

The Night Orchid
(Conan Doyle in Toulouse)

My acquaintance with Professor Challenger began with a killing and ended with one of the century's strangest acts of bravery. He was a most annoying young man, full of himself and irritatingly self-assured despite his lack of worldly experience. But I must admit he proved his worth in a pinch. Though it pains my Frenchman's soul to admit it, there is something to be said for English grit.

The final days of the summer of 1890 were nothing less than stifling. My good town of Toulouse, so pleasant in the spring, turns into a furnace when the August sun beats down upon it. The bricks hoard the day's heat and release it after sunset. Clouds of flies buzz around the droppings of the horses pulling drays and hansoms. And, worst of all, summer is also when the Museum attracts idlers in their Sunday best, crowding into the gardens for a stroll or a visit. If I close my one and only window, right above the Paleontological Gallery, my study can become a veritable Turkish bath. If I open it, the yelling of the children outside keeps me from concentrating.

However, in this particular case, I had no trouble shutting out the din. I was rereading the letter Charlus, our caretaker, had brought me earlier, asking if he might keep the Queen Victoria stamp for his collection:

Mon cher Frédéric,

The news you've given me is so astonishing and unbelievable that I would have taken it for an ill-inspired jest from anybody else but you. However, I know you well enough to trust you implicitly.

Therefore, I am coming, just as you wished. As soon as I finish packing and scrawling these few words, I will be on my way and look forward to the pleasure of seeing you again.

Do you remember Sussex? Our mutual friend is unfortunately otherwise occupied—I've been given to understand a certain lady has claimed his services most imperiously—but I've presumed to take with me a young colleague in your field, who is just burning to meet the famous Professor Picard.

If French trains do not belie their reputation, we won't be far behind this very letter.

Yours truly,

Arthur Conan Doyle

I set aside the letter just as footsteps echoed down the corridor. Charlus knocked on the half-opened door of my office, breathless from having run in spite of the heat:

“They're here, Monsieur le Professeur. But it's incredible!”

He stepped aside to let Doyle come in. The man was ever the same, stiff with his military bearing of old, yet unageing in spite of the small, round eyeglasses he wore. When I got up, I kept in mind his distaste for the full Gallic hug and simply proffered a hand. He shook it warmly and then used it to pull me into the corridor outside.

“As I feared, Frédéric, my young friend has fallen in thrall to your collections. Please blame his scientific instincts for his lack of manners; I'm sure you will find it in yourself to forgive him.”

Just opposite my office, I keep in a glass showcase one of the jewels of our collection: a skeleton, nearly whole, found in a Mousterian cave near Bruniquel. The man in front, half kneeling to examine the sutures of the pelvic girdle, turned as he heard us. I couldn't help but recoil slightly.

He was tall, quite a bit taller than Doyle or myself, who are hardly pygmies. An ample beard of the deepest black climbed all the way up to his eyebrows, which were almost as bushy. The head was nearly large enough to reduce the outsized ears to normal proportions, though they still seemed apt to flap in the slightest breeze. Their coloration betrayed a sanguine disposition, given to sudden violence.

Challenger's pale gaze dissected me with the same sharpness it had no doubt used on the unfortunate skeleton.

A skeleton to which he bore the most striking resemblance!

Well, that explained the amazement of old Charlus. It was as if a distant relative of the showcase's occupant had suddenly decided to visit him. Same cranial shape, same powerful back that might have been a wrestler's, same simian stance not unlike that of a gorilla on the verge of a headlong charge. For a paleontologist, the points of similarity were glaringly obvious.

"A remarkable specimen," the young man proclaimed in French with a booming voice. "But I must protest: the reconstruction of the innominate bones, however adept, is..."

"Frédéric," Doyle cut him off pitilessly, "may I introduce young Challenger, who's just back from Mongolia with some fascinating theories about the Kalmuks? George, this is Professor Picard, who has kindly invited us to visit his museum."

"Mongolia, *n'est-ce pas*? You'll have to tell me all about it when we have the time," I said, shaking his hand. The strength of his grip made me wince slightly.

"But still, those innominate bones..." he replied, but Doyle obviously knew how to handle him.

"Later, George," he cut him off again. "I believe time is of the essence and I look forward to hearing what Professor Picard has to tell us."

Rather than have them sit in the hothouse my office had become, I went down with them to the basement laboratory, through the trapdoor just beneath the blue whale skeleton.

Doyle sat down. Challenger rejected the armchair I was offering with a shake of the head, and he went off to gaze at an allosaurus tooth mounted on the far wall. I looked at him, pursing my lips. Not yet thirty, and he already showed all the signs of our avocation! He could have given pointers to colleagues ten times more experienced when it came to bad manners. No matter! It was Doyle, and Doyle alone, I needed, even if I deplored the absence of our mutual friend, as he called him. The man's prodigious powers of observation and deduction would have come in most useful.

"It's about a murder," I announced. "A Paleolithic murder..."

Challenger jumped perceptibly, but did not look around. Doyle smiled encouragingly at me, "Your assistant, if I recall your initial letter..."

"Michel Desnoyer. In his thirties. He'd studied with Cuvelier in Paris and been with Basserman in the Amazon during the second expedition, in '88. A bit too imaginative for my taste, but he had impeccable references—and manners!" The latter was meant for the back of my young colleague, who no more flinched than a rhinoceros bitten by a flea. "He was killed about three weeks ago, in the middle of the night, on the other side of the Garonne, near the Hôtel-Dieu."

"An affair of the heart?"

"I doubt it. He was more interested in flowers than women. He had a mistress, I suppose, but..."

"What kind of flowers?" Challenger asked, turning without warning.

I confess I was needled by the question, but we had come in one stroke to the heart of the matter. Somehow, this extraordinary man had divined it.

“Orchids. More specifically the local varieties. Which brings us to the first mystery associated with this murder.”

“Orchids in Toulouse. Who would have thought it?” muttered Doyle. “I did see a poster outside the train station, announcing an opera recital by the Night Orchid herself, but I didn’t expect to encounter her floral equivalent here in Toulouse!”

“Michel would have proven you wrong. He had discovered several spots as they are called, isolated pockets where local conditions allow them to flourish. When he died, he was holding in his fist a deep red bloom of the *Oncidium Macranthum* variety. Picked less than an hour earlier.”

Challenger scowled, his eyebrows seeming to grow even thicker, and I guessed, from the blood beating in his temples, that he was struggling hard to remain composed. I endured his glare for a moment before adding:

“This is not the only impossibility, my dear colleague. I know full well that the *Macranthum* variety is to be found only on the most remote high plateaus of the globe. And, to the best of my knowledge, no European collector has ever been able to grow them in a greenhouse. However, the case gets curiously and curiously:

“Michel was killed by a singular weapon. A claw, whose broken end we found deep in his vitals. Strange enough—murders are not rare, around here, but they’re mostly of the knifing or shooting kind. Stranger yet is what I recovered during the autopsy. Behold, the murder weapon!”

I took out from an inner vest pocket the object which I’d kept there since Michel’s death and I held it out to Doyle. But it was Challenger who grabbed it with his broad hand bristling with coarse dark hairs.

He raised it to the light, muttering under his breath. It was a curved claw, coal-black and as long as my palm. The barbs jutting out from its sides had torn Michel’s flesh, causing grievous damage. The right-hand edge bore a notch where the claw had wedged itself between two vertebrae.

“This,” Challenger pronounced with due emphasis, “passes all that can be imagined in the way of a bad joke. Come, Doyle, we have already wasted too much time coming here! As for you, Monsieur, if you thought, that we would let ourselves be fooled, even for an instant, by the most ridiculous fake I ever...”

“A moment, if you please!” I held back Doyle, who was on the verge, for once, of losing his British *sang-froid*. “Monsieur Challenger, I can understand your reaction up to a point, even if I cannot excuse it. But I must ask you to grant me the common courtesy of letting me finish my story. Please believe I am thoroughly puzzled by this affair and that it is in no way a deliberate attempt on my part to garner public notice. My present notoriety is quite sufficient!”

Having thus reminded him of our respective positions, as I am an authority in my field, which is also his own, I held out my hand for the claw. Clearly reluctant to do so, Challenger nevertheless returned it.

“Please excuse my show of temper,” he said with difficulty, “but I am unable to believe this is anything but a joke whose intent escapes me, a hoax such as the French like to play.”

“A man is dead, George,” Doyle reproved him, taking the murder weapon. “Let us see this...” He turned over the claw between his fingers. “A fascinating item, at any rate. Certainly primitive, but no less efficacious. I have already seen such things in the British Museum, used as spearheads.”

He leaned back into the armchair and steepled his fingers under his chin.

“Our mutual friend would easily deduce that this object points to a very specific category of suspects: paleontologists, or those who have ready access to the museum it was stolen from. The victim being from the same circles is hardly surprising... Professional jealousy?”

“You are on the wrong track, my dear Doyle. Monsieur Challenger guessed right away that this is unlike anything in our experience. What bird do you think this claw came from?”

“I wouldn’t know.”

Challenger's smoldering look deterred me from pursuing that line of reasoning. I sighed, recovered the fatal claw, and rose.

"Let us go and visit the scene of the crime then!"

More than a simple reprieve after the heat, summer evenings in Toulouse boast a charm of their own. The waning light lends a unique hue to the red bricks it caresses. Near the river blows a soothing breeze and the Garonne's banks entice the day's last strollers. I rejoiced in pointing out to my visitors the graceful nudes of the Beaux-Arts Academy's marble facade, as well as the numerous private mansions along the cobblestoned avenues.

But Doyle proved uninterested in architecture and Challenger was hurrying as if to keep an appointment with Old Nick himself. The young beauties who brushed by with their parasols did not succeed in distracting him. When we reached the Pont Neuf, I resolved to hail a cab. It dropped us behind the Hôtel-Dieu, at one end of a narrow and winding street that opened directly onto the river's bank.

The street was lined with abandoned houses, their windows barred with thick wooden planks. Since the last epidemic, no one felt like living this close to the hospital. My fellow citizens still remembered the days when the dead went downstream aboard requisitioned barges to be burned far from the city, atop immense pyres. And we were right by one of the loading docks used for that gruesome work.

"Desnoyer was found in a courtyard by the water," I said as we went through a porchway. "This very one!"

When she heard these words from me, a young woman whose face was hidden by a mourning veil turned around, uttering a stifled cry. My companions halted and Doyle took off his hat, bowing formally.

Where the body had lain on a bed of rough cobblestones, a hand had set down a wreath of freshly-cut flowers, tied with a speckled band of black velvet. It was no doubt the young woman's own shapely hand which had tended to this forlorn task before our arrival on the scene.

"You were a friend of his, I presume?" I said, after presenting my companions and myself.

"No, Monsieur le Professeur!" The stranger drew herself up proudly. "I am Irène Ader-Desnoyer. I was... I am his wife."

She raised her veil. Her magnificent green eyes, lined with long, fluttering lashes, glistened with tears. Her brow and her cheeks still bore a touch of the pallor granted by an unexpected shock. The sorrow she bore with such dignity did not detract from her beauty; on the contrary, it lent her a unique charm. I could well understand how she had entranced my ill-fated collaborator. But why had he kept her existence a secret?

"Michel often spoke of you," she whispered, as in response to my thoughts. "He wanted to keep our marriage a secret as long as his situation was not secure. I can reveal all, now: I am denizen of the stage, a mere artist who did not fit in the scientific world he was a part of!"

"I assume you're a singer, Madame?" Doyle asked. "I can see the first bars of a musical score in your bag, but your hands exhibit none of the common deformities of musicians. In England, I assure you that the singing profession is a perfectly respectable one."

"The local public is less forgiving, sir... And no favor is shown to those men who marry women like me. If Michel had been content with a mistress, a kept woman, he could have shown me off in public, as a trophy of sorts. He chose to marry me in secret. He loved me, I know it."

"We will avenge him," I said, nodding. "My friends here came to help me solve the mystery of his death. If you will allow it, we will explore this place to look for clues."

"You will find nothing! The monster who did this is already back in his lair, where no one will dare to pursue."

"So you know who it was," Doyle said. "I suppose..."

He was interrupted by Challenger's exclamation. The professor had set a knee on the ground to get a closer look at the wreath lying on the cobblestones. He pulled out a flower of the deepest red, streaked with purple, and he pointed it at the young widow. "This, my lady," he said,

brandishing the flower like a sword, oblivious to the grotesque pose he was striking, “deserves an explanation. *Oncidium*, the giant species from the high Amazonian plateaus. What in the Devil’s name is going on here?”

I do not know if it was the profanity or the sudden reminder of her loss, but the young woman suddenly started sobbing. Doyle, ever the British gentleman, looked away embarrassedly.

“We are very sorry,” I said, trying to soothe her. “Our friend is a bit high-strung.”

“No,” she said, choking. “He’s right! I haven’t said a word to anybody. I was scared of being laughed at. Only my brother Clément knows. He’s a scientist, but he is not a skeptic, like so many.”

“Please believe, my dear child...”

She stopped me with a single resolute gesture, drawing from her sleeve a linen kerchief to dry her tears.

“Promise that you will listen to me and I’ll tell you everything I know. Even if my story seems quite mad, I will swear on what I hold most sacred that it is as true as the Gospel.”

Without releasing the orchid, Challenger bowed before the young woman and answered, more respectful than I had ever expected to see him:

“Please forgive my deplorable manners, Madame. I can assure you that your account will have no listener more devoted than myself.”

She thanked him with a nod. Behind her, the cupola of the Hôtel-Dieu blushed rosily in the sunset, not unlike an upturned woman’s breast naked to the sky. On the other side of the Garonne, Saint-Sernin erected a phallic church tower above the surrounding roofs. The town of Toulouse is a true hermaphrodite, a proud and secret city, entrusted every evening with its share of mysteries to be scattered by the first rays of sunrise.

A flock of sparrows streaked by, and I could hear in their songs the first intimations of the summer’s end.

“Michel was mad for orchids,” the young woman began. “When our liaison began, when I knew I’d found the man I’d been waiting for all my life, I already feared that his passion for those confounded flowers would stand between us. He spent most of his free time hunting for them and I finally resolved to come along in order to see more of him. The poor man even believed I’d grown to share his passion.

“We’re not rich, and it was unthinkable that Michel would buy from rare flower merchants the expensive blooms he coveted. He had to make do with the common varieties that grow in and around Toulouse, in secret spots known only to connoisseurs. However, he came home one day in an extraordinary state, holding tenderly a flower such as I had never seen before.

“‘Look, look!’ he told me. ‘An exotic from a hothouse that has managed to survive under our latitudes! I’ve discovered an old abandoned house above the old sandstone quarries. It’s filled with the most unlikely plants. I wonder what collector used to live there... I’ll have to ask around!’

“I didn’t know it then, but this flower was to seal his fate. The place he had discovered”—she pointed to the crumbling walls of the building which occupied one side of the courtyard, by the water—“had an amazing history. It was built over one of the oldest underground sandstone quarries. Tunnels dug as far back as the Middle Ages led to its cellar. Or to this very courtyard.”

We looked where she was looking. A shadow-filled opening, half hidden by grass growing wild, yawned by the farthest wall. I caught sight of a stretch of rope tied to a rusty ring set in the corner stone.

“It is said the Cathars hid in the caves underneath Toulouse after the fall of Montségur and that they dug all the way to Hell. It is said Fermat, the mathematician, left in these tunnels secrets of geometry bound up with the nature of God. He lived here, you know... But people say so many things!”

“Michel was too reasonable to swallow such ridiculous tales,” I smiled in spite of myself.

“Michel is dead, Monsieur le Professeur. Killed by the curse of this awful place. People like you, who dig into the layers of the past, should be scared of unearthing the deepest myths of Mankind. This is the century of Steam and Electricity: some things should remain buried. One day, the same curse will strike archaeologists who dare to disturb even the millennia-old sleep of the mummies!

“I tell you this, because I have seen, with my own eyes, things nobody would credit. There, in the gallery Michel convinced me to explore with him.”

She stopped to search our faces for a sign of doubt. I believe that any expression of skepticism on our part would have caused her to break off her story once and for all. But Challenger nodded gravely:

“I have just returned from Mongolia, Madame, and the natives of those lands share your views on all points. I learned not to dismiss their warnings.”

“Michel heeded them not, alas! In the course of his explorations, he delved farther and farther, armed with a paraffin lamp and a mere walking stick. One day, I saw him come back in a state of utter exaltation, with an armful of orchids. He had discovered an unimaginable place which he absolutely wanted me to see.

“I followed him, fool that I was. We had hardly entered the darkness when a bloodcurdling roar echoed before us. It was as if all the night’s terrors had come together into one lone cry. Then, there was another, closer yet. Michel dropped our only lamp, which shattered upon impact. He yelled for me to go back outside and I ran without looking to see if he was following me.”

She buried her face in her hands. Doyle looked skeptical, which did not surprise me greatly. On the other hand, Challenger appeared to be prodigiously interested. His gaze wandered from the young woman to the entrance of the underground world, as if he expected an army of ghosts to issue any minute now from the pit.

“What can I tell of the horror of the following minutes?” Irène whispered. “I ran in the darkness and I got lost. The screams behind me grew dimmer, but the dark still clung to me like a spider’s web. My arms before me, I walked onward, unable to spot the precious light of the entry well.

“A miracle saved me then. A light appeared in the darkness, a glowing dot floating in mid-air, shining with a distant radiance. I followed it, unable to catch up to it, but it led me to another exit by the riverbank. Once there, it vanished from my sight. But I do not doubt that I was guided by a kindly spirit out of that hellish place!”

“I must disagree with you there,” Doyle said. “Your spirit was probably a will-o’-the-wisp, due to the presence of flammable gases. It merely followed a draft toward the nearest exit. A common enough occurrence in old mines. To paraphrase an old friend: only accept the improbable when you have eliminated everything else!

“Not that this explanation detracts from your courage in the least,” he hastened to add. “And what did Michel have to say of your adventure?”

“I never saw him again,” she answered with a sob. “I waited for hours by the entry well, before going home, beset by worry, as you can imagine. A police constable came later with the terrible news, but I think I already feared the worst, in the bottom of my heart.”

“And you didn’t see anything?” Doyle persisted. “The slightest detail could put us on the trail...”

“Only that horrible cry, but it was enough to convince me.” She turned to me, her voice rising. “My husband’s killer is a beast more terrible than all the wild animals of your museum, Monsieur le Professeur. I’ve sworn to hunt it down without mercy. I may only be a woman, but I will not let it go on and kill again.”

“An admirable sentiment!” Challenger said, without a hint of irony. “Let me assure you, Madame, of my sympathy, and offer my wholehearted support.”

His rough manner had mellowed noticeably, but I suspected it was no more than a lull. Through the beard extending over two thirds of his face, I could see his mouth quirk

doubtfully, while his penetrating gaze ranged over the entire courtyard, looking for the answer to a question he alone had asked.

“May I see again the item you showed us, Professor?” he said suddenly, putting out his hand. “I’m almost inclined to regret my earlier skepticism. I have the glimmers of an idea or two... The whole affair is impossible, of course, but an Englishman starts off the day by believing six impossible things before breakfast.”

I gave him the claw, a bit surprised by his turnaround. He raised it in the air, bathing it in the last of the light. His rough-hewn hands seemed strangely out of place, too primitive to stand in front of the ochre rooftops, seamed with the delicate pink of sun-splashed bricks.

“We will hunt with you, Madame, if you let us,” Challenger announced with a sonorous voice. “Professeur, I’m sorry I lost my temper. I have made too many enemies among my colleagues and my suspicions are easily aroused. My theories are misunderstood by those fools, but this time they will be shown up once and for all...”

“Doyle, and you, Picard,” he added abruptly, “do you have anything suited to big game hunting? I fear I left my guns in London.”

Doyle shook his head, and I did likewise. In a few minutes, this amazing young man had gained such a hold over us that I found myself ready to let him take charge of the next phase of operations.

“A pity! We will have to be content with a simple scouting expedition, when night falls. Yet, this case must be brought to a quick resolution, for I feel that worse may yet be to come.”

“I must sing tonight,” the young woman announced after a pause. “It’s the next to last performance of the ‘Night Orchid’ and I’m in the first rank of the choristers. If I leave, I risk being let go. Wait for me by the stage exit, after the show. My brother will be there too.”

“Are you really sure?” I protested. “The danger...”

“Michel thought I deserved the best he could offer, Monsieur le Professeur. I will not betray his trust in me.”

She lowered her veil and bent to rearrange the wreath at her feet. It was clearly time to leave her alone. When we stood again on the Pont Neuf, whose brick and stone arches spanned a river reduced to a trickle by the drought, I tried to look for the house we’d found among the jumble of roofs around the Hôtel-Dieu. But I could not find it, as if our meeting place already belonged to a bygone era.