

## SOME HISTORICAL CONTEXT TO *THE PÈRE-LACHAISE MYSTERY*

### **France in 1890**

In 1890 there was a new air of liberty in Paris. At the Moulin Rouge the cancan was all the rage and the dancers' skirts were daringly short. The style of dress of both men and women became less formal and the term *fin de siècle* began to be heard. The start of 1890 was nonetheless grim. Paris was in the grip of an influenza epidemic that had claimed 370 deaths by fourth January. In Panama the deaths were counted by the thousand. Of the 21,000 Frenchmen who had gone to Panama since the start of the digging of the canal nine years previously, 10,000 had died of yellow fever.

The fever was not the only hazard of the canal. The project started in 1878 when Prince Louis Napoleon Bonaparte was granted a concession to build a canal in Panama by the Colombian government. Ferdinand de Lesseps headed up the construction company, and the project was financed by hundreds of thousands of French investors, many of them of modest means, who put their faith in 'the great Frenchman' as de Lesseps was known because of his success in building the Suez Canal. Work began on February 1st 1881. The canal was intended to link the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. Seventy-five kilometres in length, it was to be dug across the narrowest place on the continent, in the Colombian state of Panama. De Lesseps insisted on using the same construction methods as in Suez making no allowances for the different climatic and geographical conditions. For example, the geology of the Culebran hills created enormous technical difficulties. Under the tropical rain, machinery sank into mud and trenches collapsed. In the dry season, work was possible, but there were monsoon conditions for seven months out of the year, along with constant humidity. Along the coast the many lakes were breeding grounds for mosquitoes. In the 1880s, no-one knew that mosquitoes carried yellow fever. In fact, to counteract the invasion of ants in their homes, people would put the feet of their beds in water, where mosquitoes multiplied. The result was the spread of yellow fever.

After seven years of work, it was discovered that the company was in serious debt. In December 1888 it applied to the French government for a deferment of its liabilities which was refused. In February 1889, the company was dissolved and liquidated. More than 870,000 investors did not receive their payment and were subsequently ruined. Suicides rates soared. Back in Paris, predicting the future was all the rage. Everyone was turning to occultists, cabbalists and necromancers, pseudospiritists who claimed to be able to reveal the future and communicate with those beyond it. These characters abounded in the city with small announcements appearing in the newspapers such as 'Madame Duchatellier, 45 rue Sainte-Anne, answers all questions about the future', or even 'Madame Berthe, the famous somnambulist, 23 rue Saint-Merri, receives every day between one and six, by appointment only.' 'How is one to distinguish between the real mediums and those who only claim to possess the gift of divination?' asked the French painter James Tissot who became very interested in spiritualism when his mistress died. From 1869, the London Dialectical Society selected a committee of 33 members to study supernatural phenomena. Victor Hugo, Théophile Gautier, Victorien Sardou and Conan Doyle stuck to the spiritualism

that Allan Kardec (Hippolyte-Léon Rivail to use his real name) shed light on, defining the following principles: man is not solely composed of solid matter, there exists within him a thinking soul linked to the physical body by the perispirit. This thinking body controls the physical body, which it then leaves, as one would remove a worn-out piece of clothing, when its present incarnation has completed its course. Once disincarnated, the dead can communicate with the living, either directly, or through mediums, visibly or invisibly. Opinions varied but many were convinced that spiritualism was scientific proof of life after death.

The interest in spritualism sat alongside significant scientific progress, but not everyone embraced the changes that this brought. Some people in 1890 looked back nostalgically to the past and vigorously denounced the lack of manners, the depopulation of the countryside, the pessimistic and pornographic literature, socialism, soaring crime rates, and the influx of immigrants from Belgium, Italy, Switzerland, Spain, Russia and Poland. As the end of the century approached, France was having to open itself to the rest of the world.