



THE  
CRIMES  
OF  
PARIS

A TRUE STORY OF MURDER,  
THEFT, AND DETECTION

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DOROTHY AND THOMAS HOOBLER

AUTHORS OF *The Monsters*

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# THEFT

It was a Monday and the Louvre was closed. As was standard practice at the museum on that day of the week, only maintenance workers, cleaning staff, curators, and a few other employees roamed the cavernous halls of the building that was once the home of France's kings but since the Revolution had been devoted to housing the nation's art treasures.

Acquired through conquest, wealth, good taste, and plunder, those holdings were splendid and vast — so much so that the Louvre could lay claim to being the greatest repository of art in the world. With some fifty acres of gallery space, the collection was too immense for visitors to view in a day or even, some thought, in a lifetime. <sup>1</sup> Most guidebooks, therefore, advised tourists not to miss the Salon Carré (Square Room). In that single room could be seen two paintings by Leonardo da Vinci, three by Titian, two by Raphael, two by Correggio, one by Giorgione, three by Veronese, one by Tintoretto, and — representing non-Italians — one each by Rubens, Rembrandt, and Velázquez.

A stunning display, certainly. But even in that collection of masterpieces, one painting stood out from the rest. That very morning — August 21, 1911 — as the museum's maintenance director, a man named Picquet, passed through the Salon Carré on his rounds, he pointed out Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, telling a co-worker that it was the most valuable object in the museum. "They say it is worth a million and a half," Picquet remarked, glancing at his watch as he left the room. The time was 7:20 A.M.

Shortly after Picquet departed the Salon Carré, a door to a storage closet opened and a man (or men, for it was never proved whether the thief worked alone) emerged. He had been in there since the previous day — Sunday, the museum's busiest, as that was the only day most Parisians had off from work. Just before closing time, the thief had slipped inside the little closet so that he could emerge in the morning without the need to identify himself to a guard at the entrance.

There were many such small rooms and hidden alcoves within the seven-hundred-year-old <sup>2</sup> building; museum officials later confessed that no one knew how many. This particular one was normally used for storing the easels, canvases, and supplies of artists who were engaged in copying the works of Old Masters — a training exercise for those who wished to improve their technique. The only firm antiforgery requirement the museum placed on such students was that the reproductions could not be the same size as the originals.

Emerging from the closet, the intruder might have been mistaken for one of these copyists, for he wore a white artist's smock. However, his garment had another purpose on this particular day: the museum's maintenance staff also wore such smocks, apparently a practice intended to demonstrate that they were on a higher plane than "ordinary" workers, and if anyone noticed the thief, he would likely be taken for another of the regular museum employees.

As he entered the Salon Carré, he headed straight for his intended target: the *Mona Lisa*. Only four sturdy hooks held it there, no more securely than if it were a framed print in the house of a bourgeois Parisian. Later, museum officials said that the paintings were fastened to the wall in this way to make it easy for guards to remove them in case of fire.

Even so, lifting down the *Mona Lisa* and carrying it into a nearby enclosed stairwell was no easy job. The painting itself weighs approximately eighteen pounds, for Leonardo painted it not on canvas

but on three slabs of wood. A few months earlier, the museum's directors had taken steps to physically protect the *Mona Lisa* by reinforcing it with a massive wooden brace and placing it inside a glass-fronted box, adding 150 pounds to the weight. The decorative Renaissance frame contributed perhaps 30 additional pounds, bringing the total to nearly 200 pounds.

Once safely out of sight behind the closed door of the stairwell, the thief quickly stripped the painting of all its protective "garments" — the brace, the glass case, and the frame. Since the *Mona Lisa*'s close-grained wood, an inch and a half thick, made it impossible to roll up, the thief slipped the work underneath his smock. Measuring approximately thirty by twenty-one inches, the painting was small enough to avoid detection.

Though evidently familiar with the layout of the museum, the thief had made one mistake in his planning. The enclosed stairway led down to the first floor of the museum, but at the bottom was a locked door. The thief had obtained a key, but now it failed to work. Desperately, he used a screwdriver to remove the doorknob — but then heard footsteps coming from above.

Down the stairs came one of the Louvre's plumbers, a man named Sauvet. Later, Sauvet — the only man to witness the thief inside the museum — testified that he saw one man (only one), dressed as a museum employee. The man complained that the doorknob was missing. Helpfully, Sauvet unlocked the door with his own key and even produced a pair of pliers to turn the mechanism to open the door. The plumber suggested that they leave it open in case anyone else should use the staircase. The thief agreed and went on about his business.

The door opened onto a courtyard, the Cour du Sphinx. From there the thief crossed through another gallery and into the Cour Visconti and then — probably trying not to appear in a hurry — headed toward the main entrance of the museum. Few guards were on duty that day, because it was felt they were only necessary when the public was admitted. However, there was one assigned to that entrance, the last barrier between the thief and the city. As luck would have it, he had left his post to get a bucket of water to clean the vestibule. He never saw the thief, or thieves, leave the building.

One person outside did: a passerby who noticed a man on the sidewalk carrying a package wrapped in white cloth (the smock that he had used to impersonate a workman). The witness recalled seeing the man throw a shiny metal object into the ditch along the edge of the street. The passerby glanced at it. It was a doorknob.

Inside the museum, all was serene and would remain so for quite some time. At 8:35 A.M. Picquet passed through the Salon Carré again and noted that the painting was gone. He thought little of it at the time, for the museum's photographers freely removed objects without notice and took them to a studio elsewhere in the building. Indeed, Picquet even remarked to his workers, "I guess the authorities have removed it because they thought we would steal it!" <sup>3</sup> His quip seemed less humorous later.

Incredibly, all through that day no one thought it alarming that there was an empty space where the *Mona Lisa* should have been. Not until Tuesday, when the Louvre again opened its doors to the public, did anyone express concern over the fact that the world's most famous painting was missing from its usual place. Louis Beroud, an artist, set up his easel in the Salon Carré. He was not there to copy a particular work. His intention was to create a genre painting that would show much of the room and the contents of its walls. (Sometimes Beroud's scenes included attractive young women viewing the museum's collection. His paintings, and others like them, were popular with foreign visitors who wanted something more than postcards as souvenirs of their trips to Paris.)

Beroud noticed at once that the centerpiece of his intended work was missing. He complained to a guard, who shrugged. Like Picquet the day before, he assumed the *Mona Lisa* had been removed to the photographer's studio. Beroud persisted. His time was valuable. No one had scheduled a removal of the painting. How long would it take before it was returned?

To stop Beroud's badgering, the guard finally went to see the photographer, who denied having anything to do with the painting. Perhaps it had been taken by a curator for cleaning? No. Finally, the guard thought it wise to inform a superior. A search began and soon became increasingly frantic. The director of the museum was on vacation, so the unthinkable news filtered up to the acting head, Georges Bénédite: *Elle est partie!* She's gone.

## THE CITY OF LIGHT

On April 14, 1900, French president Émile-François Loubet opened the Paris Exposition Universelle whose goal was to “reflect the bright genius of France, and show our fair country to be, today as yesterday, in the very vanguard of Progress.”<sup>1</sup> Spread across the city, from the place de la Concorde to the Eiffel Tower, was a fantastic array of Swiss villages, Hungarian Gypsy caravans, mosques and minarets and Arab towns, as well as reproductions of the great Basilica of San Marco in Venice, a temple at Angkor Wat, and the Imperial Palaces in Peking. The expo contained displays from fifty-eight countries in 210 pavilions covering 350 acres. From April to November of that centennial year, Paris welcomed fifty million visitors from all over the world.

The star of the event was electricity, newly harnessed by science. Every evening, with a flick of a switch in the Palace of Electricity, light from fifty-seven hundred incandescent bulbs flooded the pavilions, inspiring the nickname *Ville Lumière*, “City of Light,” for Paris. Electricity also powered a train that circled the fair and a *trottoir roulant* (moving sidewalk) that allowed people to glide to the galleries. This newly harnessed invisible force propelled a giant Ferris wheel, carrying forty cars and twenty-four hundred people at full capacity, modeled after the original that had appeared at the Chicago World’s Fair ten years earlier. The fair was seen as a herald of the exciting and unparalleled new gifts that science would bring to the modern age.

A visitor, Pierre Laborde, a university student from Bordeaux, wrote: “You could say I’ve touched with my finger this delicious century that’s just begun. I’ve danced all the dances of the world from the Pont des Invalides to the Pont de l’Alma, and travelled by ‘moving carpet’ from a Venetian palazzo to Washington’s Capital, from an Elizabethan manor to a Byzantine church.... I’ve seen moving photographs and electrified dancing: cinematography and Loie Fuller [a red-headed American dancer who used electric lights to make her costumes glow and attempted to buy radium as a decoration because she had heard it glowed in the dark].... Life on a screen [the movies]... isn’t yet art, but it will be. And on a glass floor when the lights change color a woman becomes a flower, a butterfly, a storm, a flame from a brazier.”<sup>2</sup> The fair was an affirmation of the new century’s glowing promise, transformed by an energy that no one could see but all could experience.

### i

The years in Paris from 1900 to the beginning of the First World War are often called the *Belle Époque*, the “beautiful time.” It was the height of a great civilization, confident, prosperous, cultured and creative. Paris was not only the seat of the nation’s government but also the cultural focus of France — and, many felt, of the world. Within the city were the collected treasures of France — not only in museums, but within institutions of higher education, libraries, and archives. Paris was an international center for the arts of painting, dance, music, theater, and publishing. It had the foremost



medical and scientific institutions of the day, and the most modern manufacturing facilities. The face of the future could be seen in Parisian leadership of such brand-new fields as motion pictures, automobile manufacturing, and aviation.

Visitors and wanderers were an essential component of this success. France's colonial empire in Asia and Africa (a "civilizing mission," as the French called it) brought to Paris examples of foreign cultures that understood the world in ways that were different from the European tradition. These in turn stimulated the imagination of the artists and scientists. Among the geniuses who lived in Paris in 1900 were Henri Matisse and Paul Cézanne in art, Claude Debussy in music, Henri Poincaré in mathematics, Marcel Proust in literature, and the Curies, Marie and Pierre, in science. The achievements in painting during the Belle Époque can only be compared with those of Renaissance Florence when Leonardo lived there.

Among the fifty million visitors to the Paris fair was the nineteen-year-old Spaniard Pablo Ruiz, who visited the Spanish Pavilion (which resembled a Castilian castle) to see his own painting on display. Pablo was entranced with the city, its freedom, its variety, its openness to what was new and different. Like so many others, he would return and forge a new identity for himself. In his youth in Spain, the young man had learned to paint anything he could see; in Paris, he would discover how to paint things that nobody but himself saw. Forging a new identity for himself, he took his mother's family name: Picasso.

A city of more than 2.7 million people in 1900, Paris had been the site of a settlement long before the Romans established a fort there around 300 C.E. Yet the twentieth-century city was in many ways quite new, the creation of Baron Georges Haussmann, the first and the most powerful representative of what today are known as city planners. Serving as prefect of the Seine from 1853 to 1870, Haussmann had been entrusted by Napoleon III with the task of modernizing the city, making it grander and more beautiful. He had acted ruthlessly to fulfill his mandate. He demolished much of the ancient center of the city, wiping out whole neighborhoods on the Île de la Cité and the banks of the Seine. Paris also expanded, adding suburbs in places previously occupied by mills, grape arbors, and fields. Haussmann filled such lightly populated areas with housing for workers who had been displaced from the central city.

Drawing bold lines across the existing map of Paris, Haussmann built wide, straight, tree-lined boulevards that, fortuitously, would eventually carry multiple lanes of traffic by an invention he had not yet seen: the automobile. New bridges across the Seine and the Île de la Cité bound the Left Bank and Right Bank together and further eased traffic circulation. Safe drinking water was carried to the city through aqueducts from as far as one hundred miles away, and the new underground canals of the sewer system were regarded as so extraordinary that they became tourist attractions despite their smell. The wide streets made police surveillance easier as well, and the police force expanded to monitor Paris's growing population.

Lining the boulevards were fine theaters, expensive restaurants, shops, cafés, and music halls. Elegant apartments with balconies offered housing to the very rich on broad avenues such as the Champs-Élysées. As dynamos brought electricity to all parts of Paris, it became possible to install electric-powered elevators in buildings, reversing the traditional Parisian order of living. Formerly the poor had to climb stairs to their upper-story apartments; now the rich could ride there in comfort to enjoy the beautiful views. Construction began on even taller buildings, called *à l'américaine* after the home of the skyscraper. Some people feared that these new outsize structures would destroy the

proportions of the city and even hurt the tourist trade. “When Paris resembles Chicago and New York,” a newspaper editor warned his fellow Parisians, “the American women we want so much to attract, won’t come here anymore.”<sup>3</sup> He needn’t have worried. Paris was a shopper’s mecca. Recently opened were huge department stores called *grands magasins*, such as Au Bon Marché and Galeries Lafayette, with multistory connected galleries that attracted shoppers from all over the world.

The American writer Theodore Dreiser was in Paris at the turn of the century and described its mode of life: “He [the Parisian] lives by the way,” he wrote, “out of books, restaurants, theaters, boulevards, and the spectacle of life generally. The Parisians move briskly, and they come out where they can see one another — out into the great wide-sidewalked boulevards and the thousands upon thousands of cafés, and make themselves comfortable and talkative and gay. It is obvious that everybody is having a good time, not merely trying to have it; that they are enjoying the wine-like air of the *brasseries*, the net-like movements of the cabs, the dancing lights of the roadways, and the flare of the shops. It may be chill or drizzling in Paris, but you scarcely feel it. Rain can scarcely drive the people off the streets... for there are crowds whether it rains or not, and they are not despondent.”<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, after the theft of the *Mona Lisa*, many people joked that the woman in the painting had gone out for a night on the town. If she had, she would have fit right into the scenes on either bank of the Seine, for the French capital was a magnet for the beautiful, wealthy, talented, and creative the world over. Gertrude Stein, an American who arrived in the city in 1903, wrote, “Paris was where the twentieth century was.”<sup>5</sup>

## ii

Many came to Paris because of the city’s bohemian neighborhoods, where artists and writers congregated to be on the cutting edge. Though Paris was a rich city, it was possible to live quite cheaply, if one could endure hardship. In 1891, Maria Skłodowska (who would later become the wife and scientific partner of Pierre Curie) arrived in Paris from her native Poland, then under Russian control, to study at the Sorbonne. “The room I lived in,” she recalled, “was... very cold in winter, for it was insufficiently heated by a small stove which often lacked coal. During a particularly rigorous winter, it was not unusual for the water to freeze in the basin in the night; to be able to sleep I was obliged to pile all my clothes on the bedcovers. In the same room I prepared my meals with the aid of an alcohol lamp and a few kitchen utensils. These meals were often reduced to bread with a cup of chocolate, eggs or fruit. I had no help in housekeeping and I myself carried the little coal I used up through six flights.”<sup>6</sup>

Another of the city’s residents was Guillaume Apollinaire, who was to become the great friend and publicizer of Picasso. Born out of wedlock in 1880 to a Polish woman in Rome (he himself spread stories that his father was a cardinal or perhaps even a pope), he formally bore an impressive collection of names: Guillaume Albert Wladimir Alexandre Apollinaire de Kostrowitsky. Along with a younger brother, he and his mother lived for a time in Monte Carlo, Cannes, Nice, and several other French cities, giving Guillaume a cosmopolitan air that would serve him well — although he recalled they frequently had to sneak out of hotels in the middle of the night when they could not pay the bill. Though Apollinaire was too poor to take the required courses for a university degree, he was able to find a job as a tutor with a wealthy family. A sojourn in Germany and then an unrequited passion for

young Englishwoman inspired him to begin writing poems. He settled in Paris, living in his mother's house in the suburb of Le Vésinet but spending his time in Montmartre, like so many other aspiring artists. Working as a bank clerk, he contributed poems and articles to small literary journals and even edited one himself. He also wrote two elegant pornographic novels, which brought an offer from a publisher to edit and write introductions to a series of classic erotic works. Carrying all this off with aplomb and dignity, Guillaume soon became a familiar figure in the cafés of Montmartre.

Another arrival who had invented her own identity in Paris was Gabrielle Chanel, later known to the world as Coco. Born in a poorhouse in the town of Saumur on the Loire River, she spent her teen years in an orphanage after her mother died and her father deserted his children. Chanel devoured romance novels, whose plots she later incorporated into her own life story. After she became a famous couturier, a friend suggested that psychotherapy might help her to be more honest about her humble origins. Chanel replied with a laugh, "I — who never told the truth to my priest?" <sup>7</sup> Like many who came to Paris, her life was a work of art, a blend of fact and fiction, assembled as she chose.

Not everyone found immediate success. Marcel Proust, the son of a doctor, spent hours on the bed of his cork-lined room on the second floor of 102, boulevard Haussmann, writing the mammoth six-part novel *À la recherche du temps perdu*, which many regard as the greatest French literary work of the twentieth century. In 1911, however, when he sent the first part of the book to a publisher, the editor emphatically rejected it, saying, "I may be dense but I cannot understand how a man can use up thirty pages to describe the way he turns over and moves about in bed before falling asleep. It makes me want to scream." <sup>8</sup> Proust later sent his work to André Gide, an editor of the *Nouvelle Revue Française* who would himself become famous as a writer. Gide, like Proust, was a homosexual and feared a public outcry over the frank depictions of sexuality in Proust's novel, which he rejected as "the worst thing possible for our magazine." <sup>9</sup> Proust was doing in literature what Picasso would do in painting: creating a world from the images inside his head, just as the narrator of his novel relates. But he had to publish the first volume of his long work at his own expense.

### iii

Proust may have consoled himself at one of the homosexual brothels that he frequented. (He even made money investing in one.) By the dawn of the twentieth century, Paris was a center for sex tourism. In the 1890s there were thirty strip shows in Paris. A critic described Mlle. Cavelli, the star attraction at one of them, the Alcazar d'Été, "doffing her hat, her dress, her petticoats, her corset, her pretty white and pink underwear, with a decent interval between each stage of her undressing to allow the spectators to recover their sang-froid." <sup>10</sup> Fully nude dancers were not hard to find. The city's most famous bordello had been opened in time for the Paris Exposition of 1878; a favorite of the Prince of Wales, it had a special bathtub designed to hold his girth and reserved for him exclusively. A visitor at the time wrote, "The salons are sumptuous, each one represents a cabin in a pleasure yacht, and with elegant bathrooms. Visitors are received in a magnificent hall modeled from a courtyard of the Spanish Alhambra and are given an illustrated booklet of views of the best apartments in the eight-storied house. Every flat is divided into numerous rooms, neatly furnished in Louis XV style." <sup>11</sup>

Paris offered many pleasures even for those who were not royalty. The city's nightlife centered in the two well-known bohemian sections on either side of the Seine: Montmartre and Montparnasse.

Montmartre, on the Right Bank, kept its rural charm well into the twentieth century. The highest point in Paris, it still contained vineyards and windmills and the narrow, winding streets that were characteristic of all Paris before Haussmann's renovations. Its cabarets and cafés attracted bohemian and working-class people alike; moreover, it was known as the haunt of criminal gangs. Aristocrats seeking adventure liked to go slumming there.

Rodolphe Solis, an artist and mathematician, boasted: "God created the world, Napoleon founded the Legion of Honor, and I invented Montmartre." <sup>12</sup> Solis opened Le Chat Noir in 1881; it was a cabaret that would forever influence entertainment in Paris. The waiters were dressed like members of the prestigious Académie française, with the headwaiter wearing the colorful uniform of the papal Swiss guards. The interior was decorated in the style of Louis XIII, with ornate, voluptuous lines and colors. Its entertainment ranged from *ombres chinoises* (Chinese shadow puppets) to barbed political humor and songs that commented on follies and scandals in the news. Avant-garde composer Erik Satie often accompanied singers on the piano, and another composer, Claude Debussy, was a regular patron. Stand-up comedians told dirty jokes and threw insults at members of the audience, bringing roars of approval. One performer whose act was so vulgar as to be beyond taste was Pétomane, the world's greatest farter, whose poster proudly proclaimed: "the only performer who doesn't pay composers' royalties." <sup>13</sup> Though Le Chat Noir had closed in 1897, its spirit and influence lived on through the Belle Époque, inspiring other entertainment venues throughout Montmartre.

Another option was the *café-concert*, a kind of music hall or nightclub. A contemporary described the raucous atmosphere:

In all of these halls, singing, dancing, and often shameless dramatic performances are given these days in front of princes, wealthy loafers, fashionable ladies, and those who act as if they were. This type of entertainment... manifests above all, a desire for uninhibitedness, spectacle, and debasement that is peculiar to our times. However low the [more formal type of] theater may have sunk, however little it demands from its audience in terms of behavior and intellectual effort, it still makes certain demands. One may not smoke or keep one's hat on there; moreover, one has to understand the play, or at least seem to understand it, and even the actors do not say or mime everything. In the *café-concert*, on the other hand, there are none of these limits! One smokes, drinks, comes and goes as one pleases, while watching highly suggestive acts and listening to incredibly risqué jokes. The *café-concert* is the paradise of libertinism and the more determined bad taste. On top of this the prices are low and the incitement of all the senses is practically free. For a few sous one gets everything that refreshes as well as excites. How then could one avoid coming here to still, or seem to still, the freely admitted or secret desire for dissolute excess that currently plagues the *peuple* as much as good society? <sup>14</sup>

Montmartre became well known as a place where people went to abandon their inhibitions. At Le Rat Mort in place Pigalle, for example, women dressed in men's clothing and danced with one another. Guides to the city, such as one written in 1913 by the English man Frankfort Sommerville, raved about the area Parisians nicknamed the Butte. "Montmartre," he declared, "is the dwelling-place of the most curious collection of poets, painters, sculptors, bar-keepers, vagabonds, girls of the street, models, apaches, scoundrels in the world — the most gifted and the most degraded (and there is not always a very sharp line dividing them). Montmartre is just as remarkable a mixture of gaiety,

strenuous work, poetry and mockery, artistic sense and irreligion.” <sup>15</sup>

To outsiders, perhaps the best-known spot in Montmartre was the Moulin Rouge, which opened in October 1889 to take advantage of the Paris World’s Fair of that year. Its moving windmill sails (and later, flashing electric lights) served as a beacon to attract visitors to its shows — revues and popular musical plays as well as dance routines. (One observer commented that the cabaret’s “sails never ground anything but the customers’ money.” <sup>16</sup> ) The Moulin Rouge was renowned for its professional female dancers performing the then-risqué cancan, and the first time Picasso visited Paris, he went there, as did many other tourists. Posters and paintings of the entertainers by the artist Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec added to the international fame of the cabaret. The chanteuse Yvette Guilbert charmed the audience with her sophisticated and touching songs, in which she invoked the pathos of lower-class suffering.

The cabaret scene in Montmartre provided entertainment for every taste, even the tantalizingly perverse. Picasso’s companion Carles Casagemas wrote home that his favorite haunts were the next-door-neighbor cabarets named Ciel (Heaven) and Infer (Hell) — and a third named Néant, or Nothingness. At the Cabaret du Ciel, patrons entered gates lit by blue-tinted electric lights, with the action starting at 11:00 P.M. Inside, the ceiling was painted blue, with stars and clouds; paintings of saints and angels lined the corridors. Another visitor described his experiences here around 1910:

The head waiter greets visitors with a blasphemous welcome that need not be set down.... Suddenly from among the clouds at the end of the room St. Peter appears, keys at girdle, a mysterious vessel in one hand; he sprinkles the nearest devotees with his imitation of holy water and disappears. The waiters now assemble before a shrine at the end of the room, on which a gilt pig sits enshrined. They light candles and perform genuflections. From the pulpit at the other side of the café a man dressed as a preacher delivers an unprintable discourse. Then after a procession of Angel garçons the assembled guests, being duly sanctified, file out of the “Home of the Angels,” St. Peter himself being in the passage to give out tickets.... You pass out to the street, meeting Father Time at the exit with his hourglass turned up to receive the contributions of those who wish to enjoy a long life.

In the Cabaret du Néant you can see a body put into a coffin and turn into a skeleton before your eyes, and return again to healthy life. You are attended by mutes, and the drinks supplied are called by the names of various hideous diseases. Outside the Cabaret of Hell you are greeted by a red devil with horns and trident, who bids you enter and be d——d, for Satan is calling for you. And if you care to go inside, Satan will be heard delivering a discourse, strange medley of morality and blasphemy. <sup>17</sup>

Cafés and cabarets also dotted Montparnasse, on the other bank of the Seine. Especially popular was La Closerie des Lilas, <sup>18</sup> a café on the boulevard Montparnasse, adjacent to the Latin Quarter, where many students from the University of Paris lived. Vladimir Lenin, then an exile from Russia, lived in Paris from 1901 to 1912. And though he much preferred London as a city (he described Paris as a “foul hole”), he did have drinks sometimes at the Closerie des Lilas. <sup>19</sup> Across the street was Bal Bullier, which held a weekly *grande fête* for students, artists, and workers, who danced in its backyard gardens under colored lights. In the spring, costumed art students paraded in the Bal Bullier. One who did so remembered “students and artists, handsome and merry in their stunning velvet suits and floppy



slouch hats, and with their girls, some in their cycling bloomers, others in silk robes, and still others summer blouses.”<sup>20</sup> The Café Dôme’s proprietors welcomed visitors and new arrivals, and it became a gathering place for foreign artists. The Cabaret de la Rotonde, which opened around 1911, was called “the navel of the world” at the height of its popularity.<sup>21</sup> It attracted such Russian revolutionaries as Lenin, Leon Trotsky, and Anatoly Lunacharsky and was the favorite café of the Italian artist Amedeo Modigliani. Also to be found there were the Mexican painter Diego Rivera and the Russian artists Marc Chagall and Chaim Soutine.

Gino Severini, an Italian, arrived in Paris in October 1906. A friend of Picasso and Apollinaire, he was to become a leader of the Italian futurists, who pursued their own kind of modernism and sought to incorporate speed, energy, and force into their works. “Few have ever arrived in an unfamiliar city as penniless and hopeless as I was,” he wrote. “I had no friends, no money (barring 50 francs I counted in my pocket that evening), only a scant knowledge of French.... I arrived at the Gare de Lyon in a lighthearted, ebullient frame of mind. I took the white tram... went straight to Montparnasse, and ordered my first café-au-lait at a little bar on the corner of boulevard Montparnasse and boulevard Raspail. The bar was called La Rotonde and years later would become a famous meeting place for modern artists.... Having arrived at six in the morning, by nine I was settled in, and could wander out to the boulevard Raspail, where a new building was going up in a wonderfully chaotic construction site that I could start to draw.”<sup>22</sup> Paris, with its unmatched atmosphere of intellectual and artistic ideas, was a place where Severini, like others, could thrive.

## iv

Paris at the turn of the century was the epicenter of modernism — the new artistic, social, cultural, and scientific revolution that was changing the way people looked at the world. Rapid change was to be an essential part of modern life. Technological advances, including automobiles, telephones, airplanes, electric streetcars, and urban railways such as Paris’s Métro, were radically increasing the speed at which products and information could be exchanged. The dense urban concentration of populations made retail establishments like department stores possible and gave rise to a new consumerism. Population density also fostered crime, for human relationships became increasingly random and impersonal and the gaps between the haves and the have-nots became more conspicuous. Meanwhile, Freudian psychology, physical studies of the human brain, and the experiments of French psychologists such as Jean Charcot were providing new theories of human behavior and motivation.

Above all, modern life was marked by speed. As the poet Octave Mirbeau said of the streetcar, “Life everywhere rushes headlong.”<sup>23</sup> Nothing captured the imagination of people like the automobile. Between 1890 and 1904, France led the world in the production of motor cars, and in 1900 the wait could be as long as twenty-two months for delivery. Before the days of the assembly line, each coach was custom-built to each owner’s specifications, and the height could vary along with the fashions in ladies’ hats. The renowned *grande horizontale* (courtesan) known as La Belle Otéro had a automobile that was so high and narrow that it could overturn if rounding a curve too fast. Race car drivers became celebrities, and before World War I, some automobiles reached the phenomenal speed of eighty miles per hour. Even at lower velocities, however, an automobile made the world seem different. Mirbeau observed that riding in a car “put things into a new relief, giving me an impression

that objects and persons were not just static but intensely active.”<sup>24</sup> The poet strained to express the feelings that his automobile gave him: “I can contemplate without a tremor the dispersion of my books, my pictures, and all my collection, but I cannot bear the thought that a day may come when I shall no longer possess my magic charger, this fabulous unicorn that bears me so gently and swiftly, with a clearer and a keener brain, across the whole map of nature’s beauties, the richness and diversity of the human scene.”<sup>25</sup>

Even more thrilling than the automobile, though not so widely available, was the airplane. The realization of the dream of flight, one of the many obsessions that Leonardo had filled his notebooks with, was seen as a manifestation of the great power of modern science. At the 1900 Paris Exposition Alberto Santos-Dumont, the son of a Brazilian coffee king, made ascents in his bicycle-powered balloon, using the handlebars to steer. By 1906, Santos-Dumont had constructed a biplane, which he flew a distance of 60 meters, the first powered flight in Europe. This set off a competition to build better engines and planes and increase the time in the air. In 1908, Léon Delagrange, a sculptor, flew plane 854 meters, the first flight to be filmed.

The great hero of early flight in France was Louis Blériot. The survivor of many crashes, he was determined to win the prize of one thousand pounds offered by the London *Daily Mail* for the first person to fly across the English Channel. At 4:35 A.M. on July 25, 1909, hobbling on crutches from an earlier accident, Blériot set off in his monoplane, a cratelike machine called the X1. He headed out to sea and soon faced head-on squalls. He pressed forward, though he could not swim and had only a small supply of water. The plane responded and eventually he landed at Dover Castle. The crossing had taken just thirty-seven minutes. When British soldiers ran up to congratulate Blériot, he responded, “Be good enough to hand me my crutches.”<sup>26</sup> An hour later he was joined by his wife, who had arrived by boat. Blériot received a hero’s welcome on his return and was awarded the Légion d’honneur. His achievement was a source of pride to the French, who by 1911 had more than three times as many pilots as Germany and Britain combined.<sup>27</sup>

In conquering the air, humans violated an ancient law: the gravity that bound them to the earth. The world looked smaller from the air, easier to encompass. In the same way, the speed of automobiles gave people enormous new powers of mobility and independence. The telephone further compressed space and time. Some doubted these changes were for the better. The German writer Max Nordau feared that everyone would soon be required to “read a dozen square yards of newspaper daily... be constantly called to the telephone... think simultaneously of five continents of the earth,” and “live half their time in a railroad carriage or in a flying machine.”<sup>28</sup> But there was no stopping what people saw as “progress.”

France’s greatest philosopher of this era, Henri Bergson, rejected the mechanistic ordering of time by seconds and minutes, claiming instead that past and present were linked to the future by a free flow of moments, which he called “duration.” Only by taking away mundane data, he wrote, could one reach the level of consciousness that permits highly creative people to assimilate impressions from childhood to adulthood in order to live a whole and fulfilling life. It was through intuition that duration could be grasped in all its complexity. Bergson’s term for this creative and intense living in duration was *élan vital*, which became a catchphrase of the time.

Bergson gave free lectures each Friday at the Collège de France, open to the public. Society women and tourists as well as workers came to hear the man in his three-inch stiff collar “fashioning phrases like a sculptor with his slim white hands.”<sup>29</sup>

Bergson believed that art played a special role in helping a person grasp “some secret chord which

was only waiting to thrill.”<sup>30</sup> At this time, the French were among the world’s leaders in the brand-new motion picture industry, and the cinema was an ideal illustration of Bergson’s ideas. A strip of motion picture film contains many individual frames. When these are run through a projector at a certain speed, the mind perceives them not as a series of stills but as a continuous flow — in other words, duration. (The impressionist artists, in their move away from a literal representation of reality in their works, were another example. So was the literary work of Marcel Proust, who is said to have been inspired by Bergson in the conception of his six-volume novel, *Remembrance of Things Past*.)<sup>31</sup>

The first French movies, made by the Lumière brothers in 1895, were little more than filmed tableaux and playlets. Soon, however, Georges Méliès, who had started his career as a magician, discovered how to work magic with a camera. He pioneered the use of trick photography, producing images that startled audiences of the time. His films showed ghosts produced by double exposures, made people abruptly appear and disappear, and transformed objects from one thing to another. Méliès’s 1902 science fiction movie *A Trip to the Moon*, based on Jules Verne’s novel, remains a classic. The young Picasso was fascinated by the movies; he saw his first in Barcelona in 1896. From the time of his arrival in Paris he was an avid moviegoer. A recent exhibition of his work in conjunction with Méliès’s films showed the influence the Frenchman had on Picasso’s depiction of reality.<sup>32</sup>

Movies were, of course, another way of transcending space and time, for they could preserve and reproduce the images of past events. The Parisian Charles Pathé pioneered the first newsreels, which permitted theatergoers to view events of the day as if they had been eyewitnesses. (Because cameras could not always get to scenes in time to film the actual events, Pathé and his imitators often reenacted them with actors.) By 1913, Pathé owned the largest cinema in Paris, which included the world’s largest screen and a sixty-piece orchestra.

Léon Gaumont was one of the first filmmakers to discover that audiences would return on a regular basis if he divided his movie stories into installments, or serials. Crime stories, adventures, and even Wild West thrillers influenced by American novels drew enormous audiences to Paris’s theaters. The month after the theft of the *Mona Lisa*, Parisians were flocking to see *Zigomar*, the first of a series that pitted an archcriminal against the Paris police — inevitably concluding with the triumph of the forces of evil.

Jean-Paul Sartre recalled going to the movies with his mother as a child in Paris:

The show had begun. We would stumbingly follow the usherette. I would feel I was doing something clandestine. Above our heads, a shaft of light crossed the hall; one could see dust and vapor dancing in it. A piano whinnied away. Violet pears shone on the walls.... I would scrape my back against knees and take my place on a creaky seat. My mother would slide a folded blanket under my behind to raise me. Finally, I would look at the screen. I would see a fluorescent chalk and blinking landscapes streaked with showers; it always rained, even when the sun shone brightly, even in apartments. At times, an asteroid in flames would shoot across the drawing-room of a baroness without her seeming to be surprised. I liked that rain, that restless anxiety which played on the wall. The pianist would attack the overture to *Fingal’s Cave* and everyone understood that the criminal was about to appear: the baroness would be frightened out of her wits. But her beautiful, sooty face would make way for a purple show-card: “End of Part I.” I saw *Zigomar* and *Fantômas*, *The Exploits of Maciste*, *The Mysteries of New York*... As for me, I wanted to see the film *as close up as possible*.... I



was utterly content, I had found the world in which I wanted to live, I touched the absolute. ~~What an uneasy feeling when the lights went on: I had been wracked with love for the~~ characters and they had disappeared, carrying their world with them. I had felt their victory in my bones; yet it was theirs and not mine. In the street I found myself superfluous. <sup>33</sup>

Time was altered not only by speed but also by the erasure of night. The electrification of the city transformed Paris, obliterating old patterns in great washes of illumination. The impressionists had often taken their canvases and paints into the countryside and worked in the midst of nature under sunlight. Picasso, on the other hand, liked to sleep during the day and paint at night by artificial light. He was far from alone in his after-midnight activities.

Though electricity could illuminate a city, it was itself invisible, one of a number of unseen forces scientists were now discovering. Radio waves could send a message across a continent; X-rays could expose the inside of the body; and radioactivity had other, not yet fully understood, powers. Picasso and his fellow artists were aware that these scientific discoveries were changing the world and that art would have to change with them. In 1840, the invention of photography by two Frenchmen had doomed the academic artists who sought to portray the world as it appeared to the eye: now any photographer could do that perfectly. There was a growing awareness that artists would have to uncover a deeper reality beneath the everyday appearances of things. Maurice Maeterlinck, a Belgian playwright living in Paris, wrote, “There lies a vast ocean of the Unconscious, the unknown source of all that is good, true and beautiful. All that I know, think, feel, see and will are but bubbles on the surface of this vast sea.” <sup>34</sup> Paris was filled with people floating on that sea, searching.

## V

For all its gaiety and progress, there were still dark shadows in the City of Light. The Third Republic, the current national government, had been born in the midst of the tragedy and humiliation of the Franco-Prussian War. When the Prussian army defeated the forces of Napoleon III at Sedan in northeastern France on September 2, 1870, it brought a crashing and ignominious end to France’s Second Empire. In the span of less than a century, France had experienced eight different forms of government. <sup>35</sup> Now, a provisional leadership in Paris declared the establishment of a republic — France’s third. Its prospects seemed bleak. As sporadic resistance continued in the countryside, the Prussian army surrounded the capital and laid siege to it. Starvation and bombardment took their toll and the government had no choice but to agree to harsh terms for an armistice. Parisians had to endure the sight of German soldiers marching down the Champs-Élysées; the government agreed to pay a large indemnity and, worst of all, to give up entirely the French provinces of Alsace and Lorraine. These were humiliations that the French never forgot.

The conditions of peace angered the populace, particularly in Paris. On March 18, 1871, as a precautionary measure, the head of the French government, Adolphe Thiers, sent troops to take back the cannons set on the heights of Montmartre. They met with resistance and two of the soldiers were killed. Workers in Paris, joining forces with some National Guard troops stationed in the city, set up revolutionary municipal government called the Commune. Its goals were to carry on the war with Germany and to return to the revolutionary principles of 1793. Friction between the government in

Versailles and the Commune in Paris broke into a bloody conflict marked by atrocities on both sides. The national army entered Paris on May 21, 1871, fighting its way through the city streets until the Communards made their last stand in the Père Lachaise Cemetery, in the center of working-class Belleville. The defenders were shot down among the tombs of French luminaries. Remembered as *la semaine sanglante* or Bloody Week, the urban battle caused death and destruction on a wide scale.

As the army tightened its hold on the city, the Communards killed the archbishop of Paris and wreaked vengeance on such landmarks as the Hôtel de Ville, Tuileries Palace, the Prefecture of Police and expensive houses along the rue de Rivoli. The victorious army was far more ferocious, carrying out mass executions that made the Seine River run red with blood. The smell of burning bodies wafted through the city. Between twenty thousand and twenty-five thousand Communards were slaughtered and even more sent to penal colonies in Guiana and New Caledonia. The carnage on both sides and its legacy of hatred would haunt the Third Republic for decades.

The first goal of the government was to repair the material damage to the city. By the end of the decade, this was accomplished. Paris had sought to demonstrate its recovery by staging a World's Fair in 1878; a second, in 1889, added the Eiffel Tower to the city skyline. Ironically, its construction had been vehemently opposed by French intellectuals, who only relented on condition that the tower be demolished after a certain period. (Fortunately, it proved useful as a place from which radio transmissions could be sent overseas, so it was spared.) More controversial was the white-domed Basilica of Sacre-Coeur, which was built at the top of Montmartre as atonement for the violence of the Communards. Construction began in 1876 and did not end until just before World War I. Those who lived in Montmartre, most of whom were sympathetic to the memory of the Communards, resented the structure.

## vi

More than most cities, Paris retained the memory of revolutions. In 1789, 1793, 1848, and 1871, Parisians had sacrificed their lives to overturn the established order — and, for a time, succeeded in doing so. The words “Liberté, égalité, fraternité” carved on buildings and monuments were a continual reminder of the ideals of the city’s revolutionary past, and by the turn of the twentieth century, many still felt these were goals that had yet to be fully realized. At sidewalk cafés and in shadowy meeting halls, people engaged in heated debates about politics and philosophy. These were by no means theoretical discussions. Parisians understood that ideas could be turned into action.

Among the most ardent of the would-be revolutionaries were those who espoused anarchism. The idea that the state — -government itself — is responsible for most of humankind’s problems has deep roots in the French psyche. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the Swiss-born philosopher whose ideas formed the underpinnings of the French Revolution, idealized the “natural man” who needed no government to enforce his proper conduct. (Rousseau, however, fell short of opposing government altogether.) The first French thinker to discuss what he termed “anarchism” was Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, in his 1840 work *Qu’est-ce que la propriété?* (*What Is Property?*). His short answer: “Property is theft.” Though Proudhon did not advocate the abolition of private property and did find a place for government in his ideal society (a national bank, for example, would finance workers’ projects), his slogan appealed particularly to those who wanted a drastic leveling of social classes and an end to government that served to protect the wealthy.

The most prominent anarchist of the mid-nineteenth century was Mikhail Bakunin, a Russian émigré who had met Proudhon and tried to turn the Frenchman's ideas into action. Bakunin took part in the rebellions in Paris in 1848 and Dresden in 1849. Imprisoned, he escaped and joined other Russian agitators in London, where he initiated ambitious schemes for worldwide anarchist revolutions. (Interestingly, he bitterly quarreled with Karl Marx, because Bakunin believed Marxist revolutions would increase the power of governments over their people — a prediction that proved correct.) Bakunin's writings were not subtle or difficult to understand. He wrote: "The revolutionary a man under vow. He ought to occupy himself entirely with one exclusive passion: the Revolution.... He has only one aim, one science: destruction.... Between him and society, there is war to the death, incessant, irreconcilable." <sup>36</sup> Bakunin died in 1876, but his ideas remained influential, and anarchism grew into a force that was widely feared by those who had an investment in the established order.

Anarchism exploded on the scene in the 1890s in Paris and in other European cities. Its adherents called bomb throwing the "propaganda of the deed." In Paris, a new reign of terror started in 1891, when workers protesting low pay marched under the black anarchist banner on May Day. This led to fighting between the police and anarchists in the Clichy section of Montmartre. Three marchers were arrested and one was sent to prison. In retaliation for the arrests, on March 11, 1892, bombs were set off at the house of the judge who had sentenced the protesters. A few days later another bomb went off at the house of the public prosecutor who had pressed the case. The chief culprit, a man named Ravachol, was captured largely through the efforts of Alphonse Bertillon, chief of the Service of Judicial Identity of the Paris police. Bertillon had developed a system of identifying suspects based on measurements of their faces and bodies and had introduced other scientific crime-fighting techniques. Ravachol's capture, however, made Bertillon a household name.

Even so, the violence continued when an anarchist named Auguste Vaillant struck inside the Chamber of Deputies in December 1893. Vaillant had gone to the Chamber with a bomb, intending to kill the premier of France and the president of the Chamber. But when he hurled his explosive device from the public gallery, a female spectator jostled his arm and the bomb hit a pillar, sending a shower of plaster and nails onto the floor, wounding many deputies and spectators.

Two months later, Émile Henry set off a bomb in a hotel café. It ripped through the crowd, killing one person and wounding twenty others. Running from the scene, Henry shot at a pursuing policeman but stumbled and was caught. Both Vaillant and Henry were convicted and guillotined. Nevertheless, Paris remained in a state of siege, with residents looking suspiciously at any package.

The greatest outrage of the anarchists was the assassination of French president Marie-François-Sadi Carnot in 1894. This time the culprit was an Italian named Sante Caserio, who had been booted from his homeland for distributing anarchist pamphlets. When he learned that Sadi Carnot was to go to Lyons to open the Colonial Exhibit, Caserio decided to assassinate him there. On June 24, as the president rode by in his carriage, Caserio pushed his way through the crowd, carrying a knife. While the noise of celebratory fireworks distracted the president's security guards, Caserio lunged inside the carriage and stabbed the president in the stomach. Shouting, "Vive l'Anarchie!" the assassin tried to run away, but spectators captured him and turned him over to the police. Caserio was unrepentant, declaring from his cell, "I am an anarchist and I have struck the Head of State. I've done it as I would have killed any king or emperor, of no matter what nationality." <sup>37</sup> Though his lawyers argued that he was insane and should not get the death penalty, he was guillotined on August 16.

Despite the violence and outrages, many artists and writers sympathized with anarchism, feeling that they shared the anarchists' aim of breaking down society's repressive rules. The cafés of Montmartre were particular hotbeds of support; entertainers there sometimes glorified the anarchists

in song. Maxime Lisbonne, a former Communard who had returned from New Caledonia in 1880, ran a cabaret where the doors had bars, the tables were chained to the floor, and the waiters were dressed as galley slaves, dragging shackles behind them as they served customers. Lisbonne tried to take advantage of the anarchist outrages by advertising that his establishment was “the sole Concert sheltered from the Bombs.” <sup>38</sup> This claim in fact brought to his establishment a slew of police informers who filed regular reports about the goings-on there.

Another cabaret associated with anarchism was Le Zut, owned by Frédéric “Frédé” Gérard and affiliated with the anarchist paper *Le Libéraire*. It was one of Picasso’s favorite hangouts in his early years in Paris, and he decorated its walls with murals. After police shut down that establishment, Frédéric went on to open a new place, which became famous as Le Lapin Agile. (Previously it had been called the Cabaret of Assassins because portraits of murderers were hung on the walls.) The new name came from a pun on the name of the sign painter André Gill, who painted over the entrance a rabbit hopping out of a stew pot (*le lapin à Gill*). Le Lapin Agile became a gathering place for anarchists and criminals as well as the artists and poets who patronized it for the cheap Burgundian food. Here, as late as 1910, informers were reporting on the anarchist clientele. In 1911, the owner’s son was gunned down on the threshold of the café. His murderer was never found.

Anarchist newspapers continued to be published, and antigovernment sentiments remained active. In 1911, a Russian émigré named Victor Kibalchich, later known as Victor Serge, took over editorship of the newspaper *l’anarchie* and urged his comrades to resume the active struggle to overturn the state. His words caused a spark that would burst into flame when they reached Jules Bonnot, a one-time chauffeur. A series of disappointments in love and in his career had embittered him, and he had turned to stealing the cars of wealthy people. Now, embracing anarchism, he would make his own contribution to automotive history and become for a time the most feared criminal in France.

## vii

Though Paris grew and prospered, the national government was perennially unstable. Unsure of how long the Third Republic would last, Parisians believed, in the words of one, that they were “dancing on a volcano.” <sup>39</sup>

The execution of President Sadi Carnot’s assassin was soon followed by the most severe internal crisis France faced during the Third Republic. The false accusation of a Jewish military officer for treason, known as the Dreyfus affair, divided the nation into bitterly opposed camps for years. It began in September 1894, when Major Hubert-Joseph Henry of the French intelligence service came into possession of a document that had been taken from a wastebasket at the German embassy. It was a note, afterward referred to as the *bordereau*, which indicated that someone in the French army apparently had provided the Germans with important information about French military plans. The type of information described in the *bordereau* implied that the traitorous informant had to be an artillery officer on the general staff of the army.

That brought Captain Alfred Dreyfus under suspicion, on no grounds other than the fact that he fit that general description and that his handwriting was said to have resembled that on the *bordereau*. More important, Dreyfus was a Jew — a rarity at such an elevated rank — and his colleagues did not like him. France was experiencing an upsurge in anti-Semitism around this time. Despite the fact that there were only about 85,000 Jews in a French population of 39 million, <sup>40</sup> anti-Semites blamed them

for many of the country's problems. The accusation against Dreyfus played directly into this metastasizing intolerance.

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Military officials seeking to build a case against Dreyfus had asked Alfred Gobert, the handwriting expert of the Bank of France, to compare the handwriting on the incriminating *bordereau* with samples of Captain Dreyfus's writing. Gobert reported that although the two writing samples were "of the same graphic type," they "presented numerous and important disparities which had to be taken into account."<sup>41</sup> He concluded that the *bordereau* had been written by someone other than Dreyfus. This did not satisfy the military, which began to look for a second opinion. Prefect of Police Louis Lépine recommended Alphonse Bertillon, France's best-known expert on crime. Since he had identified and helped convict the anarchist Ravachol two years earlier, Bertillon's reputation had only increased. Police forces throughout Europe, the United States, and Latin America were keeping records of criminals and suspects according to Bertillon's identification system.

Unfortunately, Bertillon had no expertise as a handwriting expert, but at the urging of his chief, he acted as if he did — thus stepping into a morass from which his reputation never recovered. He pronounced his own judgment after a single day of examining the handwriting on the *bordereau*: "If the hypothesis of a document forged with the utmost care is eliminated, it appears clear to us that it was the same person who wrote the various items submitted and the incriminating document."<sup>42</sup>

In court, during Dreyfus's initial court-martial, Bertillon's testimony was far from compelling, for he tended to speak in a convoluted manner, complete with charts and diagrams that seemed dauntingly confusing. Moreover, the defense produced experts who contradicted his conclusion. By now, openly anti-Semitic publications, notably *La Parole Libre*, edited by the notorious bigot Édouard Drumont, had inflamed the public with their declarations that Dreyfus was a traitor. It was clear that if he were *not* convicted, the heads of those who accused him would roll. Desperate, Major Henry and others forged documents that added to the weight of "evidence" against the defendant. These were presented secretly to the judges, with the caution that "national security" would be compromised if they became public. Bertillon had no role in the forgery, but because he was the chief prop of the prosecution's case, he would eventually be tarred by the dishonorable conduct of those who sought to pillory Dreyfus.

The court, influenced by the forgeries, sentenced Dreyfus to a life term in the French penal colony at Devil's Island. But that was only the beginning of the Dreyfus affair. His brother and wife never ceased their efforts to clear his name, even while he sat in an isolated hut inside a walled compound off the coast of South America. In July 1895, Major Marie-Georges Picquart became chief of the Intelligence Bureau of the army and found that Germany was still receiving secret information, apparently from a French officer, Major Ferdinand Esterhazy. When Picquart reported this discovery to his superiors, he was reassigned to Africa to get him out of the way. Relentlessly, he continued to press the case against Esterhazy, who demanded a court-martial to prove himself innocent. He was, indeed, acquitted by the military judges, prompting the novelist and journalist Émile Zola to write "J'accuse," an open letter to the president of France, denouncing those who had conspired against Dreyfus. The minister of war successfully sued Zola, forcing him to leave the country.

By now, Esterhazy's handwriting had been compared to that on the *bordereau*, and the resemblance seemed compelling. France was divided into two warring camps: pro- and anti-Dreyfusard. Anti-Semitic mobs in the streets, urged on by demagogues, chanted "Death to the Jews!" Even some of those who doubted Dreyfus's guilt worried that the French army's prestige would suffer an irreparable blow should his conviction be reversed. Some asked whether reviewing the conviction of one innocent man was worth weakening the nation's security at a time when many feared that a new war with



Germany was imminent.

But Dreyfus's defenders were encouraged when Henry (by then promoted to lieutenant colonel) committed suicide after his forgeries were discovered; Esterhazy then fled the country. At last, in August 1899, the government yielded to public pressure and brought Dreyfus back from Devil's Island for another court-martial.

The military judges were determined to uphold the honor of the army; unfortunately, they saw honor only in clinging to what had clearly been discredited. Most onlookers were astonished by the verdict: once again, Dreyfus was found guilty, but this time with "extenuating circumstances," as if there could be extenuating circumstances for treason. The president of France offered him a full pardon, which Dreyfus accepted, while continuing the legal efforts to prove his innocence. A civilian court cleared Dreyfus of all charges in 1906, and by an act of the French Parliament, he was reinstated to the army and decorated with the Légion d'honneur.

The wounds of the Dreyfus affair were far from healed, however, and Bertillon in particular felt anguish, with good reason, that his own reputation had been damaged. He saw the theft of the *Mona Lisa* as a chance to show that he was still, as many believed, France's premier criminal investigator.

## viii

Parisians were both fascinated and terrified by crime and criminals, *le prestige du mal*. Sensational accounts of the most lurid crimes thrilled readers of the mass-circulation newspapers. Supposedly true crime stories, called *faits divers*, and serialized novels, the *feuilletons*, were popular features of any newspaper wanting to attract readers. The historian Ann-Louise Shapiro has commented, "The culture seemed saturated with accounts of sensational crimes and infamous criminals. Mass-circulation newspapers entertained a wide popular audience with criminal stories, even as crime became the focus of scientific inquiry and the subject of articles that moved... out of professional journals into more popular formats and general social criticism. Medical and legal experts as well as professionalizing social scientists began to think of crime as a mirror held up to society, exposing the tendencies of the day writ large." <sup>43</sup> During the years 1906–8, the death penalty had been suspended for the first time in more than a hundred years, but the ban created such anxiety among the populace that it had to be reversed. Guillotinings, traditionally held in public, were so popular that even when officials held them at inconvenient times and without publicity, mobs of spectators still showed up.

The courtrooms were packed with spectators when the juicy trials of famous criminals were on the docket. People went to the morgue to look at corpses, sometimes to guess the identity of unknown victims. An underground railway carried groups of tourists through the city sewer system, which had been made famous by Victor Hugo in *Les misérables* and was in real life often used as a hiding place for criminals. Wealthy residents of Paris's fashionable Right Bank headed up the slope of Montmartre for a *frisson*, or thrill, as they rubbed shoulders with the dangerous criminal and lower classes. Cabaret singers sang of characters such as pimps, streetwalkers, and tramps. Sprinkled among the audience were real crooks, prostitutes, and pimps.

The French loved gossip and scandal, and Paris's numerous daily newspapers catered to their needs, though some tales were too hot even for the scandal sheets to repeat. Meg Japy, a twenty-one-year-old from the provinces, had married Adolphe Steinheil, an artist who was twenty years older. Steinheil was not an avant-garde artist like Picasso; each year he managed to have one of his canvases

accepted for display in the Salon, the government-sponsored exhibition of art that had acquired a stamp of approval marking it as culturally stifling. Nor was Adolphe exciting in bed, but Meg, beautiful and vivacious, found it easy to attract other lovers. Her husband consoled himself with the fact that his wife's paramours were generally men of wealth and power, who graciously purchased some of Adolphe's works, enabling the Steinheils to maintain a well-to-do lifestyle in Paris.

Meg eventually reached the pinnacle of her particular form of art: she became the mistress of Félix Faure, the president of France. At fifty-eight, Faure was twice her age, but as a connoisseur of feminine beauty, he remained a devotee of the *cinq à sept* — the traditional late afternoon tryst. And Meg, according to Maurice Paléologue, an official in the foreign office, “was expert at shaking men by the loins.” [44](#)

Late in the afternoon of February 16, 1899, Meg slipped through a side door of the Élysée Palace for a rendezvous with Faure in a room known as the Blue Salon. Sometime later, the president's male secretary heard cries that sounded more like signals of distress than of passion. He investigated to find Meg naked and Faure dead, with his fingers gripping her hair so tightly that she could not get free. Paris gossips later supplied the detail that she had been administering oral sex when the strain proved too much for Faure's heart. Servants were able to release Meg by cutting her hair and quickly spirited her away as a priest was brought in to belatedly administer the last rites.

Because Faure had been a determined anti-Dreyfusard, resolutely refusing all demands for a retrial of the imprisoned officer, his death was rumored to have been part of a conspiracy. By one account, he had been killed in a far more sinister and deliberate fashion; by another, his mistress had stolen some papers relating to the Dreyfus case from the president's office.

To those who knew the truth, none of this did anything to hurt Meg's reputation. She continued hosting her weekly salon at the four-story house on a cul-de-sac called the impasse Ronsin, where she and her husband lived. She might thus have continued for the rest of her life, taking occasional lovers and living off her reputation. But Meg was destined to burst into the headlines soon in her own right, as the defendant in a double murder trial that fully satisfied the public's appetite for scandal and intrigue.

A similar fate awaited the new bride of the man who was premier of France at the time the *Mona Lisa* was stolen. Henriette Rainouard Claretie had obtained a divorce from her first husband three years earlier, in 1908, after a fourteen-year marriage. After a decent interval, she expected to marry her lover, the rising politician Joseph Caillaux. Caillaux, however, found it difficult to obtain an amicable parting from the woman he was already married to (and who had also divorced a husband to marry him), and he did not press the issue until after he had attained the ultimate political prize, the post of premier of France, in June 1911. Four months later he made Henriette an honest woman — but unfortunately, not quite a respectable one.

It was unusual for French politicians to divorce and remarry. It was socially acceptable for them to take lovers, even long-term ones, but they were not supposed to elevate their mistresses' status to wife. Moreover, Caillaux's first wife, though agreeing to a divorce, had found and kept some incriminating letters that her husband and Henriette had exchanged during their illicit affair. When hints of these started to appear in a prominent newspaper, Henriette feared the correspondence itself would appear in print. She took drastic action and in so doing became the star of the era's most spectacular murder trial, in which politics played a major role and the murder victim was even accused of causing his own death.

Parisians had a particular love-hate obsession with the apaches, or young gangsters, who made their headquarters in Belleville, on the Right Bank. <sup>45</sup> From that neighborhood, the apaches emerged to terrorize citizens on the central boulevards of the city. They specialized in violent tactics, using sudden kicks, sucker punches, and head butts as a prelude to robbing victims. (A crime reporter, Arthur Dupin of *Le Journal*, had coined the term *apache* in 1902 because the gangs' fierce tactics and violence resembled the French image of the Apache Indians in battle.) Soon the menace of *apachism* appeared to be the greatest threat to normal life in Paris.

A typical apache crime could start with a thug asking a potential victim for a light and tipping his hat. If the victim put his hand in his pocket, the apache would throw the hat in his face and head-butt him. Sometimes the attacker pulled the victim's jacket over his face to blind him. Some worked with a pretty female, a *gigolette*, serving as a foil. While she engaged the victim in conversation, the male would come up behind with a scarf and loop it around the victim's neck. Newspapers printed detailed accounts of the apaches' methods, increasing the public's fears of being accosted.

The apaches differed from ordinary street thugs by their lifestyle, which included distinctive clothing, argot, and even a dance. Similar to the tango and imitative of street fighting, the apache dance was sometimes dubbed the Dance of the Underworld. Because of its violent nature, in which the female partner is literally thrown around, it was popular as an exhibition dance. Upper-class Parisians enjoyed watching it performed in the cafés around Montparnasse and in dance halls called *musettes*. Adventurous tourists sometimes made a visit to a *musette* a part of their Paris experience. Bored upper-class women would pay an apache dance partner for a half hour's whirl around the floor — usually a toned-down version of the real thing.

Off the dance floor, entertainers sentimentalized the apaches' fatalism about life and love. Yvette Guilbert, the star of the Moulin Rouge, performed a popular song, "My Head," in which an apache defiantly contemplates his future, which must end on the guillotine in a perverse kind of triumph:

*I'll have to wait, pale and dead beat,  
For the supreme moment of the guillotine,  
When one fine day they'll say to me:  
It's going to be this morning, ready yourself;  
I'll go out and the crowd will cheer  
My head!* <sup>46</sup>

Parisians' appetite for entertainment that reflected their fascination with the underworld found its fullest satisfaction at the Théâtre du Grand-Guignol. Located at the end of Montmartre's rue Chaptal, the tiny theater presented a series of short, gruesome plays each night, alternating comedy and horror. The fare was not for the squeamish, for the creators of the Grand-Guignol brought incredible realism to grotesque special effects, regaling audiences with stabbings, ax murders, gouged-out eyes, torture, acid throwing, amputations, mutilation, and rape. Indeed, there was no outrage that the Grand-Guignol shrank from attempting to depict. Because of the theater's small size, the spectators were often sprayed with "blood" as well.

Oscar Méténier, a former secretary to the police commissioner of Paris, was the theater's founder



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