

Bob Van Laerhoven,

De wraak van Baudelaire – Baudelaire's Revenge

Tr. Brian Doyle

1

Life and death had taught commissioner Lefèvre to love poetry and wenches, and in spite of his fifty-three years, he still wasn't certain which of the two he admired the most. Poetry is an abstract emotion rooted in the primordial world, before the existence of language. The act of copulation skulks through the human brain like a prehistoric lizard, biting at random.

The commissioner had decided to feed the reptile that evening and was in search of a warm haven. The prospect increased his sensitivity towards the aesthetics of a visit to the brothel. His burly frame, covered with coarse grey hair, had been washed and perfumed, reminiscent of years of abundance, handsomely oiled and gleaming. Lefèvre had trimmed his pubic hair as neatly as his short beard. He was ready to bear the burden of the flesh.

He had spent more money on *cocottes* in his life than he cared to remember. But he wasn't interested in expensive suits or alabaster handled walking sticks. In exchange, he had memories: a lock of hair covering the eyes, ample dangling breasts *à la levrette*, trembling thighs in muted lamplight. They took him by surprise at times and soothed his restlessness.

The commissioner's favourite of the last six months was a faun-like creature, an outsider like himself. He thought it best not to get attached to one woman, even when it came to courtesans. The talons of a woman's heart are greedy and it was wise to avoid them. But the commissioner was fascinated by the wench's tender coquetry. She was a firefly trapped in amber. Compared with her, the other *cocottes* paled into insignificance. Then take two, Paul charged himself repeatedly, but he never did. He put it down to age.

An agreeable sensation in his chest inclined him to walk with a jaunt. What had started off as sexual necessity – Lefèvre was in his early forties – had become more intoxicating than opium. The commissioner usually swaggered along the splendid Chaussée d’Antin, brandishing his walking stick in the cool light of L’Opéra, which had been refurbished three years earlier in 1867 at considerable expense. But this evening, his rugged, stocky yet well-tailored frame seemed agitated. Lefèvre’s gaze drifted towards the gleaming coaches bringing courtesans of name and fame to the inner courtyards of the city’s palaces, where liveried servants waited to escort each to her *aimant*. The ‘skulls and Pickelhaube helmets’ – a designation much favoured by *Le Moniteur* – of the Prussian troops advancing towards the border appeared to be having a significant effect on the aristocratic libido.

Lefèvre had read in the same *Moniteur* a couple of hours earlier that Baudelaire was now considered one of France’s greatest men of letters, a mere three years after his death. The article also claimed that he had predicted this disastrous war. Lefèvre had only witnessed a single performance of the deathly pale Baudelaire, a genius if many were to be believed. But traces of the poet’s words – rumour had it he was already suffering from syphilis at the time, which explained his bulging eyes and their metallic lustre – had left their mark on him, like the tracks of a vineyard snail. Typical of the French bourgeoisie to cherish a poet years after his death, when they had loathed and persecuted him while he was alive.

Lefèvre involuntarily mouthed the words of *Les Deux Bonnes Soeurs*, as strophes of the poem with their vigorous timbre invaded his mind. His head told him he had garbled the lines. His heart told him that a few shreds of the poem contained everything he wanted to know about life.

Debauchery and Death are pleasant twins (...)
Both tomb and bed, in blasphemy so fecund
Each other's hospitality to second,

*Prepare grim treats, and hatch atrocious things.*¹

The last line rubbed against the commissioner like an invisible satyr when he heard a woman scream behind the chic facade of one of the Chaussée d'Antin's sumptuous bordellos.

2

Paintings by Bougeureau decorated the vestibule, a sign of opulence given the hefty fees the artist charged for his work. As Lefèvre charged up the thickly carpeted stairs, he cast a fleeting yet disapproving gaze at the painter's classical panoramas, which had come to symbolise the strict guidelines of *L'Académie* on realism in painting. The woman's scream resounded once again somewhere above him. Lefèvre held his revolver in his left hand, his police badge in his right. An older woman in a turban, *en vogue* among the more fashionable whores, awaited him on the landing, wringing her hands. Lefèvre guessed she was the concierge, held his finger to his lips when she was about to open her mouth, and showed her his police badge. He brought his lips close to her neck, pointed to the doors on the landing and whispered: "Which one?"

She pursed her lips. There was a look of uncertainty in her eyes, but she was neither surprised nor disapproving. Lefèvre could see she had lived a life of secret encounters and smiles behind lace napkins. She pointed to room twelve.

Lefèvre approached the room with caution, but the door swung open to meet him and a young lady in a lavishly fluffy negligee, filling the air with the scent of absinth and a hint of musk, came running from the room. 'Inside?' the commissioner inquired. He had had plenty of experience dealing with romantic intrigues. As *officier du paix*, he had to keep an eye on the city's moral reputation. Lefèvre preferred discretion to good morals. That is why he remained disapprovingly

tight lipped when he discovered a corpse in the room instead of a disappointed client demanding his money back because an excess of wine had affected his ability to rise to the occasion. The man's twisted expression reminded him of Dr Guillaume Duchenne de Boulogne's electrophysiological experiments, photographs of which Lefèvre had recently had the privilege of seeing. De Boulogne, according to many a dangerous madman, applied electrodes to the human body to chart muscular reactions. He was convinced that electrical pulses could suggest immense agony on a patient's face without him suffering real pain.

But the dead man had clearly felt something: the horrific cramps of one or other poison. Strychnine? He missed the odour of bitter almonds. Lefèvre cursed under his breath. His plans for a night snuggled up against his mystifying Claire de la Lune had disappeared in smoke.

He leaned over the body and noticed a scrap of paper with fragments of a poem scribbled wildly, as if the holder of the pen had been drunk or had fallen prey to violent emotion.

*Debauchery and Death are pleasant twins (...)
Both tomb and bed, in blasphemy so fecund
Each other's hospitality to second,
Prepare grim treats, and hatch atrocious things.²*

It was as if a needle had pierced Lefèvre's left eye. He shook his head in amazement and a faint smile appeared on his lips. A murderer who reads poetry, how appropriate on a night like this.

But there was more to this, the commission thought, unable as yet to lay his finger on it. He examined the handwriting. The slightly sardonic smile on his face disappeared. It was strangely familiar.

He examined the corpse at closer quarters and observed the tattoo of a mythical animal on the left wrist.

The subdued light of the boudoir's sparingly distributed oil lamps started to play games with his powers of perception.

The tattoo appeared to change colour for a moment.

3

The Chaussée d'Antin? According to the coachman, something had happened in one of the street's fancy bordellos. Inspector Bernard Bouveroux grimaced. No wonder the commissioner had made it to the scene of the crime so quickly. Bouveroux was familiar with Lefèvre's predilection for ladies of ill repute. In such circumstances, even a coach was warranted to have his assistant brought to the scene. As he put on his jacket, Bouveroux glanced outside at the coachman, oil lamp in hand, waiting for his fare to arrive. The vehicle seemed out of place in the darknes of the Rue du Jardinnet. The inspector lived on the left side of the street, where wealthy 18th century merchants had built unimaginative yet spacious buildings, which had since been divided into apartments for people who found it difficult to make ends meet. The people on the other side were a lot worse off: a hotchpotch of tiny, low-built, dingy houses, inhabited by labourer's families with hordes of children, who emptied their potties every morning onto the street from their bedroom windows. As he searched for his coat, the inspector rubbed his stomach, which had been troubling him for the best part of twenty years. It was the end of August and already hard to get by without coal for the fire or a warm coat and hat outside. But the fire wasn't burning. The war with the Prussians had sent coal prices soaring. The room was cold and damp. Bouveroux shivered, but not because of the approaching autumnal chill. He had read somewhere that those who study the human mind were convinced that nightmares had meaning. He made his way down to the coach, still perplexed by the symbolism of the dream from which the coachman had awakened him. The stairwell reeked of chicken casserole. All that had remained

was an overpowering sense of misery, a loneliness that dangled round his neck like a rope. Marthe had appeared to him again, but not in her usual angelic radiance. This time she was a beacon of affliction. Bouveroux hoped that this oppressive vision was the result of an excess of wine diluted with vinegar he had downed the night before. ‘Marthe, when will it all end?’ he thought, as he left the building and observed a vague shadow of himself cast on the rain drenched cobblestones by the light of the coachman’s lamp.

4

Lefèvre had already questioned most of the ladies before the coach returned with his assistant Bouveroux. The inspector’s nose was gleaming from the cold when he entered the boudoir, his small, perceptive eyes streaked with red.

Bouveroux looked at the corpse, snapped his fingers, crouched, and traced the contours of the tattoo on the dead man’s wrist with his index finger. He looked up at Lefèvre.

‘A *rakshasa*, commissioner.’

When both men were on duty, Bouveroux addressed his superior as commissioner, although they were old friends who had saved each other’s lives on more than one occasion.

Lefèvre removed his hat and rummaged in his jacket for his chewing tobacco.

‘Looks like some kind of exotic Japanese demon.’

‘It’s an evil spirit from Indochina,’ said Bouveroux. ‘My nephew just returned to Paris with a similar tattoo. He had it done during a drunken night on the town when he was stationed in Tonkin. He didn’t know at the time that the image was actually a curse, and now he’s worried about his future. Tattoos like this are usually done by women. They call it a *khout*. Take a look: part man, part hawk, standing on a magic square.’

‘So where did you pick up your knowledge of Indo-Chinese mythology, Bouveroux?’

Lefèvre already knew the answer. Bouveroux was an ardent collector of useless information. Anything even vaguely related to the supernatural made him laugh, but curious facts from exotic places drove him wild. In spite of his caveman exterior, Lefèvre was more sensitive to moods and impressions than his gaunt assistant.

‘After we spent the night in the palace of the Dey in Algiers, where we supped better wine than we’d ever tasted at home and found parchment scrolls that appeared to be older than the Qu’ran, I developed something of a passion for scholarly research into foreign peoples and their history,’ said Bouveroux.

‘Scholars fill the newspapers with nonsense these days just to butter up the public.’ Lefèvre realised he sounded a little stale. During that memorable night in the palace of Algiers to which Bouveroux had alluded, Lefèvre had done things that had little to do with knowledge or wisdom, things of which Bouveroux was unaware. His assistant was only three years his younger, but the inspector was better equipped to deal with the feverish pace of change characteristic of the times in which they lived. Paris had become one enormous building site. Conflict between the rich and the poor was close to boiling point. The emperor was a simpleton with an inflated ego, who was determined to lead France into a war it could never win. Little wonder people were prepared to listen to scholarly humbug or believe in the devil.

What was a man to do in such circumstances? His duty ‘to the last’, as prefect of police Banlieu had prescribed.

‘Get the concierge in here. It’s time we had a word.’

Bouveroux obediently disappeared. Moments later the concierge was standing in the doorway. She had taken off her turban to reveal silver-blond hair, as dry as straw. Her slanted eyes and ample mouth suggested she was once an exceptional beauty. Lefèvre glanced at her shoes, which had clearly seen better days, and then her delicate shoulders, which had once borne the burden of a covetous, faithless

love. 'I saw nothing, sir,' she said, before Lefèvre had the chance to ask her a question. He tried to concentrate on the task at hand. The unfortunate murder had cast a shadow over his evening. His mind's eye was working fast and furious, leaving his senses far behind. He could picture the prostitute he had christened Claire de la Lune in every corner of the boudoir. Her smell, a potpourri of oriental memories, her husky laugh, the look in her eyes of a startled mare, the danger that appeared to lurk beneath her quivering limbs, were more tangible now than when he was with her.

'Tell me it was about jealousy, and we can both get on with our day,' he said, gesturing towards the courtesan from room twelve who was still snivelling into her lace handkerchief. Her ears were red and her shoulders lifted, as if some invisible figure was holding her under the arms.

'Natalie is well-suited to her profession. She has a weak character, but self-preservation has made her sweet,' said the concierge, walking over to the fragile nightingale and caressing her hair as one would pet a poodle. 'I can't imagine her committing murder. She might be pushed into stabbing man in the eye with a pair of scissors out of fear or repugnance. But master Albert was a regular customer and Natalie often spoke highly of his manners, discretion and generosity.' The woman she had referred to as Natalie looked at her with timid gratitude and gently nodded.

'Albert who?'

'It's not our custom to ask our guests for their surnames, sir,' the concierge replied reproachfully.

The whore started to sob again and produced a second handkerchief from her low-cut bodice, this time with even more lace.

'If you ask my advice, Natalie's not the one you're looking for,' the concierge concluded.

'You'll have to come up with more than that if you're to convince me,' said the commissioner. 'The girl told me her client had suddenly taken ill, started to wave his arms around, and collapsed to the floor,

foaming at the mouth. For no apparent reason? Sounds a bit fishy to me!’

‘I know nothing about the circumstances,’ said the concierge, ‘but this looks more like the work of some tormented soul.’

‘What makes you think that?’

She pointed to the tattoo. ‘An old lady like me has few pleasures, commissioner, but I have seen master Albert stripped to the waste on previous visits and I can assure you that this is the first time I have noticed any form of bodily decoration.’

‘Young men are prone to such whims, even when we wouldn’t expect it of them,’ said Lefèvre dryly.

‘Right you are, commissioner, but that decoration gives me the shivers.’

Lefèvre glanced over at Bouveroux, who was on his knees in front of the body and not really listening to the conversation. The inspector leaned forward and sniffed the man’s wrist. He then carefully touched the tattoo with his gloved righted hand.

‘It’s not a tattoo,’ he observed. ‘The image has been painted on.’

‘Don’t touch it, Bernard,’ said the commissioner. ‘Take off that glove and wrap it in a cloth.’

Bouveroux raised his eyebrows, but did what he was asked. His old friend’s occasional outbursts – which he liked to call ‘danger signs’ – were best obeyed.

Lefèvre turned once again to the concierge, as if the short intermezzo with his assistant had never taken place. ‘Did anything unusual happen today?’

‘No.’

‘Take your time.’

The concierge struck a pensive pose, which only lasted a few seconds.

‘A couple of hours ago, one of the Ursuline nuns knocked on the door. She said she wanted to pray for the souls of the ladies who work

here. She then visited each of the rooms to introduce herself. I didn't see her leave. So many people come and go in this place.'

'Had none of the other sisters ever come up with such an idea?'

'No. But it's not really surprising for a nun, if you think about it.'

'What did she look like?'

The concierge sighed, raised her hands, and shook Natalie by the shoulder. The girl turned her tear-stained face: 'She wanted to pray with me, but I didn't have the time.'

'Did you see what she looked like?'

The girl looked at the commissioner with dismay. Lefèvre grunted: 'A hooded figure. Religion is a beautiful thing, don't you think?' The commissioner's military service in Algeria had eroded his faith in religion.

Bouveroux coughed impatiently. Lefèvre restrained him with a glare. The commissioner knew that patience could be rewarding in some situations. If only he could count on the same patience when lust drove him to the *cocottes*.

'Do you have anything else to say, madam,' Bouveroux inquired.

'Actually I do, sir,' said the concierge, 'but I'm not sure if it's relevant.'

'This is a murder inquiry, madam.'

'The nun was extremely beautiful. She had a face like one of those porcelain dolls that are supposed to look like Japanese women, do you get my drift? Please understand, commissioner. I've been in this business for a long time. Ladies who receive men and are well-versed in the art of love-making take on a particular appearance after a while. The thought went through my head that the nun might once have been a courtesan.'

Lefèvre raised an eyebrow.

'And if I'm right, she practised her profession not so long ago,' the concierge concluded with a vague expression on her face, as if she were reminded of something in her own past she would have preferred to forget.

The commissioner's official place of work at the prefecture had heavy curtains, a pipe stand, and two woollen carpets he had brought back from his military service in Algeria. A portrait of Napoleon III, which made *l'empereur* look like an escapee from an lunatic asylum, graced one of the walls, while his desk, which connoisseurs would describe as classical, was a little out of the ordinary with its countless drawers and extraordinary ornamentation. Most of the drawers contained weapons. Lefèvre had a predilection for heavy-gauge pistols. His collection included a Basque front-loader and a Richards-Mason .357. Lefèvre considered the Mason more reliable than the Colt with the same calibre Bouveroux used.

The commissioner blew his nose and browsed through his notebook. He had spent a restless night in his apartment on the Rue de Nesle. After organising the removal of the corpse to the morgue, where a police doctor could examine it, he had considered continuing on his way to Claire de la Lune after all, but a curious listlessness had prevented him. The demon on the wrist of the murdered young man, which had changed colour while he was looking at it, continued to preoccupy him. He put the optical illusion down to the Algerian love potion he had downed before getting dressed. The commissioner was aware that drinking the watery solution of *Scilla Autumnalis* was not without its risks. The Berber from Sidi Bel Abbès, who taught him to make the potion long ago, had told him about the Roman legend of the beautiful nymph Scilla who had begged Circe for a love potion. Instead of drinking it, she had bathed in it, to be sure her satyr lover Glaucus would remain faithful. 'Too much passion, *sidi*, can turn a person into a monster. Scilla was transformed into a woman with two serpent's tails and six barking dog heads. She threw herself into the sea, and since then she has murdered every unfortunate soul who comes near her.' The Berber produced the sinister, piercing smile of someone you would prefer not to meet in a dark alley. But his potion

worked and Lefèvre had come to trust its properties down through the years. He had noticed the need to increase the dose every now and then to maintain the effect. The love potion produced a burning sensation like hot fiery coals in his lower belly, running from his navel to his testicles. But *Scilla Autumnalis* sometimes made him see things that were not there. Did he really see the *khout* change colour? The commissioner made up his mind to reduce the dose next time.

Bouveroux entered the office without knocking. ‘You look as if you did more last night than interrogate the *demoiselles*,’ he said in good spirits. Lefèvre could smell wine on his old army comrade’s breath. He had stopped reprimanding Bouveroux for his alcohol consumption years ago. The commissioner accepted that everyone needed their own secret poison to make life liveable. He had advised his assistant to rinse his mouth with a *digestif* made from crushed mint, to freshen his breath after drinking serious amounts of alcohol. The inspector had answered that his memory was like a sieve. By the time he had downed his first glass, the thought of mint flavoured concoctions had vanished. When they were alone, they treated each other as friends. In 1842, twenty-eight years earlier, they had spent three years in Louis Napoleon’s Algerian army. The man insisted on being referred to as Emperor Napoleon III, in spite of the fact that Otto von Bismarck – the ‘Iron Chancellor’ – had sworn he would humiliate the ‘puppet emperor’ if he continued to resist the presence of a German Hohenzollern prince on the Spanish throne. Twenty-four year old Lefèvre and twenty-one year old Bouveroux had fought in Algeria against *Sufi* who were convinced that death in the name of Allah was a man’s proper and only destiny. They had reclined in the arms of *houris*, highly skilled at satisfying a man’s needs, yet dangerous nonetheless. Esoteric contacts with *djinnns* sometimes drove these veiled creatures to relieve the Frenchman they had just fondled at their welcoming breasts of his testicles, hacking and cursing like women possessed.

Nostalgic by nature, Bouveroux had gradually come to the conclusion that he would never become the great historian he had

dreamed of becoming if he didn't stay away from the wine. His syntax may have been pedantic at times, but it concealed an industrious and analytical intellect. The inspector was a fervent library visitor with an encyclopaedic disposition. While Lefèvre was interested in the subterranean twists and turns of the criminal mind and often followed his instincts, Bouveroux was a gatherer of facts. In contrast to the commissioner, whose bulbous cheeks were reminiscent of an English bulldog, Bouveroux had an elongated ascetic look, in spite of his alcohol consumption.

'We have the victim's identity,' he said triumphantly, as if it was the result of peerless detective work. 'His name is Albert Dacaret. An artist.' Bouveroux placed a wickedly large pile of snuff on his thumb, snorted it deep into his nostrils and grinned blissfully. 'The motive was probably money. Artists are always short of cash and end up borrowing from the wrong kind.'

'Dacaret?' said Lefèvre. 'Interesting. A promising young poet, the papers say.'

Bouveroux's grin turned to a frown. The commissioner had maintained an interest in the press, in spite of his well-publicised conviction that it was full of lies and foolishness, but the inspector preferred not to make a point of it. 'Your knowledge of French literature continues to amaze me, Paul.'

Lefèvre looked at him with a smile. He knew his friend better than he was willing to admit. 'I presume you also know the cause of death. Otherwise you wouldn't look so self-satisfied.'

Bouveroux took a seat and placed his hat on the chair next to him. 'That's what makes the case so remarkable,' he said. 'The painting on the man's wrist contains an exotic poison. The natives of French Guyana use it to kill giant lizards.' Bouveroux appeared to be hungry. In spite of his thin frame, he could eat as if there was no tomorrow. 'It takes time for the deadly tincture to take effect. Once the colossal reptiles are dead, they cut them up and cook them. They say their flesh is as tender as a baby's.'

He started to pat his jacket and trousers and after some searching produced a crumpled piece of paper from his inside pocket. Bouveroux was in the habit of scribbling down the things his investigative mind was likely to forget and ferreting them out later from various openings in his clothing. ‘Albert Dacaret. Caused a furore six months ago with the collection *Le fièvre du diable*. Critics hailed him as ‘the new Baudelaire’. Dacaret became seriously angry at the response and wrote a letter to the editor of a newspaper in which he annihilated his deceased predecessor. Just three weeks ago, the Spanish poet Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer predicted that Dacaret would ‘tear the staggeringly conceited romanticism of French letters to pieces.’ Bouveroux started to pat his pockets again, this time in search of his tobacco box, which turned out to be empty. Lefèvre tossed his own tobacco at Bouveroux, who caught it with gratitude. ‘Where do you get all this information?’

‘You know me, Paul,’ said Bouveroux. ‘I have plenty of journalist friends. Let me tell you something. In less than a century, the journalists will be bigger stars than the sopranos at the Opera!’

Lefèvre, who was standing at the window with his back to Bouveroux, could see the church of Saint-Germain-L’Auxerois a couple of blocks up the street. The gothic edifice was constructed on the site of an ancient Merovingian sanctuary. Simpler souls believed that light could be seen inside in misty weather, giving the deep-blue stained-glass windows an unearthly glow.

Once again he felt a stabbing pain in his left eye and imagined, for a split second, that he was leaning against a curtain that had once concealed a wall. He glanced over his shoulder. It was a grey morning. The gaslight in his office made Bouveroux’s cheeks appear pallid and the sockets of his puny eyes black. The sky above Paris was restless and darker than the cloak of a servant-girl, waiting in the doorway for her lover. It was the end of August and the summer had been a disappointment. Rain, thunderstorms, a plague of mosquitoes, howling dogs and agitated cats. The commissioner’s broad face, which betrayed his roots among the fishermen of Brittany, was grim and

dour. Bouveroux was convinced that an air of melancholy had been hanging round his old friend of late. Perhaps the commissioner was worried about approaching old age. It was better to drown such worries in wine than to face them eye to eye, the inspector thought.

‘Artists have explosive temperaments,’ said the commissioner pensively. ‘They sometimes hate one another with a vengeance.’

Bouveroux fluttered his eyelids: ‘I’m no great follower of Art, Paul. Overstated trickery, if you ask me. I prefer to stick to the facts in the papers and in books. Art is the same as spiritualism. Did you know that there are more than six-hundred soothsayers and mediums in Paris at the moment, all of them earning huge sums of money from people who believe that their future can be read in a crystal ball?’ Bouveroux produced a neighing sound, interrupting the commissioner’s concentration. He hadn’t been paying his assistant much attention. The prickly atmosphere of the previous night and the apprehension in his stomach left the commissioner with the impression that he had missed something important.

Lefèvre tried to sort out the evidence so far: an exotic poison introduced into the body of the deceased via a painted tattoo. What did this have to say about the murderer’s methodology? He had learned the technique during a visit to Indochina? Or had he picked it up from an island dweller living in Paris. Dark-skinned foreigners had been popular in the city of late. It was hard to avoid hearing about the furore caused by Creoles, Indians, Patagonians and Spice Islanders at the salons held daily in the capital, as if the danger posed by the advancing Prussians were a mere fantasy.

‘How long does the poison take to work exactly?’

Bouveroux looked contritely at his boss. ‘I’ll have to check that with doctor Lepage. You won’t get an answer right away, I’m afraid. Lepage will have to track down a colleague who served in French Guyana.’

‘Fine. And check whether Dacaret ever visited any exotic destinations. The man’s simple background leaves me with my doubts. If he’s never been abroad, then we should concentrate our inquiries on tattooists in Paris...’

‘It’s not a real tattoo, commissioner.’

‘Perhaps some tattooists are familiar with the technique you were talking about...’

‘Rakshasa tattoos?’

‘Precisely, that demon of yours. Which of them is talented enough to paint such creatures on the skin? Try to find out as quickly as possible.’

The commissioner’s demeanour told the inspector that his boss wanted to be alone. Bouveroux made a couple of meaningless remarks and left the office.

The corridors of the prefecture were old, winding and poorly lit, reminiscent of the wine-coloured light illuminating the bazaars in Algeria. The memory sharpened Bouveroux’s senses. As he headed mechanically towards the stairs, he muttered under his breath about the séances that were all the rage at the time. An Enlightened Empire? Not a bit of it! The French were either stupid, frightened or unfortunate, mostly a combination of the three. Bouveroux counted himself among the unfortunate. The rooms he rented in the Rue du Jardinot were poorly maintained, had curtains the colour of rotting gums, and were furnished with junk delivered by cart some time in the distant past.

But his apartment provided the anonymity he needed when he was away from the prefecture. He liked to compare it with the lair of a wounded animal. Since his Marthe’s death, the only thing that could relieve his melancholy was a visit to the public library. While his wife was alive, Bouveroux had only succumbed to the distraction of cheap women when the need was greatest, when certain memories of Algeria returned to haunt him, memories he had to expel. He had never told his colleagues that he had remained monogamous in his heart, not even Paul Lefèvre. If he had confessed that he was attached to his wife like

a homing pigeon, they would have accused him of betraying the true Frenchman's pride in his national flag, flown by preference 'in his trousers'.

His name resounded against the walls. Bouveroux looked back to find the commissioner standing in the doorway of his office. A different image took its place. Lefèvre at an outstation in the Sahara, covered in blood, standing in the doorway of the brightly-lit waiting room of a whitewashed fort, illuminated by the frosty stars of the desert night. Bouveroux remembered the excitement on his friend's face.

Almost thirty years later, he saw the same expression. The commissioner had been on the prowl for a long time, and he wallowed in the confusion and hunger in his soul. Lefèvre was waving the piece of paper that had been found on the corpse. 'The same handwriting,' he said. 'Identical! I knew I had seen it somewhere before. Take a look.'

In his other hand the commissioner was holding a book, which he held out to Bouveroux. As a fervent library visitor, the inspector registered both title and author in an instant: *Le peintre de la vie moderne* by Charles Baudelaire. He took hold of the book and followed Lefèvre's index finger. The volume contained a dedication: *For a man of the law who obeys the laws of poetry above all else. Charles Baudelaire, 1857.*

A single glance at the scrap of paper in the commissioner's right hand was sufficient.

The handwriting was indeed identical.

6

Granier de Cassagnac was so excited about his recent trip to Nouméa, and the impeccable travelogue he planned to write about it, that he didn't pay the slightest attention to the picturesque cloudscape hanging

over Paris. He turned into the Rue Saint-André-Des-Arts and strutted boldly past the *estaminet* of the moustachioed landlord Jean-Claude, who almost certainly had a good bottle of wine at the ready to kindle his ardour. But not today! His writing desk was waiting, unpolished and fragrant with beeswax. He passed a newspaper kiosk on the Rue Dauphine where they sold *La Patrie* and *Paris Journal*. It wouldn't be long now before *Paris Journal* was begging for the right to publish his story about the French penal colony on New Caledonia. Gautier, a literary jester who imagined himself to be the French Thackeray, but was little more than a small-minded nobody who constantly grumbled about money, was going to vomit with jealousy. The last time de Cassagnac had seen the upstart, he was in the company of the de Goncourt brothers, perfumed vampires and the bane of every promising young artist. With enough pathos to make a third-rate Greek theatre jealous, Gautier had thrown himself on the sofa and announced that as far as he was concerned he was dead, and that everyone should rejoice in the fact. Death, after all, was the highest form of existence. A poet capable of producing such nonsense, deserved to earn no more than a vulgar journalist. Gautier considered the latter a plague to which he frequently dedicated lengthy and whining laments.

De Cassagnac chased the conceited dandy from his thoughts and replaced him with sonorous sentences that drifted through his mind as coaches clattered past on the rutted cobblestones. He stopped to admire the gloomy side wall of Jean Mangin's restaurant, which was decorated with fashionable paintings advertising his wares. He paid no attention to the conspicuous cluster of clouds above the pointed edifice, but saw in his mind's eye the crude huts of New Caledonia, populated by young men caught stealing or committing some other crime and shipped to the colony to serve as cheap labour. The miserable brutality he had witnessed on New Caledonia had given his writing an exceptional élan. One of the rascals was a particularly effeminate individual, referred to by the others as the White Bitch. He would put on a turban, make up his eyes with black powdered kohl and

parade himself among the workers until the bidding started. The colony's guards took their cut of his profits and provided him with henna to colour his hair, and natural oils used by Polynesian women to keep their skin smooth.

De Cassagnac had never encountered the kind of moral depravity he had witnessed in the Malaysian, Chinese and Polynesian quarters. He suspected that the task of describing the natives, who were prone to humping one another at every opportunity, day and night, would likely stretch his syntax beyond its usual elegance. Many an author would be unable to rise to the occasion. The brothers Edmond and Jules de Goncourt, for example, would turn such an immense subject into gutter prose and emboss every disgusting detail on pretentious medallions with fancy writing. De Cassagnac had decided to use a naturalistic style, which he was sure would cause the book-loving ladies in the most infamous salons to faint. He couldn't imagine a better expression of appreciation. He had even taken note of a couple of sayings in Ajië, the local dialect of the Polynesian tribes. Their opulent resonance would grant an extra dimension to the innovative literature that was lingering in his mind.

As he turned right at Petin's *Bronzes d'Art et Pendules* on the way to his rented study, a coach with drawn curtains stopped immediately in front of him. De Cassagnac clearly saw its occupant step out onto the street and automatically stood aside. He was surprised when the person spoke to him, but he responded nevertheless with a gallant bow. He suddenly felt a hefty stabbing pain in his neck.

7

Granier de Cassagnac recovered consciousness when someone held a cloth soaked in ammonia under his nose. The penetrating odour confused his senses. The feeling that he was having a nightmare was reinforced by the lack of light. De Cassagnac hoped this was a dream,

like the horror stories of that hysterical American Edgar Amman Poe. But the cold, hard floor beneath his body and the stench of brackish water that had gradually replaced the smell of ammonia, were all too real. His body stiffened involuntarily when he realised he was in a cave, a feeble smoking torch in a corner its only illumination. The light flickered against the walls of the cave revealing stacks of human skulls and other bones, black with age. De Cassagnac instinctively looked away. A figure dressed in a hooded cloak crouched to his left, silent, motionless.

‘Gracious God!’ The words were out before he had the time to regret them. He already knew that his prayer would go unanswered. His breathing accelerated and he broke into a sweat, in spite of the cold humidity of his catacomb prison.

‘*Arrêtez! C’est ici l’empire de la mort.*’ The whispered words echoed round the cave. They were familiar words, words used by Baudelaire years before as the title of an article.

De Cassagnac realised that he had not been tied up. He wanted to get to his feet, push his assailant out of the way and flee, but his limbs refused to move.

‘You are familiar with more exotic climes,’ the voice continued. ‘It should please you that I set aside an exotic poison for you alone. It’s made from algae called *Pseudonitschia* found only in far-off waters. The natives of Mauritius use it to commit crimes of passion. The algae renders the victim powerless, but has no effect on the mind. The symptoms all have ritual value. The sacrifice is forced to watch in silence and fully conscious as the machete cuts a graceful ark through the moonlight. No raucous screaming, no pig-like death throes, just elevated torment, precise, meticulous, poetic.’

The figure leaned forward.

‘An enemy eliminated in such a fashion furnishes the perpetrator with magic powers. Magic, my dear Mr de Cassagnac, is a talent, equal to writing. With your phenomenal literary talent, you should be able to appreciate such a death, am I wrong?’

De Cassagnac tried to scream, but was forced to watch in silence as the flicker of light that had appeared in his murderer's hands moved precisely, meticulously and poetically towards his throat.

8

Deep in the catacombs, Bernard Bouveroux cleared his throat, making a noise that sounded as if the piles of skulls behind him were grating together.

'I thought I had seen the dirtiest filth God's creation had to offer in Beni Abbas,' the inspector muttered, 'but I was wrong.'

Lefèvre crouched over the body and said nothing. His face appeared pale and sickly in the light of the oil lamps placed around the cave by the uniformed police.

The commissioner's gloved fingers fumbled with the lines of verse lying on de Cassagnac's belly.

He read the text out loud with a lilting tone, which the inspector found completely inappropriate, given the situation and, indeed, the words themselves:

*Men scheme each night and hope each morning,
Yet no man grows one moment riper
But suffers, at each turn, the warning
Of the insufferable viper.³*

'Our killer must have been a sizeable viper,' said Bouveroux. 'He's taken the man's head off with a single bite.' The inspector retrieved a perfumed handkerchief from his pocket and held it under his nose as he kneeled down, although the corpse was still fresh. He ran his hand with the utmost care over the naked torso and hesitated above the two mock breasts that had been roughly stitched to the man's chest.

‘Is that human skin?’ the inspector asked. He cleared his throat once again.

Lefèvre nodded, but said nothing.

‘What do they contain?’ Bouveroux coughed. The cold air of the catacombs was not good for his weak lungs.

‘Candle wax.’

Bouveroux’s eyes strayed towards the man’s naked crotch.

‘There must have been a lot of blood with such a wound,’ he observed.

‘He cleaned up after himself.’ The commissioner rubbed the dust from his gloves. ‘A tidy murderer.’

‘He removed the man’s genitals.’

‘So it would appear. But if he hid them behind one of these piles of bones we’ll never find them.’

‘The wound has been stitched together, commissioner.’

‘Yes, I noticed.’

‘There appears to be a protruding layer of frayed skin, like female genitalia...’

‘I noticed that too, Bernard.’

‘What is the murderer trying to tell us?’

The commissioner heard his knees crack as he got to his feet. Lose weight, resume his fencing lessons, recover his fitness. Too much red wine in mediocre establishments that stuck to the glass like tar and added extra layers of fat to his waistline.

‘We can’t be sure if the killer was also responsible for Dacaret’s demise.’

‘There is one obvious similarity: verses from Baudelaire,’ the inspector observed.

‘True, but the method is completely different. The poison tattoo suggested extraordinary preparation, almost artistic talent. This murder was a ferocious deed. Even the symbolism is unrefined. There was a great deal of blood. He took the head with him as if it had insulted him. He attached false breasts to the man’s chest and castrated him,

sowing up the wound in a manner suggestive of a vulva. In short: he turned the man into a woman.’ The commissioner looked down at the body. ‘An ugly, repulsive woman.’

‘Both victims were young and had slightly effeminate features,’ Bouveroux chipped in. ‘Mr de Cassagnac’s long curls and bizarre wardrobe made him look womanish. Police physician Lepage discretely informed me that young Dacaret’s genitals were... eh... not the normal size for a man of his age.’

‘Do you think we are dealing with sex inspired killing?’ said Lefèvre, ‘committed by a sodomite, perhaps?’

The inspector coughed delicately into his handkerchief. He was used to his boss’s boorish character. Bernard Bouveroux had often heard his friend say that women were worse pigs in the bedroom than men, especially when they pretended to be bashful and prudish in company.

‘Perhaps the killer is raging against his own gender?’ said the inspector.

‘You sound like that half-wit analyst who is always on about human urges and desires,’ said Lefèvre, who wasn’t much impressed with such new-fangled tendencies.

‘Charcot?’ said Bouveroux, unconsciously strutting his encyclopaedic intellect. “‘We look up to the heavens, but the heavens are empty. That is why we look inside ourselves.’”

The commissioner grumbled angrily.

‘And what do we see, commissioner?’ Bouveroux continued cheerfully. ‘That we lie to ourselves day and night. We talk about love but want to copulate like ordinary riff-raff. We talk about friendship yet stab one another in the back. We hate humanity and we hate ourselves. All that’s left, after a bout of tragic lucidity inspires us to clear the table of our little house of cards, is the universal power of desire.’

The commissioner said nothing for minutes on end.

‘Let me put it in analytic terms, Bouveroux. The corpse tells me we are indeed dealing with the same killer, but he’s getting angrier and is coming closer and closer to the heart of your infamous desires. But it’s not because of some insight into his inner existence, as you so eloquently explained, but because it is making him suffer and his soul has broken adrift. He can no longer communicate with words and is forced to use slaughtered flesh instead.’

‘And what about Baudelaire’s poems?’ said the inspector dryly. ‘Haven’t you noticed the handwriting, commissioner?’

Lefèvre looked at the piece of paper. ‘Indeed, the handwriting of the poet.’ The commissioner sounded like someone gasping for air after waking from a frightening dream. ‘The handwriting of a dead man.’

¹ Roy Campbell, *Poems of Baudelaire* (New York: Pantheon, 1952)

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.