Baudelaire's Revenge

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p 1-3

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 most. To him, poetry was an abstract emotion rooted in the primordial world, before the existence of language. The act of copulation skulked through the human brain like a prehistoric lizard, biting randomly.

The commissioner had decided to feed the reptile that evening and was in search of a warm haven. The prospect increased his sensitivity toward 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 alabasterhandled 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 favorite of the last six months was a faunlike 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.

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 at the time—had become more intoxicating than opium. The commissioner usually swaggered along the splendid Chausée 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 toward 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 favored by *Le Moniteur*—of the Prussian troops advancing toward 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 Baudelaire had predicted this disastrous war. Lefèvre had only witnessed a single performance of the deathly-pale poet, a genius if many were to be believed. But traces of the poet's words—rumor 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 the commissioner, 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 Chausée d'Antin's sumptuous bordellos.

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p 4-6

2.

Paintings by Bouguereau decorated the vestibule, a sign of opulence given the hefty fees the artist commanded for his work. As Lefèvre charged up the thickly carpeted stairs, he cast a fleeting yet disapproving glance at the painter's classical panoramas, which had come to symbolize 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.

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

Lefèvre approached the room with caution, but the door swung open to meet him. A young lady in a lavishly fluffy negligee, filling the air with the scent of absinthe 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 was 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 body’s twisted expression reminded him of Dr. Guillaume Duchenne de Boulogne’s electrophysiological experiments, photographs of which Lefèvre had recently been privileged to see. 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 another poison. Strychnine? He missed the odor of bitter almonds. Lefèvre cursed under his breath. His plans for a night snuggled up against his mystifying Claire de la Lune had gone up 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 mind-reading murderer. How appropriate on a night like this.

But there was more to this, the commissioner thought, unable as yet to put his finger on what it might be. 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 sparsely distributed oil lamps started to play games with his powers of perception.

The tattoo appeared to change color for a moment.

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[2] Ibid.

p 7-8

3.

The Chausée 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, 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 darkness of the Rue du Jardinet. The inspector lived on the left side of the street, where wealthy eighteenth-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 hodgepodge of tiny, dingy, low-built houses, inhabited by labourers' 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.

His dead wife 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.

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p 9-13

4.

Lefèvre had already questioned most of the ladies before the coach arrived 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 Indochinese 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 sipped better wine than we'd ever tasted at home and found parchment scrolls that appeared to be older than the Qur'an, 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 in 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 junior, 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 silverblond 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 called 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 toward the courtesan from room twelve who was still snivelling into her lace handkerchief. Her eyes 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 a 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 referred to as Natalie looked at her with timid gratitude and nodded gently.

“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 one had 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 small pleasures left, commissioner. I have seen Master Albert stripped to the waist on previous visits and I can assure you that this is the first time I’ve noticed any form of bodily decoration.”

“Young men are prone to such whims, even when they’re aesthetically questionable,” 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 as he was asked. His old friend's occasional intuitive 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 pious 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 shoulders. 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 lovemaking 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.