantecoq turned as the phone rang. Anthony snatched it up and answered. As he spoke to his man, Chantecoq scooped up the rifle and ejected the ammunition clip. When Anthony hung up for a second time, Chantecoq said, “Look at this.”

Anthony took the clip. “Tom is heading to their home now, and he’ll call the police and let them know. I have special dispensation from the Sûreté after that business with the Vampires in Marseille, so it should be no difficulty in arranging a protective detail. Unless they’ve been shadowing me since I got to Paris, our mysterious masked enemies will have no idea what Tom looks like, or who he is. It should be easy for him to get the drop on them.”

“You have much faith in your subordinates.”

“I have faith in my friends,” Anthony replied, examining the clip. “Are these bullets? They look like they’ve been baked out of flour.”

“Not flour. Something similar, however.” Chantecoq bounced one of the bullets on his palm. “Water soluble, I’d guess.”

Anthony went to the wall where the sniper’s shot had ended up. Though the plaster was cracked, there was no sign of a hole. Taking a penknife off of the desk, he traced the crack and pried a small soggy lump free of the wall. He made to grab it and Chantecoq hissed, “Don’t!” Anthony glanced at him. Chantecoq held up the bullet in his palm. “Smell, eh?”

Anthony did, and grimaced. “Is that what I think it is?”

“The delicate odor of the *Aminata Muscaria*. A hallucinogenic weed. The bullets are crafted from it. On impact, they release their deadly cargo. Diluted, it causes hallucinations. In its concentrated form, it is positively lethal.” Chantecoq placed the bullet back in the clip and carefully wiped his palm with a handkerchief.

“I tangled with a Russian who smeared that stuff on his ammunition. Called them *Fear-Bullets*,” Anthony said, hefting the rifle. “Why not use regular bullets, though?”

“Regular bullets leave obvious clues. But if a man dies of fright...?” Chantecoq shrugged. “A simple murder becomes something much more complex.”

“And this phantom...?”

“Belphegor,” Chantecoq interjected.