

Charnier: an appropriate enough name for a drug baron, the French word for mass grave.

Just where Popeye stands and fires is a very particular point in Marseille. Behind him was once located the ditch where the victims of the 1720 plague were thrown, the charnier. Just as Popeye fires, the film shows the yacht passing in the background the Church of Notre Dame de la Garde, high up on the hill, surmounted by its great golden Madonna, the symbol of Marseille, and visible to ships out at sea. Popeye fires along a line joining the plague ditch to the Madonna, a line crossed by the yacht and the escaping drug dealer.

The golden Madonna is the patron saint of sailors, not gangsters.

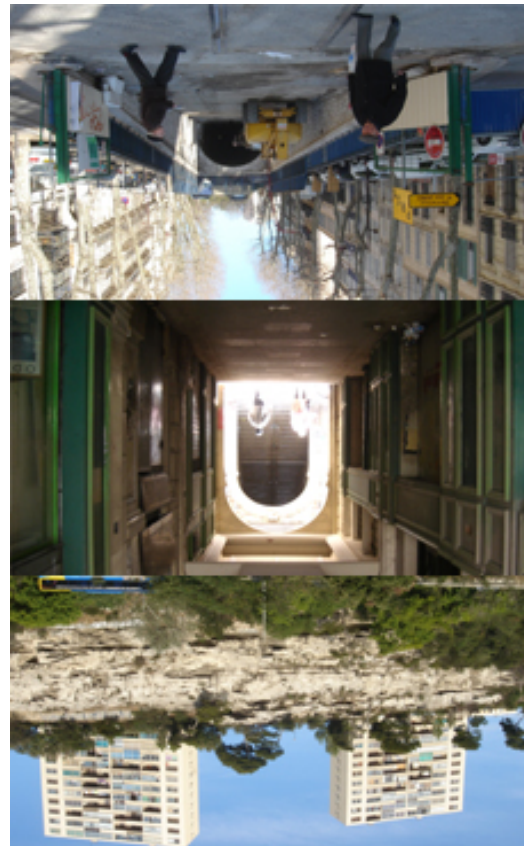
### 3. white pavilion

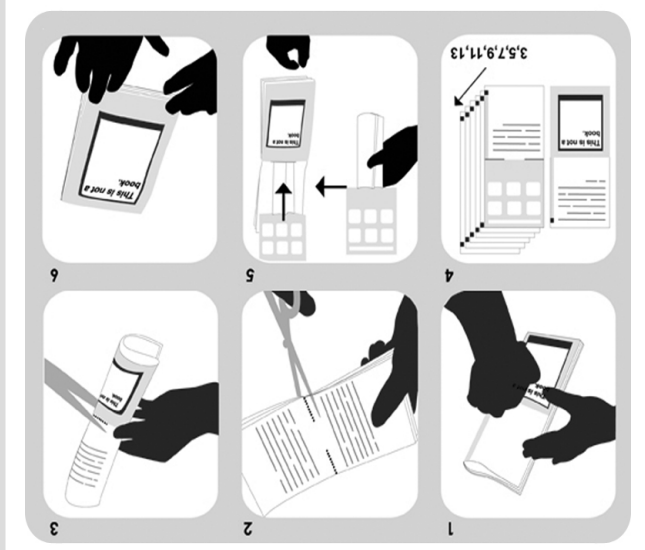
Francois Vanverberghe, known as Le Belge, caid of the Marseille milieu of the nineties, was shot in a Paris bar in 2000. He had ruled uncertainly over the Marseille criminal scene since the death of his rival Gaetan Zampa, who was found hanged in his cell in Les Baumettes, in 1984. The feud between Le Belge and Zampa, for control of the drug trade

Popeye: a strange name for detective, the sailorman who stays on land.  
ends.  
Charnier falls backwards into the boat, the film  
Charnier turns and sees Popeye, who fires twice.  
Charnier!  
sock and calls out:  
and draws his pistol which has kept hidden in his  
base of the Fort of Saint-Jean. He reaches down  
that he will arrive too late. He halts beside the  
Popeye is breathing heavily, exhausted, fearful  
petanque.  
Mon capitaine, a voice calls out, la pilote joue a la  
connect the harbour to the sea.  
boat approaches the narrow isthmus which  
yacht, about to escape towards the open sea. The  
Fernando Rey, is sailing out of the harbour on his  
Charnier the well dressed drugs baron, played by  
Vieux Fort, stumbling over walls and cables.  
by Gene Hackman, runs along the quayside of the  
Popeye Doyle the badly-dressed detective, played  
Connection 2.  
The last scene from the film *The French*  
least expected moment.

# Marseille Mix: dangerous liaisons

William Firebrace





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**Marseille Mix: dangerous liaisons**  
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## 1. sharing out the cake

In Marseille the gang wars stop for a while. And then start again.

Sparrow wrote in large clear letters: A B C, followed by the word MURDERS.

In April 2006 a commando of 6 armed men burst into the Marroniers restaurant and killed three of the occupants including B, a known drug dealer with international connections.

A few days later C, a known criminal and safe-breaker, was killed as he was riding his scooter in Rue-Sainte-Baume beside the Hospital of La Timone. He was shot by a woman, D, armed with a 9mm pistol, mounted on a scooter, driven by a man E.

In June 2007 a masked man, F, arrived as pillion on a powerful motorcycle at the Le Felfa restaurant in the 4th district. He walked over to the restaurant and shot G, several times with a large calibre automatic. G, who was dining on the terrace of the restaurant with a companion, H, was of Corsican origin.

C may have been part of the gang led by B. G may have been from a rival Corsican gang. B was

This is a fragment from *Marseille Mix*, a forthcoming book exploring the city's literary, criminal, urban, gastronomic and cinematic aspects.

It would be better, replied the woman, not to try at all. *Life in Marseille has its own way of being, an endless series of stories half-true, half-invented. You are a visitor, free to do as you wish. Forget the darkness. Why don't you just enjoy the city and the sea and the sun, without asking too much? The city, after all, doesn't ask anything much of you.*

At the gates a large black car was waiting. The rear door opened and the woman, ignoring Sparrow, got in. The car sped away down the road.

One of the Maroniers killers may have been discovered. J has been arrested after his DNA was found to match that found at the scene of the crime. J, who was admitted to hospital with gunshot wounds shortly after the massacre, claims to have been an innocent bystander, peacefully drinking a mineral water at the bar, and to have been hit by a ricochet. Witnesses however have stated that a wounded man was seen escaping from the scene of the crime.

This sequence of murders apparently seeking to eradicate the gang of B could originate in the killing in 2005 of A, the first in this alphabetical series. Of course he was not really the first, he was already part of a sequence of killings stretching back many years, but for the sake of convenience he will be called A. A, from a well-known family from Basta, and the former patron of a bar in Vitrolles was assassinated by a burst from a Kalachnikov as he was driving in his

himself a former lieutenant of the notorious Marseille caid Francois le Belge, who needs no alphabetical disguise, himself shot dead in 2000. It is probable that B was lured to the Marroniers bar by a traitor from his own gang.

*He was betrayed*, stated B's lawyer.

*They are very fine flowers.  
Fine flowers for a fine man.*

Le Belge was buried in style at Le Canet, a fine cemetery overlooking the sea, located in the 14th district. The milieu turned out in force for the occasion, including presumably those responsible for his death. They were followed by numerous journalists, for by this time the lives of Marseille gangsters, often illustrated and turned into legend in films, had almost become a branch of show business.

The tomb of Le Belge is a distinguished white pavilion, in classical style, with Corinthian columns and rather feminine art nouveau gates in turquoise and gold. Beside it there are always some bunches of fresh flowers.

The life of Le Belge, who had spent half of his years in prison, may have been a continual series of grubby criminal actions. With his tomb he attains a certain pure whiteness, and also a certain elegance.

*I have been trying, said Sparrow to the well-dressed woman as they walked away together, to make sense of all these different stories, all this violence and death in the city. I*

powerful 4x4, which was hit by sixty bullets. A had in turn been suspected of involvement in the murder of various small-time drug dealers (K, L and M) involved with B.

Finally, or finally for now or there are other letters waiting to be assigned, N, a Marseille caid and a former lieutenant of le Belge, was recently shot in August 2008 outside his apartment in Manosque. There were no witnesses. Some stray bullets pierced the door of a flat belonging to a ninety-year old woman, and ended up in her wardrobe.

A Marseille lawyer comments: *Until recently held together by an old-fashioned underworld, the town has fallen into the hands of gangs based on their districts, their ethnicity, their origins. Allied briefly to pull off a coup, they then separate, thin out, or kill one another when the share-out of the cake goes badly. Now that the last elements of the gang of Le Belge have been swept away by the Mistral, the milieu has been balkanised between the gypsies of L'etang de Berre, the north Africans of Salon-de-Provence, the Bastians and the native Marseillais who control the town.*

Is this, considered Sparrow looking nervously around, avoiding all dubious looking bars, and

and the sous machines had caused a considerable number of gangland killings as each attempted to wipe out the other's gang. Neither had really succeeded in establishing their authority over Marseille, in the style of older 'parrains', with their hierarchic organisations and business sense. The disappearance of Le Belge let loose yet another gangland war in which his remaining gang members were gradually eliminated. It was peaceful up here. Sparrow stood in the bright sunlight beside the white pavilion, munching on a piece of baguette. Some way down below was the Mediterranean. In the distance could be heard the sound of a motor scooter, accelerating and decelerating. A woman came up, middle-aged, very correctly dressed, carrying a basket of flowers. She spoke to Sparrow in a rather peevish tone. *Are so hungry? Do you need to eat your baguette here? I am sorry, I didn't realise it was the wrong place to eat a baguette. Just here is the worst place to eat a baguette. It is not the place for snacks.* She took out the flowers and placed them in a jar.

**2. playing pétanque**  
Sparrow carefully observed the dock. Luxurious yachts were moored up along the quay. Tourists idled in the cafes. The golden statue of the Madonna, up on the church on the hill shined in the sunlight. Nothing unusual seemed to be happening, but it was best to pay attention. It is the nature of unusual things to happen at the

with an eye out for motorcycles with potentially dangerous pillion passengers, all a tedious story of petty criminals wiping one another out, a Marsellais version of Tarantino, some endless gangster serial? Do A B C and these others have some kind of personality, some kind of individuality beyond the simple facts which appear in the papers? Where do the boundaries of the story lie? Certainly these events tie to other stories involving O, P, Q, R and others more numerous than the letters of the alphabet, so that the story spreads out, forwards, backwards, sideways. Marseille: the original gangland city, an image encouraged by the press and by the fiction industry, part real and part imagined. He looked at his notebook, covered with letters. He added the words WOMAN ON SCOOTER.