

A Host of Furious Fancies

Don't look now, but an unusual young woman and her elderly companion are sitting down behind us. Every Thursday afternoon they leave the Casino and come here to the café terrace of the Hotel de Paris, always choosing the same two tables near the magazine kiosk. If you lean forward you can see the girl in the restaurant mirror, the tall and elegant one with the too-level gaze and that characteristic walk of rich young women who have been brought up by nuns.

The man is behind her, the seedy-looking fellow with the once-handsome face, at least twenty years older, though you probably think thirty. He wears the same expensive but ill-fitting grey suit and silver tie, as if he has just been let out of some institution to attend a wedding. His eyes follow the secretaries returning from their lunches, plainly dreaming of escape. Observing his sad gaze, one not without a certain dignity, I can only conclude that Monte Carlo is a special kind of prison.

You've seen them now? Then you will agree it's hard to believe that these two are married, and have even achieved a stable union, though of a special kind, and governed by a set of complex rituals. Once a week she drives him from Vence to Monte Carlo in their limousine, that gold-tinted Cadillac parked across the square. After half an hour they emerge from the Casino, when he has played away at the roulette wheels the few francs he has been given. From the kiosk of this café terrace she buys him the same cheap magazine, one

of those dreadful concierge rags about servant girls and their Prince Charmings, and then sips at her citron presse as they sit at separate tables. Meanwhile he devours the magazine like a child. Her cool manner is the epitome of a serene self-assurance, of the most robust mental health.

Yet only five years ago, as the physician in charge of her case, I saw her in a very different light. Indeed, it's almost inconceivable that this should be the same young woman whom I first came across at the Hospice of Our Lady of Lourdes, in a state of utter mental degeneration. That I was able to cure her after so many others had failed I put down to an extraordinary piece of psychiatric detection, of a kind that I usually despise. Unhappily, however, that success was bought at a price, paid a hundred times over by the sad old man, barely past his forty-fifth year, who drools over his trashy magazine a few tables behind us.

Before they leave, let me tell you about the case...

By chance, it was only the illness of a colleague that brought me into contact with Christina Brossard. After ten years of practice in Monaco as a successful dermatologist I had taken up a part-time consultancy at the American Clinic in Nice. While looking through the out-patients' roster of an indisposed colleague I was told by his secretary that a 17-year-old patient, one Mlle Brossard, had not arrived for her appointment. At that moment one of the nursing sisters at the Our Lady of Lourdes Hospice at Vence — where the girl had been under care for three years - telephoned to cancel the consultation.

'The Mother Superior asks me to apologize to Prof. Derain but the child is simply too distraught again.'

I thought nothing of it at the time, but for some reason — perhaps the girl's name, or the nun's use of 'again' — I asked for the clinical notes. I noticed that this was the third appointment to be cancelled during the previous year. An orphan, Christina Brossard had been admitted to the Hos-

pice at the age of fourteen after the suicide of her father, who had been her only guardian since the death of her mother in an air-crash.

At this point I remembered the entire tragedy. A former mayor of Lyon, Gaston Brossard was a highly successful building contractor and intimate of President Pompidou's, a millionaire many times over. At the peak of his success this 55-year-old man had married for the third time. For his young bride, a beautiful ex-television actress in her early twenties, he had built a sumptuous mansion above Vence. Sadly, however, only two years after Christina's birth the young mother had died when the company aircraft taking her to join her husband in Paris had crashed in the Alpes Maritimes. Heart-broken, Gaston Brossard then devoted the remaining years of his life to the care of his infant daughter. All had gone well, but twelve years later, for no apparent reason, the old millionaire shot himself in his bedroom.

The effects on the daughter were immediate and disastrous—complete nervous collapse, catatonic withdrawal and a slow but painful recovery in the nearby Hospice of Our Lady of Lourdes, which Gaston Brossard had generously endowed in memory of his young wife. The few clinical notes, jotted down by a junior colleague of Derain's who had conscientiously made the journey to Vence, described a recurrent dermatitis, complicated by chronic anaemia and anorexia.

Sitting in my comfortable office, beyond a waiting-room filled with wealthy middle-aged patients, I found myself thinking of this 17-year-old orphan lost high in the mountains above Nice. Perhaps my anti-clerical upbringing—my father had been a left-wing newspaper cartoonist, my mother a crusading magistrate and early feminist—made me suspicious of the Hospice of Our Lady of Lourdes. The very name suggested a sinister combination of faith-healing and religious charlatanry, almost expressly designed to take

advantage of a mentally unbalanced heiress. Lax executors and unconcerned guardians would leave the child ripe for exploitation, while her carefully preserved illness would guarantee the continued flow of whatever funds had been earmarked for the Hospice in Gaston Brossard's will. As I well knew, dermatitis, anorexia and anaemia were all too often convenient descriptions for a lack of hygiene, malnutrition and neglect.

The following weekend, as I set off for Vence in my car — Prof. Derain had suffered a mild heart attack and would be absent for a month - I visualized this wounded child imprisoned above these brilliant hills by illiterate and scheming nuns who had deliberately starved the pining girl while crossing their palms with the dead man's gold dedicated to the memory of the child's mother.

Of course, as I soon discovered, I was totally in error. The Hospice of Our Lady of Lourdes turned out to be a brand new, purpose-built sanatorium with well-lit rooms, sunny grounds and a self-evident air of up-to-date medical practice and devotion to the well-being of the patients, many of whom I could see sitting out on the spacious lawns, talking to their friends and relatives.

The Mother Superior herself, like all her colleagues, was an educated and intelligent woman with a strong, open face and sympathetic manner, and hands — as I always immediately notice — that were not averse to hard work.

'It's good of you to come, Dr Charcot. We've all been worried about Christina for some time. Without any disrespect to our own physicians, it's occurred to me more than once that a different approach may be called for.'

'Presumably, you're referring to chemotherapy,' I suggested. 'Or a course of radiation treatment? One of the few Betatrons in Europe is about to be installed at the Clinic.'

'Not exactly...' The Mother Superior walked pensively

around her desk, as if already reconsidering the usefulness of my visit. 'I was thinking of a less physical approach, Dr Charcot, one concerned to lay the ghosts of the child's spirit as well as those of her body. But you must see her for yourself.'

It was now my turn to be sceptical. Since my earliest days as a medical student I had been hostile to all the claims made by psychotherapy, the happy hunting ground of pseudo-scientific cranks of an especially dangerous kind.

Leaving the Hospice, we drove up into the mountains towards the Brossard mansion, where the young woman was allowed to spend a few hours each day.

'She's extremely active, and tends to unsettle the other patients,' the Mother Superior explained as we turned into the long drive of the mansion, whose Palladian façade presided over a now silent fountain terrace. 'She seems happier here, among the memories of her father and mother.'

We were let into the imposing hall by one of the two young nuns who accompanied the orphaned heiress on these outings. As she and the Mother Superior discussed a patient to be released that afternoon I strolled across the hall and gazed up at the magnificent tapestries that hung from the marbled walls. Above the semi-circular flights of the divided staircase was a huge Venetian clock with ornate hands and numerals like strange weapons, guardians of a fugitive time.

Beyond the shuttered library a colonnaded doorway led to the dining-room. Dustcovers shrouded the chairs and table, and by the fireplace the second of the nuns supervised a servant-girl who was cleaning out the grate. A visiting caretaker or auctioneer had recently lit a small fire of deeds and catalogues. The girl, wearing an old-fashioned leather apron, worked hard on her hands and knees, meticulously sweeping up the cinders before scrubbing the stained tiles.

'Dr Charcot...' The Mother Superior beckoned me into the dining-room. I followed her past the shrouded furniture to the fireplace.

'Sister Julia, I see we're very busy again. Dr Charcot, I'm sure you'll be pleased by the sight of such industry.'

'Of course...' I watched the girl working away, wondering why the Mother Superior should think me interested in the cleaning of a fireplace. The skivvy was little more than a child, but her long, thin arms worked with a will of their own. She had scraped the massive wrought-iron grate with obsessive care, decanting the cinders into a set of transparent plastic bags. Ignoring the three nuns, she dipped a coarse brush into the bucket of soapy water and began to scrub furiously at the tiles, determined to erase the last trace of dirt. The fireplace was already blanched by the soap, as if it had been scrubbed out a dozen times.

I assumed that the child was discharging some penance repeatedly imposed by the Mother Superior. Although not wishing to interfere, I noticed that the girl's hands and wrists showed the characteristic signs of an enzyme-sensitive eczema. In a tone of slight reproof, I remarked: 'You might at least provide a pair of rubber gloves. Now, may I see Mlle Brossard?'

Neither the nuns nor the Mother Superior made any response, but the girl looked up from the soapy tiles. I took in immediately the determined mouth in a pale but once attractive face, the hair fastened fanatically behind a gaunt neck, a toneless facial musculature from which all expression had been deliberately drained. Her eyes stared back at mine with an almost unnerving intensity, as if she had swiftly identified me and was already debating what role I might play for her.

'Christina...' The Mother Superior spoke gently, urging the girl from her knees. 'Dr Charcot has come to help you.'

The girl barely nodded and returned to her scrubbing, pausing only to move the cinder-filled plastic bags out of

our reach. I watched her with a professional eye, recalling the diagnosis of dermatitis, anorexia and anaemia. Christina Brossard was thin but not under-nourished, and her pallor was probably caused by all this compulsive activity within the gloomy mansion. As for her dermatitis, this was clearly of that special type caused by obsessive hand-washing.

'Christina — ' Sister Louise, a pleasant, round-cheeked young woman, knelt on the damp tiles. 'My dear, do rest for a moment.'

'No! No! No!' The girl beat the tiles with her soapy brush. She began to wring out the floorcloth, angry hands like bundles of excited sticks. 'There are three more grates to be done this afternoon! You told me to clean them, didn't you, Mother?'

'Yes, dear. It does seem to be what you most want to do.' The Mother Superior stepped back with a defeated smile, giving way to me.

I watched Christina Brossard continue her apparently unending work. She was clearly unbalanced, but somehow self-dramatising at the same time, as if totally gripped by her compulsion but well aware of its manipulative possibilities. I was struck both by her self-pity and by the hard glance which she now and then directed at the three nuns, as if she were deliberately demeaning herself before these pleasant and caring women in order to vent her hate for them.

Giving up for the time being, I left her mopping the tiles and returned to the hall with the Mother Superior.

'Well, Dr Charcot, we're in your hands.'

'I dare say — frankly, I'm not sure that this is a case for me. Tell me — she spends all her time cleaning out these grates?'

'Every day, for the past two years, at her own wish. We've tried to stop her, but she then relapses into her original stupor. We can only assume that it serves some important role for her. There are a dozen fireplaces in this house, each as immaculate as an operating theatre.'

'And the cinders? The bags filled with ash? Who is lighting these fires?'

'Christina herself, of course. She is burning her children's books, determined for some reason to destroy everything she read as a child.'

She led me into the library. Almost the entire stock of books had been removed, and a line of stags' heads gazed down over the empty shelves. One cabinet alone contained a short row of books.

I opened the glass cabinet. There were a few schoolgirl stories, fairy tales, and several childhood classics.

The Mother Superior stared at them sadly. 'There were several hundred originally, but each day Christina burns a few more — under close supervision, it goes without saying, I've no wish to see her burn down the mansion. Be careful not to touch it, but one story alone has remained immune.'

She pointed to a large and shabby illustrated book which had been given a shelf to itself. 'You may see, Dr Charcot, that the choice is not inappropriate — the story of Cinderella.'

As I drove back to Nice, leaving behind that strange mansion with its kindly nuns and obsessed heiress, I found myself revising my opinion of the Mother Superior. This sensible woman was right in believing that all the dermatologists in the world would be unable to free Christina Brossard from her obsession. Clearly the girl had cast herself as Cinderella, reducing herself to the level of the lowest menial. But what guilt was she trying to scrub away? Had she played a still unknown but vital role in the suicide of her father? Was the entire fantasy an unconscious attempt to free herself of her sense of guilt?

I thought of the transparent bags filled with cinders, each one the ashes of a childhood fairy tale. The correspondences

were extraordinarily clear, conceived with the remorseless logic of madness. I remembered the hate in her eyes as she stared at the nuns, casting these patient and caring women in the role of the ugly sisters. There was even a wicked step-mother, the Mother Superior, whose Hospice had benefited from the deaths of this orphan's parents.

On the other hand, where were Prince Charming, the fairy godmother and her pumpkin, the ball to be fled from at the stroke of midnight, and above all the glass slipper?

As it happened, I was given no chance to test my hypothesis. Two days later, when I telephoned the Hospice to arrange a new appointment for Christina Brossard, the Mother Superior's secretary politely informed me that the services of the Clinic, of Prof. Derain and myself, would no longer be called upon.

'We're grateful to you, doctor, but the Mother Superior has decided on a new course of treatment. The distinguished psychiatrist Dr Valentina Gabor has agreed to take on the case — perhaps you know of her reputation. In fact, treatment has already begun and you will be happy to hear that Christina is making immediate progress.'

As I replaced the receiver a powerful migraine attacked my left temple. Dr Valentina Gabor — of course I knew of her, the most notorious of the new school of self-styled anti-psychiatrists, who devoted whatever time was left over from their endless television appearances to the practice of an utterly bogus psychotherapy, a fashionable blend of post-psychoanalytic jargon, moral uplift and Catholic mysticism. This last strain had presumably gained her the approval of the Mother Superior.

Whenever I saw Dr Valentina my blood began to simmer. This glamorous blonde with her reassuring patter and the eyes of a cashier was forever appearing on television talk shows, putting forward the paradoxical notion that mental illness did not exist but nonetheless was the creation of the patient's family, friends, and even, unbelievably, his

doctors. Irritatingly, Dr Valentina had managed to score up a number of authenticated successes, no doubt facilitated by her recent well-publicised audience with the Pope. However, I was confident that she would receive her comeuppance. Already there had been calls within the medical profession for a discreet inquiry into her reported use of LSD and other hallucinogenic drugs.

Nonetheless, it appalled me that someone as deeply ill and as vulnerable as Christina Brossard should fall into the hands of this opportunist quack.

You can well understand, therefore, that I felt a certain satisfaction, not to say self-approval, when I received an urgent telephone call from the Mother Superior some three weeks later.

I had heard no more in the meantime of the Hospice or of Christina. Dr Valentina Gabor, however, had appeared with remorseless frequency on Radio Monte Carlo and the local television channels, spreading her unique brand of psychoanalytic mysticism, and extolling all the virtues of being 'reborn'.

In fact, it was while watching on the late evening news an interview with Dr Gabor recorded that afternoon at Nice Airport before she flew back to Paris that I was telephoned by the Mother Superior.

'Dr Charcot! Thank heavens you're in! There's been a disaster here — Christina Brossard has vanished! We're afraid she may have taken an overdose. I've tried to reach Dr Gabor but she has returned to Paris. Could you possibly come to the Hospice?'

I calmed her as best I could and set off. It was after midnight when I reached the sanatorium. Spotlights filled the drive with a harsh glare, the patients were unsettled, peering through their windows, nuns with torches were fruitlessly searching the grounds. A nervous Sister Louise

escorted me to the Mother Superior, who seized my hands with relief. Her strong face was veined with strain.

'Dr Charcot! I'm grateful to you - I only regret that it's so late...'

'No matter. Tell me what happened. Christina was under Dr Gabor's care?'

'Yes. How I regret my decision. I hoped that Christina might have found herself through a spiritual journey, but I had no idea that drugs were involved. If I had known...'

She handed me an empty vial. Across the label was Dr Gabor's florid signature.

'We found this in Christina's room an hour ago. She seems to have injected herself with the entire dosage and then driven off wildly into the night. We can only assume that she stole it from Dr Gabor's valise.'

I studied the label. 'Psilocybin — a powerful hallucinogenic drug. Its use is still legal by qualified physicians, though disapproved of by almost the entire profession. This is more than a dangerous toy.'

'Dr Charcot, I know.' The Mother Superior gestured with her worn hands. 'Believe me, I fear for Christina's soul. She appears to have been completely deranged — when she drove off in our oldest laundry van she described it to one of the patients as "her golden carriage".'

'You've called the police?'

'Not yet, Doctor.' A look of embarrassment crossed the Mother Superior's face. 'When Christina left she told one of the orderlies that she was going to "the ball". I'm told that the only ball being held tonight is Prince Rainier's grand gala in Monaco in honour of President Giscard d'Estaing. I assume that she has gone there, perhaps confusing Prince Rainier with the Prince Charming of her fairy tale, and hoping that he will rescue her. It would be profoundly awkward for the Hospice if she were to create a scene, or even try to...'

'Kill the President? Or the Rainiers? I doubt it.' Already

an idea was forming in my mind. 'However, to be on the safe side I'll leave for Monaco immediately. With luck I'll be there before she can cause any harm to herself.'

Pursued by the Mother Superior's blessings, I returned to my car and set off into the night. Needless to say, I did not intend to make the journey to Monaco. I was quite certain that I knew where Christina Brossard had fled — to her father's mansion above Vence.

As I followed the mountain road I reflected on the evidence that had come together — the fantasy of being a skivvy, the all-promising woman psychiatrist, the hallucinogenic drug. The entire fairy tale of Cinderella was being enacted, perhaps unconsciously, by this deranged heiress. If she herself was Cinderella, Dr Valentina Gabor was the fairy godmother, and her magic wand the hypodermic syringe she waved about so spectacularly. The role of the pumpkin was played by the 'sacred mushroom', the hallucinogenic fungus from which psilocybin was extracted. Under its influence even an ancient laundry van would seem like a golden coach. And as for the 'ball', this of course was the whole psychedelic trip.

But who then was Prince Charming? As I arrived at the great mansion at the end of its drive it occurred to me that I might be unwittingly casting myself in the role, fulfilling a fantasy demanded by this unhappy girl. Holding tight to my medical case, I walked across the dark gravel to the open entrance, where the laundry van had ended its journey in the centre of a flower-bed.

High above, in one of the great rooms facing the sea, a light flickered, as if something was being burned in a grate. I paused in the hall to let my eyes feel their way in the darkness, wondering how best to approach this distraught young woman. Then I saw that the massive Venetian clock above the staircase had been savagely mutilated. Several of

the ornate numerals tilted on their mountings. The hands had stopped at midnight, and someone had tried to wrench them from the face.

For all my resistance to that pseudo-science, it occurred to me that once again a psychoanalytic explanation made complete sense of these bizarre events and the fable of Cinderella that underpinned them. I walked up the staircase past the dismembered clock. Despite the fear-crazed assault on them, the erect hands still stood upright on the midnight hour — that time when the ball ended, when the courtships and frivolities of the party were over and the serious business of a real sexual relationship began. Fearful of that male erection, Cinderella always fled at midnight.

But what had Christina Brossard fled from in this Palladian mansion? Suppose that the Prince Charming who courted her so dangerously but so appealingly were in fact her own father. Had some kind of incestuous act involved the widowed industrialist and his adolescent daughter, herself an uncanny image of his dead wife? His revulsion and self-disgust at having committed incest would explain his apparently motiveless suicide *and* his daughter's guilt — as I knew only too well from my court attendances as an expert medical witness, far from hating the fathers who forced them to commit incest, daughters were invariably plagued by powerful feelings of guilt at their responsibility for their parent's imprisonment. So after his death she would naturally return to the house, and try to expiate that guilt as a servant-girl. And what better model for an heiress than Cinderella herself?

Drawn by the distant flames, I crossed the upstairs hallway and entered the great bedroom. It was filled with paintings of young nudes cavorting with centaurs, unmistakably Gaston Brossard's master-bedroom, perhaps where the act of incest had taken place.

Flames lifted from the fireplace, illuminating the ash-streaked face of Christina. She knelt by the grate, crooning

as she read the last of the pages torn from a familiar book of fairy tales. Head to one side, she stared at the soft blaze with overlit eyes, stroking the rough seams of the hospital tunic she wore over her bare legs.

I guessed that she was in the middle of her hallucination and that she saw herself in a resplendent gown. Yet her drifting eyes looked up at me with an expression of almost knowing calm, as if she recognized me and was waiting for me to play my role in the fable and bring it to its proper conclusion. I thought of the mutilated hands of the clock above the staircase. All that remained was to restore the glass slipper to its rightful owner.

Had I now to play the part of her rescuer? Remembering the familiar sexual symbolism of the foot, I knew that the glass slipper was nothing more than a transparent and therefore guilt free vagina. And as for the foot to be placed within it, of course this would not be her own but that of her true lover, the erect male sexual organ from which she fled.

Reaching forward, she added the cover of the fairy tale to the dying blaze, and then looked up at me with waiting eyes. For a moment I hesitated. High on psilocybin, she would be unable to distinguish truth from fantasy, so I could play out my role and bring this psychoanalytic drama to its conclusion without any fear of professional disapproval. My action would not take place in the real world, but within that imaginary realm where the fable of Cinderella was being enacted.

Knowing my role now, and the object which I myself had to place in that glass slipper, I took her hands and drew her from her knees towards her father's bed.

I murmured: 'Cinderella...'

But wait - they're about to leave the terrace. You can look at them now, everyone else is staring frankly at this attractive young woman and her decrepit companion. Sitting here

in the centre of Monte Carlo on this magnificent spring day, it's hard to believe that these strange events ever occurred.

It's almost unnerving — she's looking straight at me. But does she recognise me, the dermatologist who freed her from her obsession and restored her to health?

Her companion, sadly, was the only casualty of this radical therapy. As he sits hunched at his table, fumbling with himself like an old man, I can tell you that he was once a fashionable physician whom she met just before her release from the Hospice. They were married three months later, but the marriage was hardly a success. By whatever means, presumably certain methods of her own, she transformed him into this old man.

But why? Simply, that in order to make the incest fantasy credible, any man she marries, however young and princely, however charming, must become old enough to be her father.

Wait! She is coming towards this table. Perhaps she needs my help? She stands in front of the restaurant mirror looking at herself and her elderly husband, and places a hand on his shoulder.

That elegant face with its knowing smile. Let me try to shake that composure, and whisper the title of this cheap magazine on my lap.

'CINDERELLA... '

Her hand pats my shoulder indulgently.

'Father, it's time to go back to the Hospice. I promised the Mother Superior that I wouldn't over-tire you.'

Knowing, elegant, and completely self-possessed.

'And do stop playing that game with yourself. You know it only excites you.'

And very punitive.