

SCENE II
SISTER MARY OF THE ANGELS

The steamship Bayard. The stage is made up of three levels offering a cut-through view of the ship:

The top level is that of the bridge, rising two meters above the main deck. The bridge is connected to the deck by a ladder. On it is a machine gun, pointing at the deck. There is also the wheel-house and, above it, the smoke stacks.

The middle level is that of the main deck, with netting on both sides, ropes and tackle, and a door leading to the lower deck.

Beneath that, the bottom level is that of the lower deck. This one features, center stage, a door with iron bars, which can be closed with a wooden shutter, and a door leading to the upper deck. We can see and hear the ocean through the portholes.

AT RISE, Lieutenant de Vilène, sextant in hand, stands on the bridge plotting the course of the ship. A sailor mounts guard by the machine gun. Captain Barrachon enters the top deck from the door connecting the two decks.

BARRACHON: Have you plotted our course, Lieutenant?

DE VILENE: Yes, Captain. We are 32 degrees, 20 minutes, latitude North and 24 degrees, 50 minutes, longitude West, from the Paris meridian.

BARRACHON: Good man. Can you come down a moment? I have something to tell you.

DE VILENE: Aye, aye, Captain.

(He comes down the ladder.)

BARRACHON: *(confidentially)* I've just seen him in his cell...

DE VILENE: Is he in a better mood?

BARRACHON: Quite the opposite...

DE VILENE: And yet, the manacles always brings reason even to the most bull-headed of convicts.

BARRACHON: My dear de Vilène, that bull-headed man is the worst prisoner I've ever seen since I've been commanding the *Bayard* and transporting convicts to their penal servitude.

DE VILENE: He's been rendered completely powerless. He's better off behind the bars of his cell, that in the middle of his comrades.

BARRACHON: Do you know what he said to me when I asked him why he spat in my face?

DE VILENE: Which was the cause of all the stern measures taken against him.

BARRACHON: He said: "You were wrong to take it as a personal insult. Consider instead that I was spitting in the face of society."

DE VILENE: The wretch! Luckily for all of us, he'll die before the end of the journey. His feet and hands were already bloody this morning.

BARRACHON: (*considering*) The Devil! Now there's a matter of conscience...

DE VILENE: Should your conscience torment you when it comes to men like him? They're unredeemable—they'll always be pigs!

BARRACHON: I've never been more in a hurry to reach Cayenne.

DE VILENE: Then, what are you worried about, Captain?

BARRACHON: Nothing. But I'll admit to you that this Chéri-Bibi keeps me awake at night.

DE VILENE: Why, Good Lord! He's a vulgar criminal, who, but for the ridiculous sentimentality of the jury, ought to have been guillotined mercilessly.

BARRACHON: He's a repeat offender. He's already escaped from prison.

DE VILENE: Once is not a habit. His cage, with steel bars 30 millimeters in diameter, shackles and padlocks, will not so easily give up its prey.

BARRACHON: At least, make sure that two guards never take their eyes off him.

DE VILENE: Worry no more about Chéri-Bibi, Captain. You're really doing him too much honor!

(*The Chief Guard, Pascaud, enters, followed by a sailor carrying a bell that rings twice.*)

DE VILENE: Ah. It's time for the stroll of the convicts.

BARRACHON: (*calling the Chief*) Pascaud!

PASCAUD: Yes Captain?

BARRACHON: You will give the order to rotate the guards watching Chéri-Bibi every hour. That will be less exhausting. You know the password. Don't ever say it aloud, and never speak to Prisoner No. 3216.

PASCAUD: Yes, Captain.

BARRACHON: (*to de Vilène*) Walk with me, Lieutenant. We're going to go through the lower deck and inspect the cages in detail. All the cages. I've got a feeling that something unusual is going to happen...

(*Followed by de Vilène, Barrachon walks through the door leading down to the lower deck. Pascaud then opens the wooden shutters, revealing the metal cages in which the convicts are kept. Some pass their hands through the bars.*)

PASCAUD: Let's go—convicts on deck!

(Gueule-de-Bois, Petit-Bon-Dieu, Le Rouquin, Le Kanak and other convicts emerge from the cages, carefully watched by the guards, revolvers drawn. The prisoners' faces are filled with despair. They all wear uniforms with their respective numbers printed on their hats.)

GUARD: *(pushing them)* Try to hurry up! What a bunch of malingerers.

LE ROUQUIN: No need to shove me.

GUARD: What? The gentleman demands respect!

LE ROUQUIN: Ah! If we ever meet again face to face...

PASCAUD: *(to the convicts)* I don't want to hear any noise during the stroll, understood? The first one caught gabbing will join Chéri-Bibi in his private cabin, or will get acquainted with this. *(pointing to his revolver)*

GUEULE-DE-BOIS: *(to Petit-Bon-Dieu)* All the same, it's better to be here than below, where the guards beat us. *(pointing to the guards out of the corner of his eye)* What do you think, Petit-Bon-Dieu?

PETIT-BON-DIEU: I think the same as you, friend Gueule-de-Bois. As long as the sea is a bit rough this morning, some of our chums would enjoy giving the fish something to eat! Don't tell me that it wouldn't be fun.

LE ROUQUIN: *(joining in)* We sure could use some fun!

PETIT-BON-DIEU: You said it! Rouquin, my dream has always been to become a honest man.

GUEULE-DE-BOIS: Why?

PETIT-BON-DIEU: To set myself up as a wine merchant.

LE ROUQUIN: Get out! What an ambitious little guy!

GUEULE-DE-BOIS: Hey! Not everybody can be a wine merchant. That would be too easy. Each man's destiny has already been written when he comes into the world. Thus, you, Petit-Bon-Dieu, were destined to chop wood in Cayenne. As Chéri-Bibi says: What's written is written. Fatality!

PETIT-BON-DIEU: Pfft! That's just stories to frighten children! *(lowering his voice)* The moment has come to speak seriously. Look, is it for today or for tomorrow?

LE ROUQUIN: *(loudly)* Yes. Is it for today or for tomorrow?

GUEULE-DE-BOIS: Your voice! Christ! Speak lower!

PASCAUD: (*from the bridge*) I thought just now I had impressed upon you the necessity for absolute silence! (*pointing to his revolver*) Must I provide you with more convincing arguments?

LE ROUQUIN: (*between his teeth*) Ah! The brutes!

GUEULE-DE-BOIS: I would give my share of beans to get my paws on one of 'em!

(*Pascaud and the guards resume talking.*)

PETIT-BON-DIEU: (*whispering*) Then things are going to get hot?

GUEULE-DE-BOIS: For some; and it's not going to be put off any longer.

LE KANAK: (*who has been part of the group from the beginning but has remained silent*) Going to be some trouble. I don't like trouble.

GUEULE-DE-BOIS: (*guffawing*) Oh! Kanak! Suck on it! Trouble makes you queasy now, eh? Did you feel that way when you were cutting up your patients and using strips of their flesh to amuse yourself?

LE KANAK: (*angry*) Shut up!

GUEULE-DE-BOIS: You shut up, you cannibal!

PETIT-BON-DIEU: Shut both your mouths! We've got better things to do than reviewing each other's youthful peccadilloes!

GUEULE-DE-BOIS: Yes! We must follow the orders of our leader, Chéri-Bibi, because he is superior to us in every respect.

LE ROUQUIN: Even though, he began his criminal career by being innocent.

PETIT-BON-DIEU: (*pretentiously*) And I'm using his case as an example in the book I'm writing on the reform of our judicial system.

LE KANAK: Poet!

PETIT-BON-DIEU: Ah, it's not learning that I lack!

LE ROUQUIN: But now you want to become a wine merchant!

PETIT-BON-DIEU: The legal profession disgusts me. During my, er, nervous breakdowns, I've stabbed 18 lawyers and one solicitor who refused to give me the key to his strong box.

LE ROUQUIN: That's the way things are in this world. It's enough to be innocent to be thrown in jail. I've only stabbed five people—my word of honor!—Not one more, not one less. Well, it's for a sixth stiff, whom I'd never even met, that you have the pleasure of my company.

LA KANAK: (*smirking*) Another judicial error!

PETIT-BON-DIEU: And meanwhile, our poor Chéri-Bibi is in chains.

GUEULE-DE-BOIS: And I have the notion that they put him there for some good reasons.

LA ROUQUIN: So I ask again: is it for today or for tomorrow?

GUEULE-DE-BOIS: (*emphasizing his words*) It's for when Chéri-Bibi says it is.

ALL: (*singing together in chorus*) The Republic screws us. / From Boulogne to Pantruches /
Who makes things go tick-tock? / It's Chéri-Bibi!

PASCAUD: (*on the bridge, hopping mad*) You scum! You dare screw with me!

(*Followed by some guards, he runs down the ladder and lines up the convicts by force, elbowing and pushing them.*)

PASCAUD: I want a straight line. More! Straighter! More!

(*Lieutenant de Vilène enters by the door leading to the lower deck.*)

DE VILENE: They won't be calm, unless they're deprived of food. That'll teach them not to sing. They must be delighted that their friend Chéri-Bibi is in the lock-up!

(*La Ficelle, dressed as a scullion, enters from the hold, dragging buckets containing food for the convicts.*)

PASCAUD: (*to La Ficelle*) What are you waiting for to give them their grub?

LA FICELLE: (*frightened*) I don't dare come forward.

DE VILENE: It's obvious you're afraid, my lad.

LA FICELLE: Lieutenant, I am frightfully afraid of these (*hesitating*) gentlemen.

PASCAUD: (*bursting into laughter*) These gentlemen! That's a good one!

(*All the guards burst into laughter.*)

DE VILENE: With cold feet like that, you shouldn't have signed on the *Bayard*. Start serving the food. (*to the convicts*) But before you eat, listen up. I've just inspected your cages. They're filthy. The men on fatigue duty will stay on duty for another 24 hours, and will not be authorized to follow the others on deck during the daily stroll until after their work is done. I want your cages to be as clean as the Captain's quarters. Do you understand, Le Rouquin?

LE ROUQUIN: But the Captain said...

DE VILENE: (*putting his revolver right under Le Rouquin's nose*) As far as you're concerned, this is the only Captain aboard!

(The guards burst out laughing again.)

DE VILENE: Enough! *(to La Ficelle)* Take back some of the food. Two buckets will do, since they're not well behaved.

(La Ficelle returns back to the lower deck with all but two of his buckets. Another Guard enters from the door.)

GUARD: Lieutenant, the Countess is requesting insistently to talk to you.

DE VILENE: What does she want?

GUARD: I don't know. She says that it is to you alone she must speak.

DE VILENE: *(after having considered)* Very well. Bring her to me.

(A moment goes by, then the Countess enters, escorted by the guard. She's a woman of rare beauty. She wears the uniform of a convict.)

DE VILENE: You asked to speak to me alone?

COUNTESS: Alone or in public, it's all the same to me. For a long time, I've had a mad desire to pull your beard, and I'm going to satisfy it. *(rushing at him like a fury)* I've got him by the beard! I've got him by the beard!

ALL THE CONVICTS: Go for it, Countess!

(The guards hurl themselves on the Countess and, with blows from their revolver butts free, the Lieutenant.)

DE VILENE: Put this woman in irons immediately!

(Two guards drag the Countess away.)

DE VILENE: *(to the convicts)* As for you lot, I'm hereby authorizing the guards to shoot the first one of you who budges. *(to Pascaud)* Come, Pascaud, let's go down to the lower deck.

(He goes out, followed by Pascaud.)

GUARD: Fall out!

(The convicts, gesticulating wildly, jostling each other, hurl themselves like starving animals on the two buckets of food.)

GUEULE-DE-BOIS: Hey! Watch out!

LE ROUQUIN: You were going to spill some beans on the deck.

PETIT-BON-DIEU: This isn't bad grub!

(Petit-Bon-Dieu, Le Kanak, Gueule-de-Bois and Le Rouquin eat in silence around the same bucket.)

LE ROUQUIN: *(to Le Kanak)* Say, Kanak, why does your crazy mistress, the Countess, wants to pull the Lieutenant's beard?

LE KANAK: *(mysteriously)* It's her nerves.

PETIT-BON-DIEU: Women are such complicated creatures! Especially the Countess... Didn't she help you operate on your patients, Kanak?

LE KANAK: Enough! I've already told you, I don't like anyone to speak to me about that.

PETIT-BON-DIEU: OK! I'll shut my trap.

LE ROUQUIN: *(as he eats)* It's not criticize the Republic, but they could spend a little more food-wise. That grub's nothing like that famous Spanish cod that Chéri-Bibi keeps telling us about.

GUEULE-DE-BOIS: At the Santé prison, where I made my debut, the food was better.

PETIT-BON-DIEU: As for me, I used to go to Vichy every year to take the waters.

LE ROUQUIN: Say, pals, if we get to be the masters of this ship, what will we do next?

PETIT-BON-DIEU: Well, we could become pirates. *(to Gueule-de-Bois)* Not so, my little friend?

LE KANAK: We'd be kings of the ocean.

GUEULE-DE-BOIS: Hey! Look sharp! *(pointing to a guard heading towards them)* A screw!

PETIT-BON-DIEU: Let's sing so he won't know what we're talking about.

(They sing—the guard passes by.)

GUEULE-DE-BOIS: Might be nice to go where there's a revolution. We could offer our services to the revolutionary army. Better still, we could even become the government!

PETIT-BON-DIEU: That's a wonderful idea! You could be minister of justice, and I would be minister of education. You'd see how well I'd educate people. There will no longer be any need for assassins!

LE KANAK: *(coldly)* And now that you've shared your delusions with us, Gueule-de-Bois, maybe you might tell us how, without weapons, locked in cages, and surrounded by guards, ever ready to whip us, we might take over the *Bayard*?

GUEULE-DE-BOIS: The Doctor is curious! *(low and quickly)* Chéri-Bibi said we'll have enough weapons to render us masters of the lower deck. When the time comes, we'll hurl ourselves on those we find there and kill them all.