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**Messengers of Evil Being a
Further Account of the Lures and
Devices of Fantômas**

Pierre Souvestre

Imprint

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MESSENGERS OF EVIL

BEING A FURTHER ACCOUNT OF THE LURES AND DEVICES
OF FANTÔMAS

THE FANTÔMAS DETECTIVE NOVELS

BY PIERRE SOUVESTRE AND MARCEL ALLAIN

AUTHORS OF "FANTÔMAS," "THE EXPLOITS OF JUVE," ETC.

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MESSENGERS OF EVIL

I

THE DRAMA OF THE RUE NORVINS

On Monday, April 4th, 19—, the evening paper *La Capitale* published the following article on its first page:—

A drama, over the motives of which there is a bewildering host of conjectures, was unfolded this morning on the heights of Montmartre. The Baroness de Vibray, well known in the Parisian world and among artists, whose generous patroness she was, has been found dead in the studio of the ceramic painter, Jacques Dollon. The young painter, rendered completely helpless by a soporific, lay stretched out beside her when the crime was discovered. We say 'crime' designedly, because, when the preliminary medical examination was completed, it was clear that the death of the Baroness de Vibray was due to the absorption of some poison.

The painter, Jacques Dollon, whom the enlightened attentions of Doctor Mayran had drawn from his condition of torpor, underwent a short examination from the superintendent of police, in the course of which he made remarks of so suspicious a nature that the examining magistrate put him under arrest then and there. At police headquarters they are absolutely dumb regarding this strange affair. Nevertheless, the personal investigation undertaken by us throws a little light on what is already called: *The Drama of the Rue Norvins*.

The Discovery of the Crime

This morning, about seven o'clock, Madame Béju, a housekeeper in the service of the painter, Jacques Dollon, who, with his sister, Mademoiselle Elizabeth Dollon, occupied lodge number six, in the Close of the rue Norvins, was on the ground-floor of the house, attending to her customary duties. She had been on the premises about half an hour, and, so far, had not noticed anything abnormal; however, astonished at not hearing any movements on the floor above, for the painter generally rose pretty early, Madame Béju decided to go upstairs and wake her master, who would be vexed at having let himself sleep so late. She had to pass through the studio to reach Monsieur Jacques Dollon's bedroom. No sooner had she raised the door curtain of the studio than she recoiled, horrorstruck!

Disorder reigned in the studio: a startling disorder!

Pieces of furniture displaced, some of them overturned, showed that something extraordinary had happened there. In the middle of the room, on the floor, lay the inanimate form of a person whom Madame Béju knew well, for she had seen her at the painter's house many a time—the Baroness de Vibray. Not far from her, buried in a large arm-chair, motionless, giving no sign of life, was Monsieur Jacques Dollon!

When the good woman saw the rigid attitude of these two persons, she realised that she was in the presence of a tragedy.

Stirred to the depths, she redescended the stairs, calling for help: shortly afterwards, the entire Close was in a state of ferment: house porters, neighbours, male and female, crowded round Madame Béju, endeavouring to understand her disconnected account of the terrifying spectacle she had come face to face with but a minute before.

Sudden death, suicide, crime—all were plausible suppositions. The more audacious of these gossip-mongers had ventured as far as the studio door; from that standpoint, a rapid glance round enabled them to get a clear idea of the truth of the housekeeper's statements: they returned to give a confirmation of them to the inquisitive and increasing crowd in the principal avenue of the Close.

'The police! The police must be informed!' cried the Close portress.

Whilst this woman, with considerable presence of mind, and aided by Madame Béju, exerted herself to keep out the people of the neighbourhood who had got wind of the tragedy, two men had set off to seek the police.

Lodge Number 6

On the summit of Montmartre is the rue Norvins. In shape it resembles a donkey's back, and at one particular spot it hugs the accentuated curve of the Butte. The Close of the rue Norvins is situated at number 47. It is separated from the street by a strong iron gate, the porter's lodge being at the side. The Close consists of a series of little dwellings, separated by wooden railings, up which climbing plants grow. Fine trees encircle these abodes with so thick a curtain of leafage that the inhabitants might think themselves buried in the depths of the country.

Lodge Number 6 is even more isolated than the others. It consists of a ground floor and a first floor, with an immense studio attached. Three years ago, Number 6 was leased to Monsieur Jacques Dollon, then a student at the Fine Arts School. It has been continuously occupied by the tenant and his sister, Miss Elizabeth Dollon, who has kept house for her brother. For the last fortnight the painter has been alone: his sister, who had gone to Switzerland to convalesce after a long illness, was expected back that same day, or the day following.

The reputation of the two young people is considered by their neighbours to be beyond criticism. The artist has led a regular and hard-working life: last year the Salon accorded him a medal of the second class.

His sister, an affable and unassuming girl, seemed always much attached to her brother. In that very Bohemian neighbourhood she is highly thought of as a girl of the most estimable character.

The Baroness de Vibray visited them frequently, and her motor-car used to attract attention in that high, remote suburb—the wilds of Montmartre. The old lady liked to dress in rather showy colours; she was considered eccentric, but was also known to be good and generous. She took a particular interest in the Dollons, whose family, so it was said, she had known in Provence. Jacques Dollon and his sister highly valued their intimacy with the Baroness de Vibray, who was known all over Paris as a patroness of artists and the arts.

First Verifications

Already slander and imagination between them had concocted the wildest stories, when Monsieur Agram, the eminent police superintendent of the Clignancourt Quarter, appeared at the entrance to the Close. Accompanied by his secretary, he at once entered Number 6, charging the two policemen, who were assisting him, on no account to allow anyone to enter, excepting the doctor, whom he had at once sent for.

He requested the portress to hold herself at his disposal in the garden, and made Madame Béju accompany him to the studio. Barely twenty minutes had elapsed since the housekeeper had been terror-struck by the dreadful spectacle which had met her eyes there. When she entered with the superintendent of police nothing had been altered. Madame de Vibray, horribly pale, her eyes closed, her lips violet-hued, lay stretched on the floor: her body had assumed the rigidity of a corpse. That of Jacques Dollon, huddled in an arm-chair, was in a state of immobility.

Monsieur Agram at once noticed long, intersecting streaks on the floor, such as might have been traced by heavy furniture dragged over the waxed boards of the flooring. A pungent medicinal odour caught the throats of the visitors: Madame Béju was about to open a window: the superintendent stopped her:

'Let things remain as they are for the present,' was his order. After casting an observant eye round the room he questioned the housekeeper:

'Is this state of disorder usual?'

'Never in this world, sir!' declared the good woman. 'Monsieur Dollon and his sister are very steady, very regular in their habits, especially the young lady. It is true that she has been absent for nearly a month, but her brother has often been left alone, and he has always insisted on his studio being kept in good order.'

'Did Monsieur Dollon have many visitors?'

'Very seldom, monsieur. Sometimes his neighbours would come in; and then there was that poor lady lying there so deathly pale that it makes me ill to look at her....'

Jacques Dollon lives

The conversation was interrupted by the arrival of the doctor employed in connection with relief for the poor. The superintendent of police pointed out to this Dr. Mayran the two inanimate figures. A glance of the doctor's trained eye sufficed to show him that Madame de Vibray had been dead for some time. Approaching Jacques Dollon, Dr. Mayran examined him attentively:

'Will you help me to lift him on to a bed or a table?' he asked. 'It seems to me that this one is not dead.'

'His bedroom is next to this!' cried Madame Béju. 'Oh, heavens above! If only the poor young man would recover!'

Silently the doctor, aided by the superintendent and a policeman, transported young Dollon into the next room.

'Air!' cried the doctor, 'give him air! Open all the windows! It seems to me a case of suspended animation! There is partial suffocation. This will probably yield to energetic treatment.'

Whilst good Madame Béju, whose legs were shaking under her, was carrying out the doctor's orders, the superintendent of police kept watch to see that nothing was touched. The doctor's attention was concentrated on Jacques Dollon. Monsieur Agram was searching for some indication which might throw light on the drama. So far he had been unable to formulate any hypothesis. Should the moribund painter return to consciousness, the explanation he could give would certainly clear up the situation. At this point in the superintendent's cogitations, the doctor called out:

'He lives! He lives! Bring me a glass of water!'

Jacques Dollon was returning to consciousness! Slowly, painfully, his features contracting as at the remembrance of a horrible nightmare, the young man stretched his limbs, opened his eyes: he turned a dull gaze on those about him, a gaze which became one of stupefaction when he perceived these unknown faces gathered round his bed. His eyes fell on his housekeeper. He murmured:

'Mme ... Bé-ju ... je...,' and fell back into unconsciousness.

'Is he dead?' whispered Monsieur Agram.

The doctor smiled:

'Be reassured, monsieur: he lives; but he finds it terribly difficult to wake up. He has certainly swallowed some powerful narcotic and is still under its influence; but its effects will soon pass off now.'

The good doctor spoke the truth.

In a short time Jacques Dollon, making a violent effort, sat up. Casting scared and bewildered glances about him, he cried:

'Who are you? What do you want of me?... Ah, the ruffians! The bandits!'

'There is nothing to fear, monsieur. I am simply the doctor they have called in to attend to you! Be calm!... You must recover your senses, and tell us what has happened!'

Jacques Dollon pressed his hands to his forehead, as though in pain:

'How heavy my head is!' he muttered. 'What has happened to me?... Let me see!... Wait.... Ah ... yes ... that's it!'

At a sign from the doctor, the superintendent had stationed himself beside the bed, behind the young painter.

Keeping a finger on his patient's pulse, the doctor asked him, in a fatherly fashion, to tell him all about it.

'It is like this,' replied Jacques Dollon.... 'Yesterday evening I was sitting in my arm-chair reading. It was getting late. I had been working hard.... I was tired.... All of a sudden I was surrounded by masked men, clothed in long black garments: they flung themselves on me. Before I could make a movement I was gagged, bound with cords.... I felt something pointed driven into my leg – into my arm.... Then an overpowering drowsiness overcame me, the strangest visions passed before my eyes; I lost consciousness rapidly.... I wanted to move, to cry out ... in vain ... there was no strength in me ... powerless ... and that's all!'

'Is there nothing more?' asked the doctor.

After a minute's reflection Jacques answered:

'That is all.'

He now seemed fully awake. He moved: the movement was evidently painful: 'It hurts,' he said, instinctively putting his hand on his left thigh.

'Let us see what is wrong,' said the doctor, and was preparing to examine the place when a voice from the studio called:

'Monsieur!'

It was Monsieur Agram's secretary. The magistrate left his post by the bed and went into the studio.

'Monsieur,' said the secretary, 'I have just found this paper under the chair in which Monsieur Dollon was: will you acquaint yourself with its contents?'

The magistrate seized the paper: it was a letter, couched in the following terms:

Dear Madame,

If you do not fear to climb the heights of Montmartre some evening, will you come to see the painted pottery I am preparing for the Salon: you will be welcome, and will confer on us a great pleasure. I say 'us,' because I have excellent news of Elizabeth, who is returning shortly: perhaps she will be here to receive you with me.

*I am your respectful and devoted
Jacques Dollon.*

The magistrate was frowning as he handed back the letter to his secretary, saying: 'Keep it carefully.' Then he went into the bedroom, where the doctor was talking to the invalid. The doctor turned to Monsieur Agram:

'Monsieur Dollon has just asked me who you are: I did not think I ought to hide from him that you are a superintendent of police, monsieur.'

'Ah!' cried Jacques Dollon. 'Can you help me to discover what happened to me last night?'

'You have just told us yourself, monsieur,' replied the magistrate.... 'But have you nothing further to tell us? Can you not recollect whether or no you had a visitor before the arrival of the men who attacked you?'

'Why, no, monsieur, no one called.'

The doctor here intervened:

'The pain in the leg, Monsieur Dollon complained of, need not cause any anxiety. It is a very slight superficial wound. A slight swelling above the broken skin possibly indicates an intra-muscular puncture, which might have been made by someone unaccustomed to such operations, for it is a clumsy performance. It is a queer business!...'

Monsieur Agram, who had been steadily observing Jacques Dollon, persisted:

'Is there not a gap, monsieur, in your recollections of what occurred?... Were you quite alone yesterday evening? Were you not expecting anyone?... Are you certain that you did not have a visitor? Did not someone pay you a visit—someone you had asked to come and see you?'

Jacques Dollon opened his eyes—eyes of stupefaction—and stared at the superintendent:

'No, monsieur.'

'It is that—' went on Monsieur Agram. Then stopping short, and drawing the doctor aside, he asked:

'Do you consider him in a fit state to bear a severe moral shock?... A confrontation?'

The doctor glanced at his patient:

'He appears to me to be quite himself again: you can act as you see fit, monsieur.'

Jacques Dollon, astonished at this confabulation, and vaguely uneasy, was, in fact, able to get up without help.

'Be good enough to go into your studio, monsieur,' said the magistrate.

Jacques Dollon complied without a word. No sooner did he cross the threshold than he recoiled, terror-struck.

He was shaking from head to foot; his lips were quivering; every feature expressed horrified shrinking from the spectacle confronting him.

'The—the—the Baroness de Vibray!' he barely articulated: 'how can it be possible?'

The superintendent of police did not lose a single movement made by the young painter, keeping a lynx-eyed watch on every expression that flitted across his countenance. He said:

'It certainly is the Baroness de Vibray, dead—assassinated, no doubt. How do you explain that?'

'But,' retorted Jacques Dollon, who appeared overwhelmed: 'I do not know! I do not understand!'

The magistrate replied:

'Yet, did you not invite her to your studio? Had you not asked her to come some evening soon? Had you not certain pieces of painted pottery to show her?'

'That is so,' confessed the painter: 'but I was not aware.... I did not know....' He seemed about to faint. The doctor made him sit down in the chair where he had been found unconscious. Whilst he was recovering, Monsieur Agram continued his investigations. He opened a little cupboard, in which were several poisonous powders: this was shown by the writing on the flasks containing them. He spoke to the doctor, taking care that Jacques Dollon should not overhear him:

'Did you not say that this woman's death is due to poison?'

'It certainly looks like it.... A post-mortem will ...'

