

Dr. Cerral's Patient

In his personal laboratory at the Countess Yalta Memorial Hospital, Dr. Anatole Cerral filled a syringe with curare. An injection of this South American poison would bring quick death to the recipient and leave the outward symptoms of heart failure. Dr. Cerral had never before contemplated murder, but a man would soon be arriving who threatened the surgeon's marriage and career. That individual was Victor Chupin, a private detective from Paris.

The Countess Yalta Memorial Hospital was located in Avignon. The institution was named after a wealthy Russian aristocrat celebrated in Parisian society. A decade earlier, the Countess had suffered an accident that resulted in the loss of one of her hands. She had died shortly after that misfortune, and her considerable wealth had been bequeathed to a young Frenchman. Rather than spent the money on selfish pleasures, the heir of the Countess had sought to honor her memory by financing the construction of a hospital. The principal function of this institution was to treat laborers who had lost limbs in industrial accidents.

In a private room at the hospital, a young female patient awoke screaming. Dr. Cerral was summoned from his private laboratory by an orderly. He spent the night calming the distraught girl.

"I dreamed that I was disciplining another student in the boarding school, Papa," murmured the girl. "God then punished me by destroying my hands."

The next afternoon, the disturbed girl was playing the piano in a room in the hospital. Her soft delicate hands swept deftly over the keyboard. As she played, a middle-aged woman with dark hair sang a cabaret song. When the song ended, the older woman motioned her accompanist to sit beside her on a nearby table. On its surface laid *Isis Unveiled* and *The Secret Doctrine*, two books by the occultist Helen Petrovna Blavatsky.

"Your father told me you again had a difficult night, but you have nothing to fear. You now have a new life... a new existence" asserted the middle-aged singer. "Let me show you your destiny."

The older woman took a pack of Tarot cards from her handbag. She proceeded to remove cards from the deck and place them on the table.

It was in June 1890 that Victor Chupin received a telegraph from his sister, Victoire. He had just returned to Paris after a difficult investigation that forced him to spend over three months in London. The message indicated that there was an urgency to discuss the status of her daughter. Chupin immediately settled his affairs in Paris and departed for Normandy.

Chupin was nearly 41 years old. He was a lean, short man with blonde hair. When he arrived at his sister's residence, he was greeted at the door by a slim athletic 16-year old boy.

"Victoire is in the kitchen making dinner," intoned Raoul d'Andresy.

The investigator critically scrutinized his young host. Chupin had always felt a tinge of resentment towards Raoul because of the crucial role that the boy had played in his sister's life. Victoire was five years older than Victor. They were the only children of Polyte Chupin, a pickpocket and a drunkard. Their father's intoxicated rages had caused her to flee the Chupin household when she was 14.

Like his father, young Victor had drifted into a life of crime. At the age of 18, Victor had become a member of the notorious Mascarot blackmail ring. When the gang was smashed by the famous M. Lecoq of the Sûreté in 1867, Victor had surrendered to the police. Rather than prosecute him, Lecoq had arranged for the young miscreant to become a protégé of the wealthy Champdoce family. They sponsored Chupin to become an apprentice to a private

inquiry agent. As a reward for his assistance in solving the mystery of the Chalusse heirs in 1868, Chupin received sufficient capital to start his own detective agency.

After 12 years, Victor Chupin was running a sound and profitable business. Nevertheless, he was deeply dissatisfied with his life. He had lofty ambitions of expanding his agency into a nationwide venture that would become the French equivalent of the American Pinkertons. He just needed to solve a case that would give him the enormous publicity needed for his dreams to reach fruition.

Raoul d'Andresy had almost provided the means to achieve Chupin's hopes.

In 1880, Paris had been stunned by the theft of the Queen's Necklace, the property of the Count de Dreux-Soubise. This article of stolen property had enormous significance in French history. It had been purloined in 1785 as part of a complex swindle that severely damaged the reputation of Queen Marie-Antoinette. The original thieves had removed all the diamonds, but the intricate setting of the necklace had survived. The Dreux-Soubise family had arranged for new diamonds to be placed in the setting.

At the time of the robbery, Henriette d'Andresy had been living as a servant at the Dreux-Soubise residence with her six-year old son, Raoul. Due to the loss of the Queen's Necklace, the Dreux-Soubise family fell on financial hardship and discharged Henriette. A police investigation proved that Henriette d'Andresy was incapable of having committed the theft.

In the manner of C. Auguste Dupin in the Marie Roget case, Chupin had devoured the details of the investigation in the newspapers. And like his illustrious predecessor, he had come to a correct solution of the crime: the thief must have been young Raoul.

The question in Chupin's mind was whether the boy had perpetrated the crime as some sort of prank or as the accomplice of an adult. Chupin had located Henriette and interviewed her. It became apparent to the astute sleuth that she was an honest woman in poor health. She clearly had no suspicion that her son was indeed the architect of this audacious crime. Chupin had thought it wise not to enlighten her about Raoul's thievery.

Chupin had also talked to Raoul, whom he pegged as a rude and obnoxious child. After leaving the apartment, he had continued to watch their dwelling. When Raoul had left the building, Chupin had followed him for a few blocks. The boy had met a woman, whose age was in the mid-thirties. She looked vaguely familiar to Chupin. Raoul had handed her an envelope. Once Chupin overheard her first name, he began to surmise her true identity. Raoul had called her Victoire. She was Chupin's long-lost older sister.

Chupin's subsequent queries had revealed his sister's sordid past. Under the alias of Victoire Tupin, she had once been arrested for transporting stolen goods and had served a year in prison. Victoire had never married, but that did not prevent her from giving birth to a daughter, Irene, in 1870. Four years later, she had been hired as nurse for the infant son of Théophraste Lupin and his wife, Henriette. Théophraste's son was now known as Raoul, but his real name was Arsène.

Chupin had wondered if his niece was the daughter of Théophraste Lupin. After an intense quarrel, rumored to concern an extra-marital affair, Théophraste and Henriette had separated. Henriette had resumed her maiden name of d'Andresy and kept the custody of their young son. Victoire was dismissed as Raoul's nurse. Chupin had concluded that Henriette had learned of a love affair between her husband and Victoire.

Chupin had a difficult choice to make. It became clear that Raoul had stolen the diamonds from the Queen's Necklace and was now passing them to Victoire. There could also be no doubt that Victoire was using her criminal contacts to convert the stones into hard currency. Chupin had a chance to gain national acclaim by solving the celebrated theft. But the only way to achieve this end would be to send his sister to prison.

In order to understand the consequences of his decision, Chupin decided to become reacquainted with his sister. One day, pretending that family ties were his sole motivation, he

had knocked on his sister's door. Victoire gave him a cold reception. The investigator had no qualms about sacrificing his sister for his own personal glory, but an unexpected factor stayed his hand.

Chupin had developed a rapport with Irene.

His niece had bridged the gulf between Chupin and Victoire. Consequently, the detective had relinquished the opportunity to secure enormous publicity. Victoire had never realized that her brother knew of her role in the Queen's Necklace affair.

Through observing his sister, Chupin had deduced the true motive behind the robbery. The proceeds from the fencing of the diamonds were anonymously mailed to Raoul's mother. The naïve Henriette presumed that these funds were donations from a philanthropic source and had used the money to secure better lodging for herself.

Her new prosperity had softened Henriette's heart towards Victoire and she soon re-hired her. Both Victoire and Irene had come to live with Henriette and Raoul.

As the years passed, Chupin frequently visited Irene at Henriette's residence. He played the role of an indulgent uncle and often purchased gifts for his niece. She proved to be an excellent student during her elementary education. Irene possessed a love of literature and a gift for foreign languages. At the age of 13, she was already fluent in English. This achievement prompted Chupin to buy her several books by Charles Dickens. By the time she was 15, she was studying Spanish and Italian. She also had some skill as an artist. On the wall of his office, Chupin had framed a sketch that Irene had made when she was only 14. It was a portrait of himself. Her firm strong hands had captured his likeness perfectly.

Chupin's business often took him outside of Paris. One evening, in 1885, he had arrived at the d'Andresy residence. Chupin discovered, to his dismay that Irene had left for the College for Young Women, a boarding school in Provence. Victoire had explained that the school would give her daughter a better opportunity to pursue her interest in the foreign languages.

The following year, Henriette had died from natural causes. Victoire had taken charge of her employer's orphaned son, and the pair of them had moved to Normandy.

Irene had spent five years at the College for Young Women, until a monstrous series of events turned her into a patient at the Countess Yalta Memorial School.

Entering the kitchen, Chupin discovered his sister making a salad. She ceased her labors once Victor entered the room.

"I just returned from Avignon. Dr. Cerral refused to let me see Irene," said Victoire.

"Did he give any reason for this prohibition?"

"He simply stated that she had no wish to see me. He gave no further explanation."

"Cerral can't forbid your visit. Irene is still a minor. In fact, she won't reach her twentieth birthday until next month. You remain her legal guardian, Victoire."

"I tried to make that argument, but he would not listen."

"Did you threaten him to go to the authorities?"

"Such a threat would have been useless, Victor. The Avignon Police will do nothing to disturb Dr. Cerral. They feel indebted to him for his help with the College Girl Murders. I made a far worse threat."

"Which was?"

"I warned Cerral that you would be forced to pay him a visit."

At the *Tivoli* cabaret in Avignon, singer Mathilde Grévin entered the office of the nightclub's manager to discuss her status.

“I’m sorry, Mathilde, but you can longer be a star attraction at the show. We need to give top billing to a younger star. All that notoriety surrounding Teresa’s enrollment in that damned boarding school has damaged your career.”

“I have a new addition to my act that will change your mind.” Mathilde unrolled the draft of a poster advertising her act.

After the manager read the poster, he just had one question for the singer.

“When will your accompanist be ready to start?”

On the train to Avignon, Chupin perused a letter that had been written to him by Irene in late 1885. She had sent it to him only a few months after her arrival at the College. The letter had ended with certain requests:

“When you have time, dearest uncle, you may wish to read Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* or Dana’s *Two Years before the Mast*. You will find them just as enthralling as *Nicholas Nickleby*. I pray for you every night. Please pray for my soul every night, too.”

Chupin often wondered if Irene had experienced a premonition of the cruel blow that fate had in store for her. From her letters, it appeared that she had prospered. A select elite of female students functioned as assistants to the headmistress, Madame Fourneau. Irene had joined that exclusive clique in late 1885. In 1889, she had been promoted to Fourneau’s chief assistant. A year later, Irene nearly lost her life.

Fourneau had a son who suffered from asthma. His ill health prevented him from being sent to a boarding school for boys. He lived on the premises of the College. At 16, a bizarre idea had come into his head to become a modern Pygmalion. Rather than sculpt his vision of the perfect woman from clay, the boy had opted for a more grotesque ingredient: human flesh.

He had murdered five girls over a period of four months in order to obtain supplies for his ghastly handiwork. He was able to hide his atrocities by creating the impression that the girls had run away from the school. Irene was his sixth victim. The killer had knocked her unconscious and then had mutilated her hands. The headmistress, who had been unaware of her son’s butchery, had discovered her murderous offspring and Irene’s comatose body in the school’s attic. The sudden revelation of her son’s abominable crimes had caused her to expire from a fatal heart attack.

Irene surely would have bled to death in the attic if not for a fortuitous coincidence. A doctor had arrived at the College late that night. He had forced the janitor of the school to let his carriage inside the gates. The doctor and the janitor had then searched for the headmistress. Their quest had taken them to the attic. The killer had attacked the janitor with a knife, but the custodian had easily disarmed him. The doctor had found the dying Irene and taken her to his carriage which rushed to the Countess Yalta Memorial Hospital. The doctor was Anatole Cerral.

The newspapers had ruthlessly exploited the horrific events. They dubbed the killings the College Girl Murders. Although journalists had howled for the execution of the youthful maniac, he was eventually judged to be mentally incompetent to stand trial. He would probably spend the rest of his life in an asylum for the criminally insane. Many lurid stories had circulated about the College Girl Murders. It was often claimed that the killer’s sixth victim had perished. One popular story was that the butchering youth had completely severed both of Irene’s hands.

Chupin knew that the latter story was totally false. He had seen Irene at the hospital twice. The first time was in late January 1890 when she was still comatose. The second was a month later when she was awake, but in a state of delirium due to her terrible ordeal. On both instances, her hands had been wrapped in bandages. Shortly after his last visit, Chupin had embarked on the case that caused him to make a lengthy trip to England.

When the train arrived at Avignon, Chupin took a carriage to the Countess Yalta Memorial Hospital. He was able to secure an interview with Dr. Cerral in his private office.

During his previous visits to the hospital, Chupin had only had brief discussions with Cerral. He was a tall, thin man with black hair and a short beard. His hands were soft and delicate. Cerral had been a talented surgeon who left Avignon to work in Paris in 1871. He eventually secured a position at a medical school, but a controversial proposal concerning surgical procedures had led to his resignation in 1885. Chupin was unaware of the exact circumstances, but he had heard rumors that Cerral's critics had compared him to Moreau, the notorious vivisectionist. Returning to Avignon, Cerral had risen to a position of authority at the Countess Yalta Memorial Hospital. Chupin had only had brief meetings with him during his previous two visits because the surgeon had been occupied with other matters in the hospital.

After thanking Cerral once again for saving his niece's life, Chupin took a chair in front of the doctor's desk.

"You have expected this visit, Doctor, because of your altercation with my sister. Let me assure you that I am not acting in her interests. I am merely concerned with my niece's welfare. My sister and I have never been very close."

"You claim to have no strong bonds to your sister, then why are you so concerned about her daughter?" asked Cerral.

"Doctor, I am over 40 and unmarried. I doubt very much that I will ever be a husband. Bachelorhood suits me. I have always possessed a special kinship for Irene. Perhaps it is because I always harbored a foolish hope."

"I do not understand, Monsieur."

The detective noticed a photograph on the doctor's desk. It was of a middle-aged woman, five young girls and a boy. Victor gestured towards the photograph,

"You have a rather large family, doctor."

"The oldest girl is 22. My son is only six years old."

"Do any of them show an interest in becoming a doctor?"

"The girls have no desire to seek a vocation in the medical profession. I hope that young Alexandre may follow in my footsteps, but he is too young to make such a choice now. "

"Yet you would desire that he, too, become a doctor."

"I am conducting a line of research that will probably not reach fruition in my lifetime. The possibility that Alexandre could finish my work is highly attractive."

"I have established a small but profitable detective agency. I harbor the ambition of enlarging it to be a nationwide concern. I have capable assistants, but none of them could function as a possible successor. The thought that Irene might perhaps inherit my business has entered my mind. She is intelligent and perceptive. She may even possess managerial skills. Of course, I recognize that my idea may be naive. Irene had artistic aspirations. Most likely, she might want to be an artist or a writer. In light of her recent trauma, it is now extremely unlikely that she would ever find my line of work appealing."

"If you felt so close to your niece, then why did you concur in the decision to send her to boarding school?"

"I was not involved in that decision at all. If I had been consulted in the matter, I would have opposed it. Of course, I understand the reason for it."

"What is your understanding?"

"My niece wished to study at a school in Southern France because it would be more conducive to her mastering the Italian and Spanish languages."

"You are under a misapprehension, I'm afraid. Your niece was enrolled in that school for a far different reason. She was blamed for a theft."

"Theft? What nonsense are you mouthing, doctor?"

"I assure you that I am being quite serious. Madame Fourneau kept meticulous records. In 1885, she interviewed extensively the two ladies who brought Irene to the school."

"Was my sister one of these ladies?"

"No. The ladies were Henriette d'Andresy and the Countess de Dreux-Soubise. The Countess had visited the d'Andresy residence earlier. On that occasion, she was wearing a diamond brooch. After she left the house, she discovered that it was missing. She returned to the house and insisted that Henriette search the rooms of your sister and your niece. The brooch was found hidden under Irene's mattress. She was accused of stealing it."

"Did my niece offer any explanation as to how the brooch had gotten there?"

"Irene gave a rather intriguing theory: the brooch had been stolen by Raoul, Henriette's son. Your niece argued that he had temporarily hidden the brooch under her mattress planning to retrieve it later. Although Irene was warned that there would be serious consequences if she persisted in her denials, she refused to recant. Your sister declined to defend her. The Countess recommended that your niece be sent to the College as punishment. The headmistress of that institution had gone to convent school with the Countess and Henriette. Your niece was even registered with a false surname, Tupin."

"Did you say Lupin?"

"No, Tupin. I can see by your face that all this information comes as a shock. Do you believe the story that I have outlined?"

"Yes," stated Chupin bitterly.

"Do you feel that your niece was innocent?"

"Yes."

"May I ask your reasons?"

"Because I have a strong belief in my niece's character, and because I know Raoul's all too well."

The investigator reconstructed in his mind the probable significance of Cerral's revelations. Raoul must have hoped to repeat the success of his theft of the Queen's Necklace five years earlier. Victoire knew that the only way to protect Irene would be to expose Raoul. To pursue such a course would have made public both her and Raoul's involvement in the previous crime against the Dreux-Soubise family. Irene had been made a scapegoat in order to protect both her mother and her half-brother. Chupin reasoned that Henriette d'Andresy sincerely championed her son's innocence. He also concluded that Irene had no idea about her mother's role in the theft of the Queen's Necklace.

"I must be honest with you, Doctor. There is one thing that I can't explain." The detective reached into his briefcase and pulled out a packet of letters. "I do not understand why my niece never mentioned these events in any of her letters."

"May I see those letters?"

Chupin handed the letters to Cerral. The doctor untied them and read the letter at the top of the bundle. It was the same missive that Victor had been reading on the train.

"You may be correct, Monsieur Chupin, about your niece's potential as a detective. I wonder if Irene is as talented at discerning clues as she is at deliberately leaving them."

"Clues? Why did Irene leave clues?"

"In order to fool the censor. All of the mail that the students received or sent was read by an assistant of the headmistress. Irene would never have been allowed to write you the truth about her situation at the College. The individual responsible for censoring Irene's mail must have been ignorant of English literature."

"I do not understand, Doctor."

Irene mentioned three books in this letter, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Two Years before the Mast* and *Nicholas Nickleby*. Have you read them?"

"Yes."

“The three books have radically different settings, but they all have something in common. Do you recall what that is?”

Victor paused before answering. “They all deal with physical beatings. Slaves are whipped in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Sailors are beaten in *Two Years before the Mast*. *Nicholas Nickleby* involves the flogging of boys in a boarding school.”

“Your niece was in a boarding school similar to that portrayed by Dickens. The majority of the pupils were sent there because their families believed them to be guilty of crimes. Fournau ran her school like a dictatorship. She had a tyrannical personality that must have sparked her son’s madness. Corporal punishment was employed to maintain discipline.”

“Doctor, you examined Irene. Was she ever beaten?”

“I regret that I must inform you that your niece has permanent scars on her back. She was beaten with a lash during her initial months in the school.”

“But Irene accepted a position as one of Fournau’s student assistants!”

“Conformity is a convenient avenue of escape from constant persecution.”

“Irene was later promoted to the position of chief student assistant. Did she try to mitigate the oppression?”

“By that time, your niece was a privileged member of the ruling regime. The chief assistant was responsible for censoring the mail and administering the floggings.”

“I can’t conceive that Irene would be capable of such acts!”

“Did you ever know an individual who was once a decent person but then was compelled by duress to commit a sinful act? And then became a habitual sinner as a result of that one act.”

“I once knew a man named Baptiste Mascarot. He was a blameless teacher of algebra and geometry until those he loved were in danger of perishing from starvation. Mascarot committed an act of extortion to gain money to feed them. He gradually evolved into the most dangerous blackmailer in Paris.”

“Your niece embarked on a similar downward path the moment she became one of ruling circle of the College.”

“I still find your assertions about Irene’s conduct impossible to accept.”

“Do you ever hear of a student whose name was Teresa Grévin?”

“Mademoiselle Grévin was the College Girl Murderer’s fifth victim. She was slain the night before my niece was attacked.” Chupin recalled the grisly details in the newspapers of Teresa’s corpse after it was found by the Avignon Police. The throat had been slashed and the hands and feet had been removed. There had been further mutilations as well.

“Teresa was a virtuous girl of 18 years,” continued Cerral. “It is my misfortune that I never met her during her lifetime. Unlike most of her fellow pupils, Teresa had never been accused of any crime. Her offense was her mere existence. Her mother, Mathilde Grévin, was a singer at the *Tivoli* cabaret in Avignon. She is now over 40, but she likes to pretend otherwise. The presence of a daughter of Teresa’s age called that subterfuge into question. Mathilde simply wished to place Teresa away from prying eyes.”

Chupin knew the *Tivoli*. Female entertainers there would generally lose their audience as they grew older unless they were either exceptionally talented or able to develop an unusual gimmick that generated publicity.

“What about Teresa’s father? Did he not object to Teresa’s enrollment in the College?”

“Mathilde had her daughter out of wedlock. Teresa’s father was a former lover who left Avignon before she was born. He was totally unaware of her birth.” Cerral paused for a brief moment. “You have probably wondered what prompted me to arrive at the College. Teresa wrote a letter to her mother and arranged for it to be posted outside the normal channels of the school.”

“How did she engineer that feat?”

“She befriended a fellow student named Suzanne Noel. Teresa gave the letter to her. There was a workman who delivered firewood to the school. He had arranged a romantic rendezvous with Suzanne. As a favor to her, he posted the letter after he left the school’s grounds. The letter revealed that Teresa was being persecuted to join the coterie that functioned as the school’s enforcers. Teresa had not been flogged, but she had been warned that constant refusals could result in such a penalty. When Mathilde received the letter, she became distraught. Not only did she decide to remove her daughter from the school immediately, but Mathilde also wanted a doctor to perform an examination. Mathilde wanted to make sure Teresa had not been further abused. My assistance was enlisted to retrieve Teresa.”

“Why did Mathilde come to you?”

“I had been a patron of the *Tivoli* early in her career. I hired a carriage and traveled with her to the College. I forced the janitor to open the gates and let us in. You know the rest, how I found your niece in the attic.”

“Yes, and I will always be grateful for your heroic actions. What relevance does Teresa’s letter have to my niece?”

“You probably assumed that it was Madame Fourneau who was persecuting your niece, but in fact she delegated much authority to her chief assistant. On her own volition, Irene was harassing Teresa.”

“I can’t believe that!”

Cerral reached into a drawer of his desk and pulled out a letter. “This is the letter, Monsieur Chupin. I will let you read it, but I must warn you that it concerns other unusual practices at the school besides the floggings.”

Cerral handed his companion the letter. Chupin read it in silence for several minutes. When the sleuth had finished, he threw the letter on the desk in disgust.

“My Irene... Could she be that corrupt!” moaned Victor.

“Do not be so harsh in judging your niece, Monsieur Chupin. She was accused falsely of a crime and exiled to the equivalent of penitentiary. She was victimized in the same manner as Teresa. If Teresa had not been slain, she could easily have succumbed to the same temptations that ensnared your niece.”

“I do not blame my niece. I blame myself.”

“How could you be at fault?”

“I failed Irene. I styled myself to be a solver of mysteries, but I couldn’t see the cries for help concealed in her letters.”

“You had no reason to suspect that the letters had hidden meaning. If anyone failed Irene, it was her mother. Your sister refused to defend your daughter against the accusations made against her, and I suspect there are more complex motivations for her actions. “

“What are you hinting at, doctor?”

“Henriette d’Andresy died in 1886, one year after your daughter was enrolled in the College. The headmistress did not keep her pupils captive for mere spite. She was paid tuition by their relatives or guardians. After Henriette’s death, there was nothing to prevent your sister from removing Irene from the College. Nevertheless, tuition to ensure her entrapment in that school continued to be paid for the next four years. I think you may know the man who authorized those payments. You mentioned his name earlier.”

“Théophraste Lupin.”

“Quite correct. I have been very honest with you, Monsieur Chupin; I expect reciprocity. Who is this Théophraste Lupin?”

“My sister may have told you that she’s a widow living under her maiden name. She’s lying. I can’t prove this, but I have long suspected that Théophraste Lupin is Irene’s real father. He is also the father of Raoul d’Andresy.”

“Things are becoming clearer now, Monsieur Chupin. The father must have wished to protect his son from being exposed as a thief. Consequently, Théophraste Lupin paid to continue Irene’s confinement. Your sister seems to have a stronger affection for her lover’s son than for her own daughter.”

TO BE CONTINUED IN THE BOOK