

# The Metro

A short story by Josef Essberger



The discovery of a body in the Paris Metro early one morning was not particularly unusual. That it was headless sent a frisson through the sixth *arrondissement*, but the incident went unnoticed outside Paris.

Yet there was clearly something strange about the case. It was hardly as though the body had been decapitated to frustrate identification, for it was fully clothed and none of the owner's personal effects had been removed, save of course for his head. The Paris police soon tied up the contents of the dead man's wallet with forensic evidence from the body. Added to that, Madame Charente, the dead man's wife, could positively identify the body in the most intimate ways. (She had already reported her husband as missing.)

A few men were despatched to poke around in the warm, dark tunnels on either side of Odéon station, where the body had been found. Above ground another search was made, equally fruitlessly, and to Inspector Dutruelle it looked as though the case would linger on unsolved.

Two weeks later, four kilometres away in the west, a headless body was found at Courcelles station, again in the tunnel not far from the platform. As in the earlier case, the cause of death was apparently the severing of the head, which appeared to have been done with some precision. Again, the body was fully clothed and easily identified, and nothing but the head had apparently been removed.

"What can I tell these blessed reporters?" Inspector Dutruelle said as he handed his wife the two sticks of bread he usually bought on the way home. "They want answers for everything. And it's not just the papers now, the politicians are getting worried too. I'm reporting to the Préfet on this one."

"If there were instant answers for everything, *mon petit chou*, they'd have no need of you," said Madame Dutruelle. "And where would they be without you? Who cleared up that terrible Clichy case last year, and the acid bath at Reuilly Diderot?"

The little *inspecteur divisionnaire-chef* pulled in his stomach, puffed out his chest and rose to his full height. A smile spread across his round face. In his smart dark suit and

gold-rimmed glasses you could have taken him for a provincial bank manager rather than one of Paris's most successful policemen.

"Just think," he said wryly, "they were actually about to close the file on Dr Gomes before I took charge of the investigation."

"They're fools, all of them."

"All the same, my dear, I don't know where to go on this one. There're no leads. There's no apparent motive. And it's a bizarre pattern. Assuming, of course, it is a pattern. We can't be sure of that until there's been another."

Inspector Dutruelle did not have long to wait for his pattern to emerge. A telephone call at half past five the next morning dragged him from his bed.

"It's another one, sir," said the voice at the other end.

"Another what?"

"It's identical. Another headless corpse, just like the others - male, middle-aged, white."

"Where?" asked Inspector Dutruelle fumbling for a cigarette.

"Château Rouge."

"In the Metro?"

"Yes sir, just inside the tunnel. In the anti-suicide well between the tracks."

"Close the line - if you haven't already. I'll be with you soon. And don't move it, d'you hear?"

Inspector Dutruelle replaced the receiver with a sigh as his wife padded into the room.

"I hate these early morning cases," he muttered. He lit his cigarette.

"Have a coffee before you go. Another dead body will keep."

"But we've closed the line. And it's the other side of town, my dear. North Paris."

"All the same."

He sat down heavily and watched his wife sullenly as she made the coffee. Madame Dutruelle was a simple woman of forty-six whose long, thin-lipped face was framed by stern grey hair. Her strong, practical hands were country hands, and she had never got used to city life. She lived for the day when she and her husband would retire to their home village in Les Pyrénées. Inspector Dutruelle sighed to himself again. Poor Agnes.

She tried so hard to please him. How could she know that he longed to be free of her? How could she possibly know of Vololona, the young Malagasy he had met while on the Clichy case? For him it had been love at first sight.

"And for me too, my darling," Vololona had been quick to agree, her large brown eyes welling with tears as they gazed at him through the smoke of the Chatte et Lapin where she worked, "a veritable *coup de foudre*." She spoke French well, with a Malagasy accent and huskiness that left you with a sense of mystery and promise. Inspector Dutruelle was a happy man; but he was careful to tell no-one except Monsieur Chébaut, his closest friend, about the source of his happiness.

"I've never felt like this before, Pierre. I'm captivated by her," he said one evening when he took Monsieur Chébaut to see Vololona dancing.

It was a rare experience, even for the jaded Monsieur Chébaut. In the frantic coloured spotlights of the Chatte et Lapin Vololona danced solo and in her vitality you sensed the wildness of Madagascar. Her black limbs lashed the air to the music, which was raw and sensual.

"You know, Pierre, in thirty years of marriage I was never unfaithful. Well, you know that already. There was always my work, and the children, and I was happy enough at home. It never occurred to me to look at another woman. But something happened when I met Vololona. She showed me how to live. She showed me what real ecstasy is. Look at her, Pierre. Isn't she the most exquisite thing you ever saw? And she adores me. She's crazy about me. But why, I ask you? What can she see in me - three times her age, pot-bellied, bald . . . married?"

Inspector Dutruelle leaned back in his chair and swung around to look at the other customers applauding Vololona from the shadows. He smiled proudly to himself. He knew exactly what was on their minds. Life was strange, he thought, and you could never tell. Some of them were young men, tall and handsome and virile, yet none of them knew Vololona as he knew her.

Monsieur Chébaut finished his whisky.

"I can see," he said, "that a man in your position might have certain attractions for an immigrant without papers working in one of the more dangerous quarters of Paris." Monsieur Chébaut was a lawyer.

"You're a cynic, Pierre."

"And after thirty years in the force you're not?"

"Personally, I believe her when she says she loves me. I just don't know why. Another whisky?"

"Well, one thing's for sure, Régis, it can't go on like that. One way or another things'll come to a head. But I must agree, she's exquisite all right. Like an exquisite Venus

flytrap. And at the germane moment, you know, those soft, succulent petals will close around you like a vice."

The normally placid Inspector was piqued by his friend's unreasonable attitude.

"How can you say that?" he snapped. "When you haven't even spoken to her."

"But all women are the same, Régis. Don't you know that? You should be a lawyer, then you'd know it. They can't help it, they're built that way. Believe me, it can't go on without something happening."

Inspector Dutruelle glowered at his old schoolfriend and said nothing. Monsieur Chébaut could see he had touched a raw nerve. He grinned amicably and leaned across to slap his friend playfully on the shoulder.

"Look Régis, all I'm saying is, be careful, you haven't got my experience."

Of course, that was true. When it came to women few men had Monsieur Chébaut's experience. Or his luck, for that matter. He was one of those people who go through life insulated from difficulties. He crossed roads without looking. He did not hurry for trains. He never reconciled bank accounts. Tall, slim, with boyish good looks and thick, black, wavy hair, he was the antithesis of Inspector Dutruelle.

"Look, you've got two women involved, Régis," Monsieur Chébaut continued, "and women aren't like us. Agnes isn't stupid. She must know something's going on."

"She hasn't said anything," said the Inspector brusquely. He lit another Gauloise.

"Of course she hasn't. She's cleverer than you are. She intends to keep you."

"Mind you," said Inspector Dutruelle grudgingly, "she has had some odd dreams recently - so she says. About me and another woman. But anyway, she just laughs and says she can't believe it."

"But Régis, you must know that what we say and what we think are seldom the same."

"Sometimes I wonder if I ought to tell her something, if only out of decency."

Monsieur Chébaut nearly choked on the fresh whisky he had just put to his lips.

"No," he cried with a passion that surprised the Inspector, "never, you must never tell her. *Écoute* Régis, even if she did mention it, you must deny everything. Even if she caught the two of you in the act, you must deny it. You can only tell a woman there's another when you've definitively made up your mind to leave her, and even then it may not be safe."

"So much for logic."

"It's no use looking for logic in women, Régis. I told you, they're not like men. In fact, I've come to the conclusion that they're not even the same species as men. Men and women aren't like dog and bitch, they're more like dog and cat. *C'est bizarre, non?* In any case, I do know you can't keep two women on the go without something happening. I don't know what, but something."

Now the European press had picked the story up and the little Inspector did not know how to deal with the international reporters who hung around like flies outside the old stone walls of the Préfecture de police. Their stories focussed on the bizarre nature of the killings, and the idea that there were three severed heads somewhere in Paris particularly excited them. They wanted constantly to know more. So of course did Inspector Dutruelle.

"I assure you, gentlemen," he told a press conference, "we are at least as anxious as you to recover the missing parts. We are doing everything possible. You can tell your readers that wherever they are, we'll find them."

"Can we have photographs of the victims for our readers?" asked one of the foreign reporters.

"So as we know which heads we're looking for," added a journalist from London.

It was a joke that was not shared by the people of Paris. Suddenly the normally carnival atmosphere of the Metro had evaporated. Buskers no longer worked the coaches between stations. Puppeteers and jugglers no longer entertained passengers with impromptu performances. Even the beggars, who habitually hung around the crowded stations or made impassioned speeches in the carriages, had gone. And the few passengers who remained sat more long-faced than ever, or walked more hastily down the long corridors between platforms.

Inspector Dutruelle despaired of ever clearing the case up. His mind, already excited over Vololona, was now in a turmoil. Vololona had suddenly, and tearfully, announced that she was pregnant. Then, having accepted his financial assistance to terminate the pregnancy - but refusing his offer to take her to the clinic - she told him one day on the telephone: "I thought you were going to ask me to marry you." Inspector Dutruelle was stunned.

"But you know I'm married, *ma chérie*," he said.

"I thought you'd leave Agnes," she replied. "I wanted to be with you. I wanted to share everything with you . . . my child . . . my life . . . my bed." Inspector Dutruelle could hear her sobbing.

"But darling, we can still see each other."

"No, it's too painful. I love you too much."

Inspector Dutruelle could not concentrate on his work at all. Day and night his thoughts were on Vololona; he longed to be with her. If only Agnes would leave him. And if only Vololona would be satisfied with what he gave her already - the dinners, the presents, the apartment. Why did women have to possess you? It seemed that the more you gave them the more they took, until there was nothing left to give but yourself. Perhaps Pierre was right after all, when you thought about it.

The investigation into the Metro murders was proceeding dismally. Inspector Dutruelle had no suspect, no leads, no motive. His superiors complained about his lack of progress and the press ridiculed him without pity. "It appears," commented *France-Soir*, "that the only thing Inspector Dutruelle can tell us with certainty is that with each fresh atrocity the Metro station name grows longer." The detectives under him could not understand what had happened to their normally astute Inspector, and they felt leaderless and demoralised. It was left to the security police of the Metro to point out one rather obvious fact: that the three stations where bodies had been found had one thing in common - their lines intersected at Metro Barbes Rochechouart, and it seemed that something might be learned by taking the Metro between them.

Inspector Dutruelle did not like public transport, and he especially did not like the Metro. It was cramped, smelly and claustrophobic at the best of times, and in the summer it was hot. You stood on the very edge of the platform just to feel the breeze as the blue and white trains pulled into the station. It was years since the Inspector had used the Metro.

"I can't take much more of this, Marc," he said to the young Detective Constable who was travelling with him, "it's too hot. We'll get off at the next stop."

"That's Barbes Rochechouart, sir. We can change there."

"No, Marc. We can get out there. Someone else can take a sauna, I've had enough. Anyway, we need to have a look around." Inspector Dutruelle wiped his brow. He sounded irritable. "God knows what it's like normally," he added.

When the train pulled in they took the exit for Boulevard de Rochechouart.

"At least we can get through now," said the Detective Constable as they walked up the passage towards the escalator.

"How d'you mean?" asked Inspector Dutruelle.

"Well, normally this station's packed - beggars, passengers, buskers, hawkers, plus all their tables and stalls. It's like a damn great fair and market rolled into one. You can get anything here, from Eiffel Towers to cabbages and potatoes - not to mention a spot of cannabis or heroin."

"Oh, yes," said Inspector Dutruelle, vaguely. "I remember." He passed a handkerchief across his brow again.

At the turnstiles a man was handing out publicity cards and he thrust one into Inspector Dutruelle's hand. Glancing down at it and squinting in the bright sunlight, the Inspector read aloud: "'Professor Dhiakobli, *Grand Médium Voyant* can help you succeed rapidly in all areas of life . . .'"

He broke off in mid-sentence with a snort.

"What a lot of mumbo-jumbo! Headless chickens and voodoo magic."

"It may be mumbo-jumbo to you, sir," said the Detective Constable with a laugh, "but round here they take that sort of thing seriously. And not only round here - after all, we use some of these techniques in the police, don't we?"

"Oh really? Such as?"

"Well, graphology for a start - you can hardly call basing a murder case on the size of someone's handwriting scientific, can you sir? Or what about astrology - employing people on the basis of the stars? Or numerology."

"Yes, Marc," said Inspector Dutruelle, pushing the card into his top pocket, "maybe you're right, and maybe when you're older you won't be so sure. Now get on the blower and call the car."

The hot July turned to hotter and more humid August. No more bodies were found in the sweltering tunnels of the Metro, and the media, bored with the lack of developments, left Inspector Dutruelle to his original obscurity. Paris, deserted by its citizens in the yearly exodus to the coast, was tolerable only to the tourists with backpacks who flocked to the cheap hotels and began again to crowd the Metro. Then, in September, the Parisiens came back and life returned to normal.

But Inspector Dutruelle's passion for Vololona did not cool with the season. Vololona had at last agreed to see him, occasionally; but she always managed (with tears in her eyes) to deflect his more amorous advances. For Inspector Dutruelle it was beneath him to observe that he continued to pay the rent on her apartment, but he was growing increasingly frustrated. The notion that she had another lover obsessed him, and in the evenings he took to prowling the broad Boulevard de Clichy between her apartment and the Chatte et Lapin. Sometimes he would stand for hours watching her door, as locals strolled past with their dogs or sat on the benches under the plane trees. Now, denied the one thing here he wanted, the scene filled him with dismay. Money and music were in the air. Lovers sipped coffee in the open and watched the whores in their doorways. Pigeons fluttered as girls in tight mini-skirts hurried to work. Tourists with their Deutschmarks arrived by the busload and the touts in dark glasses worked hard to coax them into the expensive sex shows and neon-lit video clubs. Somewhere deep below ran the Metro; but Inspector Dutruelle had no more interest in that. His superiors had given up hope of solving the Metro murders and had moved him on to other things. Sometimes he would stay all night, leaving to the tinkle of broken glass as workmen swept up after the night's revelries. Occasionally he would

see Vololona leave her apartment to buy cigarettes, but he never once saw her on the arm of another man, or saw a male visitor take the lift to the seventh floor.

One night, late in October, he returned from the Boulevard de Clichy just after midnight. Madame Dutruelle, having been told that her husband was working on a case, and perhaps believing it, was already asleep. Had she been awake she would surely have been surprised to see him throw his jacket over a chair, for Inspector Dutruelle had always been meticulous with his clothes, the sort of man who irons his shoelaces. But the jacket missed and dropped to the floor. Muttering to himself, the Inspector bent and picked it up, and as he did so something fell from the top pocket. He gazed at it blankly for a moment. Then he realised it was the card he had been given at the metro station, a little the worse for having been once or twice to the cleaners, but still legible. He picked it up and slowly started to read:

### **PROFESSOR DHIAKOBLI**

*Grand Médium Voyant* can help you succeed rapidly in all areas of life: luck, love, marriage, attraction of clients, examinations, sexual potency. If you desire to make another love you or if your loved one has left with another, this is his domain, you will be loved and your partner will return. Prof. Dhiakobli will come behind you like a dog. He will create between you a perfect rapport on the basis of love. All problems resolved, even desperate cases. Every day from 9am to 9pm. Payment after results.

**13b, rue Beldamme, 75018 Paris**  
**staircase B, 6th floor, door on left**  
**Metro: Barbes Rochechouart**

Inspector Dutruelle stood in his socks and braces reading the card over and over again. "All problems resolved . . ." It was preposterous. And yet, it was tempting. What harm could there be in a little hocus pocus when everything else had failed? After all, everyone knew that even the police used clairvoyants when they were really up against it.

Rue Beldamme was a backstreet of tenement buildings in Paris's eighteenth *arrondissement*, an area popular with immigrants from francophone Africa. It lay close to the busy crossroads straddled by Metro Barbes Rochechouart. Inspector Dutruelle parked in the next street and walked the rest of the way, cursing because he had not brought his umbrella. The door to number 13b was swinging in the wind, its dark paint peeling badly. He stepped through into a narrow courtyard and found his way to the sixth-floor door on which a brass plaque read: "Professor Dhiakobli *Spécialiste des travaux occultes* Please ring". He stood there, breathing heavily from the stairs, and before he could press the bell the door opened and a man appeared.

"Please enter, my dear sir," said the man with an elegant wave of the hand and exaggerated courtesy. "I am Dhiakobli. And I have the honour to meet . . . ?"

As Inspector Dutruelle had imagined, Professor Dhiakobli was black. He had a short yet commanding figure, and was dressed in a well-tailored grey suit. A large, silk handkerchief fell from his top pocket.



"For the moment," said Inspector Dutruelle, "my name is hardly important. I've only come in response to your advertisement."

"Monsieur has perhaps some small problem with which I can help? A minor indiscretion? Please be seated, sir, and let us talk about the matter."

Inspector Dutruelle handed his coat and gloves to the Professor and sat in the large, well upholstered chair to which he had been directed. Professor Dhiakobli himself settled behind a large mahogany desk, on top of which a chihuahua hardly bigger than a mouse was lounging, its wide, moist eyes gazing disdainfully at the newcomer.

"Ah, I see that Zeus approves of you," said the Professor, stroking the tiny dog with the tips of his manicured fingers, his own unblinking eyes also fixed on Inspector Dutruelle. "Poor Zeus, *mon petit papillon*, he is devoted to me, but he must remain here whenever I leave France. And you are fortunate, monsieur. It is only now that I return from Côte d'Ivoire. It is my country you know, I return there for a few months each summer. Paris in summer is so disagreeable, don't you agree?"

Professor Dhiakobli glittered with success. The frames of his glasses, the heavy bracelet on his right wrist and the watch on his left, the gem-studded rings on his fingers - all were of gold. From his manner and cultured French accent it was evident that he was an educated man. Around him the large room was like a shrine. Heavy curtains excluded the daylight (the only illumination was a small brass desk lamp) and the dark, red walls were festooned with spears, costumes, photographs and other African memorabilia. There was a sweet smell in the air, and in one corner of the room the feathers of a ceremonial African headgear lay draped inappropriately over an enormous American refrigerator. You could not help being struck by the incongruity of this bizarre scene in the roughest quarter of Paris.

"As I say," began Inspector Dutruelle, ignoring the Professor's question, "I saw your card and I wondered just how you work."

"And may one enquire as to monsieur's little difficulty?"

Inspector Dutruelle cleared his throat and tried to adopt as nonchalant an air as he could.

"Well," - he coughed again - "first of all, I wondered what sort of things you can help people with."

The Professor's eyebrows rose.

"Anything," he said slowly, his smile revealing a set of large white teeth that shone brilliantly in the dimness against his black skin. "My dear sir, anything at all."

"And then, I wondered, how do you operate? That's to say, what exactly do you do . . . and how do you charge?"

"Ah monsieur, let us not talk of money. First I must learn just how I can help you. And for that a consultation is in order."

Inspector Dutruelle shifted in his seat.

"And what would a consultation involve? What does it . . . cost?"

Professor Dhiakobli wrung his hands and shrugged amicably.

"*Mon cher monsieur*, I do understand how distasteful it is to you to discuss so vulgar a matter as money. I too recoil at the mere thought of it. It has been my mission in life to help those who have suffered misfortune. And if some donate a small token of their gratitude, who am I to refuse their offering? They pay according to their means, to assist those who have little to offer. But for a preliminary consultation, monsieur, a nominal sum, as a mark of good faith, is usually in order. For a gentleman of your obvious standing, a trifle, a mere two hundred francs. And let me assure you, monsieur, of my absolute discretion. Nothing you may choose to tell me will go beyond these walls." He paused. Then he threw out his hands and added with a grin: "They have the sanctity of the confessional."

"I'm glad to hear it," said the Inspector.

"But monsieur still has the advantage of me . . ." continued Professor Dhiakobli.

Inspector Dutruelle decided that he had nothing to lose by talking. He adopted the name of Monsieur Mazodier, a Parisien wine merchant, and began to tell the Professor of the dilemma that was tearing at his soul. He told him of the young Malagasy girl he had met while entertaining clients; of their instant and passionate love for one another; of her sudden irrational refusal any longer to give herself to him; and of the wife he now knew he should never have married but whom he had not the heart to leave. Monsieur Mazodier was at his wits' end and now even his business was suffering. He feared that if he did not find a resolution to his problem he might do something that he or others would regret. The Professor listened intently, asking appropriate questions at appropriate moments. Finally Inspector Dutruelle said: "Well, Professor Dhiakobli, I think that's all I can tell you. I don't think I can tell you any more. From what I have told you, do you believe you can help me?"

For a long time there was silence. The Professor appeared to be in another world. He stared at Inspector Dutruelle, but seemed to be looking through him.

"My dear Monsieur Mazodier," he said at last, very slowly, almost mechanically, "the story you have told me is most poignant. Each of us has a hidden corner in his life, a *jardin secret*. Yet it is rare indeed for men to come to me with problems such as yours. Perhaps it is natural that most of my lovelorn clients should be women. At the mercy of their complex physical structure, is it any wonder that women are such emotional creatures? I help them find their lost ones, their partners of many years, to recreate again the rapport of their youth. You will understand that it is not easy. But this is my work. My domain."

"So you can't help me?" said Inspector Dutruelle, adding despondently: "Perhaps what I really need is a headshrink."

The Professor gave a start. Again, for a long time he did not answer. Then his teeth flashed in the dimness.

"*Écoutez monsieur*, this is my work, my domain," he repeated. "Certainly I can help you. But you must understand that it will not be easy. It calls for a special ceremony. In the first place, you are married, and I shall be required to work my influence on not one but two women. In the second, we are both men of the world, *monsieur*, and you will not be offended if I remark upon the extreme disparity in your ages. And finally, it is clear to me that this young girl has chained your heart with her magic. You know, the magic of Madagascar is very strong. No, *monsieur*, it will not be easy. Enduring love cannot be bought with money alone. Sometimes . . ." He hesitated and looked Inspector Dutruelle straight in the eye, his own eyes suddenly cold and vacant. "Sometimes," he said, "we must make sacrifices."

"What sort of sacrifices?" asked Inspector Dutruelle dully.

"Oh, my dear sir, you must leave that to me. But one cannot make an omelette without breaking eggs." His cold eyes remained fixed on the Inspector and he spoke in a monotone without pausing for breath. "You must not concern yourself with technicalities, *monsieur*. Your mind must be fixed on the future, on the life you have dreamed of. You must envisage your wife - happy in the arms of another. You must picture the fragile young child you so yearn for . . . secure in your arms . . . sharing your life . . . your days . . . your nights. The perfect solution to all your problems. Is it not worth a considerable sum?"

"It certainly would be worth a lot . . ." Inspector Dutruelle muttered as the Professor's words came to life in his mind.

"Shall we say thirty thousand francs?"

"I'm sorry?" muttered the Inspector.

"Let's say fifteen thousand before and fifteen afterwards," the Professor went on as though his visitor had not spoken. "Do you see, *monsieur*, how confident I am of success?"

Inspector Dutruelle did not reply. He was confused. He had not expected the Professor to be so blunt, or to propose quite so generous a token. But it did not seem to matter. After all, what was thirty thousand francs to achieve what he craved so desperately? And, in any case, at worst it was only fifteen thousand.

The Professor's eyes were still fixed on Inspector Dutruelle.

"Of course, *monsieur*, I have faith in your gratitude. I know that you will not forget, in your delight, that what I have done, I can undo. And now, *monsieur*, you must not

allow me to detain you further. We have much work to do. In eight days you will return with photographs and details of Madame Mazodier and the Malagasy. And with some little articles of clothing, something close to their thoughts, say a scarf or a hat. You can arrange this?"

Inspector Dutruelle nodded blankly.

"Excellent, monsieur. I must know them in every detail - if I am to have a spiritual tête-à-tête with each of them. So, in fifteen days, you will return for the ceremony. It will take place beyond those curtains, in the space reserved for the ancestral spirits. Nobody but I and my assistants may enter there, but nevertheless it is imperative that you be present on the day. It must be at dawn, and you must come without fail - the ceremony cannot be deferred. Can you manage six in the morning, shall we say Monday the sixteenth?"

Inspector Dutruelle did not sleep well on the night of the fifteenth of December. At four o'clock in the morning he got out of bed. Though his wife stirred she did not wake. He showered and dressed. His nerves were on edge as he fiddled around in the kitchen, boiling water for his coffee. He drank two cups, strong and black, but he looked helplessly at the croissants he had spread clumsily with jam. He lit a Gauloise and paced the room. Then he pulled the windows open and leaned on the railing, finishing his cigarette. Below him the courtyard was dark and silent, and above him the sky was black. But away in the east, through the open end of the court, a violet hue was creeping over Paris. He glanced at his watch. It was a quarter past five and time to fetch the car. It would seem strange, leaving at that time of the morning without an official car and driver. He wondered what the concierge would make of it all - she was bound to be polishing the brasses by the time he reached the ground floor. He gave a shiver and pushed the windows shut.

Then he put the keys of the Renault in his coat pocket and checked that he had everything. He looked into the bedroom. Gently, he drew the duvet back and looked at his wife as she slept, her arms clasped about her knees. He leaned over and touched his lips to her cheek. Then he closed the bedroom door silently behind him, switched the lights off in the living room and kitchen, and opened the front door. As he did so the telephone rang. It startled him and he cursed aloud. He closed the front door again and hurried to answer the phone so that his wife should not wake.

"Inspector Dutruelle?" said the voice at the other end.

"Yes, what is it?"

"Sorry to disturb you at this time of the morning, *Monsieur l'Inspecteur*. It's the Préfecture."

"Never mind the time," said Inspector Dutruelle with as much irritation as his whispering voice could convey. "I'm off duty today."

"Well, that's the point, Inspector. The Préfet's ordered us to call you specially. He appreciates you're not on duty, but he wants you anyway."

"It's quite impossible."

"I'm afraid he insists, sir."

"Why?"

"He insists you come on duty immediately, sir. We're sending a car round for you."

"Yes, yes, I understand, but why?"

"It's the Metro again, sir."

"The Metro?"

"Yes, sir. They've found another corpse on the line, decapitated again."

Inspector Dutruelle did not reply. He was cursing to himself. He was cursing the Préfet, the police, this homicidal maniac, his wife. Why today? Why ever today?

"Sir? Hello sir? The car'll be with you in five minutes."

"Yes, all right. I'll be ready in five minutes."

The big black Citroen was soon speeding away from Rue Dauphine and heading north across Pont Neuf. Inspector Dutruelle looked at the winter mists rising from the Seine. His dreams, it seemed, were evaporating just as surely.

"You'd better brief me on this as quick as you can," he said wearily to the Detective Sergeant he had found waiting for him in the car. "Where was the body found?"

"Barbes Rochechouart, sir."

A cold shiver passed through the Inspector.

"I presume it's the same as the others?" he asked.

"Well, in as much as there's nothing to go on, it's the same, sir. Otherwise it couldn't be more different. For a start, we've just heard they've found two of them now. And this time they're women. One white, in her forties, and one black. A young black girl - still in her teens, by the look of things."

But Inspector Dutruelle was not listening. He was staring blankly through the glass to his right, and as they turned at Place du Châtelet the empty streets were no more than a cold, grey blur to him. The car swung onto the broad Boulevard de Sébastopol and

accelerated northwards to cover the three kilometres to Metro Barbes Rochechouart. It was the route he should have been taking in his own car.

Outside the station, now closed to passengers, people were standing around under the street lights with their collars up. Inspector Dutruelle got out of the car. He hesitated. He glanced towards Rue Beldamme (just a stone's throw away across the bleak Boulevard de Rochechouart) where the Professor would be waiting for him. He shrugged and went down the station steps.

Underground, on the number four line, there was an air of gloom. Both bodies lay where they had been spotted by the first train drivers through that morning. Inspector Dutruelle looked impassively at the first one. It was the body of a middle-aged woman, quite unexceptional, coarse and wiry, like his wife.

"She's forty-seven, *Monsieur l'Inspecteur*," said somebody beside him. "French. Name of Madame Catherine Dubur. Not like the other one."

"The other one?" said the Inspector blankly.

"I told you in the car, sir," said the Detective Sergeant at his ear, "there's two of them."

"You'd better show me."

They strolled in their overcoats to the other end of the platform and went down the little steps that led to the track. A uniformed policeman pulled back the blanket that covered the second body, which lay on its back. Inspector Dutruelle stared dispassionately at the stiff, black limbs that stuck out awkwardly across the railway lines. Suddenly he shuddered in alarm. Even in the dim lights of the train that was pulled up beyond you could see the resemblance to Vololona.

"Identity?" he asked. He tried to control his voice.

"We don't know, sir - this is all we found," said a policeman, handing him a tattered greetings card. Inside, in large, green handwriting, were the words: "Happy Nineteenth Birthday, from Everyone in Antananarivo."

"D'you think she's Malagasy, sir?" asked the policeman. The Inspector shrugged his shoulders, then held out an open hand.

"Your torch, please," he said.

He played its beam over the body, up and down the long, slender legs, across the clothes. At least he did not recognise the clothes. Yet the body's size, its build, its colour, everything pointed to Vololona. He bent down and flashed the light onto the fingers of the left hand and laughed weakly to himself as he saw the tawdry rings that glinted back at him. He stood up in relief. That was certainly not Vololona. Yet it was uncanny how this body reminded him of her - and the other of Agnes, for that matter. Even the ages were the same.

He smoked as he stood staring at the headless corpse. He could not understand. Was the magic of Madagascar really so strong that now he saw Vololona everywhere? And what of Agnes? How would Professor Dhiakobli explain that? How could he explain it, when you came to think of it? When you came to think of it, he had explained very little. He had been happy enough to take the money, and free enough with his words - all those grandiose notions of mission and sacrifice and spiritual tête-à-têtes . . .

Inspector Dutruelle gasped.

"The devil," he muttered to himself. Suddenly he understood everything.

"The what, sir?" said somebody beside him.

"Never mind," he answered quietly, putting his hand to his breast pocket. His heart had started to pound with a sense of danger and his head suddenly ached with questions. He took out his cigarette case and lit another Gauloise. Through its curling blue smoke, back-lit by the lights of the train, the black limbs were splayed out in a grotesque dance, while beside him men's voices were thrumming in his ear. Why was there no time to think, to extricate himself from this nightmare? He cursed himself. How could he have been so stupid? He cursed his wife and Vololona. And Professor Dhiakobli. What madness had driven him to this? Then he cursed himself again, and turned abruptly to one of the men babbling at his side.

"What time is it?"

"Six-fifteen, sir."

For a moment, he hesitated. Then he called for the Detective Sergeant who was with the photographer at the other body.

"*Écoute* Guy, when he's got his pictures they can move the bodies and fix things up," he said. "Now get me the *Préfet*."

The *Préfet* was beside himself with rage at this further disturbance to his sleep, and he exploded with indignation when Inspector Dutruelle offered his resignation.

"Are you insane, man? You're in the middle of an investigation!"

"The investigation is over, *Monsieur le Préfet*."

"So, you have the killer at last!"

"In fifteen minutes, monsieur, in fifteen minutes."

"Then why in the name of God are you asking to be relieved from duty?"

"*Monsieur le Préfet*, my position is impossible. On this occasion it was I that paid the killer," he answered calmly as he took another cigarette from his silver cigarette case.

