

Cézanne's Quarry Excerpt

By Barbara Corrado Pope

From the first chapter of *Cézanne's Quarry*. The young examining magistrate Bernard Martin and his inspector, Albert Franc, search for the body of a woman in the quarry.

They made a slow, mostly silent ascent along the stony white road, past farmhouses with red tile roofs, yellowing vineyards, and groves of crooked, silver-leaved olive trees. In the distance, the luminous limestone hills jugged up toward a cloudless blue sky. Everything struck Martin as too bright, almost unnaturally so. It was nothing like the north where he had grown up.

At first it was a relief to turn onto the Bibémus road, which cut through a sheltering forest of pines and oaks. But the narrow stony road was steep, and as the pace of the mule slowed, Martin's anxieties mounted. He kept thinking about what lay waiting for them in the quarry. He loosened his collar. He was thirsty and finding it harder and harder to swallow. At last, the cart reached a plateau that was covered with rocks and brambles, and drew to a halt. Only a few misshapen parasol pines grew out of this barren plane, their trunks and feathery green branches bowing in one direction, as if in a permanent state of mournful submission to the *mistral*, Provence's fearsome winter wind. The only sounds were those of the insects, all about, screeching, buzzing, and whining.

"We're almost there," said Franc, climbing down. He looked around for a moment then pointed toward a line of red-orange rocks and boulders. "This way I think, sir. We'll need to carry the body back up, but don't forget to look for anything else a killer might have left."

Martin followed the older man's lead, steadying himself with one hand on the rough sandstone as they zigzagged down a path. The pounding of his heart had little to do with the exertion. But it was only after he slipped that he understood the full measure of his fears. He looked down, half expecting to see blood. Instead, he saw that the stones beneath his feet had been shined smooth by centuries of wayfarers like himself. Fortunately, Franc seemed too involved in the hunt to take note of his clumsiness. The inspector moved with the agility of an animal stalking his prey, sniffing and alert. At last he came up with something. Curled up amid the branches that jugged out from the rocks, was an artist's canvas. Or, rather, a small piece of one. For as Franc unrolled it, they could see that someone

had torn apart a crude painting of bent pine trees and great orange boulders. Franc studied the fragment for so long that Martin asked him if he knew who had done it.

"Not quite sure, sir, but I have my suspicions." Franc folded it up and put it in his pocket. Then he pointed to a second rocky path, which brought them to their destination, unmistakable in its eerie desolation.

Here it was not nature that showed the destructiveness of her force, but man. Below them, literally carved out of the plateau, stood gigantic geometric towers and caves, free floating steps and walls, curved arches and tunnels; the remains of the greedy hunt to provide the material for Aix's great honey-colored houses. So fantastic was the quarry's jumbled architecture, that Martin imagined that he was looking at the long-abandoned building blocks of some gigantic, ancient gods. The colors, too, were outlandish. The stones glowed orange and red and purple in the setting sun. Everywhere, branches strained and twisted to release themselves from the lifeless stone, and reached for the light in an array of black and yellow-greens.

Franc slithered down steplike indentations that had been excised by a quarryman's pick and began his search. It did not take them long to find her. The first thing they saw was her dress. White with green stripes, just like the boy said. With a start, Martin remembered where he had seen it. Across the cathedral square during the Virgin's procession, under a parasol. Undoubtedly the same parasol which Franc would bring to him at the courthouse.

She lay in shadow and light, half hidden by the remains of the quarrymen's work. As Martin approached, he saw an unmistakable sign that it was she. Her hair, unbound, shining under the rays of a merciless setting sun, looked like it had burst into flames. That magnificent golden-red hair, which he had always seen pinned up, rising gracefully from her long, white neck. Beneath her now, radiating from her shoulder to her waist, was a pool of dark blood, long dried by the heat.

Martin wanted to reach down to drive the buzzing flies from her body, but he could not move. By contrast, Franc paid little regard to ceremony. Putting his booted foot under her waist, the veteran rolled her over. And then Martin saw her face, that once beautiful face, now locked forever in a grotesque death mask. *My God*, thought Martin, *this is not right*. The day's sensations, like the shooting rays of the sun, overtook him with furious intensity. Where he had once caught a whiff of perfume, he now smelled human remains. The heat, the odor of death, and the incessant rasping of the

cicadas were making him dizzy. Afraid he would be sick, he let himself drop to a seat provided by a boulder.

"Did you know her, sir?"

"What?"

"I asked if you knew her."

"Yes . . . no, not really." Both answers were true. And what little he knew of her, he was not about to tell Franc.

"You know who she is then."

Martin nodded and buried his head in his hands, willing his nausea to subside. Barely managing to raise his voice above the roar of the cicadas, he mumbled, "It is Solange Vernet."

Martin met Solange Vernet early that spring at a bookstore near the Hôtel de Ville. He had gone to look for a recent edition of *The Origin of Species*. Because he did not yet know the political sentiments of the bookseller, he searched for it himself among the collection of books on science. He found Solange Vernet reading the store's only copy of the book at the back of the store. So concentrated had she been, her white hat hanging by a green satin ribbon around her neck, parasol leaning against the wall, brow furrowed with diligence, that she hadn't even noticed him until he was almost upon her. But she did not jump or back away. She smiled. A beautiful smile, warm and mischievous at the same time.

"Could you be looking for this?" she asked, turning her attention from the book to his face.

Martin backed away, demurring, insisting that—

"No, please," she interrupted. "We have a copy in English at home. I was only interested because. . . . Look here, see," with one white, gloved finger she pointed to the title page. "It is translated by a woman, Clémence Royer. I heard her give a series of lectures on philosophy and science in Paris."

"Yes," Martin answered, "very brilliant, isn't she? But also something of a scandal, no?" hoping that by conveying this knowledge he would conceal how much he shared the opinions of those who hooted and howled at the very idea of a woman speaking in public about such matters.

"You've heard her then? You've lived in Paris?"

"Only for three years. I was at the Law Faculty, spending most of my time being boring, I fear, while studying for my exams."

He often asked himself why he had said so much. He kept coming back to the admission that he had wanted this woman, this beautiful stranger, to argue against his modest assessment. He remembered that her eyes, so merry and direct, were green, and that they matched the emeralds in her earrings. Never had he noticed this much about a woman before.

"Very well then, you must have this," she said as she thrust the volume into his hand. Then she introduced herself and invited him to one of her salon gatherings on Thursday evening. "Cours Mirabeau, 57, second floor. At eight," she said. "Men of letters and learning of all opinions." Professor Westerbury, she explained, was the leading voice of the group. He was the Englishman whose name appeared on posters all over town, announcing separate lectures on geology for ladies and gentlemen. Without waiting for Martin's answer, which surely would have been some kind of an excuse, Solange retied her hat, saying that she had to go. Then she put one gloved hand upon his. "Really, you must come. You could be one of the interesting ones."

Neither her smile nor her eyes told Martin whether she was praising or mocking him. Now he would never know.

He had not gone to any of her "Thursdays." Since that day, he had seen her only from afar, always recognizable by the boldness of her carriage, and the glimmer of that mass of shining, golden-red hair. Usually he had spotted her on the Cours. But he also saw her entering or leaving the Madeleine Church as he went to the Palais de Justice, or out for a Sunday stroll. The last time he saw her was only a few days ago, at the procession for the Feast of the Assumption. He watched from across the cathedral square as she crossed herself and genuflected as the statue of the Virgin passed. What kind of woman reads Darwin and kneels before the Virgin?

"Sir?" Franc was addressing him and holding up a religious medal hanging by a thick white string cord. "Looks like a crime of passion. Someone tried to strangle her with this. I found it wrapped around her neck. And then he stuck a knife in her."

"But, why?" Why? What a lame and childish thing for a judge to say, or even think. Fortunately, it did not give Franc pause.

"Who knows? That's what I was saying, sir. I've been keeping an eye on her and her paramour, that Englishman Westerbury, ever since they came to town. Never trusted him. Seemed like a charlatan. And her," he shook his head with distaste. "A loose woman with lovers, trying to set herself up as some kind of lady. And then she has the nerve to wear the Virgin's medal." He gave it one last look before he pocketed it. "We don't need that kind of Parisian behavior down here."

"How do you know she had lovers?" Martin hoped he did not sound too curious.

"That's my job, sir. To keep the town clean and quiet. So when people like that come in, I watch. I can probably get you the whole list of the professors and big shots that hung around their apartment. But I've also got my own personal suspicions." Franc patted the pocket of his jacket holding the folded canvas. "I saw her hanging around with the banker's son, Cézanne. The one who calls himself an artist."

"Mme Vernet and this Cézanne, alone?" Martin stole a quick glance at the body of Solange Vernet, a pious woman with lovers.

"Yes, at least once outside the apartment, and who knows what took place inside. I wonder what the Englishman thought about that."

"Or if he even knew," Martin added quietly.

"Right, sir. Or what he did when he found out." Franc gave him an encouraging look, as if to say, now you're on the right track.

©2008, Barbara Corrado Pope

Learn More By Visiting www.CezannesQuarry.com