

BOOK ONE : THE INVISIBLE MASTER

1. Signed in Blood

In Paris this morning a cry of public indignation, terror and anger rang out. In everybody's hands, in the streets and on the tramway and buses, were newspapers being feverishly scanned, flashing their sensational headlines.

The paperboys were running around screaming, "Extra! Extra!... Read all the details... The drama on Rue Le Peletier! The mysterious crime... Murder of the banker Montreil!"

Last night the office assistant Michel had found his boss lying on the ground in a pool of his own blood with stab wounds in his chest. Terrified, Michel sounded the alarm...

They ran to find the police who were quickly on the scene with a doctor. By telephone they informed the police headquarters and the prosecutor's office.

Monsieur Montreil was lying on the floor. He had lost a lot of blood from his gaping wound. The doctor, however, found the victim still breathing, his heart still beating.

One of the bank employees was sent right away to Rue Chalgrin where the banker lived with his family in a magnificent house. They wanted to inform the banker's two sons: Raoul the lawyer and Robert the doctor, who used the utmost delicacy to tell their mother and their sister Raymonde about the great tragedy.

The Montreils were very close, a loving and affectionate family. The children adored their mother and father and always showed them the greatest respect. The two brothers were always together and not only seemed to be of one mind but of one will.

With his head burning up, his heart wrenching and his soul in turmoil, Dr. Robert rushed into his father's office. He fell onto the banker and covered him with tears. "Oh, what a tragedy! What a horrible crime! Our good, tender father... Murdered! Why him... such a great man!"

The authorities arrived right after the doctor: Monsieur Urbain, examining judge, and Monsieur Baumier, the police chief. They gave him a few minutes to pour out his grief, then the judge went to him and said, "Monsieur, be strong! Call on all your energy, all your courage... The first hours are the most valuable for justice. Please let us do our job."

Behind Monsieur Baumier stood Paulin Broquet, the finest, cleverest inspector on the force, and the most famous police detective in France. At first he let the others pursue their investigation, to launch it officially. His time to jump in had not yet come.

Broquet stayed completely calm, utterly indifferent until Robert Montreil and the doctor took off the banker's coat to reveal the wound and put a makeshift bandage on it. He approached the two and asked to see the wound, to examine it. It was on the right side of the body, just under the collarbone.

"Uh huh," Paulin Broquet muttered. "A nice clean stabbing." Then he added, "As for the killer, he's left-handed."

"Left-handed!?" they were surprised. "How do you know that?"

"The victim was stabbed in the right by the left hand of the killer."

"That's not proof," the investigating judge said. "The murderer could have struck the victim with his right hand holding him off to his right... or from behind."

The detective bowed slightly and answered, "That's true, but that's not what happened and here's the proof." He pointed to the banker's neck. "The murderer was holding Monsieur Montreil by the neck with his right hand. See, on the left of the neck, the four bruises from fingers... and the thumb is to the right. Therefore, he had to stab him with his left hand."

At that moment the anthropometric officer started taking photos of the room, the crime scene.

Broquet asked him, "Could you take some to get a really good look at the bloody traces we can assume are on the safe."

The photographer said that the door of the safe was brown and the traces of blood were very dark so nothing would show up on the plate.

Paulin Broquet did not press him. But he asked for a sheet of copy paper that he dampen and prepared carefully. With great care he laid it against the safe and pressed hard with two blotters to get the good print that he wanted. After two or three minutes, he took off the blotters, one by one, and on the door of the safe, in the middle of the big sheet of white paper, to the astonished eyes of all those present, there appeared a big, bloody mark in the frightful form of the letter Z...

"The killer's mark," Broquet said gravely. "Guard it closely, judge, like a treasure. Guard this Z because you're going to see it again. It's a deliberate sign, a sign left here... for us."

In a whisper, so that Robert could not hear, he added shrewdly, mysteriously, "Just for us this Z... for us, the law... for a few others, our partners... and maybe also for the victim."

2. *The Last Visitor*

When the bandage was on, they had a better idea of the banker's condition. He was seriously wounded but not dead and he was strong enough, according to the doctor, to be transported now without too much danger to his health.

The police continued their investigation by examining the layout of the bank. They came back to the director's office to proceed with their first interrogations. They brought in the head accountant and the teller.

Paulin Broquet stepped away to give the police and employees more room and freedom to talk. He wandered over to the fireplace in which a coke fire was burning. He squatted down and poked through the ashes until he could pick out some torn pieces of paper, half-burned, which he scrutinized.

"Oh, oh," he said, walking back to the chief and the judge, "here's something weird. Some papers... promissory notes... I've never seen anybody burn stuff like this before, the most valuable papers in a bank. In fact, if these notes were paid, whoever had issued them would have been sure to take them away. If they weren't paid yet, the holder would've been even surer to keep them safe. You never destroy them like this."

"Exactly right," the head accountant said.

"Furthermore," Paulin Broquet concluded, "we will know the reason for this strange behavior because here are some fragments of the address that with the cooperation of your accounting books will help us find who signed them."

The detective carefully put the papers into a portfolio. Even though they insisted that he participate in the questioning, Broquet said nothing more. He went and sat in a corner of the room as if he wanted to be alone but in perfect sight and hearing of the interrogation.

The head accountant and the teller could give the authorities only some technical details about the bank operations and information about Montreil's habits. The safe, a huge room built into the wall, strong as a fortress, really seemed to be able to withstand any attack by robbers. And yet the massive door, reinforced with bars and locks, stood ajar. They could open it easily. The police saw the shelves and strongboxes, some rolled gold and a handful of silver coins. But they did not see a single bill.

In the neatly arranged boxes were other promissory notes and papers that the accountant denied knowing anything about. One of these boxes, unlike the others that were locked, was turned over, its contents spilled out, indicating a hurried search... rummaging... even pillaging.

They closed the safe, locked it up and then called Michel, the office assistant. Michel was an ex-soldier, decorated, who had worked for Monsieur Montreil for many years. He entered in tears, deeply disturbed.

After a few words of consolation, the investigating judge questioned him. "You're the one who brought in the visitors who wanted to see your boss. Can you tell us who were the last people you led into Monsieur Montreil's office?"

"The last visitors? Yes, your honor..." But the old servant hesitated, confused. "Uh, who was it? Who... Oh, your honor! That's strange... quite disturbing... But, I can't say who I brought in last. I'm sorry, your honor, but my poor head got such a blow that my brain's a scramble, my memory's failing me. I know there was Monsieur Laurent... and the Count de la Gueriniere..."

On hearing this name Paulin Broquet, although he had extraordinary self-control, could not help sitting up in surprise.

"I'm sure," the old man continued, "I brought in Monsieur Laurent and the Count de la Gueriniere, but who came first? I don't know... I don't know..."

"Look, my friend," the judge insisted gently, "this is of the utmost importance for us. I understand but try to remember."

Paulin Broquet broke the silence that he had kept since the start of the interrogations. "It's no use, judge," he said, "to torture this good man's mind."

"But..."

“Since we know who the last two visitors were, we only have to ask the Count de la Gueriniere and Monsieur Laurent who was first and who was the last to see him.”

“True, that’s logical.”

“Yes. Now we just have to see,” the detective whispered to his boss, “if they’ll tell us.”

First thing the next morning Paulin Broquet entered Baumier’s office. “Hello, boss. I managed last night, not too easily mind you, to piece together the document from the scraps found in the fireplace of Montreil’s office and I think it’s going to be a key for us. Here, it’s signed by Monsieur Laurent... worth 5000 francs, payable in fifteen days.”

“Great.”

“Now, I’ve also learned that Laurent is a little hard up at the moment and will certainly have trouble meeting the deadline.”

“Good to know all this. And do you know anything about the Count?”

“The Count de la Gueriniere spent two hours last night with his mistress, Lucette Minois, the star at the Lutetia. Then he went as usual to his club where he bet big and lost a little fortune.”

“That he paid?”

“That he paid! Did you think he couldn’t?”

Baumier thought quietly for a moment. Then he asked the detective, who was staring at him the whole time, apparently waiting for a new question, “Who is this Count de la Gueriniere?”

“He’s the Count de la Gueriniere.”

“I see... But what’s he like... as a man?”

Paulin Broquet, unblinking, answered, “A gentleman.”

“Genuine?”

“Like so many others.”

“Meaning?”

“That with certificates and papers he can prove it, justify his name and title...”

“How’s he live?”

“Like so many others.”

“Gentlemen?”

“Or not... who live it up with no guaranteed income.”

Broquet’s composure was annoying Chief Baumier who barked, “Come on, out with it, you know more than you’re telling me about the Count.”

Without being disturbed in the least, the detective continued in his calm, even voice, “I’m telling you, boss, I’m telling you. He’s a dandy, a member of the most popular, chicest who’s who of Paris. He cuts a fine figure riding in the Horse Show. He’s a wonderful hunter, a fierce boxer and a formidable swordsman. With his muscles of steel, last year at Molier’s he fought Patouchny, the Cossack, the champion of casino fights, and he took him down.”

“Oh, come on, aren’t you exaggerating a little?”

“No, boss, not at all. And there’s more... a real charmer, well educated, an exquisite dancer, good-looking... and he spends a lot, his wealth is famous.”

“Lucky man!”

“His mistress, Lucette Minois, recently lost... or had stolen from her a diamond necklace.”

“Right!” the Chief said. “Now I remember. The Count came here to make a report about this stolen necklace. I met him... Oh, good, good...”

Broquet said nothing for a minute. Then he asked his boss very simply, “Should we arrest him?”

Baumier was taken aback. “What? Are you kidding? You’re asking me if we should arrest the Count de la Gueriniere?”

“Yes, Chief.”

“Arrest the Count de la Gueriniere?!”

“Either him or Monsieur Laurent. Because one or the other was the last to be with Monsieur Montreil. So, one or the other must have killed him. It’s obvious.”

The police chief looked very puzzled. "Don't arrest anyone just yet. Don't do anything stupid. I'm going to go over all this with Monsieur Urbain and I'll let you know what to do very soon."

"Okay, Chief."

"I sent for news about the banker. I'm still waiting..."

"I've got the latest... The banker had a very quiet, peaceful night. He recovered his senses and recognized his wife and children."

"Good."

"If this continues, it's likely that tomorrow we can bring in Monsieur Laurent and the Count de la Gueriniere before the banker..."

"You don't think it's too soon?"

"No, Chief. It's worth a try."

"We'll be taking a great risk."

"I figure that we'll get to the bottom of this nerve-wracking problem at the wounded man's bedside..."

The day passed. The evening papers were snapped up just like in the morning. The crime was captivating the public, piquing their curiosity, whetting their appetite for headlines.

Naturally the police and the prosecutor's office were assaulted by reporters who had to be given news for the next edition. But they could only be told what was already known. Nevertheless, despite the judges' defense, trying to keep them secret so as not to obstruct the wheels of justice, the papers printed the names of Monsieur Laurent and the Count de la Gueriniere.

Monsieur Laurent suddenly became very famous. They went to talk to him but the businessman, in a strange coincidence, had suddenly left Paris. Therefore, they made do with the Count de la Gueriniere, the other last visitor...

The elegant gentleman had not just friends in Paris. All his success had earned him a good number of jealous rivals, if not outright enemies, at the very least people who were delighted today to see him finally get mixed up in trouble.

The Count, however, in this situation like in so many others, proved to be a good sport and was kindly available for all interviews.

Summoned before the investigating judge, he readily admitted being with Monsieur Montreil around the time when the hateful crime was probably committed, which, he stated, he found out about only later, like everyone else, in the evening papers.

"Was I the last one to see him," he said to the judge, "or the next to last? I really can't say. What I can say is that Monsieur Montreil showed me to the door of his office and shook my hand like always."

But while describing the Count's visit to the judge, a reporter who wanted to strike a hard blow at the illustrious gentleman said at the end of his article that a rumor was running around the courts about the probable arrest of the Count de la Gueriniere.

Now, in public this news was more welcome than the Count really could have imagined. The Count thought it good, necessary, imperative to face the storm head-on and turn public opinion in his favor. He declared himself offended, a victim of defamation, and he sent two faithful friends to demand the journalist retract or defend his accusation with arms. Then, like every morning, he went to the woods to ride his horse. When he came back his butler told him that someone was waiting for him.

"Who is it?" the Count asked.

"The gentleman did not give his name. But he said he had an appointment with the Count about this morning's affair."

Very intrigued, the Count headed for his study. He could not hold back a shudder on seeing the unexpected visitor. And he could barely stop himself from crying out in surprise: it was Paulin Broquet!