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Black Venus



James MacManus



DUCKWORTH OVERLOOK

I

“Out, Mama! Out! Out! Out!”

The young man turned from the window and smiled at his mother. “That is where I am going: out! And you are going to say, ‘What, again?’ And I shall say, ‘Why not?’ and you will say, ‘This is the fifth time this week.’ Let’s not repeat ourselves.”

Caroline Aupick looked at her son. He wore a velvet burgundy-colored jacket over a cream waistcoat edged in red velvet to match the jacket. A pleated cream shirt rose to a red cravat held in place by a pearl tiepin. He had shaved carefully around a well-cut mustache and beard that made him look older than his twenty years.

If she was not mistaken, he had applied a little of her face powder around his eyes. His trousers were tight, emphasizing shapely calves, as fashion demanded, and he wore buttoned-up spats. He looked the caricature of a dandy, which was exactly his intention.

“Come here,” she said.

Charles Baudelaire paused at the window, gazing down at the street. It was a foggy night, and a phantom had emerged from the yellow vapor, weaving its way unsteadily over the cobbles. Looking more closely, he saw that it was a woman, a skeletal figure hunched against the cold and wearing little more than rags. He opened the window and reached into his pocket. The coin fell into the foggy darkness and he heard a metallic clink as it landed. He saw the figure scurry toward the sound. He closed the window and crossed the room.

He embraced his mother and then held her tighter, burying his face in long, curled locks of black hair. She was dressed for dinner and wore a blue satin off-the-shoulder dress with a fashionably revealing décolletage. The dress fell to her satin slippers. Teardrop earrings brushed his cheeks as he held her, breathing in the intense perfume of sandalwood that he had known since childhood.

The scent awoke memories of days in the nursery in the little house with a garden in Neuilly. Mama had never let the maid put him to bed. She was always there after his bath, to tuck him between the sheets. She would bend over to kiss him good night and he would cling to her, his arms around her neck, refusing to let go, breathing in the scent of her perfume. Every night she wore different jewelry—diamonds, rubies, emeralds, set as pendants, brooches, earrings, and rings.

She always had to take his arms gently from around her neck and tuck them under the blankets in return for a final kiss. He would not let her go. Many nights she would come to his room dressed for a night at the opera with friends. He loved those nights best because she wore satin or silk, each with its own feel and fragrance.

She would brush his damp hair, leaning over him in the

soft light, allowing him to toy with her earrings and pendants. He would hold them against the candlelight so that they flashed and sparkled. And as she rose to go, he would bury his face in her chest, breathing in the scent of powder and perfume.

There were goldfish in the garden pond at Neuilly, big lazy creatures that hung motionless just below the surface, their mouths opening in little Os. He would spend hours staring at them, rippling the water with his fingers to make them move. On one occasion he had fallen in, trying to catch them. After that, his mother had turned the pond into a rockery. He always wondered what had happened to the fish. Mama said Mariette had cooked them for her supper. He had refused to eat fish ever since.

Baudelaire stepped back and lifted the heart-shaped ruby set in a silver clasp that hung low from her neck. The jewel shone in the gaslight, casting a roseate glow onto her pale skin.

"Beautiful—have I seen it before?"

"No. The general gave it to me. You like it?"

Baudelaire let the jewel drop back. Of course the general had given it to her. Who else? His mother, unlike many women of her station, did not take lovers. She was a lady of honor, a good woman. She had cherished him when his father had died. How old was he then—five, six? For two years they had been together, just the two of them, with no one else but Mariette the maid. When he opened his eyes in the morning, there his mother would be, with a hot towel to wipe the sleep from his eyes. They would take breakfast together, out in the garden if it was warm, always with fresh coffee, and pastries baked in the oven that morning.

They hardly left each other's company in those years after his father died. At night he refused to go to sleep without the good-night kiss and the longed-for embrace. She would tell him stories about two swallows flying to Africa when winter came to Europe. The stories were always about the same two swallows, although the adventures were different. The swallows were lucky, she told him. They could fly so far on their tiny wings that they never knew winter but lived in summer all year long.

She told him about the father he had hardly known. He was an old man, generous, kind, and an amateur painter of some note. He had spent little time with his son, except for morning walks in the Luxembourg Gardens. That's how Baudelaire remembered him: a white-haired old man of seventy, using his stick to point out the beauty of the statues and sculptures around them.

François Baudelaire had died after one of those morning walks—a hot day in June—taking his pension with him. Mama was forced to sell the big apartment in rue Haute-feuille, with all its fine furniture and paintings, and move to a new and much smaller home in the place Saint-André des Arts. But she kept the little house in Neuilly. It was their special place, she said, and one day it would be his.

The move did not unsettle the young boy. In fact, he rejoiced in his new home, because it now meant that his mother would take him for long walks. Better still, those walks were not in the manicured beauty of the Luxembourg Gardens, but through one of the oldest and most unfashionable parts of Paris—the Left Bank, where little had changed since the fifteenth century.

They wandered hand in hand along the river, then crossed

the pont Saint-Michel to explore the narrow streets around Notre-Dame. They always entered the cathedral itself and lit a candle for François Baudelaire. Home before dark was the rule, but often his mother had to plead with him to hurry as they walked through the gloaming, casting fearful eyes at the sinister shadows around them. But he was not afraid. He knew he could protect her from whatever lurked in the darkness.

Then she had met Jacques Aupick, a handsome cavalry officer with a prospering career that promised Caroline the comfort and security she craved. He had had to watch his mother fall in love with a man who embraced her with a passion she had never experienced in her marriage.

Baudelaire sighed. He walked to a mantelpiece and stared intently at his favorite possession—apart from his clothes. A traditional round-faced mantel clock with Roman numerals set in a mahogany case. The hands had been removed and across the face was written: *It is later than you think*. He opened the clock, took out a silk kerchief, and carefully wiped the enamel face.

“We must talk about money,” she said.

He turned and smiled. He loved his mother deeply, but she was never less than single-minded about his perceived failings. He did not have one friend who had not run up debts. And very few of them were going to inherit the substantial sum that was due to him on his twenty-first birthday in two weeks’ time. The year was 1842 and with luck, and money, he would see the century out. He would receive ten thousand francs, he had been told, together with the little house in Neuilly. That would more than satisfy his creditors. Thank you, dear, departed father. May your weary body rest in peace.

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"Of course. But perhaps not tonight," he said.

Caroline Aupick frowned and shrugged. "As you wish. But I would like you to join us for dinner tomorrow night."

Baudelaire skipped across the room, took her hand, and bowed low to kiss it.

"Of course, my darling mama. I should be delighted."

"Take care. It's late and the streets are not safe," she said.

"Don't worry."

Baudelaire held up a silver-knobbed cane and twirled it in one hand like a child's toy windmill, a skill she supposed he had acquired from a barman in some nightclub, which was where he seemed to spend all his time. Then, taking a silk top hat and a cape, he was gone, closing the door noisily behind him.

She sighed as he clattered down the wooden staircase. The room suddenly seemed empty. Caroline Aupick crossed to the window and peered into the clearing fog. She turned at the sound of footsteps coming back up the staircase. The door opened and his head appeared.

"I hear Le Chat Noir has a new chef," he said.

Baudelaire saw the woman the moment he stepped into the street. She was lying a few feet from the front door, one arm at her side, the other stretched out in front of her. He knelt down and looked at the death-white face and sightless eyes. He saw the coin he had thrown her, tightly clasped in her outstretched hand.

He stood up, made the sign of the cross, and walked off into the fog. Another hand would soon reach for that coin and within an hour the few rags she wore would have been

stripped from her corpse. The night-soil carrier would find the body on his rounds and take it to the new mortuary on the île de la Cité, where he would be paid a small fee.

In death, the woman, just another of the anonymous poor in Paris, would achieve the attention she had never found in life. Her body would be stripped and laid out on one of the twelve ramped marble slabs in the viewing room. A small cloth would be placed over her loins to provide some modesty. What was left of her clothes would be hung beside her as a means of identification for the relatives she did not possess. For a fee, mourners and the curious public would inspect the daily display of the Paris dead.

The mortuary had been specially built with high windows to throw light on the scene, and all day long visitors filed through to look on the corpses through a large glass screen. This had been erected to shield the public from the odor of decomposition, but some bodies had been in the river for more than a week. Visitors were advised to use heavily perfumed handkerchiefs. After two days the corpses were moved and the marble slabs hosed down, ready for a fresh intake. The city made good money from this ghoulish display and defied repeated demands from the Church authorities to end the practice.

Baudelaire headed toward the river. He was almost twenty-one years old and had known the city since childhood. He felt Paris itself was his real home, more than any house in which he had lived. This was his city. He knew how it awoke at daybreak yet never slept at night—the paradox of a restless metropolis. He had roamed the streets of Paris for years in all weathers and all seasons. The city opened itself to him

like a book, revealing its present, remarking on its past, and foretelling its future.

That night the fog rolled up the Seine, sliding beneath bridges, pushing cold, wet fingers into slums that tumbled to the very edge of the river's muddy foreshore. Wharves and jetties jutted through reed beds into deeper water, allowing hundreds of barges and sailing vessels to tie up.

Baudelaire crossed the pont Royal and made his way around the Tuileries Palace. Here King Louis Philippe held court, an unlikely monarch empowered by the mob that had deposed two earlier Bourbon rulers. Baudelaire knew they would overthrow him too in a few years. Everyone in Paris knew that. There was always unfinished business for the Paris mob.

The young man gripped his cane more tightly and walked into the dark underbelly of the city. Huddled between the great public buildings and large private houses were the dwellings of the poor: wattle-and-daub wooden houses separated by narrow lanes running with filth.

Even on a foggy night, the stench was unbearable to a stranger. Wealthier neighborhoods were served by night-soil carriers, who took their reeking cargo of human waste in open wagons to the forest of Bondy in the northeast or, more often, to be unloaded into the Seine. For most of the nine-hundred-thousand-strong population the street or the river provided the only sanitation. The Seine, like so many of the lanes and alleyways in the city, was an open sewer.

Baudelaire left the slums and turned left on the rue de Rivoli. Larger and busier streets such as this now had gas lighting, which had recently begun to replace the whale-oil

lamps that had lit the city for centuries. Here city authorities had covered the cobbles with bitumen to prevent them being dug up during outbreaks of mob violence—a fruitless gesture, as it turned out, but it had made the evening promenade easier on the feet.

On nights such as this, Le Tout Paris shrugged off the fog and walked the grander streets seeking pleasure and profit in the flaring gaslight. Sparks flew as iron-rimmed wheels clashed on the boulevard. Horse-drawn carriages jostled for road space with wagons bringing farm produce to the city for the next day's markets. Gentlemen and their ladies dressed in the fashions of the day—top hats and brass-knobbed canes for the men; bonnets, shawls, and crinoline dresses for their women—walked slowly up one side of the boulevard and then back down the other. Dancing dogs, tame rats on long leads, conjurors, fire-eaters, snake charmers, costumed monkeys—all competed with lavishly stocked shop windows for the attention and money of the passing public.

Young prostitutes, some still children, scampered between the wheels of the carriages, offering thin, undernourished bodies to the occupants comfortably seated in the plush interiors. No one paid any attention as a carriage stopped, a door swung open, and a beckoning hand pointed to a young girl—or boy. A flick of the whip and the carriage rolled on. A couple of streets away, the child would be set down, richer by a few francs.

The politics and poverty of Paris did not concern the patrons of Café Momus, not far from the Louvre, or those in the Café Procope, south of the river. These were his favorite places in Paris, but Baudelaire was going elsewhere that

night. For once he would forgo the company of writers, poets, and painters—the famous, the would-be famous, and the hopeless dreamers who gathered at night to drink coffee with a dash of cognac or sip tall glasses of green, anise-flavored absinthe. Their drugs of choice, hashish and opium, were taken openly and liberally. The first was smoked in long cheroots, while opium was added to drinks in the form of liquid laudanum.

He could imagine the scene. The young painter Gustave Courbet sitting in awed silence in the Momus as Honoré de Balzac and his friend Alexandre Dumas discussed matters of the day: the recent arrival of the railroad in Paris, the sudden rise in the price of wine, and the latest cholera epidemic in the slums. Balzac had just finished his masterwork, *La Comédie humaine*, and presided over the patrons of the café with casual ease, a literary lion with flowing beard, long, graying hair, and a favorite six-button moleskin waistcoat liberally flecked with ash and stained with wine and food.

Dumas was busy planning his own masterpiece, *Les Trois Mousquetaires*, a romantic tale of swordsmanship and honor in the seventeenth century that would eclipse Balzac's social realism and become the most successful and widely translated French novel of all time. Courbet, although only twenty-three, listened and dreamed of his own success.

The patrons of the Momus and the Procope styled themselves as the bohemians, a group of artists, journalists, and hangers-on who were deliberately careless of contemporary manners and morals and intent only on the pursuit of their chosen art form—and, rather more discreetly, on the fame and wealth that went with it.