

Monday, 21st January 2013

“So where did it go?”

“Kind of heavy for a pigeon to fly off with.”

“Same goes for the rats.”

“Never underestimate the rats. If they team up, they can gnaw through anything.”

“You think it was eaten, skull and all?”

“No. There’d be more mess.”

Sternberg pointed to where the trail of blood stopped.

“It could have rolled that far on its own?” asked Franck.

“Not so much rolled as wobbled. Heads are oval, not round. A spheroid rather than a sphere, to be exact,” said Sternberg. Being exact was an integral part of his job. “And an imperfect one at that. The nose would have acted as both rudder and a brake – changing its course and slowing it down every time it came into contact with the ground. But with enough kinetic energy, there’s no reason it couldn’t have rolled that far on its own. It shouldn’t have, though.”

“Why not?”

“There should have been a basket. The Berger model even had a custom-made iron tub with a raised edge to make sure nothing escaped it. Looked a bit like a hip-bath.”

“A hip-bath?” Franck didn’t know what the Berger model was either, but preferred to deal with things one question at a time.

“One of those tubs that aren’t long enough to stretch out in. With a raised back you can lean against. The kind of thing Marat was stabbed in.” Sternberg was an *ingénieur principal* of the *police scientifique*. Circumstances under which people had been stabbed were one of his fields of expertise. “But this isn’t the Berger model. It’s the original, which didn’t come with the same range of accessories. Generally they just stuck a wicker basket at the end, or tried hitching up a canvas sack. Pioneering days, I suppose. They had to improvise.”

Extract from Sharp-Edged

© John Law Media 2020

“Well, whoever made this one seems to have a marked preference for steel,” observed Franck. “Maybe they thought a wicker basket would spoil the effect.”

“Or they weren’t too worried about the head wandering off for a walk on its own.”

The two of them swivelled, turning their backs on the Seine, and contemplated the latest addition to the Place de la Concorde.

It stood on a raised esplanade in the centre of the Place between the obelisk, one of the city’s few relics of Ancient Egypt that had not been carried off as plunder, and an ornate fountain surrounded by scaffolding through which could be glimpsed a host of copper-skinned cherubs. Its form was rudimentary – a bench, almost two metres long, borne up waist-high by sturdy vertical pillars rooted to a sledge-like base that underpinned the entire structure. At one end of the bench the upright supports ran on towards the sky, terminating in a wide crossbar, through which a rope had been threaded. A deep groove had been cut on the inside of each pillar and a thick-set support neatly slotted between them, free to slide up and down. Tethered to the rope stretched down from the high-perched crossbar, it sat at its lowest possible position, at rest upon a double-walled vertical section pierced with a round opening, the gap between its two sides just large enough to welcome the diagonally cut blade currently nestled inside it.

Although every element of the structure had the surface appearance of timber, with rough grain, random knots, and pegs hammered deep into holes to hold it together, it was made of steel. Dully gleaming stainless steel at that. Or rather, almost stainless, given the blood spattered around the circular opening into which the triangular blade had neatly slotted itself, right next to the headless body laid out, stomach down, on the horizontal bench, its feet hanging off one end and its shoulders jammed tight against the neck brace at the other.

“If it’s solid metal it must weigh a ton,” said Sternberg. “Somebody must have worked very hard to install it. And, before

you ask – no, it wasn't here yesterday.”

“I don't suppose whoever set it up left their contact details?”

“We're looking.” Sternberg pointed to where two of his assistants were patrolling the outer reaches of the esplanade, their eyes on the ground. They had just switched off their torches. It was eight thirty in the morning and a hungover sun had appeared over the treetops of the nearby Tuileries.

“I think there'll be easier ways to get that information,” said Franck. “Cameras on the lights, for a start.” The meeting point of the Champs Elysées, the rue de Rivoli, and a bridge across the Seine, the Place de la Concorde saw heavy traffic from dawn to dusk – now, early on a Monday morning, a sea of vehicles eddied around the crime scene. Those whose job it was to attempt to prevent the centre of the city becoming an exhaust-choked logjam had equipped it with a host of traffic lights and video feeds. “And then there's that lot over there.” A nod towards the north-western corner of the Place, home to the American embassy, possibly the best-protected building in the capital. “We're well within the sweep of their surveillance equipment. Whatever kind of vehicle brought this here – and it must have been a big one – we'll know everything about it within the hour.”

“Vehicles are easy to spot,” said Sternberg. “The people who get in and out of them tend not to have licence plates stuck to their backs. You might need a little more help tracking them down.”

“Which is why you're here. Got anything yet?”

Sternberg shook his head.

“For once, you almost got here at the same time as we did. We've just secured the scene. The serious forensic work has yet to start.”

“Nothing interesting you can throw my way for starters?” asked Franck.

“Aside from the date?”

“The date?”

“It's the twenty-first of January.”

“So it is.” Franck waited to see if Sternberg would offer up the morsel without prompting. No such luck. “So?”

“What happened here two hundred and twenty years ago today?”

“In 1793?”

“Glad to see your arithmetic’s up to scratch. What about your history?”

“1793? The Revolution, of course.” offered Franck.

“I’m tempted to ask which one, since we’ve had a few.”

“The big one. The fall of the Bastille. The first Republic. Danton, Robespierre, Saint-Just, and a supporting cast of sans-culottes – until Napoleon came along to hog the limelight.”

“And what happened on the twenty-first of January 1793? Right here. Actually, no – over there.” Sternberg indicated a spot between where they stood and the American embassy. As ever, a stickler for detail.

“How about you tell me, and I promise not to forget next time?”
Sternberg sighed.

“On the twenty-first of January 1793 Louis the Sixteenth was brought here in an open cart. He was no longer Louis the Sixteenth of course – his title had been swept away with the rest of the *ancien régime* when the Republic was founded the previous year. By then he was just Louis Capet, a simple citizen like everyone else. Once he arrived and had been brought through the mob that packed the entire Place, he was bundled out of the wagon and marched up to a machine just like this one, except it was made of wood.”

“Did it have a basket?”

“It had a basket. Couldn’t have the former king’s head making a break for it.”

“So this was the day that showed that no one was above the guillotine.”

Sternberg nodded.

“As someone has just gone to a lot of trouble to remind us.”