

The price of peace

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“To Lead is to anticipate”

AUGUST 28th, 1947

Specks of dust suspended in the soft rays of sunrise float aimlessly through the warm air of the Grand gallery, coming to rest upon centuries old masterpieces. Rising over the Seine and refracting off the magnificent overhead windows the summer sun floods the room, filling it with vibrant colours. Winding corridors of freshly waxed floorboards are yet to bear the footprints of the hordes of people waiting eagerly outside. The crisp morning air is alive with excitement and the occasional blinding flash of a camera. The world is waiting anxiously. After months of speculation all that is needed is a glimpse of the most famous painting in the world. To see her hung on rightful soil; exactly where she was 8 years prior. Only then will the entire country breathe a sigh of relief: knowing that their nation that has been so violently stripped of its youth and honour has not lost its pride.

A lone figure sits opposite, gazing at the portrait. The eyes smiling back in an alluring but secretive manner as if inviting rebellion. Smartly dressed in a pinstriped suit, a gold pocket watch resting on his crossed knee and an unlit pipe between his lips, any passer-by would be unaware the importance of the clean-shaven Frenchman sitting peacefully in the Louvre. Jacques allowed his mind to wander, as it often did when he found himself alone, to a time in French history that many were trying to forget.

AUGUST 28th, 1939

Despite the promising skies of blue and comforting breeze the usual lively ambience of Paris had been dampened that morning by more unsettling news from the East. Threatening like an inevitable thunderstorm, the air in Europe was thick with uncertainty. Jacques stepped out of the taxi, generously tipped the driver and walked briskly along the Seine. The cobblestoned streets outside the Louvre were already alive with students and staff of l'école de Louvre as well as volunteers from surrounding shops, prepared to execute their final day of a meticulously delicate plan. Closed ostensibly for "repairs" the Louvre was anything but derelict. Inside the historic facades, the greatest treasures of renaissance art were being unhinged, boxed, labelled and evacuated in convoys, ambulances and taxis. Jacques had devised the scheme over several months, but he had hoped that time would prove him wrong. Now, as he pushed open the double glass doors he was immediately swarmed by a young, uniformed student.

"Monsieur Jaujard, your paper," He thrust forward a copy of 'Le Monde', "Madame Valland is waiting in the Central Forum." The boy scuttled off. This morning's headline ran bleaker than last: "C'est Juste Une Question De Temps...". He had barely climbed the first flight of marble stairs when another student rushed forward. "Director Jaujard, Monsieur Lont wishes to clarify the evacuation priority of the Delacroix?" she announced in a flurry.

Jacques' hazel eyes widened in horror, "Liberty leading the people is still here? Mon dieu!" Swinging the paper under his arm he extracted a large red sticker from his pocket. "Give this to him immediately and don't be afraid to reprimand him for leaving behind such a piece." He winked as she hurried away. As Jacques entered the vast forum he sighed at the empty walls; he had hoped it would never come to this. Suddenly he was engulfed in a whirlwind of Chanel and floral fabric as Assistant director of the Museums of France and close friend, Rose Valland, embraced him. "Jacques, how are you? Now before you say anything I don't want you to get stressed," She began fervently as she led him over to a collection of muscly men standing around a rickety, wooden track leading down the staircase, "We're having a bit of trouble moving her..." Jacques stared up at the imposing figure of the

Winged Victory of Samothrace perched precariously on a custom-made metal trolley. He furrowed his brows.

“Don’t move her. Tell the technicians to secure her to the ground. Keep her off the incline and block off the area until she’s stabilised. We can’t afford a slip.” He ordered.

“Did you hear that?” Rose piped at the men to a murmur of agreement.

“Follow me, Rose.” Navigating their way through the bustling labyrinth they emerged 10 minutes later at the temporary loading dock, crowded with an array of vehicles and thick with exhaust fumes. A Nationale ambulance with its doors open was parked before them. Stripped of all medical equipment a single stretcher supported a small poplar crate, fastened with elastic. Neatly stencilled on the side: ML.

“Are you sure it’s-?”

“Positive. I loaded her myself.” He assured. “She’ll be safe now.” Saluting the escort, he slammed the doors shut. Rose and Jacques stood back as they watched the Louvre’s most precious painting disappear into the traffic.

Four days later Germany invaded Poland.

SEPTEMBER 3rd, 1939

The Chateau de Chambord stood overlooking bountiful acres of precisely manicured gardens and lush countryside. The French flag fluttered proudly from the highest turret. Once a luxurious hunting lodge for the royal family, the spacious three-tiered castle now harboured thousands of evacuated artworks. All 440 rooms filled to capacity with firmly sealed crates, preparing to be triaged across the safe havens of the countryside. Instead of an ambulance, an armoured vehicle was parked below on the gravel courtyard, exclusively reserved and ready at a moment’s notice to whisk away precious cargo.

180 miles away, Jacques Jaujard sat wearily on the marble steps of the Louvre’s grand staircase staring at the desolate walls and barren galleries; a radio crackled beside him. Any glimmer of hope that France could be spared from another bloodbath diminishing as the Ultimatum, the final chance for peace, went ignored by Germany. Suddenly the radio spluttered to life, “A live broadcast from 10 Downing Street as we join the British Prime Minister for his address.” The booming voice of Neville Chamberlain ricocheted around the Louvre, “-unless we had heard from them by 11 o’clock, a state of war would exist between us.” Jacques listened uneasily his hands clasped beneath his chin, “I have to tell you now that no such undertaking has been received and that this country is now at war with Germany.” Jacques dropped his head into his hands. “May I add that the French Government stand in the same position on this matter as do His Majesty’s.” Jacques flicked the power switch. The silence that followed more profound than ever. He stood up slowly, brushed his pants and picked up the radio. When he reached the double doors below, he looked back at the eerily bare museum. *The time had come.* He stepped out under the overcast sky and disappeared into the sombre crowds of bowed heads and upturned collars.

AUGUST 16, 1940

Almost a month had passed since German soldiers had marched freely into Paris, past the Arc d’Triomphe, staining the Champs Elysees with the blood of France’s youth. All the shops now closed and shuttered. German occupation had brought the frontline of the war to Paris’ doorstep.

Jacques had been sweeping the floors of the Grand Gallery when a stampede of boots tremored the floor of the Louvre. He hurried downstairs to find soldiers scouring the

corridors, depositing mud and filth on the freshly polished tiles. A squat man plainly dressed, with round glasses resting on his prominent nose stood awkwardly before him. Jacques strode over extending an arm to the man, "Director Jacques Jaujard." The man looked around nervously before shaking his hand, "Monsieur, Count Franz Von Wolff-Metternich. But you can call me Franz." He announced in a thick German accent. Jacques extracted a pack of Royale cigarettes and offered one to Franz with a satirical smirk. "In here?" he replied confused.

"Sure, why not there's nothing here to damage?"

"Jah, jah" he muttered, his voice echoing around the halls, "I'd noticed. The Führer will not be pleased when he learns of this." He gestured to the artless walls and grimaced at Jacques. Jacques lit his cigarette and placed a hand on Franz's shoulder leading him away from any eavesdropping soldiers.

"I know why you're here." Jacques whispered assertively. "I have been anticipating this moment for months...years and it is imperative that you understand that we will not simply step aside and let you rob us of our pride. Try as you please, you will never find them." He glared unblinkingly at the Count who shifted uneasily, glancing behind him before he began.

"Monsieur Jaujard, no one could have been more pleased than I to arrive here and find them gone." Jacques' forehead wrinkled slightly. "I'm no more a party member than you are. I'm an art curator, was-was an art curator, I was summoned by Hitler to bring them to him." He falters for a second. "I could never have brought myself to steal these pieces, a monstrosity, an utter disgrace, who knows what he might do to them..." he mumbled. Jacques heart began to relax but the cogs inside his head continued to spin rapidly as he listened.

"But where is everything? I see not one piece. How did you move everything? Thousands of paintings, sculptures... If they hadn't been hidden they would be in Germany by sunset tomorrow." He stuttered uncontrollably.

"Everything is safe." Jacques assured the fretting German who pulled out a handkerchief and mopped his brow. After several moments he turned resolutely. "Anything. Anything at all I can do you just tell me, I will try keep them off the scent for as long as possible." He scribbled down an address and handed it to Jacques. "A pleasure." He said quickly as he hurried off downstairs ordering the soldiers out in brisk German and muttering in English, "Monstrosity!"

Jacques smiled for the first time in a while.

JULY 27th, 1942

Spreading like vermin, the Germans had invaded nearly two-thirds of France, leaving a temporary "Zone Libre" in the south. A haven to which many had flocked to. Jacques' job grew harder each day, the artwork now scattered around the south, hidden in basements and empty châteaux; safe from the perilous skies but helpless against an advancing army.

Jacques comfortable Parisian apartment had begun to resemble a pig-sty. Newspapers strewn across the floor, neglected cups of coffee crowding his oak desk and a large map of France pinned to the wall: indecipherable notes scribbled beside colourful pins. Jacques sat in the dark, "It would only be for a few months and I can organise transport to Montpellier...Monsieur le chateau de Mogère is perfect, the cool air is precisely what these paintings require...I can assure you, you would not be in danger...d'accord... merci pour votre aide." He returned the phone, walked over to the map and crossed off a location. Rubbing his temples, he filled his glass with a vile liquor he wouldn't have touched had the times not seemed so dire. A shrill ring startled him, he picked up the receiver to the familiar

accent. “Jacques, it’s me. It’s over. They’re recalling me to Germany.” The voice stumbled.

“I sent the humidifiers to Montal and She’s safe in the Loc abbey. I’m sorry, I’m so sorry-”

“Franz, slow down, what has happened? Who found out?”

“Jacques, I have no time they’ll be here any minute.”

“Listen Franz, you’ve been indispensable, I can’t thank you enough on behalf of our country.”

“Jacques it’s been my pleasure, you’re a righteous man.” The line cut out. Jacques barely had time to blink when a violent rapping shook the door. *Christ. They’re here too.* He inhaled deeply and opened the door to find Rose, eyes bloodshot and shaking despite the mild night.

“Rose, what’s happened?”

He hustled her inside where she promptly burst into tears. “Gone. All gone.” She shuddered between gasps of air. “Picasso. Dalí. Van Gogh.”

“Calm down Rose. What happened? Was there a raid?” he asked gently, fearing the worst.

“The Jeu de Paume. In the courtyard. The same as in Berlin.”

Jacques leant back slowly in his chair and nodded his head in understanding. Impressionist art: Illegal in Germany and offensive, degenerate trash in their eyes.

“How creatures of the same blood could detest such beauty and raw insight is beyond me.”

Jacques sighed.

“A crime! Masterpieces now just ashes in the air... soulless barbarians.” Jacques placed a blanket around her and filled her a brandy. She gulped it gratefully.

“Franz is gone, Rose. They caught on. He’ll be replaced by someone from the party, someone merciless, they’ll send us away and all will be lost. We have to leave before they come.”

“Leave?” she stammers, “but the papers, they say-”

“Never mind the papers, we can’t risk it.”

“But is everything accounted for down south?”

“Yes, all of it’s safe. We’ve seen what they do, we must protect the rest.”

“I know, I know...” Rose ponders the thought. “There’s someone in Lozère who will hide us but only while it’s a Free Zone. After that we’re a liability to all.”

“Then let’s hurry.”

AUGUST 28th, 1947

Jacques blinks himself out of the memory. Once all of France had been consumed by the Germans he had lived in hiding for the final three years, even joining the resistance while still protecting the artwork. Triumph finally arrived, not when the war ended but when all the art was returned, unscathed, and the Louvre was decorated to its former glory. But not before the broken windows and crumbling walls had been repaired. A bitter reminder of the cruelty of the German occupation.

“Jacques, are you ready?” a voice calls from down the hall. Rose stands with her arm linked through a familiar figure. She wears a vibrant crimson dress and an ecstatic smile on her face, but nothing can hide the weariness behind her eyes. A weariness the entire nation holds in their hearts. There is a price to pay for peace. Jacques breaks into a grin and rises from his seat, winking at the Mona Lisa before him and stowing his pipe in his pocket. As he nears Rose he laughs aloud. “Franz! How fantastic to see you!” He embraces the German.

“How could I miss such an occasion, this is what you risked it all for Jacques.” He smiles.

“Every piece, gone for 6 years and returned as mysteriously as it left!” He chuckles.

“Nonsense, if it hadn’t been for you two they would have sniffed me out like a rat.”

“Oh no, *I* was the rat they sniffed out Jacques.” They laugh together. “But really I had the fright of my life when I arrived and found the Louvre empty. I thought maybe they’d gotten there before me and then I realised I was one of ‘them’.” He booms heartily. “And might I say, I much prefer the wood to the old tiles. The whole place looks spiffing!”

“But in all seriousness boys you two very much deserve these.” Rose touches the two golden Légion d’honneur proudly pinned to the men’s suits. Gifted to them by Charles de Gaulle in recognition of their efforts to protect the Louvre art during the war. As they descend the stairs, they guffaw at the troublesome Winged Victory; recalling how nervously she had swayed on the wooden track. It seemed like a lifetime ago. When they reach the ground floor a sea of furiously flashing bulbs greets them. “Well this is a sight for sore eyes.” Franz whistles. Beyond them crowds of people have gathered, united by their patriotism and passion for art, unaware of the toil involved for them to marvel at the masterpieces of the Louvre in this very moment. But such vanity doesn’t concern Monsieur Jacques Jaujard who simply smiles. His job is done.

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This story was inspired by a recent trip to France and the opportunity to marvel at the renowned masterpieces the Louvre flaunts.

But had the events of this story ended any differently, thousands of paintings would have fallen victim to ‘Degenerate burnings’, been stolen and sold, hidden, lost and damaged had it not been for the courage and forward-thinking of one Frenchman, and his allies, in a time of utmost peril. With eternal gratitude to Jacques Jaujard, for saving France’s pride from the clutches of evil.



Le château de Chambord, September 2017. Where the artwork of the Louvre was stored before being triaged around the countryside.

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