

MURDER ON THE EIFFEL TOWER

PROLOGUE

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Storm clouds raced over the barren plain between the fortifications and the goods station at Les Batignolles, where the scrubby grass smelled unpleasantly of sewers. Rag-and-bone men, grouped around carts filled with household rubbish, were using their gaffs to level the mounds of detritus, raising eddies of dust. A train approached from far in the distance, gradually getting bigger and bigger.

A gang of children came running down the hillocks, shrieking: 'There he is! Buffalo Bill is coming!'

Jean Méring straightened up and, hands on hips, leant backwards to relieve his aching joints. It had been a good haul: a three-legged chair, a rocking horse that had lost its stuffing, an old umbrella, a soldier's epaulette and a piece of wash-basin rimmed with gold. He turned towards Henri Capus, a lean old man with a faded beard.

'I'm going to see the Redskins. Are you coming?' he said, adjusting the wicker basket on his shoulders.

He picked up his chair, passed the Cook Agency vehicles and joined the crowd of onlookers gathered around the station, a mixture of workmen, petit bourgeois, and high society people who had come in carriages.

With a great hiss of steam, a locomotive followed by an endless convoy of coaches pulled up beside the platform. A covered wagon stopped in front of Jean Méring. Inside, panic-stricken horses were stamping wildly, and tossing their manes. Sunburned men in cowboy hats and Indians with painted faces and feather headdresses leant out of the doors. Everyone was jostling to catch a glimpse. Jean Méring slapped the nape of his neck: an insect sting. Immediately he faltered, slid sideways, staggered, and then stumbled against a woman, who pushed him away, thinking he was drunk. His legs buckled and, as he lost his grip on the chair, he sank to the ground, dragged down by the weight of his basket. He tried to raise his head but already he was too weak. He could faintly hear Henri Capus's voice.

'What's the matter, my friend? Hold on, I'll help you. Where does it hurt?'

With a tremendous effort Méring managed to gasp: 'A . . .

bee . . .'

His eyes were watering and his sight was becoming blurred. Amazingly, in the space of just a few minutes, his whole body had become as limp as an old rag. He could no longer feel his limbs, his lungs were straining for air. In his last moments of lucid thought he knew that he was about to die. He made a final effort to cling to life, then let go, slipping into the abyss, down . . . down . . . down . . . The last thing he saw was a dandelion flower, which was blooming between the paving stones, as yellow as the sun.

LE FIGARO, 13 MAY 1889 (page 4)

CURIOUS DEATH OF A RAG-AND-BONEMAN

A rag-and-bone man from Rue de la Parcheminerie has died from a bee-sting. The accident occurred yesterday morning at Batignolles station as Buffalo Bill and his troupe arrived in Paris. Bystanders tried in vain to revive the victim. The enquiry has revealed that the dead man was Jean Méring, 42, a former Communard who had been deported to New Caledonia but returned to Paris after the amnesty of 1880.

The man crumpled the newspaper into a ball and tossed it into the waste-bin.