

ALL CRY CHAOS

ADVANCE UNCORRECTED GALLEY

332 pp. ISBN: 978-1-57962-222-0

Pub. Date: September 2011

\$29 cloth

AN HENRI POINCARÉ MYSTERY

ALL CRY
CHAOS

LEONARD ROSEN

The Permanent Press
Sag Harbor, NY 11963

Copyright © 2011 by Leonard Rosen

All rights reserved. No part of this publication, or parts thereof, may be reproduced in any form, except for the inclusion of brief quotes in a review, without the written permission of the publisher.

For information, address:

The Permanent Press
4170 Noyac Road
Sag Harbor, NY 11963
www.thepermanentpress.com

Printed in the United States of America.

In the Temple, all say “Glory!”
In the streets, all cry “Chaos!”
Who can see the order in the whirlwind?
Who can see the pattern in the wildness?
Who dares cry “Glory” in the midst of chaos?

— R. SHAPIRO, *after Psalm 29*

PROLOGUE

He could not approach the grave all at once. Instead, Henri Poincaré wandered the Cimetière du Montparnasse until the gloom drew him in and down to a place where he could hear spirits scuttling, calling his name.

For thirteen years he had come, circling past monuments to poets, philosophers, artists, and scientists—heroes of the republic all. As a young Inspector, he believed that one day he might rest among them, beside his great-grandfather, as a reward for his service to country and love of justice. His ambitions had been that large, driving him not merely to solve cases but to solve them with a fortitude and intelligence that would credit the family name.

What a fool he had been. To restore this one life, he would have given his own a thousand times over. He would have signed away his soul. Yet no Devil's bargain, not even suicide, could have canceled his existence. For Poincaré *had* lived and had hurt the ones he loved, the most terrible proof of which lay in a quiet corner of this cemetery.

He walked, therefore, until half shadow himself he stood over the grave.

Clouds churned and trees moaned. He would measure out his life this way: in an overnight train from the Dordogne each week, arriving at noon to clean the granite and exchange new flowers for old. An efficient man would have cleared the debris in minutes; but this man had borrowed a broom from the caretaker's shed and swept for an hour. He plucked a last wind-driven scrap and marveled that it was Spring again. He did not understand why the daffodils still bloomed. But they did . . . even here in the cemetery. And the songbirds were back and the trees were leafing out. It should have been a comfort.

He knelt and with his good hand set fresh lilies on the grave.
*Dear heart, he said. They killed the wrong person. They should have
killed me.*

→⇐ PART I ⇐→

What is the way to the abode of light?
And where does darkness reside?

— JOB 38:19

CHAPTER 1

When he entered the cellblock, Henri Poincaré braced himself for the clank of steel doors coupling, which produced in him a physical effect not unlike the dysentery he once contracted drinking bad water in Senegal. A long career had made him no stranger to prison corridors; yet the clank of steel on steel still ripped through his insides like a disease bent on killing him, which it did, in its way, with every visit. The extortionists, the counterfeiter and Ponzi schemers, the assassins who for the love of money would take one life at a time and the fanatics who would weep if they killed fewer than fifty: those condemned to these cages thought themselves superior but misunderstood, justified in what they snatched from the world. In Poincaré's estimate, they deserved the daily reminder of these clanging doors, and most of all they deserved each other.

Which is to say, Stipo Banović kept good company.

Cathedral light from high, fixed windows cut through the upper air of the cell block, though little of the Dutch springtime made its way inside. Here was the prison and this the block reserved for celebrities of a sort, war criminals awaiting trial in The Hague's international court. Four months earlier, at the end of a lengthy search that had taken him to six countries and two continents, Poincaré had found Stipo Banović living in a suburb of Vienna with his young bride and their son and daughter. On the evening men with battering rams knocked through his front door, Banović had been reading bedtime stories to these same children, who sat in his lap in an easy chair by the fire. The very picture of domestic happiness, save for the fact that Banović had in another lifetime personally ordered and participated in the massacre of seventy Muslim men and boys—some younger than the ringleted beauties in his lap that evening. His wife cried bitterly and his children cried as Banović screamed in

perfect if heavily accented English: “Can’t you see I’ve started over? I’m leading a *good* life!”

That was not for Poincaré to decide. Before they assigned him the case, his superiors at Interpol-Lyon sent him to the ravine where those bodies lay. It was springtime in the former Yugoslavia, and the snow melt had made traveling to the site a muddy ordeal. But the day was crisp and green shoots were emerging and everywhere the sound of water flowing suggested the possibility of life. Everywhere but in that shadowed ravine, where the stillness of bleached bones and the flapping fragments of cloth dropped him to his knees. No, it was not for Poincaré to decide or to forgive. He had done his job and the courts would do theirs.

He was already busy with another case, supervising security at the ministerial meetings of the World Trade Organization in Amsterdam. This visit was unnecessary, but he had come to face Banović one last time before catching his train, much as he would check to see the fire was off in the kitchen before leaving on a trip. The man, unattended, was dangerous. Poincaré needed to see him in his place, behind bars.

“As I live and breathe,” said the prisoner at the approach of footsteps.

“Good news, Stipo. I’m officially off your case. Reassigned. It’s enough to make one sentimental . . . all the time I spent hunting you.”

Banović turned away. His plaid shirt buttoned to the collar and his wire-rimmed glasses lent the former death squad commander an aspect very like the librarian he was before the Bosnian war: high forehead, small boned, a pianist’s fingers. He looked more the scholar than the mass murderer, an impression only strengthened by the fortress of law books he had amassed for his upcoming trial.

His back still turned, Banović said: “It was war time. Ugly things happened. You have your witnesses, those traitorous sons of whores. But the law gives me precedent, Inspector. Battle conditions. Men are beasts, it’s true—as even a cursory reading of history will attest. Do you know what Titus’s soldiers did to the Jews fleeing Jerusalem?”

“I don’t really care,” said Poincaré, approaching the bars.

Banović glanced over his shoulder. “They cut living men and women open to look for swallowed gold.”

If Poincaré faced him alone in the forests of Bosnia, beyond the reach of law, he knew he would have died and suffered considerably in the process. As it was, standing before this cage was rather like standing in a zoo before a predator high on the food chain. The steel offered some assurance, but even so Banović radiated a danger that backed Poincaré away and made his heart beat erratically. This job had never been easy. Friends predicted that with his fondness for opera and arcane journals he would last all of three weeks. Three decades later, notwithstanding his successes, he wondered if he was truly cut out for this work.

“Years I ran,” said the prisoner in a low, rasping voice. “The fight ended. I deserved a life, as combatants do. Now look at me, gagging on law books and reduced to kissing photos of my children. You are responsible, Poincaré. The others Interpol sent showed some common sense, some human concern—an appreciation for my circumstance. I warned them away and they broke off their searches. But you. . . .” He reached for a photograph and slowly traced a finger.

How could the man bear to look at those children? If Poincaré lived to be a hundred he would not forget what lay in that ravine, the bones of young ones reaching for fathers, brothers, neighbors—men who, if they reached back, could offer only a willingness to die first. And all of them left to rot until the snows came. “I could have broken off the search,” Poincaré agreed. “There was a war. You *were* a combatant.”

The prisoner nodded.

“And now that the war is over and you have a new family, you want to go home.”

Banović closed his eyes at the thought.

“Like those men and boys wanted to go home. Did they beg for mercy, Stipo? Did they pray?”

The prisoner stared down the corridor, and Poincaré wondered if his words had registered. They had—and the response, when it came, was saw-blade jagged: “Bad things happen in war,” said Banović.

“But then you never fought a war. So don’t talk to me. Don’t you *dare* judge me.”

“Not to worry, Stipo. The Court will do that.”

The cell block was half the length of a soccer field, the two men the sole representatives of their species on that square of earth.

The prisoner laughed. “Why the visit?”

Poincaré stared at him.

“Come on, now—a clever man like you.”

“You disgust me.”

“Ah—honesty! There’s a start!” Banović held up two fingers, a peace sign, and pointed them at Poincaré’s eyes, then his own. “I do declare, Inspector: you came to look in the mirror.”

“Go to Hell.”

“Too late . . . I’ve been here years already. Admit it—I *fascinate* you!”

“What I admit is a strong desire to see you rot.”

“And keep the world safe from bogeymen like me?” Once more he pointed to Poincaré’s eyes, then his own. “Take a closer look. . . . You know, you really should have killed me when you had the chance.”

Poincaré leaned close to the bars. “I nearly did,” he whispered, drawing Banović closer still. “It would have been an easy thing to report that the arrest went bad and we shot you. But that would have been your way. No. I saw what you left in the ravine. You’ll stand trial, you’ll be convicted, and you’ll rot.”

Not before he was halfway down the corridor did the wave of bellowing and invective rush past him like effluent from a sewage pipe. “They were animals! You read my file, Poincaré. You knew I had a family! Three children raped and disemboweled—in front of their mother, my Sylvie. Sylvie raped in front of her parents! Then her womb with our unborn child split open and her parents left to stagger through their lives, begging for someone to kill them. You *read* that, Inspector! And still you came. Did you once stop to think why a man becomes a killing machine? I was an ordinary man. A *good* man! I had a family, a job. Then a war I did not make and did not want ruined us. I will put you in my shoes before I die. I swear, you will walk in my shoes!”

I don't let people go, the inspector said to himself, repeating the words like a talisman to get him through the gate at the end of the cell block, and through another gate, and through another until the final gate closed, steel on steel, and he stood outside the prison walls beyond the reach of Banović's agony. *These are not my decisions*. Poincaré leaned hard against a truck and slipped two pills between his lips.

He felt an attack coming on.

The train from The Hague to Amsterdam ran past acres of fields laid out in rectangles gaudy with color. Against a screen of heavy clouds rumbling off the North Sea, the famous Dutch tulips were an antidote to weariness itself. Poincaré needed the help. More than he cared to admit, Banović had unnerved him. Even now, an hour later, his heart beat erratically—if not from fear exactly then from the knowledge that a prodigious hatred was trained on him. *It's nothing life-threatening*, doctors had assured him. *A nuisance arrhythmia. Too much wine can bring it on. Also cold drinks, and sometimes stress. Do you have a stressful job?*

Soon enough, the pills would kick his heart back into a normal rhythm, and his life would begin to look orderly again. It had all happened before, this confrontation with the blunted, redirected rage of men he had put behind bars. He would set aside Banović's outburst, as he had learned long ago to do.

He flipped open his phone and waited through dead air, hoping she would answer. "It's me," he said finally.

"Ah—Henri! Are you OK? You sound tired."

"Not exactly."

"It's that man in Den Haag. You said you would quit him."

"I know."

"Well, then . . . quit him. Etienne called last night. He and Lucille and the children will join us at the farmhouse after all. You know what an ordeal it is for them to juggle their schedules. Promise—take it easy with work until we're back in Lyon."

"You know I'll be busy through the weekend," he said.

She did not answer. She hardly needed to.

“I’ll come straight home from Amsterdam. I promise.”

“Enough already. Retire.”

A distinct possibility, given the morning. For the thirty years he had worked at Interpol, rising through the ranks, he had taken virtually no holiday that had not been delayed or interrupted by some special request from headquarters. Once, in Patagonia, in a river basin as remote as the Marianas trench, a local official arrived on horseback to request that on returning to France might Inspector Poincaré first consult with the national police in Buenos Aires on a matter of stolen art. “Interpol-Lyon telex,” began the official, hat in hand and so clearly apologetic for interrupting a family on holiday that Poincaré hadn’t the heart to object. Claire, by contrast, placed her hands over the young Etienne’s ears and, rather than attempting to kill the messenger, turned on her husband. “Could we be any further from civilization, Henri? Should we try for the Arctic next time?”

It would not have mattered. Interpol put Poincaré to strategic use, holiday or no. He had become for many in the security offices of Western Europe and the Americas the agent who had aged with grace. What he had lost physically he gained in intuition. He could anticipate a criminal’s moves as if he were the pursued, and his perseverance was legendary—Banović’s capture being only the latest example.

Persistence did take its toll, however; on days like this his heart argued for less strenuous work, and he considered retiring to the Dordogne. But he could not, just yet, because the question that had drawn him so improbably to police work—how to hold in one thought the abomination of a Banović in a world that was, in so many ways, sweet beyond description—had not been answered.

There was always the next case.