



Jacques turned to the curator.

"Monsieur, it is absolutely necessary that I see all the pictures in the museum; then I will know what has happened here. You must show me everything!"

"I will do anything," replied the curator, who had never seen such a strange case in all the forty-seven years he had worked at the Louvre. "Just figure out this horrible mess as quickly as possible. I cannot believe this is happening to me."

"Let's go then," said Jacques, hoping that after seeing hundreds upon hundreds of paintings he would really know the truth.

So the two left this room and entered another. Immediately they noticed that something was very wrong with another picture.

"Would you look at that!" exclaimed the curator, looking at a well-known painting by Monet. "Someone has picked half the painted poppies from the field!"

"I see that quite clearly," said Jacques. "That's most definitely our second clue."

But this clue didn't really help Jacques at all; he was in fact even more confused than before. Who could've wanted to take an apple, wine, and painted flowers, he wondered. And moreover, how did they do it?

In a third room they discovered yet another clue. In the famous picture *The Money-Lender and his Wife* by Matisse five coins were missing, including the one which was supposed to be in the Money-Lender's right hand.

"Good Heavens!" cried the curator, "Who would need this money? You can't buy anything with it. What absurdity!"

"Yes indeed," said Jacques, examining the bare canvas. Without resolving anything, Jacques hurried off to another room. The curator followed him.

While looking at Vermeer's *The Lace-maker* the two thought at first that nothing was missing. But suddenly the curator noticed that the very lace that she was making had disappeared. And it was not even finished yet!

"Maybe the thief is a woman," said Jacques. "And she will finish the lace herself and wear it on her dress." Knowing

this was nonsense, Jacques quickly shut his mouth, pulled out his magnifying glass and pretended to be searching for some hidden clue under the Lace-maker's fingers.

The curator could only look at his watch and wipe the sweat off his forehead with his madras handkerchief. The public was to arrive in one hour.

"We must hurry," said the curator.

And the two began to run from one room to another. In each they found at least one painting with something missing.

In Seurat's *The Circus* there was no longer a horse beneath the young rider and she now lay fallen and crumpled inside the circus ring. In a couple of paintings a necklace or a ring had been snatched right off the person wearing it. And almost every still life was short a handful of grapes or a slice of cheese.

Jacques and the curator did not even try to make any more guesses about who the thief could be. They were just too confused.

Finally, they thought that they had examined all of the paintings in the museum. But suddenly Jacques realized that in their haste they had forgotten one. And naturally enough they would find their most important clue here...

They ran as fast as fast can be to the portrait of the knight Alof of Wignacourt by Caravaggio. But the knight was nowhere to be seen. All that was in the picture was the young squire, who was holding the knight's helmet, and the shadow of what should have been the knight. Now Jacques was beginning to piece the case together.

"Do not fear, Monsieur, I believe we've now found the answer. Follow me, *s'il vous plait*," said Jacques as he started running off to another room.

"But this is impossible," shrieked the curator, running after Jacques.

"On the contrary," replied Jacques.

They soon arrived at a room in the Louvre where you will find a most famous painting, the *Mona Lisa* by Leonardo da Vinci. Jacques looked at the painting through his magnifying glass and then began to smile.

to some British friends). Why had Alof taken things from the pictures? He had only wanted to give the Mona Lisa all the presents in the world, because he loved her so.

Finally the whole story was known. And instead of feeling any sympathy, the old curator, who evidently did not understand love, either real or aesthetic, said that Alof would be punished and should never leave the confines of his frame ever again. The Mona Lisa looked even sadder than before.

Jacques, who after visiting the Mona Lisa so often could well understand her feelings, certainly did not want to be so strict. He smiled at her and then said to the curator:

"Monsieur, I suggest that you merely ask Monsieur Alof to return everything he took from the pictures, for we surely cannot do it. And then I think that Alof must return to his own picture so that the tourists don't ask all sorts of bothersome questions. But on the chance that your idea of punishment would cause great damage to the Mona Lisa's beautiful smile, I think that Monsieur and Mademoiselle should be allowed to meet each other, but only at night when the museum is already closed to the public. And another thought: if Alof wants to give her any more presents, he should draw them himself with crayons and paper that you, Monsieur le curator, will give him. And that is my expert opinion on this case."

But the curator was not touched in the least.

"No, that is all nonsense," he said. "Paintings certainly do not need to have love. We cannot allow this. They cannot possibly have feelings. That's absurd."

But just then, the curator looked up at the Mona Lisa and saw what seemed to be a tear rolling down her left cheek. And for fear that that dreadful tear would dry on her face and ruin the painting, he quickly pulled out his handkerchief and lightly wiped the it away. But another one followed and suddenly the curator began to understand something, even though he still couldn't believe that all this was happening to him.

"Okay, okay," he said. "I will do whatever Jacques says. You paintings can see each other."

And just then the Mona Lisa's old smile returned. And Alof bowed to the curator in thanks.

"Okay, so everyone's happy," said the curator, "but now we must hurry. The museum will open in just twelve minutes."

So very quickly Alof jumped into the Mona Lisa's picture and pulled out the gifts, which he had hidden behind her. Then he kissed her hand and hopped out of the picture with everything. And, so that he could do his work faster, Alof climbed up onto Seurat's horse and set off through the museum to put things back in place.

After Alof had put everything in the right paintings, the curator ran around to make sure that nothing had been put in upside down and that the uneaten sides of the apple and other pieces of fruit were facing out. Then both Jacques and the curator accompanied Alof to his own picture and watched as he jumped in and lined himself up with his shadow.

As always the Louvre opened its doors that day with everything in order. In his office, the curator thanked Jacques and paid him for his work.

"And," he said as Jacques was about to go, "please don't ever tell anyone about this case. No one will ever believe you."

And after Jacques had gone out the door the curator sighed a deep sigh, thinking no one would ever find out about this case.

But when Jacques went to England the next month to investigate a crime in the British Museum he told some friends this story. And now it has been told to you. But please, don't ever go and ask the head curator at the Louvre if you can enter the museum at night for I wouldn't want him to get angry with the author of this story.

"Monsieur le curator," said Jacques, "I think that this investigation is almost over. If you look at this young woman, you will notice that her smile is a little more radiant than usual... I noticed it before, but I didn't understand it. But now if you look just behind this young lady's right elbow, you will see a little spot of our gallant knight's black and gold armour."

And sure enough, this is exactly what the curator saw, even though he couldn't believe his eyes.

No one, not even the head curator, is supposed to touch the pictures, but this time there was no other choice. With his little finger he tapped lightly on the armour and within an instant the whole of Alof appeared and jumped silently out of the painting to face the intruders. He was not very tall and was as thin as the coating of paint he was made of. Even though Alof appeared to have a sword, the curator spoke to him very firmly — and quickly, as the public was due to start coming through the doors in very short order.

"Monsieur Alof," said the curator, "You will explain this mess to us at once."

Alof looked forlornly up at the Mona Lisa, who did not seem to be smiling now at all. Sorrow and fear were written across her face. For a long time Alof just stared and said nothing, and Jacques began to think that even a great artist such as Caravaggio had not thought to paint vocal chords for the people in his paintings.

The curator waited impatiently and then got on his knees to face Alof and addressed him again:

"Monsieur, you will please tell us if you stole all the things from the paintings?"

Finally, Alof opened his mouth. And in a rather good and even idiomatic French which he must have picked up by listening to people as they looked at his portrait, he said that he could not tell a lie. He was indeed now a criminal. But as the moments passed, Jacques and the head curator began to learn of a great romance: the knight was in love with the Mona Lisa, whom he once met a long time ago when the two were being photographed for an art history text book. "*Je l'aime*," he said. ("I love her," as Jacques would later translate this when telling the whole story