

Michel VACHEY

Habeas Corpus

To Jacques Fridrici

Louis Nolett, Interior Minister and author of works on Epictetus cited by the world's best philologists and political scientists, also holder of several diplomas, speaker of Malay and Swahili, and known for his laconism—and by the nickname ETC—in justice police circles, charged Super-Supercop Undequer with gathering some intel.

This body, found in the middle of the road in a plastic bag normally used for garbage, was obviously disposed of in a hurry. For fear of a rush investigation? There was an inquiry—that was better. Fear of exposure? Of betrayal?

The autopsy revealed a raging case of meningitis. Otherwise, no suspicious sign.

It is quite uncommon for one or more criminals to throw a torso-woman on a sidewalk between ten and eleven o'clock. As for ascribing the execution to meningococci... More likely to suppose this illness caused fear, then panic. The nature of the ailment was therefore known. In this case, a physician had informed... Unless the owner of the body was himself a physician, or practiced within the paramedical field.

A whole hospital system to watch, a whole world. People can also be treated at home.

First there was this rumor—or pseudo-rumor, since she escaped the common or logical fate of noise, publicity, even propaganda.

Poor world, mused Undequer, where we no longer desire our desires, fear our fears. Where in fact, we no longer have the courage of hypocrisy, he added mentally without conviction.

In which houses did these “willing amputees” live if not among the rich? He promptly corrected himself: poor reasoning. And the matter was not proven. By conceding its veracity, could one explain through misery—whether material or moral misery, or both—such a dreadful choice? Dreadful? What did he really think? More plausible than a hypothetical volunteering of mutilations, he saw a slanting rain of vectors, the delicious and frightful taste of death.

It was a little macabre novel, a pretext for psychoanalysis, a stray, wild end of a pink-shaded nightmare in a city grown bored and acclimatized to horror; it would go no further, not past the no-less-bored fantasies of the latest professor of morals. Undequer recalled a vow of pragmatism that justified his work.

There remained this woman without arms or legs, without stump, without scar, with evenly white skin. Admiringly, the medical examiner had caressed the skin where the limb was gone. “Very good teamwork. Indeed I'd say an A-1 team.” Undequer remembered his question—as out-of-the-blue as it was inane to the examiner.

— How old are you?

Obviously, the other wasn't expecting such an absurd interruption. “Thirty-three,” he replied. Completely absurd, thought Undequer.

Impeccable. Surgeons, anesthesiologists, everything. Really no problem. Astrud Jézéchiél had talked with a seemingly happy city-dweller. She saw her several times and they'd taken ambling walks together. In vain did she search her behavior for something unpleasant.

— Do you swear you are not a procuress? You're completely free? Completely?

— I give you my word.

Astrud wanted to ask her again if she did not miss the time when she was... whole. It seemed the other was ahead of her.

— Believe me, I'm fine as I am.

Before having *a bust of herself made*, Sarah Enoude considered having her legs frozen so they might, later on, reattach them should she want her normal wholeness restored.

On the other hand, seeing herself complete again, she practically trembled at the notion that her thighs would always be cold.

Anyway, she felt fine as she was.

Now she regretted not having had her four limbs devoured by a tiger.

People would call girls without arms or legs *squared*. Right away she made a mental note. But the word *amateur* stayed at the back of her mind. She heard in its place: owner, client. And other words, distressing or destructive. Scum. Shit-eater. Slave. Object. Bottom. End. Death. There were also *amatrices*.

— Who's really the slave of whom? No one's forcing you.

On the top floor of FELICE, one of the largest insurance companies on the planet, Astrud questioned Juana Carréga, an efficient and easygoing lady, dark-haired, skin a little slack.

— You manage the money of all...

— Of all the firm's employees, according to an old system there's no need to upset and which requires no commitment. It's not essentially about management, even if your income is considerable. We must protect you, support you. It's the role our contracts play in due form.

— It's... official?

— Absolutely. Even what we designate as c.c.—that is, common circumstance. In our lingo we say “compromising clause.”

— Compromising for whom?

— For a possibly unfit amateur.

— Finally... it all comes down to mistrust.

— Trust! It's different. If you start from a disastrous point of view, you may as well propose tomorrow Spain declares war on us.

Mrs. Juana Carréga smiled. “Okay,” said Astrud.

— Who isn't tempted to mislead, to misuse, starting with the State, starting with your own friends? You know what the word *credit* means... to be credible. FELICE has made itself credible; that is its true power, the only one.

— Prostheses have advanced since Homais and Dupuytren... Some women reject with—yes, repugnance—the idea of an artificial compensating system.

She had scanned the list of doctors while in the hall. In a flat voice, the secretary informed her that Dr. Derouan was no longer seeing patients that week. If he was requested more than the others, Astrud thought, perhaps that meant he was better, and she felt she should wait a week. She thought better of it, aware of her silliness, her anxiety. Neither more nor less than a pregnant woman. Pregnant with death.

She read Abilio, Cormier, Derouan, Liloup, Lochak, Pham Van Binh, Sinassär, Zriem.

— Doctor Cormier.

— For Thursday... at three o'clock. Is that all right?

She felt furious, sad. Cormier. The name like those morons who go see movies based on the titles. Cormier. An almost boorish familiarity. She realized she had decided that less by chance than by xenophobia. And she no longer knew whether she was following her own wishes or whether she now carried on so as to punish herself. Which is why your girl, so young and full of vigor, will get herself truncated with all possible safeguards. Dash

psychoanalysis. Juana Carréga: “Who knows if everything won’t suddenly come out and be voted on by Parliament?”

Dash politics. I have a fever, thought Astrud Jézéchiel.

As soon as she’d left the Functional Rehabilitation Center, the secretary caught up with her.

— Please excuse me. If you can wait another half hour, Dr. Cormier will see you.

— If your own daughter...

— You sound like a housewife bemoaning her fate, or a sententious journalist who gets her info from the cops.

— This is about my own fate.

— I don’t have a daughter... But why not?

— Why not? And you would operate on her?

— No. But it would be no for a simple appendicitis, too.

— You’re being evasive.

— Granted. But no one can live for you... When can I take you?

— As soon as possible.

— Not before five to six weeks. There are hematological and tissue tests, the speed of healing, dermachromia.

He pulled the huge wristwatch up his swimmer’s arm.

— Are there certain disadvantages for the *squared*?

— Apart from the obvious locomotor aspect, none, to my knowledge. There’s a social disadvantage that coincides exactly with the gain. In other words, you become wholly or partly heteromobile. The desire for care, on the one hand, must correspond to the desire to manipulate, *sensu stricto*, on the other. As far as I’m concerned, this level is, incidentally we’ll say, a given. Before or after, you work with excellent psychologists here. It will be a matter of not going to pot—the arms and the legs don’t exclusively have the musculature. Theoretically, no one should be more active than a torso-woman.

— One works with excellent physiotherapists, too?

— They will teach you to do without them.

Someone had told Astrud the *squared* moved on fine carpets like a lizard in the grass. You bought furniture that was particularly comfortable and practical. If you wanted and if you were gifted, teachable memory devices for all kinds of stuff.

— Maybe I’m bothering you... The rarest is what? The *squared*?

Again she panicked. Less fearful.

— The rarest are the *busts*. Surprising? The most numerous are the *urbans*. One walks better without arms than without legs, no question.

Everyone likes to walk. The *busts* and *squared* were paid about the same. It seemed wrong to him. Why then did she want to remove her four limbs?

— Not very many left hand legs and right hand legs either. An intermediate number between that of the *squared* and the *urbans*... and which tends to decrease. You know their name? The *semi-uncial*.

— You gather statistics?

— We compare certain figures.

— You don’t think there’s a fashion trend here?

— Certainly. But fashion is more mysterious than one imagines. The *gibbons* once had the densest population. As many right hand left leg as left hand right leg. The right-handers, they were called the *gibbons* “pra.” The others, the “lovers.”

The phone rang.

— No, he’s not here. The flu... Yes, in June ... Jourdreuil? Certainly. Certainly... No, we’re not going very far this year.

Astrud Jézéchiel held her breath. Jourdreuil was her doctor. Surely there weren’t fifty Jourdreuils in one place. She had absolute confidence in him.

— Thanks for letting me skim your records. Tell me, in what cases are someone's limbs removed?
— After road accidents, mostly... I still see some unfortunates who turn up here with gangrene... For me that's the most incredible. Barbarism... Exploitation, fear, ignorance.

Professor Lattice waved his hands in the pockets of his coat.

— Are you up on all the operations?

— Not possible. Administrative work... My lectures... Research. We almost won a Nobel... It's kind of a mafia, you know.

He gave a sort of weary laugh. Undequer held out his hand to take his leave.

Ahmed had been watching the gloved hand for twenty minutes. Only he and the woman in the pastry shop. A gloved hand near a cup the woman brought to her lips, set down again. With her bare right hand she smoothed some eyebrows with a fingernail. Ahmed was about to tear off the black glove, exposing her hand, revealing the prosthesis that gleamed like glazed crockery. Or a fake hand so well made he wouldn't immediately know whether it was real or fake, and that he wouldn't have time to touch since, before he could, the woman would be shrieking like a sow. In any case, once he touched the hand's material he'd know if it was warm, if it moved like a genuine hand. There are things one can't mistake. Whether someone came down on him or gave him a cuff, he'd have known. He prepared to pounce. The young woman stared. With the air of someone trying to look natural, she removed her glove, brought this new hand to her neck. Ahmed was dazed, the rush interrupted.

She regarded him. He looked away, drew a cigarette from a pack, fixed his eyes on the woman. She looked at him with provocative ennui. He went over to her.

— Excuse me, Miss, would you have a light?

She seemed to be trying not to laugh, to be taken in.

The real hand was rifling through a purse, while at the rim the other hand held one side of the clasp. A hand as real as the other one, finally. She brought out a lighter and lit Ahmed's cigarette.

— Thank you for the light, Miss.

She laughed amicably. Ahmed didn't really know what to say now, and after leaving a ten-franc coin on the table he exited the tea room.

Philippe Lehman always told bullshit stories. He said his father was well positioned to know what went on with the surgeons. But this city teemed with bullshit stories. Besides, Philippe specialized in weird-ass jibes. He kept repeating "dumb as an Arab trunk." He'd wait to be asked why so he could then respond, as if it were hilarious, that an Arab trunk had three handles. Ahmed was born in France and whatever their nationality, had not seen many trunks. He didn't find it at all fucking dumb for a trunk to have three handles, especially in buildings without a lift. Lehman was a little European asshole.

— And even if you were to question a hundred girls employed in a hundred households, what would that prove?

— Nothing. Road accidents. From the surgeon to the mechanic.

— These two young women you spoke with, do they seem unhappy?

— They don't appear to be.

— You think they really are.

— I think nothing.

Undequer snorted. Jacques Leo-Wallis would never speak frankly. In disbelief he screwed up his eyes, forcing Undequer back into the role of the absurdly suspicious official. Jacques was less the mayor of this city than center three-quarter in a rugby team where he himself once played number nine. Nostalgic and with dour amusement, he observed that nothing ever changed in some relationships.

— What's happening with you? As everyone knows, I'm a half-witted anti-democrat, an illiterate enemy of the young and the arts, the nepotist of the French Middle East. After three weeks of elections, I miss pink ballets. Must I rely on you? We're in full retro mode!

— The moral order, it's the Opposition?

— Certainly. But I'm willing to open an investigation. We have a radical prefect who won't spare his efforts... to confirm what's common knowledge: respectable families employ, or at least welcome, young female amputees. Generosity? Perversity? It's not my department. Every society is ambivalent.

Undequer had heard that somewhere before. The mayor continued to perorate.

— Today, the opposite poles deviate at their farthest so as to return with a wild collision. Extreme nobility, extreme depravity. Extreme intelligence, extreme stupidity. Extreme strength, extreme frailty. Not just in the meeting of opposing terms but within the terms themselves.

— This will go on for long?

— As a good cyberneticist you fear the fugitive. The world isn't a machine. And why would that not continue? And why should it continue?

Undequer declined all sorts of drinks.

— How long have you picked up cars?

— Long as the garage has been here. Now, it's because of the firemen or traffic police that call us. The job's not great.

— They don't pay you enough?

— Oh, we get flat rates. But for this work they've only got to go see the dump crew. Those who deal with the wrecks, the scrap dealers—all those guys. Us... we're the mechanics.

— You seen many bodies?

— Yeah, plenty.

— People badly maimed?

— Sometimes crushed. But I can tell you, we see guys leaving their cars without a scratch. They have a smoke, walk half a mile, toss off a drink while telling about the accident, and then wham! They drop dead. Zapped.

Hemorrhage in the brain, in the liver.

— Have you seen torn limbs?

— Me, no. Once we found a finger in a car, under the rubber mat... There was nothing we could do with it, should have given it to the ambulance or told them right off... Nowadays, they can sew on hands, feet.

A voice rang out from the back of the garage.

— Say, Jaime, can you come here a minute?

— Excuse me... Why are you asking these questions?

— The Prefecture's doing statistics on accidents. Okay then, good-bye.

— Not a problem.

The mechanic disappeared beneath a car. Undequer liked the sweetish chill of garages redolent of gasoline, mineral grease, and sludge.

What the Supercop actually told Inspector Undequer, roughly and approximately:

— I was just about to contact you when you called. First, I congratulate you. But we must adjust our course a bit... Of course, Leo-Wallis is the king of liars. Which doesn't necessarily call into question his municipal talents. Mrs. Carréga of FELICE is a highly respected individual... Now if you insist that road accidents are causing bodily damage that's growing more and more serious, and is bizarrely confined to the upper and lower limbs, primarily among women... you don't need to be told, my dear Undequer, that nine-tenths of these accidents are bunk. Two professional stuntmen regularly draw salaries at FELICE. Professor Lattice operates whenever he's asked to operate, he has a name to uphold... The sensitive issue is the transition from mid-sized general management to a populo-centrist phenomenon gradually overrun or ogled by a criminal element, both very high and very low—if you'll allow me these handy images.

— Who secures the actual verification and execution of FELICE contracts?

— Watch what you're about to say, Undequer. If you're referring to the secret police, you discredit yourself.

— I know nothing. I refrain from having an opinion.

Louis Nolett gave a great exhale, nostrils open wide.

— As long as I'm around, do not worry, my dear Undequer.

— This torso-woman...

— With meningitis?

— Yes.

— I don't know. It bothers me a lot, not to know.

— How 'bout if I called you a pimp?

— There are more urgent things calling. And I don't think you'd lose control like that: it's not in your nature. In your culture, I should say.

— Maybe I'm dreaming. To the extent that my hypothesis is confirmed, I bring home the phenomenal indifference people have to anything. Conversely, I'd like to imagine a kind of novel sense of decency, the desire not to neutralize by trivializing, by announcing too quickly, shouting too loudly. A careful mistrust regarding the usual relays.

— Do you dream of some great, tacit conspiracy? Where a sensible few could take their time...

— I see nothing like that.

With a motion of the head, Louis Nolett expressed his thanks.

— Are you intuitive?

— About some things. It depends on the person too.

— I have the feeling something's about to happen, I don't know what. At the Talbots I saw a boy who was *squared*—I didn't even know there were any. Seems there will be more and more.

Zumbi chuckled throatily.

— There's going to be competition!

— Not only in that respect... The gibbons are growing independent.

— I know, especially the "pra." If you want to do something right you have to do it yourself.

The women fell over laughing. Zumbi's partner had been stabbed on a business trip. She was practically a vegetable. Her income was dwindling. Wiping Astrud's back, Zumbi cried silently.

Lanson. To HABEAS he's Claude Lanson. In Hong Kong he answers to the name Lon San.

— He's an active militant of HABEAS?

— Active and sincere. He works with politicians and other VIPs. This year we owe him the release of several prisoners, including that Turk no one thought they'd ever see in one piece again. So go tell his friends or print in a respectable newspaper that Lanson is also Lon San!

— He's infiltrating HABEAS or what?

— He's infiltrating nothing. Or you might say the same way he's infiltrating the Philippines. He needs money and justice in equal parts.

— You mean he's a man without scruples?

— Smart and cynical—at best that's the impression he gives. He's a real slick one but it's more than that. Louis Nolett you know, the cop, Nolett and he both took courses at the Sorbonne. But not the same whores. Though tolerant, Nolett abhors transvestites. By walking the razor's edge Lanson dulled it, practically made it comfortable, making him look most natural. Nolett does him much honor by deeming him an experimental skeptic; Lanson's a terrible waverer who never could resist a temptation; his inability to choose is his demon.

— It's he who's the demon. Sometimes HABEAS, sometimes ASPARAGUS... Impossible!

— I think so. But Lanson exists, he doesn't commit suicide, doesn't write a bestseller... He finds that life in Thailand is abominable for many people, but do you know where he puts his money? We've got firsthand intel on him. When he goes to Manila it's not for business, and then afterward he denounces prostitution.

— He deserves a bullet in the head.

— They take him for a lowdown poser, it's a way to bump him off. I swear to you Lanson's no hypocrite.

— You're not going to have me believe...

— No. We have the will but he's not usable. So we watch him... for the sport of it. You can always hope that sooner or later the opposition will fix him.

— Where does Menard fit into this?

— Menard?

— The office of Nice...

— I don't see it. Once again all the markings of the French Connection.

— Nolett...

— A man of letters. Friend of the President. You can't make a Nolett without... You know the saying.

— Some people walk on eggshells. No reference to the Head of State.

— That would be misplaced.

— Anyway I'm not speaking of Manila but of Fontainebleau and Deauville. It takes a bit of legal genius to draw up standard contracts—the type any computer can swallow—with their famous compromising clause so-called common circumstance or *c.c.* A harmless-looking article FELICE manages to make ruinous for nosy employees or intruders: just do the usual list of transactions in an extremely unlikely, unusual order. If by chance a secretary performed the sequence of retortion, the result would be so incredible she'd burst out laughing before calling central management.

— What if she has no sense of humor?

— The retorsive application of article *c.c.* is always preceded by an extra-credible document.

— And if one mishap follows another?

— Within five minutes she climbs several positions at once. Then the mishaps are quashed.

Tery Coutras—Michel Varokian. Louis Nolett stuck the names onto the cassette. A man of letters... Who'd these two think they were?

Tery Coutras, Michel Varokian—written in blue ballpoint on a self-adhesive label. Always artsy-craftsy. Damned Undequer!

Juhillah, with a grassy, feline, calligraphic gesture, hurled the last dart. In the center of the cork target. Her cotton dress wound, clung to the hammock like shimmering vegetation. In the apartment hung with ropes, with splendid light fabrics, she did not jump but moved, wriggling among the green and tawny leathers, the brass, the black wood, the cane, the rattan.

Did she see only Undequer? Within her fluttered a certain knowledge of material distress which she outran, which she beat back with a thought as ferocious as the threat itself.

With *her* hand, she tore off the yellow and red silk panties. Sparse black hairs shone on this July afternoon.

If something did not occur to Undequer, it was that Juhillah might be missing a single part of her. Laid on a chest, the left leg immediately blended in with the décor—an inert sculpture, or a trifling, abandoned accessory that had

no memory or function. A sort of cheap prosthesis she practically wore as a challenge.
Why, mused Undequer, but God why do I prefer lovers, too?

Traduit par S. C. Delaney et Agnès Potier