

A little hint of Anisette and the barest trace of lemon added their delicate fragrances to the aroma of fresh coffee that filled Rosario's kitchen on this early April morning. She and her daughter Anne-Marie were preparing *bunyols*, because today was Holy Friday. Just about everywhere in the *Pyrenées Orientales* the past few days, homemakers were frying these delicate little Catalan pastries, or the bigger *bunyetes*, for Easter. Her husband, sitting down to his steaming bowl of coffee and already engrossed in some documents he was reading, glanced affectionately at them from time to time.

– Now, look, explained Rosario. On top of the yeast, salt, beaten eggs and Anisette, you add the minced lemon peel, the lard and little by little, the flour. Your Aunt Jeanne prefers using essence of orange blossoms and butter, but my mother always made her *bunyols* the way I do...it's more authentic. Butter and orange blossom seem so very Parisian to me. But then of course, as you know, your aunt and I don't always agree.

Apparently, the exact ingredients of *bunyols* had long been a bone of contention within the family. Anne-Marie, while smiling at her mother's words, wiped a bit of flour from the end of her nose and kissed her cheek.

– I've seen you make these a hundred times, *maman*. Don't worry. Some day I'll pass on your true recipe, just like *Mémé* Gilberte's, pork fat and all.

She poured her father more coffee and added two sugars.

At this moment of filial tenderness, the phone suddenly rang. Anne-Marie answered, casting a worried look at her mother.

– Yes,...just a moment, I'll put him on. *Papa*, it's for you.

She held out the receiver and looked at her father anxiously.

– *Commandant* Roca speaking... yes, d'Astié... *c'est pas grave*...what? Where, in Saint Jacques?... Oh, sweet Jesus! Well, have you called everyone? ...*Bien*...I'm on my way.

He hung up and slowly turned to his wife.

– Listen, Rosy,...

– Yes, I know. I heard you. You have to go.

– I'm sorry, *nina*. It's a dead body.

– Oh! No, *papa!* On the day of the *Sanch*. *Maman* and I had planned everything... Gilles and the little ones...

– Exactly, the day of the *Sanch*. Can you imagine the mess we’re in with all the people around today? And worse! The man goes and gets himself killed right smack where the *misteris* will pass this afternoon. Can you just see the bishop’s face if I don’t get the crime-scene wrapped up on time and I tell him we have to change the course of the procession?! *Me cago en...* I don’t even want to think about it.

Visibly upset but nevertheless trying to smile, he kissed his wife, patted his daughter’s arm and left the room; his steps heavy and resigned, grabbing up the files he’d been reading before the call.

With tears in her eyes, Rosario began pummeling her dough furiously.

– It’s always the same thing and though we’re only three months away from his retirement, nothing’s going to change. Right up to the very last day there’ll always be something to come and spoil our few family reunions.

Anne-Marie listlessly sprinkled flour on the dough, which was little by little, forming a ball.

– For today, I guess it’s a lost cause, but as Gilles and Florence are staying over until Monday, I should think we’d still get to eat our *bunyols* on Sunday according to the tradition.

She smiled hopefully at her mother.

– After all, didn't you tell me that some young lieutenant had just been transferred here to help *Papa* and pick up the torch when he leaves? And he's not even Catalan, right? Maybe he can take charge of this investigation and let *Papa* spend Easter with us!

Ten minutes after the emergency call to number 17 went through, two uniformed policemen had already arrived and sealed off the scene of the crime. They had then called the officer on duty at the *commissariat*, who had just now arrived. Other sirens announced the lab people with all their equipment. Inside the secured zone, two lab photographers were soon starting to film every detail of the body, the walls and ground of the alley and even the man who had found the body. The *procureur* was expected shortly. Like sheep dogs, two policemen were sorting people from the rapidly gathering crowd; those who had first arrived on the scene and might have seen something on one side, and the many simply curious ones who were only looking for excitement and who knew nothing, on the other.

Remi Coste, better known to his friends as “Horace,” moved over closer to his friend Eric.

It had been almost an hour since he'd found the body in the alley but he was still shaking a bit with emotion and nausea.

– You think they're going to keep us standing here much longer? he asked him.

– Yeah, I'd say a bit longer. They're waiting for some people, answered Eric, seemingly well informed.

At that moment, a tall thin man who very much resembled a crane, crossed the Place de la Republique, heading for the theater in front of which were standing Remi and Eric. He was carrying an old satchel and moved with the large steps of a long-legged bird, his head slightly ahead of his body. Eric nudged Horace slightly.

– Look, here comes the coroner. They call him *Gambette*<sup>2</sup> at the hospital.

– Why Gambette? Is he a legman?

– No, Gambette as in “Chevalier Gambette<sup>3</sup>” the egret.

The forensic pathologist actually did remind one of the large marsh birds. Even his thin and pointed nose could pass for a long beak. He had the very pale skin of someone who rarely stayed out in the sun and a lock of his gray hair obstinately rose in a tuft on his head. A policewoman

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<sup>2</sup> Gambette (French slang), leg.

<sup>3</sup> Chevalier Gambette (orn), redshank. A wading bird.

greeted him and escorted him into the alley, one end of which was on the Rue du Théâtre and the other on Rue de la Fusterie. At the opposite end, the *Procureur* had just arrived. From the other side of the tape stretched across both sides of the street, he washed his hands on a damp towelette and called out cheerfully:

– *Bonjour, Docteur*. It would appear that we didn't have enough with the "*sang et or*"<sup>4</sup> of this afternoon's *Sanch*<sup>5</sup> and so somebody sent us a bit more blood for good measure!

– *Bonjour, Monsieur le Procureur*, answered the doctor dryly, as he pulled on rubber gloves.

The forensic expert was not very talkative and never had appreciated the inevitable social banter of this state prosecutor. He turned back a few steps into the alley and bent down slightly to look at the victim.

– Have your people got all the shots they need?

– Yes, *docteur*, you can move him now.

The dead man was lying on his side near the middle of the little passageway. The fetid smell of urine, feces and blood that filled the narrow and

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<sup>4</sup> *Sang et or* (French), blood and gold, as in the yellow and red stripes of the Catalan flag.

<sup>5</sup> *Sanch* (Catalan, religious term), blood, as in The Holy Blood of Christ.

damp alley was nauseating the young policeman standing guard at the entrance, but the doctor seemed not to notice or be himself indisposed. He carefully manipulated the body, probing gently, as though not to hurt the victim, rapidly doing a preliminary examination.

– So, it looks like I call the *Police Judiciaire*, *n'est-ce pas, Docteur*? You agree we've got a murder on our hands and not a suicide, right?

– It would seem unlikely that he'd slit his own throat from ear to ear. Added to which, he has no blood on his hands and there is no knife on the ground near him.

The *procureur*, eager to go have his coffee and wash his hands again, thanked the coroner and headed for his car while barking his instructions to the police near him.

– Call the *P.J.*, put up a roadblock across the Place des Poilus and the Place Rigaud. Keep out cars and pedestrians. Detour the traffic towards, uh... towards, uh...well, wherever you can. I unfortunately can't stay, so present my apologies to the *commandant* and ask him to please call me as soon as he arrives.

Apparently happy to have done his duty so promptly, he drove off. The two officers who had already taken all necessary steps and had sealed off the area, looked at one another and shrugged.

Two others who were bent over and picking up the slightest objects from the ground of the alley, putting everything in little plastic bags, smiled knowingly at them.

– Poor old *Proc...* has very clean hands but he's a regular "Mr. Plod" isn't he?

Watching all the succeeding arrivals, *flics*, lab, coroner, *proc* and now reporters, Horace felt like the first domino: the one that falls, knocking down in its wake all the others, creating a chain reaction. They had questioned him, taken down his identity, taken his picture (in case he ran away?) and since then, nothing. One cop had said: "Stay here. The *P.J.* wants to see you." But, when? He still hadn't had his coffee. He needed desperately to take a leak, but didn't dare ask. Finally he was preparing to do so, when suddenly, he saw "an illusion" approaching him.

– You are Rémi Coste, *n'est-ce pas?* The one who found the victim?

She was tall, elegant, with a tiny waist but generous breasts...(he smiled as the fleeting thought of his friend Matt flashed through his mind)...thirtyish, magnificent shoulder-length auburn hair, large slightly shadowed eyes, an inviting pink mouth and...

– .....*Monsieur* Coste?