

Introduction

12 February 1899 — Diary of Mademoiselle Cecilia Natasha Dupuin written en route to Château de la Fontaine in Grenoble, France.

I begin this journal as a way of recording the events that take place after my graduation from Madame Ségolène's Finishing School for Girls. I completed my studies neither with the highest marks nor the lowest, and although I never felt that I would be well considered by possible employers, I was picked up immediately upon completion. I was issued a modest stipend to purchase a few clothes and the tools of my trade, a pad, three fountain pens with iridium tips, and a brand new Remington typewriter.

According to Madame Ségolène, my patroness is a person of renown, known throughout the country for her generosity and kindness, but I had heard little of her. This could be evidence of my innocence of the world more than anything. So here I sit in the coach transporting me to the Château de la Fontaine in Grenoble, as I scribe the first words that will not be judged by any instructors. I completed my studies, as was expected, and am now venturing into a new life.

For posterity's sake I must begin these chronicles by describing myself. I am Cecilia Natasha Dupuin, and I was born nearly eighteen years ago. If I could, I would include information regarding my family, but alas, I cannot, for I have no mother or father to speak of. I was turned over to the Sisters of Charity in the enclave of Voiron when I was but a babe. It was the sisters who named me, and their kindness to care for me until I turned six and was blessed with the privilege of obtaining an anonymous patron. Although I was saddened to leave the holy sisters and my fellow orphans, the new world of knowledge lay before me, and I could do nothing but accept the Holy Mother's reassurances that I was, indeed, a fortunate girl.

When I think back I sometimes wonder how fortunate I was. The life in Madame Ségolène's school was difficult and a challenge for one who is ordinary. The lucky girls who excelled found themselves the favorite pets of both the teachers and Madame. Although I was never treated badly, never a day went by that I was not reminded of my ordinary existence. But let me finish this sad thought, for I should really be happy that the life of a student is now behind me.

I will miss Madame Ségolène's school and the academia to which her instructors introduced me. More importantly, I shall miss the girls and my most bosom friend, Margarie. We arrived at the school together and were housed in the same room. We grew up as sisters and, when at the point of womanhood, our love grew stronger. I never knew that a love like this existed and was elated the first time we touched. Never in my dreams could I ever imagine the sweet softness of a woman's lips upon mine. For a time we dreamed of the days when we would both be equally employed and sharing an abode together. Naïve, some might say, but we were young and in love. No one could have told us that such a union was never meant to be. As the year of graduation grew closer, our relationship changed.

I wish I could blame Madame Ségolène for inviting the men to our coming out parties, but this custom is as old as the school itself. It was at our coming out I knew I would lose Margarie. Our childhood dreams and immature fantasies would not be, because a few young men had shown an interest in my beloved friend, and she in them. Who could blame them? She was young, beautiful, charming, and excelled in her studies. They were bound to love her, just as I did.

I, too, had young male callers, but unlike Margarie, I had no interest in them. In due course, they each moved on to welcoming flowers that would give of their sweet nectar.

As the men sputtered around Margarie, envy and jealousy overcame me. They were captivating her in ways that I could not, and I grew increasingly morose. I am shamed to say that there was a part of me that was angered at my friend.

Soon her heart was set on the young man who took to calling her regularly, and the dreams we once had, the nights of gentle lovemaking that we shared, were slowly forgotten. Not even I,

her bosom friend, could reason with her. So in the end I had little choice but to let her go from my heart...

Forgive me for the pause in this chronicle for I had to stop to remove the dust that brought a tear to my eye. It would be unseemly for me, should my fellow travelers think I was weeping over a girl's journal.

Like my friend, I, too, was fortunate. Upon completion of my studies, a ticket was waiting for the coach to take me to the home of Madame Agnes Brigitte Faivre, my new employer. I look forward to seeing the beautiful château nestled near the mountains of Grenoble, and am even more intrigued to meet the woman who had specifically requested my presence.

12 February, evening — Diary of Mademoiselle Cecilia Natasha Dupuin at the Château de la Fontaine

It has been a long and weary journey, and I find myself filled with excitement. The coach arrived at the rustic village of Grenoble, and waiting for me in the heart of the city was a small carriage. There was a coachman at the helm and a tall, attenuate man dressed all in black sitting beside him. From atop the carriage the statuesque man looked down at me. For an instant I saw the glow of blood red globes gazing down upon me. A moment of fearful resignation filled my soul but quickly vanished when the young man stepped from the carriage and moved to me. His feline grace was oddly calming.

"Mademoiselle Dupuin, my mistress sent me along to fetch you." The young man's voice was soothing to my ears. By the faint light of the full moon, and the nearby street lamps, I saw the depths of his dark eyes seem to smile down upon me.

The frigid air sent an uncontrollable shiver down my spine. I am certain that if it were broad daylight, with the spring air around us, my fears would not be in control. But as it was dark and the moon was full, I recalled the tales that Margarie and I stayed up late to read. Long after the matrons of the school had secured our sleep, my friend and I would sneak by the light of a single candle to the private library of Madame Ségolène. We read the forbidden books, the novels deemed too frightful for a young girl's imagination. At times when we lay awake through the night in fear, we cursed ourselves for our curiosity. Each time we swore to never allow the temptations of those novels to consume us, but in the end we could not help it for we are merely daughters of Eve and were compelled to read all of the tales of haunted castles, beasts, demons, and ghostly apparitions.

When I stood there in the darkness beside the young servant, I cursed myself yet again for falling prey to those sordid tales. While the coachman was a mere shadow upon the carriage seat, the servant who attended me was a tall, lean man. If there had been more light I might have judged his character, but in the dark, I only heard his voice. Although he was not unkind, he did not hide his impatience as he took my luggage from the coach. When he went for my Remington case, I pulled it protectively against me. I cannot explain why I denied his assistance; I only know that since its purchase, I have developed a protective nature toward the most expensive tool of my trade, my typewriter. What a miraculous invention it is. Surely even the young man would understand my protectiveness if he knew its great worth?

I do not know if he understood my actions, for his condescension was felt through his cold silence. Once he took the satchel that contained my clothing, he placed it into the carriage that waited. Before I could change my mind, the coach carrying my fellow travelers left me there on the cobblestone street, in a city I knew not, with just a looming fear before me. What choice had I but to embark upon this new journey?

Once I arrived at the château I realized that my fears were in vain. As the grand château grew closer I looked out the window and watched its looming form approaching. At this distance I was in awe at the sight of the entire château illuminated by the full moon. Like a dragon rising through the trees, the outline of the château rose in front of the jagged mountains. As we made

our way from a dark forest I could see large pillars stretching toward the night sky. The gothic arches could be seen in the moonlight. When we drew closer I could see the lights of the stone structure reflected on the blue blanket of snow. We finally entered a lane edged with large trees. The thick canopy of branches blocked out the moon, rendering me momentarily blind from the sudden loss of celestial radiance.

No sooner was the coach stopped in front of the large wooden doors than a servant stood before me holding open the carriage door. Once I disembarked, he took my luggage and preceded me up the steps. As if by magic, before I could even catch my breath, the coachman whipped the horses, and the coach was swallowed by the darkness of the lane. By the illumination of the outdoor lamps around the château, I was able to see the servant's features clearly. With a complexion as white as snow and dark hair, the man wore an exquisite overcoat. The hat balanced on his head would have given him away as a gentleman if it were not for his humble bearing.

Even as I had these thoughts, the doors to the great château opened, the light from within causing a momentary blindness. Without a word the tall servant preceded me into the lighted area. Filled with a mixture of awe and fear I followed behind, but before I could enter a woman's forceful voice stopped my steps.

"Mademoiselle Dupuin, I presume." I spied an elegant woman in a wheeled chair within the entryway. The woman was far older than Madame Ségolène and her health appeared considerably more fragile. Aged hands rested on a blanket draped over her lap and behind the elderly woman stood a younger woman dressed as a nurse.

"Madame Faivre?" I began to say by way of introduction and took a tentative step forward with one hand holding my Remington and the other extended.

"Stop!" The fragility of my employer vanished at the urgency of her command.

These people from Grenoble are so queer in their customs. Standing in the archway of the manor I felt momentary shock and must have seemed a sight before the older woman. The woman's lips curved into a slight smile as she waved away my concern with her hand. "If you please, in our Château we have a mere formality that must be followed," Madame Faivre explained.

"Child, we welcome you into our home. Do you now enter it willingly, freely, and of your own accord?" the matriarch asked.

Such a queer question, I thought as I tried to fathom the jest being played upon me. But when I looked from the older woman to her nurse, and then the servant, they each remained frozen in place. Their eyes gazed at me intently as if waiting for a decree to be read. Filled with confusion I stepped forward into the light.

"I do enter willingly, freely, and of my own accord," I stated and heard the sighs of relief released at my proclamation.

"Very good, child, very good," Madame Faivre smiled as she looked to her manservant. "Amadieu, please show Mademoiselle Dupuin to her room." Madame Faivre then turned her instructions to me. "Mademoiselle Dupuin, get some rest tonight, for tomorrow I shall put you to work." The woman's command was light and airy as her nurse began to wheel her from the cold entrance. Amadieu did not speak a word but merely carried my luggage up a long winding staircase to a part of the château that felt desolate even in the light.

"We took the liberty of preparing a meal for you," Amadieu stated as he showed me the room.

The room was bigger than any I had ever seen. The fireplace that could hold a few grown men was filled with burning wood that took the chill away. Separated by a settee, the single room had a bed, a cabinet on one wall and a desk and round table on the other. Near the window stood a desk upon which lay a few archaic plumes and an old, dried inkwell. Stacked neatly on the side was a thick sheaf of brand new paper to translate my transcription into a readable form.

Set upon the round table were silver trays laden with an assortment of treats that I had only seen on holiday, slices of meat, cheese, bread, *petits poulets*, apples, nuts, dates, and exotic pastries.

"Is Madame expected to join me?" I asked Amadiou, who merely smiled.

"Madame wished to make you welcome. She will not be seeing you until tomorrow morning," the tall man stated with a slight smile.

It was then I noticed a strange oddity about him. While Madame Faivre and her nurse held a rosy hue to their cheeks, Amadiou's remained ashy grey. For the first time I noticed the paleness of his flesh and the protrusion of his two canine teeth. Like sharp awls, they extended out from the line of his top teeth. I could not help but stare at his abnormality, but when his gaze lay upon me, I averted my eyes quickly lest he think I judged him for this insignificant defect of birth.

"I-I understand," I stammered as I moved to the flask of wine and inhaled the tangy sweet aroma.

"Good, then eat, rest, do as you like, for Madame will expect you to begin your career first thing in the morning. Until then, do not expect to venture from this room. All of your needs have been seen to within it." His task complete, Amadiou left me alone. Upon closing the door behind him I heard the telltale click of a key within the hasp. I thought it odd that I should be locked within this room, but with the combination of fatigue and warmth of the room, I gave it no more thought.

Once alone, I quickly removed my never before used typewriter and placed it on the open space of the desk. Then I set aside the old writing devices and laid my new fountain pens beside the paper. Just as I had done throughout my years at Madame Ségolène's school, I deftly attached the iridium tips to the fountain pen holders, and sat them next to the sheaf of paper. I had not truly felt liberated from my school days until that moment.

This has been the recount of my arrival at the Château de la Fontaine, the home of Madame Agnes Brigitte Faivre, my new, and first, employer.