

## Found Favor

By: Betty Vrais

In my early twenties I had the good fortune to bartend at Claridge's in London. It was easy and simple employment, the guests tipped well and the accommodations offered us were both cheap and comfortable. As a rule, I had most mornings to myself and worked the tearoom in the afternoons and the bar in the evening. Most of the men who came to the bar drank simple drinks that required little knowledge to make: whiskey-sodas and the like.

When Winter came, few businessmen traveled late in the season, so I felt free to make small talk and occasionally play a game of cards if someone asked. It was during one such game—a rubber of bridge where a company of three men found themselves wanting a fourth—I met Dr. Cireousal, a man willing to take a woman player as a partner. I never learned his first name, despite our later coincidental meetings and his occasional returns to the hotel, though I suppose I could have looked it up in the register.

Dr. Cireousal was a strange man, short and round but with apparent strength. He looked to be in his late fifties. His vest and jacket stretched uncomfortably across his girth, and the thick gold band on his left hand was obviously not coming off with any amount of tugging or twisting. Dark auburn hair sat sparsely atop his head, but he made no effort to hide his burgeoning baldness. His beard and mustache feathered luxuriously over his collar, making his face oddly unbalanced. Skeptical eyes peered out from amongst thick folds of wrinkles above fat, rosy cheeks. And though most men as plump as he kept a look of joviality, the doctor had an expression of consternation fixed upon his face at all times. He spoke rarely, in a throaty U.S. accent. When he won, a gruff laugh rumbled out from under the thick mustache, but when he lost he remained ever silent.

The overall effect Dr. Cireousal had on me was a kind of instant comfort. Although I had met him only recently, and despite his almost grotesque obesity, I never felt bothered and an evening of drinking or cards passed easily in his company. I continued to greet him warmly

whenever we met, though I have long since moved on from my job at the hotel and he rarely returns to London from his Chicago flat.

That first night, as we played bridge, I noticed he kept a steady eye on me. Whether I took pause from our game to fix a drink for another customer, or simply played an unnoteworthy move (for I was never a great hand at bridge), he always seemed to be watching me.

At one I was required to close down the bar and usher out the few remaining customers. After my acquaintances packed up their cards and went to their rooms, I found a note on the table bearing my name. It was late and I was tired from the day's labours. Besides, I assumed the note was simply a comment on my service, so I pocketed it and finished cleaning before retiring for the night.

The next morning, I woke and, noticing the chair where I'd hung my uniform, I remembered the folded slip of paper. My curiosity, more lively after a good night's sleep, insisted I open it immediately and so, despite the cold shock of the wooden floors, I jumped from my bed and fished out the note before scurrying back under the covers. Upon reading it, I discovered no small comment, but instead a neatly scrawled-out date and the name of a popular pub nearby: Evening 12/19, The Dickens Tavern. It was signed by Dr. Cireousal, though it looked like his pen had sputtered a bit from writing too quickly. I had the day off and meant to visit a friend who worked in the department stores just south of Regents Park. But after breakfast, I called to cancel and instead set out at four for Half Moon Street.

The Dickens' Pub was popular and always busy, so I had no qualms about meeting him there. Since it was still early, I walked across the newly paved road and ordered myself a bowl of stew and a coffee from a nameless corner café. From my seat by the window, I could watch for Dr. Cireousal to arrive and join him shortly thereafter. The sun had begun to set when he came striding bulkily down the street. At around half past five I paid my tab and walked over to the pub.

Old, wobbly wooden tables crowded together in the warm light of yellowed glass lamps, and a few strands of Christmas lights dangled haphazardly from the ceiling. Decades of use worn grooves marked the middle of the threadbare stairs, and after ordering a Strongbow cider, I traipsed up to the quieter eating area. I found Dr. Cireousal munching away at a large plate of beef and chips. Part of me didn't want to disturb him, but before I could head back down to wait, he waved me over and bade me sit.

Mopping a bit of mustard off of his mustache with his napkin, he harrumphed and then turned to address me. "Good of you to come. I suppose it's not often old gentlemen ask you to suffer them more conversation than is required in your line of work. Wouldn't have blamed you for ignoring the note completely."

I waved him off, though I wondered why he asked me there when he expected me not to show. "Don't worry about it," I said. "It's my night free and I haven't got anything better to do." He chuckled at this and took another huge bite of meat. The voracious way he ate certainly enlightened me as to the reason for his size—it had nothing to do with genetics.

"Sure you haven't," he said as I swallowed a mouthful of my strong cider. "Either way, good of you to come. Now, it is a little odd, I know, requesting a bartender's company when I'm not even in my own country. But I like how you played cards. It says a lot about a man or woman, their bridge game, and I liked yours. Very firm, not too arrogant, but not too shy either. Besides, I'm alone and miss the company of my family, this being the Christmas season and all, and you seemed the sort of person I could talk to."

He forked more of his dinner into that cavernous mouth, and I settled back in my chair to wait for him to continue. When he had cleared his plate and pushed it aside, I offered to fetch us both drinks, and he gratefully accepted. A moment later, I returned with two pints of Stella, and he swallowed the better part of his before speaking again. We spoke of trivialities: the weather, the holiday shoppers, and the quality of trains these days, until finally he heaved a great sigh and leaned back far in his chair.

"Truth be told," he admitted in that gruff voice, "I hoped you would come so I could tell you a story. It's weighed on my mind since I left Chicago, just over a week ago, and until someone has lent me their ear for a few minutes, I know I shall never be free of its burden. I can't possibly tell anyone I know, they'd think me mad."

What could he possibly have to say that he could not have told his fellows at the hotel, or his wife over the phone? I had always been one for stories and his intrigued me. I urged him to continue. His manner of speaking required a great deal of patience and prompting, for he had a way of talking around what he wanted to say, so this paraphrased version is what came of it:

A year ago, Dr. Cireousal was asked to examine two ailing children. He normally dealt in Psychiatry, but he had been short of business as of late and needed the extra work. The father, who called, offered to keep the doctor in his own home, near Montreal.

When Dr. Cireousal arrived, he was taken to the house by a large private car. The father greeted him warmly, and offered to show him to his rooms or give him a tour of the house. Dr. Cireousal accepted both ideas, thinking he could better understand how the children lived. First the father showed him to the East wing of the old ranch-style, which was warm and homey. Toys littered the floor and on the walls hung dozens of photos of the father and boys together: going for hikes in Muir Woods or riding horses behind their home. All of the doors to the rooms were open, and Dr. Cireousal could see the boys had the run of the house, because in every room the bed was rumpled and a videogame or puzzle lay out on the floor.

In the West wing of the house, however, it was chilly and the doors remained closed. The father merely gestured toward the doors and told him what lay inside. The photos here, instead of showing the boys or father, showed a small girl with platinum blonde hair and a young, curvy woman, presumably the mother.

“This is your wife?” the doctor asked politely.

“Was. She passed away a year ago.”

“And the little girl is your niece?”

“No. No, that is my daughter Lucy. She lives in this room here.” The father opened the door to a room that was eerily quiet and tidy, though large.

“You’ll be staying in the sunflower room,” the father said, leading him to the end of the hall and showing him a room filled with yellow carpeting, pictures of sunflowers and a gold and black duvet. Dr. Cireousal settled in to wait for the boys to arrive home, when he would examine them for any obvious medical ailments.

When Dr. Cireousal did examine them, he found nothing wrong. He checked for hearing and eyesight problems, and did blood work with the kit he brought, checking for any disease that would cause the tremors the father described over the phone. When he found nothing amiss, he decided to wait and see what the boys would do.

At dinner that night, Dr. Cireousal asked the boys questions about their play, their horses, and all the other things 11 year old boys are wont to talk about. He was quite surprised when the door opened and the girl from the photo stepped inside, now almost as tall as Dr. Cireousal himself, but quite lanky and shy. She sat in the empty chair furthest from her father and quietly served herself. It was a late meal, and when the girl hadn’t shown up during the afternoon or evening, the doctor assumed she was at boarding school. The father hadn’t mentioned her,

instead telling Cireousal all about the boys and their lessons. The boys were tutored in Latin, English, French, mathematics and biology and chemistry. It was an old-fashioned curriculum, but the mother had begun all three children on it and the father was loathe to go against his wife's wishes.

"You must be Lucy," Dr. Cireousal said as he finished his pork chop.

"Yes," the girl replied simply.

"Do you go to the boarding school near here?" He asked.

"No, I go to the public school in St. Mark's."

Dr. Cireousal was surprised; the father hadn't noticed her absence all evening.

"Doctor, these boys do play out in the woods sometimes. Is there some herb they might have gotten into that would cause the shaking?" the father asked, calling Cireousal's attention back to the boys. He didn't spare a look for his daughter.

"Not that I know of, but I'm not an expert on Canadian plants," Dr. Cireousal replied dryly.

After dinner, the boys settled themselves in front of the television. Dr. Cireousal didn't have to wait long to see the boys' odd illness; soon after the father poured drinks for himself and the doctor, one of the boys, Jesse, threw the remote with a cry and stared at his own hand in fearful astonishment. John, his brother, quickly jumped up and backed away, but an instant later fell down and began shaking. Dr. Cireousal bent over John and took his pulse and checked his breathing. Jesse started to shake as well.

Thinking it simply an odd case of epilepsy, the doctor rose to get syringes and medicine from his room. As he passed the door to Lucy's room, he accidentally knocked the girl down and hastily apologized, but didn't stop to help her up. Instead he rushed through his things and returned to the living room, tranquilizers in hand, to find the boys once again watching television as though nothing had happened.

"You saw what happens," the father said excitedly. "Only it often gets worse, much worse."

"I think it may be simple epilepsy," Dr. Cireousal said. "I'll have to wait and test them on the medicine next time it happens."

"I don't think it's epilepsy. Any doctor could have found that," the father said darkly.

For three weeks, the doctor watched the boys to no avail. They acted normally, played well with each other, and even pulled pranks on the doctor. The only odd thing Dr. Cireousal noticed was the way the father and sons pointedly ignored Lucy whenever she came into the room, which she rarely did.

The next incident occurred late one sleety night, just as the boys were preparing for bed. Jesse was brushing his teeth, and John was changing into his pajamas, when there came a strangled cry from the bathroom in the East wing. Dr. Cireousal heaved himself from his bed and grabbed the injections, then ran toward the sound. As he passed into the living room, though, he felt himself slowed, and then stopped, as though a great force were pushing him back from the wing. He tried to keep moving but seemed rooted to the floor beside the couch. A second cry rang out, this time from the bedroom, and looking down the hall, Dr. Cireousal saw a trembling Jesse crawl, toothbrush still in hand, towards the his brother's bedroom. When he was halfway inside, he screamed again and the doctor saw his legs kicking wildly out the door.

The father ran from his own bedroom and seeing Dr. Cireousal standing in the living room, bellowed, "Do something!"

The yell freed the doctor. He hurried past Lucy—who had just walked out of the kitchen holding a glass of water looking quite unconcerned—and down the hall. But again before he reached the room he was stopped. The father must have felt the same sensation, because he groaned horribly.

"Here it comes again." The father moaned and buried his face in his hands.

All movement stopped. Dr. Cireousal watched curiously as the boys rose and walked out of the bedroom, gazing carefully at the doctor and the syringes in his hand. They continued, hand in hand, to the living room, where they looked at Lucy and said, in unison, "Again?"

Lucy shook her head and sat down on the fireplace, idly twirling a finger in the ashes behind her. "Don't blame me," she said.

Suddenly the boys screamed and ran up and down the halls, back and forth past the doctor and father, and back again. Dr. Cireousal could no more move than speak. He watched the boys tear towards the stairs. Jesse glanced behind himself with terror as he ran, and in so doing missed the top step to the basement. He fell headlong into the stairwell. John scrambled after him and Dr. Cireousal heard the two boys' sobs echo up to him from below.

Lucy stood and walked to the stairs, looked down and declared, “He’s fine,” and walked into her bedroom.

Released, Dr. Cireousal could move again. He and the father rushed to the basement, and, though the bulb was shattered, the doctor could see well enough in the upstairs light that Jesse’s leg was broken at the hip. The unconscious boy lay shaking on the floor. Dr. Cireousal stretched the child’s legs into proper alignment as John tugged at his sleeve, crying. The father stared down from above.

“Call the ambulance,” Dr. Cireousal called up, but the father seemed as much in shock as Jesse.

“Watch your brother,” Dr. Cireousal told John. “Don’t let him move.” He jogged up the stairs as fast as his bulk would allow. He stepped around the father and into the kitchen, grabbed the phone and dialed the emergency number.

“Yes, hello, we need an ambulance to the Kuremsky residence on Barton road,” Dr. Cireousal said, then hung up when the operator told him to stay on the line. He was about to return to the basement when he heard screaming again, and assumed Jesse had come out of shock and could feel his broken leg. But, as he stepped out of the kitchen, he saw the father knocked aside as a screeching John barreled up the stairs and down into the West wing. John threw open Lucy’s door and ran inside.

“Go down and stay with Jesse,” Dr. Cireousal ordered the father, and hurried down the hall to Lucy’s room. When he entered he got quite a fright. In the corner stood a dressmaker’s dummy, an elaborate wedding dress pinned to its form. John had climbed up the back of the dummy and perched his head on top of the fabric neck. Tears ran from the inner corners of his eyes.

“Tell her to stop,” John moaned piteously. “We all miss her. Tell her to stop.”

“No,” said Lucy, who was reclining in her bed, looking at her brother with something like distaste.

“Tell her!” the boy screeched, crying and tearing at the dress. Bits of rhinestone and sequin came off in his fingernails.

“Quit that!” Lucy demanded. John stopped but cried harder.

Now Lucy was crying too. “Mom left it for me. Don’t ruin it.”

John cackled and began shredding the beading of the bust once again.

“Stop!” the father yelled from the doorway.

“I told you to wait downstairs with your son,” said Dr. Cireousal.

“My daughter—Lucy, stop.”

“Make him stop! Make him stop hurting me!” the girl cried. She began to mutter to herself, silly sing-song verses one learns in Sunday School.

John laughed and slid down the back of the dummy.

Dr. Cireousal became aware of the sound of a phone ringing, over and over in time with Lucy’s singing. A knock thundered at the front entrance. John and Jesse screamed. Dr. Cireousal hurried from the room to open the door.

“The boy’s downstairs,” he said, leading the way, the bed nipping at his heels. “Just at the foot of the stairs.”

John ran from the bathroom and grabbed the doctor’s leg. Dr. Cireousal pitched forward, just aware of another scream before his head cracked against the cold concrete step.

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“When I awoke,” Doctor Cireousal said, “I lay in a hospital bed, the murky glow of medical machinery swimming before me. My head gave the barest of Tramadol-dulled throbs when I groaned for a nurse. The portly woman eased into the room and began to show me how to operate the bed.

“How are the boys?” I interrupted her explanation.

“She raised a brow and continued shuffling tubes and monitors.

“The boys, the boys, you know, and their sister Emily, are they quite all right?” I demanded.

“There were no children with you,” the nurse told me through pursed lips. ‘Arnaud Wilson called about a ruckus at his burnt-out neighbor’s house. The police found you out cold on the stairs.’

“She would not hear my story, and, as evidence of my madness, declared no one had lived in that house for years, that inside was not so much as a teacup. I was believed a trespasser and a failed thief, if not now a madman.”

Here Dr. Cireousal sighed and cupped his neck in four sausage-like fingers.

“I was discharged two days later and driven to the train station. I made my wife dispose of her old wedding clothes, and if my youngest sneaked into my bed from a nightmare, I was more frightened than he.”

“But they must have mixed up houses, or your memory was scattered when you hit your head,” I said.

“No,” he moaned. “The hospital records clearly disprove that. I was found in the house. I was malnourished, as if I hadn’t eaten or drunk a drop for a week, though the meals in that home were sumptuous. And a month after returning home, the amount promised by the father was wired into my account by a nameless, private bank.”

He finished his now-warm ale and shook his head.

“The worst is the father has called again. He called at my home, the hotels, begged that I return to finish my work. Damn it, he wants me to go back. I am to go back.”

He began to tremble. “To that hellhole!”

I excused myself for the night and returned to the hotel. The deskman told me that, yes, the Doctor had received two calls, both from Canada. I asked as a personal favor he delete them immediately and direct any further calls from that area to my room instead.

“Let him get some peace, if only for this week,” I said, citing Dr. Cireousal as a good friend. That night my phone rang four times, and left no messages.

The End

Bio: Betty Vrais is a graduate student at Sarah Lawrence College and journalist with an unending curiosity about the odd, occult and just plain weird