



VINTAGE

THE GHOST RIDERS
OF ORDEBEC

FRED VARGAS

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About the Book

'People will die,' says the panic-stricken woman outside police headquarters. She has been standing in blazing sunshine for more than an hour, and refuses to speak to anyone besides Commissaire Adamsberg. Her daughter has seen a vision: ghostly horsemen who target the most nefarious characters in Normandy. Since the middle ages there have been stories of murderers, rapists, those with serious crimes on their conscience, meeting a grizzly end following a visitation by the riders.

Soon after the young woman's vision a notoriously cruel man disappears, and the local police dismiss the matter as superstition. Although the case is far outside his jurisdiction, Adamsberg agrees to investigate the strange happenings in a village terrorised by wild rumours and ancient feuds.

About the Author

Fred Vargas was born in Paris in 1957. As well as being a best-selling author in France, she is an historian and archaeologist.

Also by Fred Vargas

The Chalk Circle Man
Have Mercy on Us All
Seeking Whom He May Devour
The Three Evangelists
Wash This Blood Clean From My Hand
This Night's Foul Work
An Uncertain Place

The Ghost Riders of Ordebec

Fred Vargas

Translated from the French by
Siân Reynolds



Harvill *Secker*
LONDON

A TRAIL OF tiny breadcrumbs led from the kitchen into the bedroom, as far as the spotless sheets where the old woman lay dead, her mouth open. Commissaire Adamsberg looked down at the crumbs in silence, pacing slowly to and fro, and wondering what kind of Tom Thumb – or what ogre in this case – might have dropped them there. He was in a small, dark, ground-floor apartment, with just three rooms, in the eighteenth arrondissement, in northern Paris.

The old woman was lying in the bedroom. Her husband was in the dining room. He showed neither impatience nor emotion as he waited, just looked longingly at his newspaper, folded open at the page with the crossword puzzle, which he didn't dare try to solve while the police were there. He had told them his brief life story. He and his wife had met at work, in an insurance company: she was a secretary, he an accountant. They had married in their careless youth, not knowing it was destined to last fifty-nine years. Then his wife had died in the night. Heart attack, according to the local commissaire, who was ill in bed and had called on Adamsberg to replace him. Just do me a favour, it won't take more than an hour, a routine morning call.

One more time, Adamsberg walked the trail of crumbs. The flat was impeccably kept: the armchairs had antimacassars, the Formica surfaces were gleaming, the windows were spotless and the dishes washed. He went over to the bread bin, which contained part of a baguette, and a large half-loaf, wrapped in a clean tea towel and hollowed out in the middle. He returned to the husband

sitting in his armchair, and pulled up another chair alongside.

'No good news this morning,' the old man said, lifting his eyes from the paper. 'And it's so hot, the ink is smudged. Still, here we're on the ground floor, it's a bit cooler. That's why I leave the shutters closed. And you have to drink plenty, that's what they tell you.'

'You didn't notice anything?'

'She seemed all right when I went to bed. I always checked, because she had heart trouble. It was only this morning that I realised she'd gone.'

'There are breadcrumbs in her bed.'

'Yes, she liked to nibble some bread or perhaps a *biscotte* last thing before going to sleep.'

'I would have thought she'd clean the crumbs up afterwards.'

'Oh yes, indeed. She cleaned things from morning to night, you'd think her life depended on it. It wasn't so bad at first, but over the years it got to be an obsession. She'd even make things dirty, just for the pleasure of washing them. You should have seen her. Still, poor woman, it gave her something to do.'

'But what about this bread? She didn't sweep it up last night?'

'No, because it was me that brought it her. She was too weak to get up. She *did* tell me to clear the crumbs away, but I couldn't be bothered. She'd have done it in the morning. She turned the sheets every day. What for, I couldn't tell you.'

'So, you brought her some bread, then you put the rest back in the bread bin?'

'No, I threw it in the *pedal* bin. It was too hard, she couldn't manage it. I brought her a *biscotte* instead.'

'But the loaf isn't in the pedal bin, it's in the bread bin.'

'Yes, I know.'

'And there's nothing inside the loaf. She ate all the heart of it?'

'No, good heavens, commissaire. Why would she just eat the inside of it - and stale at that? You *are* a commissaire, aren't you?'

'Yes, Jean-Baptiste Adamsberg, Serious Crime Squad.'

'Why didn't the local police come?'

'This district's commissaire's in bed. Summer flu. And his team isn't available.'

'Have they all got the flu?'

'No, there was a disturbance last night. Two dead, four injured. All because of a stolen scooter.'

'What's the world coming to? Still, this heat, it gets to people. My name is Tuilot, monsieur. Tuilot, first name Julien, accountant, retired, for the insurance company ALLB.'

'Yes, I've got a note of that.'

'She always nagged me about my name, Tuilot, she thought her maiden name was nicer, Kosquer. She was right, I suppose. I thought you must be a commissaire to ask questions about the breadcrumbs. Your colleague up here, he's not like that.'

'You think I'm making too much fuss about the crumbs?'

'Oh, you just do whatever you want, monsieur. It's for your report, you have to have something to write on the report. I understand, that's all I ever did at ALLB, accounts and reports. Not that the reports were strictly honest. Think about it. The boss had this motto, he brought it out all the time: an insurance company shouldn't pay, even if it ought to pay. Fifty years cheating like that doesn't do your brain any good. I used to say to my wife, if you could just wash out my head instead of the curtains, you'd be doing something really useful.'

Monsieur Tuilot, Julien, gave a little laugh at his joke.

'It's just that I don't understand what you're telling me about the half-loaf over there.'

'Ah, to understand, you have to be logical, commissaire, logical and cunning. That's me, Tuilot, Julien, I've won sixteen top-level crossword championships in thirty-two years. One every other year on average. Just with my brain. Logical and cunning. It brings in good money at that level. This one,' he said, pointing to his newspaper, 'is just kids' stuff. But you have to sharpen your pencils and it leaves shavings. Oh, she was always on at me, because of the shavings too. So what bothers you about the bread?'

'Well. It's *not* in the pedal bin, it doesn't seem all that stale to me, and I don't understand why the crust has been hollowed out.'

'Aha. A domestic mystery!' said Tuilot, who seemed to be enjoying himself. 'Well, I have two little tenants, Toni and Marie, a sweet little couple, who love each other dearly. But they're not at all to my wife's taste, believe me. One shouldn't speak ill of the dead, but she did all she could to kill them. I've been one step ahead of her for three years. Logic and cunning, that's my secret. My poor Lucette, you'll never beat a crossword champion, I used to tell her. No, we're a little gang of three, these two and me, they know they can count on me, and I can count on them. A little visit every night. They're crafty and careful, they never come until Lucette's in bed. They know I'll be waiting for them, you see. Toni always arrives first, he's bigger and stronger.'

'And they ate all the crumbs? While the bread was in the *pedal bin*?'

'They love doing that.'

Adamsberg glanced at the crossword, which didn't look as simple as all that to him, then pushed the paper aside.

'So who are "they", Monsieur Tuilot?'

'I don't like to say, people disapprove. People are very narrow-minded.'

'Animals? Dogs, cats?'

'Rats. Toni's darker than Marie. They're so fond of each other they can be in the middle of their meal, and they stop

to stroke each other's head with their paws. If people weren't so prejudiced, they'd see sights like that. Marie's the lively one. After eating, she climbs on my shoulder and puts her paws in my hair. She's combing it, sort of. Her way of saying thank you. Or perhaps she just likes me. Who knows? It's comforting. Then after we've said nice things to each other, we say goodbye till next evening. They go back to the cellar, through a hole behind the drainpipe. One day Lucette cemented it up. Poor Lucette. She had no idea how to mix cement.'

'I see,' said Adamsberg.

The old man reminded him of a certain Félix, who used to prune his vines, eight hundred and eighty-eight kilometres from Paris. He had tamed a grass snake that he used to feed with milk. One day a neighbour killed the snake. So Félix killed the neighbour. Adamsberg went back to the bedroom where Lieutenant Justin was keeping watch over the dead woman, while waiting for the doctor to arrive.

'Look inside her mouth,' he said. 'Just take a look and see if you can see some white residue that could be breadcrumbs.'

'I really don't want to do that.'

'Just do it. I think the old man could have choked her by stuffing bread down her throat. Then he took it out and chucked it away.'

'You mean the inside of the loaf?'

'Yes.'

Adamsberg opened the bedroom window and shutters. He looked out at the little courtyard, strewn with birds' feathers, and partly transformed into a junkyard. In the centre, a grid covered the drain. It was still wet, although there had been no rain.

'After that, go and lift up the grid. I think he chucked the bread down there and emptied a bucket of water after it.'

'This is nuts,' muttered Justin, as he shone a torch inside the old woman's mouth. 'If he did that, why didn't he throw

away the crust, or clean up the crumbs?’

‘To throw away the crust, he would have had to go to the dustbins on the street, and that would mean going out on the pavement at night. There’s a cafe terrace next door, and these warm nights plenty of people about. He’d have been seen. He’s invented a good story about the crust and the crumbs. So original that it seems plausible. He’s a crossword champion, he has his own way of linking ideas.’

Adamsberg, feeling rather regretful and yet slightly admiring, came back to Tuilot.

‘When Marie and Toni turned up, you took the bread out of the pedal bin?’

‘No, they know how it works, they like it. Toni sits on the pedal, the lid goes up and Marie gets out anything they want. They’re great, aren’t they? Really smart, got to hand it to them.’

‘So Marie got the bread out. Then they ate it up. While making little loving gestures?’

‘That’s right.’

‘All the inside of the loaf?’

‘They’re big rats, commissaire, they need to eat a lot.’

‘So what about those crumbs on the floor, why didn’t they eat those?’

‘Commissaire, are you here to take care of Lucette or the rats?’

‘Well, I still don’t understand why you wrapped up the remains of the loaf after the rats had eaten out its inside. Whereas before that, you’d put it in the pedal bin.’

The old man filled in a couple of crossword clues.

‘You’re probably no good at crosswords, commissaire. If I’d thrown the empty loaf into the pedal bin, Lucette would have realised that Toni and Marie had been here.’

‘You could have put it in the dustbin outside.’

‘The door squeaks like a pig being slaughtered. You must have noticed.’

‘Yes, I did.’

'So I just wrapped it in a tea towel to avoid a scene in the morning. Because believe me, there are scenes all day long. Fifty years or more she's been yelling at me and wiping up under my glass, under my feet, under my bum. You wouldn't think I had the right to walk about or sit down. If you'd been living like that, you'd have hidden the loaf too.'

'She wouldn't have seen it in the bread bin?'

'No, no. In the morning she eats *biscottes* with raisins. She must do it on purpose, because they make plenty of crumbs. Then she can busy herself for hours afterwards cleaning them up. See?'

Justin came into the room and nodded briefly to Adamsberg.

'But yesterday,' Adamsberg said, with a slightly heavy heart, 'that's not what happened. You hollowed out the loaf, two big fistfuls of solid bread, and you crammed them into her mouth. When she stopped breathing, you pulled it all out and put it down the drain in the courtyard. I'm amazed that you chose this method of killing her. I've never come across a case of someone being choked with bread.'

'Yes, it's inventive,' Tuilot agreed calmly.

'As you will know, Monsieur Tuilot, we'll find your wife's saliva on the bread. And since you are logical and cunning, we'll also find signs of the rats' teeth on the hollowed-out loaf. You let them eat the remains, to bolster your story.'

'They like nothing better than burrowing inside a loaf, it's a pleasure to watch them. We spent a good evening here last night, really. I had a couple of drinks, while Marie combed my hair. Then I washed and dried my glass to avoid a row. When she was already dead.'

'When you had just killed her.'

'Yes,' said the man, sighing casually as he filled in a few blanks in his crossword. 'The doctor'd been round the day before, he told me she could last months. Dozens of Tuesdays having to eat sausage rolls for supper, endless recriminations, thousands of little wipes with a duster. At

eighty-six, a man's got the right to live a little. There are nights like that. When a man just gets up and takes some action.'

Tuilot got up and opened the shutters in the dining room, letting in the stifling heat of these early-August days.

'She didn't like having the windows open either. But I won't say all that, commissaire. I'll say I killed her to put an end to her suffering. With breadcrumbs, because she liked that, a final little treat. I've got it all worked out in here,' he said, tapping his forehead. 'There's no evidence I didn't do it as a mercy killing. Eh? An act of kindness. I'll be acquitted, and in a couple of months, I'll be back here, I'll be able to put my glass on the table without a coaster and the three of us will be happy together, Toni, Marie and me.'

'Yes, I can believe it,' said Adamsberg, getting up quietly. 'But it might turn out, Monsieur Tuilot, that you won't dare put your glass down directly on the tabletop. You'll fetch a coaster. And you'll clean up the breadcrumbs.'

'Why would I do that?'

Adamsberg shrugged. 'Just that I've seen cases like this. It's often the way.'

'Don't you worry about me, monsieur. I'm cunning.'

'That's very true, Monsieur Tuilot.'

Outside, the heat was forcing people to walk in the shade, hugging the walls and breathing hard. Adamsberg decided to walk on the empty pavement exposed to the sun and to head south. A long hike to rid himself of the contented and, yes, cunning face of the crossword champion. Who might, one Tuesday soon, be buying sausage rolls for his supper.

II

HE WAS BACK at headquarters an hour and a half later, his black T-shirt dripping with sweat and his thoughts back in order. It was rare for an impression, good or bad, to haunt Adamsberg's mind for very long. So much so that you wondered if he had a mind at all, as his mother had often remarked. He dictated his report for the colleague with the flu, and went to collect any messages from reception. Brigadier Gardon, who was manning the switchboard, was bending his head low to catch the breeze from a little electric fan on the floor. His fine hair was floating in the cool draught, as if under a hairdryer.

'Lieutenant Veyrenc is waiting for you in the cafe, commissaire,' he said without moving.

'In the cafe or the brasserie?'

'The cafe, the Dice Shaker.'

'Veyrenc isn't a lieutenant any more, Gardon. We won't know till this evening whether he's going to rejoin the force.'

Adamsberg looked for a moment at Gardon, wondering whether Gardon had a mind and, if so, what he kept in it.

He sat down at Veyrenc's table and the two men greeted each other with warm smiles and a long handshake. The memory of Veyrenc's providential appearance in Serbia during his last case still sent a shiver down Adamsberg's spine. He ordered a salad, and ate it slowly while telling at some length the story of Madame Tuilot, Lucette; Monsieur Tuilot, Julien; Toni; Marie; their love, the half-eaten loaf, the pedal bin, the closed shutters and the sausage rolls on Tuesdays. Now and then he glanced at the cafe window.

Tuilot, Lucette, would surely have made a better job of cleaning it.

Veyrenc ordered two coffees from the proprietor, a large man whose normally grumpy mood got worse in the heat. His wife, a silent little Corsican, went to and fro delivering the food like a dark fairy.

'One day,' said Adamsberg, gesturing towards her, 'she'll choke him with a couple of handfuls of bread.'

'Quite possibly,' Veyrenc agreed.

'She's still waiting on the pavement,' said Adamsberg, looking out at the street again. 'She's been there getting on for an hour in this blazing sun. She doesn't know what to do, she hasn't decided.'

Veyrenc followed Adamsberg's gaze, and examined the thin little woman, neatly dressed in a flowered overall, the kind you don't find in Paris shops.

'You can't be sure she wants to see *you*. She's not standing by the offices, she's coming and going about ten metres away. She must be waiting for someone who hasn't turned up.'

'No, it's for me, Louis, I'm sure of it. Who'd arrange a rendezvous in this street? She looks scared. That's what bothers me.'

'That's because she's not from Paris.'

'Maybe it's the first time she's come here. So she must have some serious problem. But that doesn't help us with yours, Veyrenc. You've had months to paddle your feet in the stream and think, and you still haven't decided.'

'You could extend the deadline.'

'I've already done that once. You have to sign, or not sign, by six o'clock tonight. You have to decide if you're going to be a cop again. Four and a half hours,' said Adamsberg consulting his watch, or rather the two watches he always wore for reasons no one could quite fathom.

'Plenty of time,' said Veyrenc, stirring his coffee.

Commissaire Adamsberg and ex-Lieutenant Louis Veyrenc de Bilhc, from two neighbouring villages in the Pyrenees, had in common a sort of detached tranquillity, which was rather disconcerting. In Adamsberg, it came across as a rather shocking air of inattention and indifference. In Veyrenc, this detachment generated unexplained absences, a stubborn obstinacy, sometimes silent and massive, sometimes punctuated by outbreaks of rage. 'It's the old mountain's fault,' Adamsberg would say, without looking for further justification. 'The old mountain was never going to produce frivolous, light-hearted grasses, like the ones that wave in the wind on rolling meadows.'

'Let's go,' said Adamsberg brusquely, paying the bill, 'the little woman looks like she's leaving. See, she's discouraged, hesitation is winning out.'

'I'm hesitating too,' said Veyrenc, swallowing the rest of his coffee in a gulp, 'but you're not helping me.'

'No.'

'OK. Thus the waverer wanders, amid thickets of doubt / With no one to help him find the way to get out.'

'People have always made their minds up before they take a decision. From the start. So there's no point asking advice. Except that I can tell you your verses irritate Commandant Danglard. He doesn't like to see poetry massacred.'

Adamsberg bade farewell to the cafe proprietor with a discreet wave. No point saying anything, the big man didn't like it, or rather he didn't like being 'nice'. He was like his cafe, lacking in comfort, aggressively proletarian and almost hostile to his customers. There was near-open warfare between this proud little bistro and the opulent brasserie across the road. The more the Brasserie des Philosophes accentuated its bourgeois pretensions, the more the Dice Shaker exaggerated the poverty of its decor, both of them engaged in a ruthless class struggle. 'One day,' Danglard would mutter, 'there's going to be a death.' Not counting

the little Corsican woman who might stuff bread down her husband's throat.

Leaving the cafe, Adamsberg blew out his cheeks as the burning heat hit him, and cautiously approached the little woman who was still standing a few steps away from the squad's offices. There was a pigeon in front of the door to the building, and he thought that if he made the pigeon fly away as he walked past, the woman would fly away too, in imitation. As if she were light and airy and might vanish like a straw in the wind. Seen from close up, she looked about sixty-five. She had taken the trouble to visit the hairdresser before coming to the capital: there were blonde streaks in her grey hair. When Adamsberg spoke to her, the pigeon didn't budge and the woman turned a frightened face towards him. Adamsberg spoke slowly, asking her if she needed any help.

'No, thank you,' the woman said, dropping her gaze.

'You don't want to go inside?' asked Adamsberg, pointing to the old building where the Serious Crime Squad worked. 'To speak to a policeman or something? Because in this street there isn't a whole lot else to do.'

'But if the police don't listen to you? Then there's no point going to them,' she said, taking a few steps back. 'They don't believe you, you know, the police.'

'But that's where you *were* going? To this station?'

The woman lowered her eyelashes; they were almost transparent.

'Is this the first time you've been in Paris?'

'Oh goodness, yes. And I have to get back by tonight, they mustn't find out.'

'So you did come to see a policeman?'

'Yes. Well, maybe.'

'I'm a policeman. I work in there.'

The woman looked at Adamsberg's casual clothing and seemed disappointed or sceptical.

'So you must know them, the people in there?'

'Yes.'

'All of them?'

'Yes.'

The woman opened a large, shabby, brown leather handbag, and took out a piece of paper which she carefully unfolded.

"'Monsieur le Commissaire Adamsberg'", she read out painstakingly. 'You know him?'

'Yes. Have you come a long way to see him?'

'From Ordebec,' she replied, as if the confession cost her something.

'I don't know where that is.'

'Near Lisieux.'

Ah, Normandy, thought Adamsberg, that could explain her reluctance to talk. He had met several Normans in his time, taciturn people who had taken days to loosen up. As if saying a few words were the equivalent of giving away a gold sovereign, without feeling it was deserved. Adamsberg started walking, encouraging the woman to accompany him.

'There are plenty of police stations in Lisieux,' he said. 'And even in Ordebec, I dare say. You have your local gendarmes, don't you?'

'They wouldn't listen to me. But the curate in Lisieux knows the priest in Mesnil-Beauchamp and *he* said this commissaire here might listen to me. It cost a lot of money to come.'

'Is this about something serious?'

'Yes, of course it's serious.'

'A murder?' Adamsberg pressed.

'Maybe. Or maybe not. People are going to die. I ought to tell the police, shouldn't I?'

'People are going to *die*? Have they had death threats?'

This man reassured her a little. Paris was a scary place and her decision to come even more so. Leaving stealthily, lying to her children. What if the train didn't get her back in

time? What if she missed the bus? This policeman had a soft voice, almost as if he were singing. Certainly not anyone from her area. No, he was a little man from southern France, with his dark complexion and drawn features. She would have told him the whole story, but the priest had made it very clear. She should speak to Commissaire Adamsberg and nobody else. And the priest wasn't just anyone, he was a cousin of the former chief prosecutor in Rouen who knew a lot about the police. He had only given her Adamsberg's name reluctantly, advising her preferably not to say anything, and looking as if he didn't expect her to make the trip. But she couldn't stay back home when these *things* were happening. What if any harm came to her children?

'I can only talk to the commissaire.'

'I *am* the commissaire.'

The little woman seemed on the point of arguing, frail though she looked.

'Why didn't you say so right away, then?'

'Well, I don't know who you are either.'

'Oh, no. You tell someone your name and next thing everyone can repeat it.'

'What does that matter?'

'It would bring trouble. Nobody must know.'

A busybody, a troublemaker, Adamsberg thought. Who would end up one day with bread stuffed down her throat. But a troublemaker who was scared stiff about something precise, which still preoccupied him. *People are going to die.*

They had turned back and were now walking towards the station.

'I only wanted to help you. I'd been watching you for a while.'

'And that man over there? He's with you? Was he watching me too?'

'Which man?'

'The one with funny hair, orange stripes in it, is he with you?'

Adamsberg looked up and saw Veyrenc a few metres away, leaning against the doorway of the building. He hadn't gone in, but was waiting, alongside the pigeon, which hadn't moved either.

'Ah,' said Adamsberg, 'that man, when he was a kid someone attacked him with a knife, and where he had scars, the hair grew back ginger like that. I advise you not to mention it.'

'I didn't mean any harm. I'm not good with words. I hardly ever say anything in Ordebec.'

'Never mind, no harm done.'

'But my children talk a lot.'

'Right.'

'What the devil's the matter with the pigeon anyway?' muttered Adamsberg to himself. 'Why doesn't it fly away?'

Weary of the little woman's indecision, Adamsberg left her and headed towards the pigeon, which was standing still, while Veyrenc came to meet him with his heavy tread. Fine, Veyrenc could take care of this woman, if it was worth bothering about. He could handle it perfectly well. Veyrenc's solid face was convincing, persuasive, and had the great advantage of a charming smile that made his top lip lift to the side. An advantage Adamsberg had once hated, and which had pitted them against each other as fierce rivals. Each of them was now trying to efface the last traces of their enmity. As Adamsberg lifted the pigeon up, cupped in his hands, Veyrenc came unhurriedly towards him, followed by the transparent little woman, who was breathing fast. In fact she was so slight that Adamsberg might not have noticed her at all if it weren't for the flowered overall that gave her body a shape. Perhaps she would be completely invisible if it weren't for the overall.

'Some nasty little kid has tied its feet together,' he said to Veyrenc, looking at the bird, which was filthy.

'Do you look after pigeons too?' asked the woman without a trace of irony. 'I've seen a whole lot of pigeons here, it's not hygienic -'

'Well, this one,' Adamsberg interrupted her, 'isn't a whole lot, it's just the one, one solitary pigeon. Makes all the difference.'

'Yes, of course,' said the woman.

So, she was understanding and, after all, doing no harm. Perhaps he was wrong and she wouldn't end up choked to death with bread. Perhaps she wasn't a troublemaker, but really had something serious to report.

'Do you like pigeons?' she asked him now. Adamsberg looked up absent-mindedly.

'No,' he said. 'But I don't like some sadistic kid tying their feet together either.'

'No, of course not.'

'I don't know if this kind of thing goes on where you live, but in Paris it happens. They catch a bird, tie its feet together with a bit of string. Then it can only take tiny steps and can't fly at all. It dies slowly from hunger and thirst. Just a game. But I hate it, and I intend to catch the kid who thought it was funny.'

Adamsberg went in through the large entrance to the squad's offices, leaving the woman and Veyrenc outside on the pavement. The woman was gazing spellbound at Veyrenc's hair, with its conspicuous ginger stripes.

'Will he really try to take care of that bird?' she asked, puzzled. 'It's too late, you know. Your commissaire had fleas jumping all over his arms. That means the pigeon hasn't got the strength to look after itself any more.'

Adamsberg took the bird to the squad's giantess, Lieutenant Violette Retancourt, whom he trusted blindly to care for it. If Retancourt couldn't save the pigeon, nobody could. Retancourt, an impressively tall and well-built woman, pulled a face: not a good sign. The bird was in a

bad way. The skin of its feet had been pierced by its efforts to peck off the string, which was now embedded in its flesh. It was hungry and dehydrated, but she finally said she'd see what she could do. Adamsberg nodded, pinching his lips together, as he did whenever he encountered cruelty. Which that bit of string represented.

Following Veyrenc in, the little woman walked past the imposing Violette Retancourt with instinctive deference. The lieutenant was deftly wrapping the pigeon in a damp cloth. She'd tackle its claws later, she told Veyrenc, to try and get the string off. Held in her large hands, the pigeon did not attempt to move. It allowed her to handle it, as anyone would, anxious but impressed.

The little woman, seeming somewhat calmer, sat down in Adamsberg's office. She was so thin that she took up only half a chair. Veyrenc stood in a corner of the room, examining the surroundings that had once been so familiar to him. He had three and a half hours in which to make up his mind. It was, according to Adamsberg, already made up, but Veyrenc didn't know that yet. As he had walked through the large communal office, he had met the hostile gaze of Commandant Danglard, who was rummaging through a filing cabinet. It wasn't only Veyrenc's verses that Danglard disliked, it was the man himself.

III

THE WOMAN HAD finally agreed to give her name and Adamsberg was noting it down on a scrap of paper – a sign of negligence that worried her. Perhaps this commissaire really had no intention of listening to her.

‘Valentine Vendermot, with an o and a t,’ he repeated, since he always had difficulty with new words, especially proper names. ‘And you’re from Ardebec?’

‘Ordebec. It’s in the Calvados.’

‘And you have children?’

‘Four. Three sons and a daughter. I’m a widow.’

‘So what happened, Madame Vendermot?’

The woman fished about again in her big bag and took out a local newspaper. She unfolded it, with slightly trembling hands, and put it on the table.

‘It’s this man. He’s disappeared.’

‘And what’s his name?’

‘Michel Herbier.’

‘A friend of yours? A relative?’

‘No, no. Quite the opposite.’

‘What do you mean?’

Adamsberg waited patiently for the answer, which seemed difficult to put into words.

‘I can’t stand him.’

‘Oh, OK,’ he said, picking up the paper.

While Adamsberg was concentrating on the short news report, the woman kept glancing around anxiously at the walls, looking first left then right, though Adamsberg couldn’t imagine why she was inspecting them. Something else was frightening her. She was scared of everything: of

the big city, of other people, of gossip, and of him. Nor did he understand why she had come all this way to tell him about this Michel Herbier, if she hated him. The man in question, a pensioner, and a keen hunter, had disappeared from his home, on his moped. After he had been missing for a week, the gendarmes had entered his house to make a security check. They had found the contents of his two freezers – which had been packed with every kind of game – scattered all over the floor. And that was all.

‘I can’t get mixed up in this,’ Adamsberg said apologetically, handing her back the newspaper. ‘If this man’s disappeared, the local gendarmes are in charge, you must understand that. And if you know anything about it, it’s them you should go and see.’

‘That’s impossible, monsieur le commissaire.’

‘Perhaps you don’t get on with your local gendarmes?’

‘That’s right. That’s why the priest gave me your name. That’s why I made the trip here.’

‘But to tell me what, Madame Vendermot?’

The woman smoothed down her flowered overall, and lowered her head. She spoke more readily if one didn’t look at her.

‘What has happened to him. Or what *will* happen to him. He’s either dead already, or he’ll die soon if nobody does anything.’

‘It looks as if this man just took off, since his moped is missing too. Do we know if he took any baggage?’

‘No, he just took his shotgun. He owns a lot of guns.’

‘Well then, he’ll no doubt be back sooner or later, Madame Vendermot. You know quite well that we’ve no right to launch a search for an adult, just because he hasn’t been seen for a few days.’

‘He won’t be back, monsieur. The moped doesn’t mean anything. It isn’t there because someone wants there *not* to be a search for him.’

‘Are you saying that because he’s received threats?’

'Yes.'

'He has an enemy?'

'Holy Mother of god, he has the most terrible of enemies, commissaire.'

'Do you know his name?'

'Oh no, Lord alive, we mustn't speak it.'

Adamsberg gave a sigh, feeling sorrier for her than for himself.

'And according to you, this Michel Herbier has run away?'

'No, because he doesn't know about it. He must surely be dead. He was *seized*, you see.'

Adamsberg stood up and walked around the room for a few moments, hands in pockets.

'Madame Vendermot, I'm willing to listen to you, and perfectly willing to contact the gendarmerie in Ordebec. But I can't do anything if I don't understand. Give me a second.'

He left the office and went to see Commandant Danglard, who was still consulting the filing cabinet with a grumpy expression. Among the many billions of pieces of information Danglard held in his head were the names of the chiefs and deputy chiefs of the gendarmeries and central police stations throughout France.

'Danglard, the capitaine of gendarmes of Ordebec, can you do that?'

'In the Calvados?'

'Yes, that's it.'

'Émeri. Louis Nicolas Émeri, he was named Louis Nicolas after one of his ancestors on the wrong side of the blanket, one of Napoleon's marshals, Louis Nicolas Davout, commander of the third corps of the Grande Armée. Davout fought at Ulm, Austerlitz, Eylau and Wagram, and he was given the titles of Duke of Auerstadt and Prince of Eckmühl, after one of his famous victories.'

'Danglard, it's just the one who's around now that interests me, the head man in Ordebec.'

'That's what I'm saying. He's very keen on his ancestry, doesn't let you forget it. So he can be rather arrogant, proud, military. Apart from all the Napoleonic stuff, though, he's quite agreeable, a clued-up policeman, rather cautious - perhaps a bit too cautious. He's about forty. He didn't distinguish himself in his previous posting, somewhere near Lyon, I think. In Ordebec, he has a pretty quiet life. They don't get up to much there.'

Adamsberg returned to his office where the woman had once more continued her careful inspection of the walls.

'It's not easy, I know, commissaire. Because as a rule, you're not supposed to talk about it. It could bring terrible trouble. Tell me, are your shelves fixed on properly? Because you've put all the heavy boxes on the top ones and lighter things lower down. They could fall on top of a person, you know. You should always put heavier things at the bottom.'

Scared of the police, and scared of collapsing bookshelves.

'This Michel Herbier, why do you hate him so much?'

'*Everyone* hates him, commissaire. He's a brute, he's a horrible man, and he's always been like that. Nobody talks to him.'

'Well, that might explain why he's left Ordebec.'

Adamsberg picked up the newspaper again.

'He isn't married, he's retired, he's sixty-four. He might have decided to go and make a new start somewhere else. Does he have relations anywhere?'

'He *was* married. He's a widower.'

'How long since he was widowed?'

'Oh, fifteen years or more.'

'And you see him around now and then?'

'No, never. He lives a bit outside the village, so it's easy to keep out of his way. And that suits everyone.'

'But some neighbours are concerned about him?'

'Yes, the Hébrards. They're honest folk. They saw him go off at about six in the evening - they live across the lane,

you see. And he lives about fifty yards further on, in the Bigard woods, near the old rubbish dump. It's very damp down there.'

'So why were they worried, if they saw him go off on the moped?'

'Because usually, when he goes away, he gives them the key to his mailbox. But he didn't, this time. And they didn't hear him come back. And there was post for him, sticking out of the box. So they thought Herbier only meant to go out for a short while, but something stopped him coming back. The gendarmes checked the hospitals, and he isn't there.'

'And when they went into his house, they found all the food from the freezers scattered on the floor?'

'Yes.'

'Why did he have all that meat? Does he have dogs?'

'He's a hunter, he puts his game in the freezers. He kills a lot of animals, and he never gives any to anyone else.'

The woman shivered.

'One of the gendarmes, Blériot, he's nice to me, not like Capitaine Émeri, he told me what it was like in there. Horrible, he said. There was half a carcass of a doe, with its head still on, and some sides of venison. Other female animals too, hares, wild boar, partridges. All chucked about any old how, monsieur. It had been rotting for days when the gendarmes went in. In this heat, all that rotting meat, it's a health hazard.'

Scared of bookshelves and scared of germs. Adamsberg glanced at the two huge stag antlers gathering dust, still lying on the floor of his office. They had been the generous gift from a Norman, as it happened.

'*Female* hares and whatnot? Your gendarme is observant - or perhaps he's a hunter too.'

'No, no, he says that because everyone knows what Herbier is like. He's a disgusting hunter, a wicked man. He