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Murder on the Leviathan

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Extract

From Commissioner Gauche's black file

Record of an examination of the scene of the crime carried out on the evening of 15 March 1878 in the mansion of Lord Littleby on the rue de Grenelle (7th arrondissement of the city of Paris) [A brief extract]

. . . For reasons unknown all the household staff were gathered in the pantry, which is located on the ground floor of the mansion to the left of the entrance hall (room 3 on diagram 1). The precise locations of the bodies are indicated on diagram 4, in which:

No. 1 is the body of the butler, Étienne Delarue, age 48 years
No. 2 is the body of the housekeeper, Laura Bernard, age 54 years
No. 3 is the body of the master's manservant, Marcel Prout, age 28 years
No. 4 is the body of the butler's son, Luc Delarue, age 11 years
No. 5 is the body of the maid, Arlette Foche, age 19 years
No. 6 is the body of the housekeeper's granddaughter, Anne-Marie Bernard, age 6 years
No. 7 is the position of the security guard Jean Lesage, age 42 years, who died in the St-Lazare hospital on the morning of 16 March without regaining consciousness
No. 8 is the body of the security guard Patrick Trois-Bras, age 29 years
No. 9 is the body of the porter, Jean Carpentier, age 40 years.

The bodies shown as Nos. 1–6 are in sitting positions around the large kitchen table. Nos. 1–3 are frozen with their heads lowered

onto their crossed arms, No. 4 is resting his cheek on his hands, No. 5 is reclining against the back of the chair and No. 6 is in a kneeling position beside No. 2. The faces of Nos. 1–6 are calm, without any indication whatever of fear or suffering. On the other hand, Nos. 7–9, as the diagram shows, are lying at a distance from the table and No. 7 is holding a whistle in his hand. However, none of the neighbours heard the sound of a whistle yesterday evening. The faces of No. 8 and No. 9 are set in expressions of horror, or at the very least of extreme consternation (photographs will be provided tomorrow morning). There are no signs of a struggle. A rapid examination also failed to reveal any sign of injury to the bodies. The cause of death cannot be determined without a post-mortem. From the degree of rigor mortis the forensic medical specialist Maître Bernhem determined that death occurred at various times between ten o'clock in the evening (No. 6) and six o'clock in the morning, while No. 7, as stated above, died later in hospital. Anticipating the results of the medical examination, I venture to surmise that all of the victims were exposed to a potent and fast-acting poison inducing a narcotic effect, and the time at which their hearts stopped beating depended either on the dose of poison received or the physical strength of each of the victims.

The front door of the mansion was closed but not locked. However, the window of the conservatory (item 8 on diagram 1) bears clear indications of a forced entry: the glass is broken and on the narrow strip of loose cultivated soil below it there is the indistinct imprint of a man's shoe with a sole 26 centimetres in length, a pointed toe and a steel-shod heel (photographs will be provided). The felon probably gained entry to the house via the garden only after the servants had been poisoned and sank into slumber, otherwise they would certainly have heard the sound of breaking glass. It remains unclear, however, why, after the servants had been rendered harmless, the perpetrator found it necessary to enter the house through the garden, when he could quite easily have walked through into the house from the pantry. In any event, the perpetrator made his way from

the conservatory up to the second floor, where Lord Littleby's personal apartments are located (see diagram 2). As the diagram shows, the left-hand section of the second floor consists of only two rooms: a hall, which houses a collection of Indian curios, and the master's bedroom, which communicates directly with the hall. Lord Littleby's body is indicated on diagram 2 as No. 10 (see also the outline drawing). His Lordship was dressed in a smoking jacket and woollen pantaloons and his right foot was heavily bandaged. An initial examination of the body indicates that death occurred as a result of an extraordinarily powerful blow to the parietal region of the skull with a heavy, oblong-shaped object. The blow was inflicted from the front. The carpet is spattered with blood and brain tissue to a distance of several metres from the body. Likewise spattered with blood is a broken glass display case which, according to its nameplate, previously contained a statuette of the Indian god Shiva (the inscription on the nameplate reads: 'Bangalore, 2nd half XVIII century, gold'). The missing sculpture was displayed against a background of painted Indian shawls, one of which is also missing.

From the report by Dr Bernhem on the results of pathological and anatomical examination of the bodies removed from the rue de Grenelle

. . . however, whereas the cause of Lord Littleby's death (body No. 10) is clear and the only aspect which may be regarded as unusual is the force of the blow, which shattered the cranium into seven fragments, in the case of Nos. 1–9 the picture was less obvious, requiring not only a post-mortem but in addition chemical analyses and laboratory investigation. The task was simplified to some extent by the fact that J. Lesage (No. 7) was still alive when he was initially examined and certain typical indications (pinhole pupils, suppressed breathing, cold clammy skin, rubefaction of the lips and the ear lobes) indicated a presumptive diagnosis of morphine poisoning. Unfortunately, during the initial examination at the scene of the crime we had proceeded on the apparently obvious assumption that the poison had been ingested orally, and therefore only the victims' oral cavities and glottises were subjected to detailed scrutiny. Since no pathological indications were discovered, the forensic examination was unable to provide any conclusive answers. It was only during examination in the morgue that each of the nine deceased was discovered to possess a barely visible injection puncture on the inner flexion of the left elbow. Although it lies outside my sphere of competence, I can venture with reasonable certainty the hypothesis that the injections were administered by a person with considerable experience in such procedures: 1) the injections were administered with great skill and precision, not one of the subjects bore any visible signs of haematoma; 2) since the normal interval before narcotic coma ensues is three minutes, all nine injections must have been administered within that period of time. Either there were several operatives involved (which is unlikely), or a single operative possessing truly remarkable skill – even if we are to assume that he had prepared a loaded syringe for each victim in advance. Indeed, it is hard to imagine that a person in full possession of

his faculties would offer his arm for an injection if he had just witnessed someone else lose consciousness as a result of the procedure. Admittedly, my assistant Maître Jolie believes that all of these people could have been in a state of hypnotic trance, but in all my years in this line of work I have never encountered anything of the sort. Let me also draw the commissioner's attention to the fact that Nos. 7–9 were lying on the floor in poses clearly expressive of panic. I assume that these three were the last to receive the injection (or that they offered greater resistance to the narcotic) and that before they lost consciousness they realized that something suspicious was happening to their companions. Laboratory analysis has demonstrated that each of the victims received a dose of morphine approximately three times in excess of the lethal threshold. Judging from the condition of the body of the little girl (No. 6), who must have been the first to die, the injections were administered between nine and ten o'clock on the evening of 15 March.

TEN LIVES FOR A GOLDEN IDOL!

Nightmare crime in fashionable district

Today, 16 March, all of Paris is talking of nothing but the spine-chilling crime which has shattered the decorous tranquillity of the aristocratic rue de Grenelle. The Revue parisienne*'s correspondent was quick to arrive at the scene of the crime and is prepared to satisfy the legitimate curiosity of our readers.*

And so, this morning as usual, shortly after seven o'clock, postman Jacques Le Chien rang the doorbell of the elegant two-storey mansion belonging to the well-known British collector Lord Littleby. M. Le Chien was surprised when the porter Carpentier, who always took in the post for his Lordship in person, failed to open up, and noticing that the entrance door was slightly ajar, he stepped into the hallway. A few moments later the 70-year-old veteran of the postal service ran back out onto the street, howling wildly. Upon being summoned to the house, the police discovered a scene from the kingdom of Hades – seven servants and two children (the 11-year-old son of the butler and the six-year-old granddaughter of the housekeeper) lay in the embrace of eternal slumber. The police ascended the stairs to the second floor and there they discovered the master of the house, Lord Littleby, lying in a pool of blood, murdered in the very repository which housed his celebrated collection of oriental rarities. The 55-year-old Englishman was well known in the highest social circles of our capital. Despite his reputation as an eccentric and unsociable individual, archaeological scholars and orientalists respected Lord Littleby as a genuine connoisseur of Indian history and culture. Repeated attempts by the directors of the Louvre to purchase items from the lord's diverse collection had been disdainfully rejected. The deceased prized especially highly a golden statuette of Shiva, the value of which is estimated by competent experts to be at least half a million francs. A deeply mistrustful man, Lord Littleby was very much afraid of thieves, and two armed guards were on duty in the repository by day and night.

It is not clear why the guards left their post and went down to the ground floor. Nor is it clear what mysterious power the malefactor was able to employ in order to subjugate all of the in-

habitants of the house to his will without the slightest resistance (the police suspect that use was made of some quick-acting poison). It is clear, however, that he did not expect to find the master of the house himself at home, and his fiendish calculations were evidently thwarted. No doubt we should see in this the explanation for the bestial ferocity with which the venerable collector was slain. The murderer apparently fled the scene of the crime in panic, taking only the statuette and one of the painted shawls displayed in the same case. The shawl was evidently required to wrap the golden Shiva – otherwise the bright lustre of the sculpture might have attracted the attention of some late-night passer-by. Other valuables (of which the collection contains a goodly number) remained untouched. Your correspondent has ascertained that Lord Littleby was at home yesterday by chance, through a fatal confluence of circumstances. He had been due to depart that evening in order to take the waters, but a sudden attack of gout resulted in his trip being postponed – and condemned him to death.

The immense blasphemy and cynicism of the murders on the rue de Grenelle defy the imagination. What contempt for human life! What monstrous cruelty! And for what? For a golden idol which it is now impossible to sell! If melted down the Shiva will be transformed into an ordinary two kilogram ingot of gold. A mere 200 grams of yellow metal, such is the value placed by the criminal on each of the ten souls who have perished. Well may we exclaim after Cicero: *O tempora! O mores!*

There is, however, reason to believe that this supremely heinous crime will not go unpunished. That most experienced of detectives at the Paris préfecture, M. Gustave Gauche, to whom the investigation has been entrusted, has confidentially informed your correspondent that the police are in possession of a certain important piece of evidence. The commissioner is absolutely certain that retribution will be swift. When asked whether the crime was committed by a member of the professional fraternity of thieves, M. Gauche smiled slyly into his grey moustaches and enigmatically replied: 'Oh no, young man, the thread here leads into good society.' Your humble servant was unable to extract so much as another word from him.

J. du Roi

WHAT A CATCH!

The golden Shiva is found! Was the 'Crime of the Century' on the rue de Grenelle the work of a madman?

Yesterday, 17 March, between five o'clock and six o'clock in the afternoon, 13-year-old Pierre B. was fishing by the Pont des Invalides when his hook became snagged so firmly at the bottom of the river that he was obliged to wade into the cold water. ('I'm not so stupid as to just throw away a genuine English hook!' the young fisherman told our reporter.) Pierre's valour was richly rewarded: the hook had not caught on some common tree root but on a weighty object half buried in the silt. Once extracted from the water the object shone with an unearthly splendour, blinding the eyes of the astonished fisherman. Pierre's father, a retired sergeant and veteran of the Battle of Sedan, guessed that it must be the famous golden Shiva for which ten people had been killed only two days earlier, and he handed in the find at the préfecture.

What are we to make of this? For some reason a criminal who did not baulk at the cold-blooded and deliberate murder of so many people has chosen not to profit from the spoils of his monstrous initiative! Police investigators and public alike have been left guessing in the dark. The public appears inclined to believe that belated pangs of conscience must have led the murderer, aghast at the horror of his awful deed, to cast the golden idol into the river. Many go so far as to surmise that the miserable wretch also drowned himself somewhere close at hand. The police, however, are less romantically inclined and they discern clear indications of insanity in the inconsistency of the criminal's actions.

Shall we ever learn the true background to this nightmarish and unfathomable case?

A bevy of Parisian beauties

A series of 20 photocards forwarded cash on delivery for a price of 3 fr. 99 cent., including the cost of postage. A unique offer! Hurry – this is a limited edition! Paris, rue Cuypel, 'Patoux et fils' printing house.

PART ONE

Port Said to Aden

Commissioner Gauche

At Port Said a new passenger had boarded the *Leviathan*, occupying stateroom No. 18, the last first-class cabin still vacant, and Gustave Gauche's humour had immediately improved. This newcomer looked highly promising: that self-assured and unhurried way of carrying himself, that inscrutable expression on the handsome face which at first glance appeared altogether young, until the subject removed his bowler hat, unexpectedly revealing hair greying at the temples. A curious specimen, the commissioner decided. It was clear straight away that he had character and what they call *a past*. All in all, definitely a potential client for papa Gauche.

The passenger walked up the gangway swinging his holdall while the porters sweated as they struggled under the weight of his ample baggage: expensive squeaky suitcases, high-class pigskin travelling bags, voluminous bundles of books and even a folding tricycle (one large wheel, two small ones and a bundle of gleaming metal tubes). Bringing up the rear came two poor devils lugging an imposing set of gymnastic weights.

Gauche's heart, the heart of an old sleuth (as the commissioner himself was fond of testifying), had thrilled to the lure of the hunt when this newcomer proved to have no golden badge – neither on the silk lapel of his dandified summer coat, nor on his jacket, nor on his watch chain. Warmer now, very warm, thought Gauche as he vigilantly scrutinized the fop from beneath his bushy brows and puffed on his favourite clay pipe. But of course, why had he, old dunderhead that he was, assumed that the murderer would definitely board the steamship at Southampton? The crime was committed on 15 March and today was already 1 April. It would have been

perfectly easy to reach Port Said while the *Leviathan* was rounding the western contour of Europe. And there you had it, everything fitted: clearly the right kind of character for a client, plus a first-class ticket, plus the most important thing – no golden whale.

For some time now Gauche's dreams had been haunted by that accursed badge with the acronym for the steamship company of the Jasper–Artaud Partnership, and without exception his dreams had been uncommonly bad ones. Take the most recent case, for instance.

The commissioner was out boating with Mme Gauche in the Bois de Boulogne. The sun was shining high in the sky and the birds were twittering in the trees. Suddenly a gigantic golden face with inanely goggling eyes loomed up over the treetops, opened cavernous jaws that could have accommodated the Arc de Triomphe with ease, and began sucking in the pond. Gauche broke into a sweat and laid into the oars. Meanwhile it transpired that events were not taking place in the park at all, but in the middle of a boundless ocean. The oars buckled like straws, Mme Gauche was jabbing him painfully in the back with her umbrella, and an immense gleaming carcass blotted out the entire horizon. When it spouted a fountain that eclipsed half the sky, the commissioner woke up and began fumbling around on his bedside table with trembling fingers – where were his pipe and those matches?

Gauche had first laid eyes on the golden whale on the rue de Grenelle when he was examining Lord Littleby's mortal remains. The Englishman lay there with his open mouth frozen in a soundless scream – his false teeth had come halfway out and his forehead was crowned by a bloody soufflé. Gauche squatted down on his haunches: he thought he had spotted a glint of gold between the corpse's fingers. Taking a closer look, he chortled in delight. Here was a stroke of uncommonly good luck, the kind that only occurred in crime novels. The helpful corpse had literally handed the investigation an important clue – and not even on a plate, but on the palm of its hand. There you

are, Gustave, take that. Now may you die of shame if you dare let the person who smashed my head open get away, you old blockhead!

The golden emblem (at first, of course, Gauche had not known that it was an emblem, he had thought it was a bracelet charm or a monogrammed hairpin) could only have belonged to the murderer. But naturally, just to be sure, the commissioner had shown the whale to the junior manservant (what a lucky lad he was – 15 March was his day off and that had saved his life!), but the manservant had never seen his Lordship with the trinket before.

After that the entire ponderous mechanism of the police system had whirred into action, flywheels twirling and pinions spinning, as the minister and the prefect threw their very finest forces into solving the 'Crime of the Century'. By the evening of the following day Gauche already knew that the three letters on the golden whale were not the initials of some high liver hopelessly mired in debt, but the insignia of a newly established Franco-British shipping consortium. The whale proved to be the emblem of the miracle-ship *Leviathan*, newly launched from the slipway at Bristol and currently being readied for its maiden voyage to India.

The newspapers had been trumpeting the praises of the gigantic steamship for more than a month. Now it transpired that on the eve of the *Leviathan*'s first sailing the London Mint had produced gold and silver commemorative badges: gold for the first-class passengers and senior officers of the ship, silver for second-class passengers and subalterns. Aboard this luxurious vessel, where the achievements of modern science were combined with an unprecedented degree of comfort, no provision at all was made for third class. The company guaranteed travellers a comprehensive service, making it unnecessary to take any servants along on the voyage. 'The shipping line's attentive valets and tactful maids are on hand to ensure that you feel entirely at home on the *Leviathan*,' promised the advertisement printed in newspapers right across Europe. Those fortunate individuals

who had booked a cabin for the first cruise from Southampton to Calcutta received a gold or silver whale with their ticket, according to their class – and a ticket could be booked in any major European port from London to Constantinople.

Very well then, the emblem of the *Leviathan* was not as good as the initials of its owner, but this only complicated the problem slightly, the commissioner had reasoned. There was a strictly limited number of gold badges. All he had to do was to wait until 19 March (that was the day appointed for the triumphant first sailing), go to Southampton, board the steamer and look to see which of the first-class passengers had no golden whale. Or else (which was more likely), which of the passengers who had laid out the money to buy a ticket failed to turn up for boarding. He would be papa Gauche's client. Simple as potato soup.

Gauche thoroughly disliked travelling, but this time he couldn't resist. He badly wanted to solve the 'Crime of the Century' himself. Who could tell, they might just give him a division at long last. He only had three years left to retirement. A third-class pension was one thing, but a second-class pension was a different matter altogether. The difference was 1500 francs a year, and that kind of money didn't exactly grow on trees.

In any case, he had put himself forward. He thought he would just nip across to Southampton and then, at worst, sail as far as Le Havre (the first stop) where there would be gendarmes and reporters lined up on the quayside. A tall headline in the *Revue parisienne*: ' "Crime of the Century" solved: our police rise to the occasion.' Or better still: 'Old sleuth Gauche pulls it off!'

Ha! The first unpleasant surprise had been waiting for the commissioner at the shipping line office in Southampton, where he discovered that the infernally huge steamship had 100 first-class cabins and ten senior officers. The tickets had all been sold. All 132 of them. And a gold badge had been issued with each and every one. A total of 142 suspects, if you please! But then only one of them would have no badge, Gauche had reassured himself.

On the morning of 19 March the commissioner, wrapped up against the damp wind in a warm woolly muffler, had been standing close to the gangway beside the captain, Mr Josiah Cliff, and the first lieutenant, M. Charles Renier. They were greeting the passengers. The brass band played English and French marching tunes by turns, the crowd on the pier generated an excited hubbub and Gauche puffed away in a rising fury, biting down hard on his entirely blameless pipe. For alas, due to the cold weather all of the passengers were wearing raincoats, overcoats, greatcoats or capotes. Now just try figuring out who has a badge and who doesn't! That was unpleasant surprise number two.

Everyone who was due to board the steamship in Southampton had arrived, indicating that the criminal must have shown up for the sailing despite having lost the badge. Evidently he must think that policemen were total idiots. Or was he hoping to lose himself in such an immense crowd? Or perhaps he simply had no option?

In any case, one thing was clear: Gauche would have to go along as far as Le Havre. He had been allocated the cabin reserved for honoured guests of the shipping line.

Immediately after the ship had sailed a banquet was held in the first-class grand saloon, an event of which the commissioner had especially high hopes since the invitations bore the instruction: 'Admission on presentation of a gold badge or first-class ticket'. Why on earth would anyone bother to carry around a ticket, when it was so much simpler to pin on your little gold leviathan?

At the banquet Gauche let his imagination run wild as he mentally frisked everyone present. He was even obliged to stick his nose into some ladies' décolletés to check whether they had anything dangling in there on a gold chain, perhaps a whale, perhaps simply a pendant. He had to check, surely?

Everyone was drinking champagne, nibbling on various savoury delicacies from silver trays and dancing, but Gauche was hard at work, eliminating from his list those who had their

badge in place. It was the men who caused him the greatest problems. Many of the swines had attached the whale to their watch chains or even stuck it in their waistcoat pockets, and the commissioner was obliged to inquire after the exact time on eleven occasions.

Surprise number three: all of the officers had their badges in place, but there were actually four passengers wearing no emblem, including two of the female sex! The blow that had cracked open Lord Littleby's skull like a nutshell was so powerful it could surely only have been struck by a man, and a man of exceptional strength at that. On the other hand, as a highly experienced specialist in criminal matters, the commissioner was well aware that in a fit of passion or hysterical excitement even the weakest of little ladies was capable of performing genuine miracles. He had no need to look far for examples. Why, only last year a milliner from Neuilly, a frail little chit of a thing, had taken her unfaithful lover, a well-nourished *rentier* twice as fat and half as tall again as herself and thrown him out of a fourth-floor window. So it would not do at all to eliminate women who happened to have no badge from the list of suspects. Although who had ever heard of a woman, especially from good society, mastering the knack of giving injections like that?

What with one thing and another, the investigation on board the *Leviathan* threatened to drag on, and so the commissioner had set about dealing with things in his customary thorough fashion. Captain Josiah Cliff was the only officer of the steamship who had been made privy to the secret investigation, and he had instructions from the management of the shipping company to afford the French guardian of the law every possible assistance. Gauche exploited this privilege quite unceremoniously by demanding that all the individuals of interest to him be assigned to the same saloon.

It should be explained at this point that out of considerations of privacy and comfort (after all, the ship's advertisement had boasted: 'On board you will discover the atmosphere of a fine old English country estate') those individuals travelling first class

were not expected to take their meals in the vast dining hall together with the 600 bearers of democratic silver whales, but were assigned to their own comfortable 'saloons', each of which bore its own aristocratic title and in appearance resembled a high-society hotel, with crystal candelabra, fumed oak and mahogany, velvet-upholstered chairs, gleaming table silver, prim waiters and officious stewards. For his own purposes Commissioner Gauche had singled out the Windsor saloon. Located on the upper deck in the bow section, it had three walls of continuous windows affording a magnificent view, so that even when the day was overcast there was no need to switch on the lights. The velvet upholstery here was a fine shade of golden brown and the linen table napkins were adorned with the Windsor coat of arms.

Standing around the oval table with its legs bolted to the floor (a precaution against any likelihood of severe pitching and rolling) there were ten chairs, with their tall backs carved in designs incorporating a motley assortment of gothic knick-knacks. The commissioner liked the idea of everyone sitting around the same table and he had ordered the steward not to set out the name plates at random but with strategic intent: he had seated the four passengers without badges directly opposite himself so that he could keep a close eye on those particular pigeons. It had not proved possible to seat the captain himself at the head of the table, as Gauche had planned. Mr Josiah Cliff did not wish (as he himself had expressed it) 'to have any part in this charade', and had chosen to base himself in the York saloon where the new Viceroy of India was taking his meals with his wife and two generals of the Indian army. York was located in the prestigious stern, as far removed as possible from plague-stricken Windsor, where the head of the table was taken by first mate Charles Renier. The commissioner had taken an instant dislike to Renier, with that face bronzed by the sun and the wind, that honeyed way of speaking, that head of dark hair gleaming with brilliantine, that dyed moustache with its two spruce little curls. A buffoon, not a sailor.