

“The Curious Facts in
the
Case of Mrs Juliet Schwetz
and
Her daughter Violet”

by
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For Edgar Allan Poe

**The Curious Facts in the Case of Mrs Juliet Schwetz
& Her daughter Violet**

In my considerable years as a physician, I have encountered the vast scope of extreme methods that a woman will employ to stave off the ravages of age and preserve an ideal of beauty. Those infernal whalebone corsets pressing the insides into a tangled mass; the juice of the 'Belladonna' plant, which can be poisonous, used to enlarge the pupils of the eyes; that hideous face powder giving one the appearance of a mildewed cadaver, which I'm positive (Though I'm yet to collate conclusive evidence) contains some kind of compound which is damaging to the skin. Many women have come to me, following years of smearing this gaudy paint on their persons, complaining of blindness and headaches. I have even become aware, by way of my colleagues abroad, of the horrific mutilation of the Oriental woman's feet by binding. The fairer sex is under considerable pressures from our 18th Century society; plagued by expectations of impossible waistlines and flawless skin that as a medical practitioner I consider to be quite ridiculous.

But how far will a woman go in pursuit of this ideal? I, Doctor Vincent Samaras, hereby recount the tale of the most baffling and extreme case I came across. A case which left me quite disturbed and uncertain of the supposed fixity and levelness by which God's universe is claimed to wove from.

I was called to the Schwetz home in Boston by its owner, Mr Oskar Schwetz. During a distressed phone conversation he related the apparently hysterical condition of his wife Juliet; information he had received second hand from his head maid. Mr Schwetz was one of a number of German farmers who had emigrated here in the early 1800's, capitalising on America's soil with their intensive agricultural techniques. He managed a farm in Barnstable and sent money back to his wife and daughter so that they could live comfortably.

Mrs Schwetz had become convinced that her daughter, Violet, was no longer her daughter, that she been replaced by a stranger and was slowly draining the life from her. She had become so taken by this disturbing fancy that she would no longer let Violet see her, and remained locked in her chambers in a most agitated state.

I arrived at the Schwetz household in the early morning where Molly, the head maid, took my hat and the thick scarf I had brought with me to ward off the winter chill. Forgetting myself I stamped my feet in the hallway, shaking the last flakes of muddy snow from my boots. I caught Molly's sharp look before she left to check if Mrs Schwetz was ready to see me. Moving into the main chamber a young voice piped at me from the great stairs in the main chamber:

"Father would not be pleased by your Mediterranean efforts on his carpets."

A young girl, no more than eight or nine, stood on the landing between two winding stairways that split away from the main. She wore small jodhpurs, a

jacket and riding cap, and in the centre of her round face lay two fierce blue eyes, whose effect on me, as she descended the staircase, left the feeling that a cross-section of my body had been peeled away by her gaze. She presently stood a few feet from me, an angry pulse at the top of her sternum beating rattle-snake-like life into the thick braid of golden hair that had curled and fallen there.

“My apologies, young Miss,” I said, delivering her a curt bow. “I am Dr. Samaras. You must be Violet. They did not tell me what a pretty girl you were.”

The reptilian gaze did not falter. I continued:

“I should say you must be quite worried for your Mother.”

“Bored with the ill woman’s fancy,” the girl spat at me. “I am having the servants take me outside the city for riding. You may do with the lunatic as you see fit.”

She wasted not another word on me, brushing past as though I were no more troubling than a slight breeze. I turned to watch her hover in the hallway and return my gaze with unparalleled indifference, as a male servant hurried from the stairs above us carrying a saddle and crop. He inclined his head to me briefly, almost apologetically, as he passed, and then the pair of them disappeared through the front entrance.

Presently Molly returned to collect me in my deeply rattled state and escort me to Mrs Schwetz’s room. I found Juliet sitting up in her bed, her face tight and wan.

She shared the features of her daughter, blue eyes, round face and golden locks, but to the right above the corner of her lips sat a small brown mole. The covers of the bed were drawn up over her knees and clutched in a knotted mass at her chest. Her fingers continued to crook and knead the goose-feathered bulk throughout my examination.

“She looks like my daughter, but she is not my daughter,” Juliet explained. “Her eyes looks the same, hair the same; there’s just something...*wrong*. As though there’s something, underneath...under her skin...oh God, please help me.”

She pulled more of the covers to her and trailed off, her voice high and plaintive. I managed to free an arm and take her pulse. The sweat was thick on her skin; the smoky onion smell of her unwashed body clung to the sheets and hung over the bed like a noxious perfume.

“Mr Schwetz said you believe her to be sucking the life from you?” I said. “In what way?”

“It is as I said,” Juliet replied irritably. “I feel my life’s blood drained from me. I am surely dying, Doctor. Each day I feel a little less whole.”

“But how?” I asked. Obviously the woman was quite mad but in order to ascertain the particulars of her delusion I had to appear of open mind to her fancies. “Is she like the creature of the vampire stories? To steal into your bedchambers at night and drain you of your blood?”

“She may very well be such a fiend,” said Juliet, nodding. “For it is as if she had drunk my blood; each day I feel more and more fatigued, a little closer to death’s door.”

I could find no puncture wounds or bite marks on Juliet’s body, and although it was clear she had been forgoing meals there was little else physically wrong with her. I prescribed some sedatives to help her sleep and scheduled another appointment for a week’s time. I would have left it at that had not the odd behaviour of Violet occurred to me from before.

“Your daughter’s gift for language is quite considerable, Mrs Schwetz,” I said.

“How old is she exactly?”

A new rigidity canvassed Juliet’s face, as though she were startled by this question. Her eyes seemed to draw inward, searching her own thoughts.

“Why...she would be...seven, I’m sure...no...I...seven and...” Her eyes looked up imploringly at Molly who stood beside the bed.

“Eight and nine months, Madam.” said Molly concernedly.

It was there that the strange case of the Mother and Daughter Schwetz eluded me for some time. For not five days after I left, the house staff were found murdered and Juliet and Violet strangely vanished. Mr Schewtz was deeply distressed by

the disappearance of his wife and child and in the ensuing months fed an endless series of search parties with his personal finances. During this time it came to light that Juliet and Oskar's marriage was a quite recent affair, and that Violet was the product of Juliet's liaison with another man.

A year passed and Juliet and Violet remained no closer to being found. Mocked by the scandal and close to bankruptcy, Oskar was forced to return to his native city of Calw, where he had wed his absent bride.

Perhaps a little relieved for the poor man, I thought I had heard the last of either Juliet or Violet Schwetz. Then, eight years later, largely by chance they came to my attention again. The son of a college friend was referred to me on a visit to New York. This was quite a bit after the Collect Pond in the now Five Points area had been sealed over, thankfully ridding the city of the ungodly smell that had escaped Collect Pond previously.

The son of my college friend had been neglecting his studies due to his entanglement with a destitute woman in a slum area of the Five Points. He was quite taken with her, but the woman was refusing to marry him unless he agreed to remain with her in the slums. This obviously confusing behaviour was causing the boy no small measure of grief, and rather than simply prescribe some calmatives as my friend had requested, I decided, with the boy's consent, to approach the woman directly.

Following the boy's directions - he did not dare follow for fear of upsetting the woman - I found myself at the ruined doorway of a squalid ground level tenement house. The door remained fixed by a single hinge and I easily shouldered it aside. As I moved it I could sense the structure of the destitute place buckle and shift from the disturbance. Plaster and dust dribbled from cracks in the roof as I moved inside. I reasoned it would take very little for the entire thing to come crashing down around me.

A solitary candle fluttered on a low table in the centre of the drab four-walled space. A rusted stove and chimney sat in one corner and a fetid mattress lay on a metal bed frame in another. The woman was obviously absent, so I started rifling through the various newspapers and odds and ends strewn about the room, looking for something that would clue me into the her history and why she had ended up in such a hovel.

Somewhere in the middle of my search I became aware of a loud clamouring coming from the floor. I quickly canvased the floor, finding a large piece of flat board hidden by squares of cardboard. I slid the flat board to one side, finding a sunken cavity with a large chest placed inside. The chest rattled violently with the motion and muffled murmurings of someone inside. I opened the chest to find Violet Schwartz staring up at me, bound, gagged, her wrists and ankles manacled together by iron cuffs. She was not the young girl I remembered, much more grown, an adolescent now. I lifted her from the chest, loosening the rope and freeing her mouth, but I was unable to find keys for the cuffs.

“Please...” she implored me. “She’s crazy!”

“She...?” I wondered aloud, but no sooner had I said this, a cold chill crept over my back and I turned to find Juliet Schwetz in the doorway. Juliet however, had not suffered the ravages of passing years and if anything, she looked younger. Impossibly younger... Why she looked no older than seventeen, eighteen years at the most. How could this be? She was at least twenty when I met her, a flowering woman.

Reading my thoughts, Juliet spoke:

“Yes, it is curious, isn’t it, Doctor?”

Juliet sat down at the low table and let a shaky arm drift out from under her shawl, a bottle of whisky clutched in the arm’s end. She poured herself a drink in a filthy glass from the table. Violet began to whimper again and soon gave rise to screams. Juliet bent swiftly over one leg, pulled up her skirt and removed a large wooden baton that had been strapped to her calve. She brought the baton down on the table with a heavy thud.

“Shut up you witch!” she screeched at the cowering Violet. “Or you’ll get more of this!” she indicated, raising the club once more.

Forgetting the oddness of Juliet’s appearance, I suddenly felt my indignation rise at poor Violet’s treatment.

“How dare you treat your daughter in this fashion!” I roared, surprised at my own ferocity. “Keeping her locked up; away from her Father!”

Juliet stared at me with raised eyebrows and then fell into cackling laughter. When the last of her mirth subsided she fixed me with the gleaming intelligence of her eyes and leaned forward.

“My daughter?” she asked mockingly. “Take a closer look at the wretch at your feet and tell me if anything looks out of place.”

I looked down at the trembling figure of Violet once more. Nothing seemed peculiar, she looked older, a teenager, no more than about thirteen or fourteen years old...which was inconceivable. She had had been eight and some months when I first met her on the stairs, and eight years having passed, she would have been sixteen by now. But she did not look so. My eyes scanned and suddenly fixed themselves on a detail above the right corner of her lips: a familiar brown mole.

I looked up at the figure I had hitherto thought of as Juliet.

“You’re Violet?” I asked, dumbfounded.

She smiled. She looked down at the filthy glass in her hands, turning it so the refraction of light from the candle played over her face.

“Before I explain the mystery of our ages, Doctor Samaras, let me alleviate you of a further illusion,” she said. “I am not her daughter, nor is she mine,” a malign grin inched across her face. “Long ago, we were sisters...”

“Many, many years ago now, Juliet and I found ourselves in the heart of the Black Forest. We were two girls from Freiburg, twenty-one and eight years old respectively. We both agreed that getting older than twenty-one was a stupid thing for nature to require of us; boys quickly stopped paying attention to girls whose looks began to fade and men were less inclined to marry girls past the age of twenty five. We often joked if we could find a way to never age further, we would take it.”

Violet took a large gulp of whisky from her glass.

“We happened across an Imp in the woodlands - doubt it all you like, Doctor Samaras, the evidence of his magic sits and lies before you...The Imp said it was quite rare for anyone to see him in the open and he was obliged to reward us with a wish. We both wished to never age past twenty one.”

Violet leaned back in her chair, raising the glass above her head and following the glint along its lip with her gaze.

“But oh, how the Imp perverted the course of our wish, Doctor Samaras. Oh how his hellish power cursed us and rendered us as we are.”

At last Violet let the glass drift away from her gaze and she fixed me once more with her glistening eyes.

“We never get any older than twenty-one, Doctor, this is true. But we *swap* every thirteen years.”

My blood chilled as the incredible realisation began to dawn on me.

“Every thirteen years one of us is always twenty-one and one of us is always eight. When one of us hits twenty-one she starts to age in *reverse* back down to eight, while the other begins to age *forward* from eight, till she hits twenty-one and the whole process starts up again.”

Violet stood up, her hand returning the glass to the table with a dull thud.

“And can you imagine how hateful it is for the sister who must age backwards? How she must become a frail child once more, a mature woman, year by year trapped in a younger body; men dismissing her as a girl, while her sister blossoms and courts their affections? How she must play the part of innocent daughter to her sister’s Mother, else our true natures be revealed? Why, every time it occurs the reversing girl snarls and curses the other, does everything in her power to see the naturally aging sister destroyed. I have played this part myself and it was my sister’s fate eight years ago and now.”

Violet's hand drifted away from the glass and for the first time I noticed the baton still laying on the table beside her.

“So what Juliet told you was true, I was indeed sucking the life from her, just as she will take years from me once I reach twenty one. We have been doing it for half a century, Doctor Samaras, and I wager we'll be doing it for quite some time yet. My sister and I, living forever, stuck in our own little loop of borrowed years, passing back and forth, back and forth...”

Violet's hand rested on the baton now and I steeled myself for speedy retreat or action.

“The servants at Oskar's home knew something was wrong. They would have revealed us, so they had to die. That idiot boy who sent you here, he will perish also...just as you must die, Doctor Samaras!”

Violet launched forward, bringing the baton high above her head. By a deft dodge I threw myself out of Juliet's path towards the door. I had been standing in front of Juliet when Violet began her explanation, and now Violet collided with her supine sibling, tripping over her and landing heavily against a nearby wall. Even as Violet looked up the roof began to tremble and fall away. I managed to hurl myself away from the entrance as the tiny room collapsed on them both.

I called the authorities, and spend a sleepless night in my hotel room. I had neither the heart nor faith in my own incredible circumstances to relate what

had happened that night, so when confronted by my friend's son, I could only lie and say that I arrived to find the house collapsed on his beloved.

A week was spent clearing away the rubble. No bodies were ever found. What became of the sisters I cannot say, my only hope is that no one else has perished in defence of their terrible secret. I have changed the names to protect the innocent and to save those involved from ridicule. I do not ask similarly for myself, only that my tale serve as a sobering reminder of what may befall our society should it continue to press the fairer sex towards unreasonable aesthetic demands. Let us not forget the Schwetz sisters and the horror of that ageless, unfathomable beauty.

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