

THE TRIAL OF MADAME PELLETIER

by Susanna Calkins

Maidservant Anna must testify in her employer's murder trial. Did Mme. Pelletier kill her husband? The evidence could argue either way. The answer is a chilling one in this tale set in 1840 in France.

*April 1840
Tulle, Limousin, France*

Anna Pequod stopped a few meters away from the entrance to the Tulle courthouse, closing her eyes to the madness that surrounded her and her parents.

Her father tugged her sleeve. “None of that, daughter.”

Crowds milled about the judiciary grounds, many pleading with grim-faced guards to allow a few more curious onlookers inside the building. Everyone—from sewage workers to society women—wanted to witness the spectacle that would soon unfold inside the county’s assize court.

“Trial of Madame Pelletier starts today!” the newsboys called. “Learn how the Lady Poisoner did her husband in!”

For weeks now, the scandalous poisoning of Monsieur Pelletier, Anna’s former employer, had dominated *Le Figaro* and *La Presse*, relegating news of King Louis Phillippe I and his July Monarchy to the back pages. Even the recent assassination attempt on Queen Victoria in England could not compete with this juicy *cause célèbre*.

“Took Monsieur Pelletier two weeks to die!” the newsboys shouted gleefully.

Anna shivered. Her parents had served in M. Pelletier’s household for over ten years, her father as his gardener and her mother as his cook and housekeeper. However, they’d only known Mme. Pelletier since last August, when their master had brought his new bride to Tulle, an unexpected act prompting a startling wagging of tongues.

“What kind of respectable woman is affianced through a marriage broker? Why was a match not made among her family’s acquaintances?” Tulle’s *le bon ton* had murmured behind their

fans as they strolled along the Rue de Corrèze. “*Perhaps she is ill-witted or lacking in the womanly graces.*”

The shopkeepers’ wives had been equally scathing, dissecting the newcomer while they waited for Mass to begin at Tulle’s cathedral. “*Didn’t even have a real wedding,*” they had sneered, having learned the couple were married by a judge rather than by a priest. “*Perhaps they had to get married.*”

As for Anna’s mother and the other servants of Tulle, an old city modernized by the lace industry, they were most disturbed by the bride’s lack of adornment. “*Did you know that she had no lace or even a veil?*”

Mme. Pelletier’s behavior after she arrived had only caused more gossip. Tearful and restless, the mistress had spent many hours walking alone on the grounds. She made no social calls and had refused all visitors throughout autumn. Most who met her pronounced her ‘odd.’

However, everything had changed late last October when Mme. Pelletier’s spirits seemed to lift. Unexpectedly she’d begun to cultivate her social equals, showing herself to be a lively and cultured woman. With that, her standing in the community improved greatly. Anna had been struck by her transformation, even more so when Mme. Pelletier had become almost gay in her husband’s presence. “*Finally accepted her wifely duties,*” Anna’s mother had whispered to her daughter, relieved that the family discord seemed to be dissipating. Of course, after M. Pelletier’s death two months later at Christmas, the local gossips surmised that this change in spirits had marked the moment that Mme. Pelletier had begun to plot her husband’s murder.

“She laughed, did you know, as he wretched his insides out,” one matronly-looking woman muttered to another.

“Disgraceful,” the other agreed. “It will be a short journey to hell for *that* one.”

Anna’s stomach lurched. Although Mme. Pelletier had been distant with her, she’d never been unkind.

Her father presented Judge Binet’s summons to the guard, who looked it over with interest. Just then, there was a great commotion at the edge of the courtyard.

“Here she comes!” someone called, pointing to the eastern end of the wide-paved street.

“I see her carriage!” called another. The crowd began to jostle one another, everyone eager to catch a glimpse of Mme. Pelletier as she arrived.

“Wait here,” the guard told them and pushed his way through the crowd down to the street.

From the steps, Anna watched as a hired carriage, pulled by two well-matched horses, drew up in front of the courthouse. The curtains had been pulled down over the windows, hiding the occupants within. The driver, smartly dressed in the carriage company's blue livery, hopped down in a practiced way and knocked on the carriage door.

An older gentleman, perhaps in his fifties, descended first. Anna recognized him. He was M. Le Bec, Mme. Pelletier's attorney. When he'd interviewed her at the Pelletier's home the week before, he'd been dressed as he was today, immaculate in a light gray morning suit, his cravat perfectly tied.

Extending his hand upwards, M. Le Bec helped a woman dressed in deep mourning step down from the carriage. Mme. Pelletier had a thick widow's veil covering her face and a small black handbag hanging from her wrist.

M. Le Bec and the driver flanked her while the assize guard swung his baton back and forth, clearing a path to the courthouse door. "Make way!" he called.

Around her the crowd hissed venomous words.

"Husband-killer!"

"Poisoner!"

"Murderess!"

Though the veil hid the woman's face from the crowd, Anna could tell from the way Mme. Pelletier shrank back against M. Le Bec that she was deeply frightened. He was supporting most of her weight as they moved into the old stone courthouse.

"May God have mercy on her soul!" Anna heard her mother whisper as Mme. Pelletier passed by. "Pray God forgive *us* for what we are about to do."

Her father grunted. "We are bid only to tell the truth. It is not our souls that will bear this wretched burden." But he allowed his wife and daughter to cling to him as they followed Mme. Pelletier into the courthouse.

Once inside, they were directed to a small chamber directly across from the courtroom where two other people were already seated. Anna recognized one of them as the local apothecary. She started to greet him but a heavy-set assize guard rapped his baton against the wall. "No talking," he said. "The trial is about to start."

Anna expected the courtroom doors to be shut, but they remained open, giving her clear access to the trial proceedings. The courthouse was quite warm; she could already see people fanning themselves with the trial pamphlets they had purchased outside the courthouse. At the bailiff's command, everyone rose when Judge Binet, wearing his heavy red judicial robes and great white wig,

entered from a chamber to the right of the bench. Next, the jury filed in from a chamber to the left, seating themselves in long benches. Anna could see that her former mistress had removed her veil, perhaps at the order of the judge, and was now holding a small vial of smelling salts to her nose.

M. La Rousse, the prosecuting attorney, spoke first. “We have been convened to prosecute Mme. Violette Pelletier for the most heinous act of having willfully procured and administered poison with the express purpose of murdering her husband of just five months, Simon Pelletier.”

The prosecutor then proceeded to speak at length, alluding to the evidence that he planned to lay before the judge and jury. Throughout his speech, the courtroom crowd murmured, exhaling when the more salacious details of the crime were touched upon.

When the prosecutor sat down, M. Le Bec rose and faced the jury. “I will tell you of a young noblewoman trying to make the best of an unexpected marriage. A woman whose undeserving husband racked up debt after debt without her knowledge, making many enemies in the process.” M. Le Bec paused, allowing everyone to hear Mme. Pelletier’s soft sobs. “A loving wife who tenderly nursed her husband until his untimely demise, becoming a widow before her time.”

Anna could see many female spectators sniffing and wiping their eyes, while the men shifted their feet. The jurors, striving to look impassive, looked away from Mme. Pelletier.

“Very well,” the judge said. “Let us hear from our first witness.” He consulted a paper. To her surprise, Anna heard her own name being called. “Anna Lourdes Pequod, servant, Pelletier household, of Tulle.”

The assize guard escorted her to the witness stand, where the bailiff stood with his Bible, waiting to swear her in.

Her heart pounding, Anna almost didn’t want to touch the Bible. Her hands were so sweaty that she was sure she would leave a stain upon the ornately detailed leather cover. Nevertheless, she dutifully repeated the bailiff’s statements. When the oath was completed, she climbed into the witness stand, her legs shaking.

The prosecutor smiled at her in a kindly way. “There’s nothing to be afraid of, Mademoiselle Pequod. You are seventeen years old, is that correct?”

At her soft assent, he continued. “And you have been serving in the household of Monsieur Simon Pelletier for ten years?”

“Yes.”

“Very good,” he said. “Now I am going to ask you a few questions about your daily responsibilities—what you do for the

Pelletiers. Is that all right?”

“Yes,” she replied. She noticed for the first time that a clerk was writing down their exchange, making her nervous again.

But the questions were not too hard. They were mostly about which rooms she cleaned, which ones she didn’t. “So Madame Pelletier did not wish for you to clean the bedchamber she shared with her husband, is that correct?”

Anna glanced over at Mme. Pelletier who was still staring straight ahead. She did not even seem to be listening. “Yes, that is correct. I was to exchange her laundry and make the bed only in her presence.”

“Do you know why?”

“No.”

Anna bit her lip, remembering when Mme. Pelletier had first made the odd request. “*This place is burdensome enough for three servants. I should not like to trouble you further.*”

“...Is that correct, Mademoiselle Pequod?” The prosecutor’s question cut into her reverie.

Anna flushed. She hadn’t heard his next question. Perhaps sensing her distress, he smiled and repeated the question. “One of your duties was to purchase household goods from the market and other shops, is that correct?”

“Yes,” she whispered.

“Did you purchase arsenic in October 1839 from Monsieur Schmidt, an apothecary located on *Rue du Canton*?”

“Yes, sir.”

“For what purpose did you make that purchase?”

“I told Madame Pelletier I had seen rats in the pantry. The arsenic was for a rat-poison paste.”

“Now think carefully. How much arsenic did you request?”

“I spoke to the apothecary and he made up a vial about this size.” She held her fingers a few inches apart.

“Was this the vial?” M. La Rousse asked, holding up a small glass jar with a corked top, labeled *poison*.

“Yes.”

“Please enter this into evidence.” He handed the vial to the bailiff. “What did you do with the arsenic after you purchased it from the apothecary?”

Anna glanced at Mme. Pelletier. This time her former mistress was looking straight at her. She looked to have a slight smile on her face. Did she nod at Anna? Anna couldn’t be sure.

“Mademoiselle Pequod? Please answer the question. What did you do with the arsenic after you received it from the apothecary?”

Anna gulped. “I gave it to Madame Pelletier. She wanted to

make the paste herself.”

“Thank you,” the prosecuting attorney said. .

M. Le Bec stood up. “Did you see the rat-poison paste after that?”

“Yes,” Anna said. “We made sure it was everywhere we’d seen the rats.”

The prosecuting attorney spoke again. “Now I’d like to ask you some questions about Monsieur Pelletier’s illness that occurred during the Christmas period, which culminated in his death on January 8, 1840. When did you notice that your master first took sick?”

“He was ill when he returned from Paris on December twenty-seventh,” Anna said. “I remember seeing him walk through the door. His face was green. Maman was worried we’d all get the Parisian sickness.”

“You thought it was cholera?” The defense attorney interjected. “Is that what you mean?”

“Yes, sir. Ma mère thought so. But none of us took sick,” Anna replied.

“Did Monsieur Pelletier think it was cholera too?” the prosecuting attorney asked.

“No,” Anna admitted. She glanced at Mme. Pelletier, who had gone back to staring straight ahead. “The mistress had sent him a cake while he was in Paris. He told us he’d eaten a few slices but threw it away when he began getting sick. He thought maybe it had gone bad in transit.”

“Your master attributed his illness to the cake your mistress—his wife—had sent him while he was in Paris. Is that correct?” the prosecutor asked.

“Yes, he told me that, sir,” Anna recalled. “Said I needn’t fear being near him.”

The crowd murmured amongst themselves until the judge banged his gavel and called for order.

“Did Monsieur Pelletier’s health improve?” the prosecuting attorney asked.

Anna considered. “At first he was able to eat. I remember he dined on goose and truffles.”

“Goose and truffles? That is a surprising option for a man recovering from an illness, no?”

Before Anna could reply, the defense attorney interrupted. “Mademoiselle Pequod, as capable as she may be, is not a physician and cannot speak knowledgeably of medical treatments.”

“Agreed,” the judge replied. He waved his hand at the court reporter. “Strike the question from the record.”

But goose and truffles had seemed an odd choice to Anna and her parents, too. Anna's mother had made a light broth that she thought might soothe the master's insides. *Goose and truffles*, her mother had tsk-tsked. *Whoever heard of such a thing?*

Anna frowned at the memory.

"What is it?" the prosecutor asked, evidently having caught her expression.

"It's true we were surprised by what Madame Pelletier chose to serve Monsieur Pelletier." Here, she saw her mistress raise an eyebrow, and she continued hastily. "Her devotion to her husband was touching."

Mme. Pelletier had hovered over her husband for hours, rarely leaving his side, even during the worst of his tribulations. Even when his relatives had come from Paris, she'd been the one to tend to his needs, feeding him, wiping his brow.

"Devotion and care were not enough, no?" the prosecutor prodded. "You sent for the doctor in early January?"

"Yes, my mother had me summon Dr. Bardot."

"Why? Was Monsieur Pelletier not improving?"

Anna sighed. She could not look at Mme. Pelletier. "Ma mère thought it best that the family physician attend to him."

"Why was that?" the prosecutor pressed. "Mademoiselle Pequod, what prompted your mother's belief that a doctor was now necessary?"

"I told her that I had seen Madame Pelletier sprinkle a white powder into my master's wine."

The crowd gasped, and again the judge pounded his gavel, calling for order.

"Did you ask Madame Pelletier what it was?"

"I did. She said it was gum arabic. To soothe his stomach."

The crowd murmured indignantly but settled down when the judge turned a baleful eye in their direction.

"Did it help him?"

Anna gulped again. "No," she whispered. "His legs began to cramp up terribly and he grew even more nauseous. Dr. Bardot prescribed eggnog."

Watching M. Pelletier flailing about in his tortured way had been excruciating. Over the next week he had succumbed to his malady, his body violently purging itself of the sickness within. He'd been such a large lumbering man in life, and in near-death he'd been a putrid hulking mass, alternately sobbing, praying, and groaning.

All the while, Mme. Pelletier had stayed by his side, holding his head while he sipped the eggnog in short labored bursts. Finally,

they'd all heard the one last gurgle. Anna had kept her head buried in her hands and her parents had let her be.

"Thank you, Mademoiselle Pequod," M. La Rousse said, looking pleased.

Having completed her testimony, Anna squeezed onto a bench to view the rest of the trial. Her parents were called next—first her mother, then her father. They had little else to add except, to Anna's great embarrassment, her father was forced to explain how much in back wages the Pelletiers owed them. "His financial affairs were quite disastrous even before his marriage, it would seem," the defense attorney asserted to the jury.

Next, the judge called the apothecary to the stand. M. Schmidt confirmed that Anna had purchased the arsenic for rat-poison paste in October of 1839. He then added that Mme. Pelletier had sought to purchase more arsenic after Christmas. "She told me that Monsieur Pelletier had taken ill while in Paris and that the sound of scurrying rats was keeping him awake at night," the apothecary explained. "I was rather surprised to hear this, naturally, as the supply I'd provided in October should have been sufficient."

When the apothecary concluded his testimony, he slid in next to Anna on the bench at the back of the courthouse. She could see his hands were trembling as hers had been earlier.

After a short recess for a noon meal, the doctors were called in, beginning with Dr. Bardot.

"Dr. Bardot," the prosecuting attorney said, "tell us at what point you began to suspect something was amiss with your patient."

The physician nodded. "I had already heard about the cake, the goose, the truffles, and the gum arabic. I had also observed some white powder flakes near my patient's mouth. When I asked Madame Pelletier about it, she told me that she had added some orange-blossom sugar to sweeten his tea." Dr. Bardot paused. "As I could not yet rule out that my patient was suffering from a latent form of cholera, I then prescribed eggnog."

"And then?" M. La Rousse prompted. "Did the eggnog help him?"

Dr. Bardot shook his head. "No, it did not. As Monsieur Pelletier continued to decline, I called in Dr. Roque to consult on the case. When Monsieur Pelletier succumbed to his illness, Dr. Roque ordered an autopsy, as we were both suspicious of his death."

Shortly after, Judge Binet called Dr. Roque to the stand, who arrived directly to the point. "As soon as I laid eyes on Monsieur Pelletier, I had little doubt that he was in the final grips of arsenic

poisoning. Upon his death, I called for an autopsy immediately, carrying out the analysis of the man's stomach contents myself."

"What did you discover?" the prosecutor asked.

"I found no poison in Monsieur Pelletier's stomach." Dr. Roque replied.

"Aha!" M. Le Bec exclaimed. "My client's husband may well have died of cholera then."

The spectators gasped and murmured among themselves.

The judge banged his gavel. "Order!" he called. "Order!"

"Not so," Dr. Roque replied to the defense attorney when the room had settled back down. "I then called for the Marsh test, which required the exhumation and study of the entire skeleton and remains." Now, the onlookers were sitting forward in their seats. "We took a carbonized mass consisting of the organs of the thorax and abdomen, the liver, part of the heart and the brain—which for brevity's sake, I shall refer to as the visceral mass—and boiled it with distilled matter."

"What did you discover, from this more thorough testing?" M. La Rousse asked.

"Arsenical crusts! M. Pelletier was most certainly poisoned, most likely over the course of several months. We checked the rat-poison paste, which was nearly devoid of arsenic. Yet, the box containing gum arabic contained traces of the poison."

"Murderess!" a spectator shouted, standing to her feet and pointing at Mme. Pelletier.

"Hang her!" called another, as Judge Binet banged his gavel again.

The apothecary glanced at Anna, a question on his face.

She shook her head. "I don't believe it," she whispered.

But M. Pelletier had been a brute of a man, a loud-mouthed lout. Anna remembered the bruises on her mistress's face and arms. The stiffness of her movements. The fear in her eyes. She knew why her mistress had not gone calling or sought out visitors in those first few months. She knew why poisoning might have seemed the only answer.

Watching her mistress now, she was dismayed to see the woman's eyes roll back in her head and her body slump over the table. "Madame Pelletier!" she shouted.

"Tend to your client," Judge Binet said sternly to M. Le Bec. "We will close the proceedings for the day."

The next day, Anna returned to the courthouse, unaccompanied by her parents. During the morning session, several members of M. Pelletier's family took the stand, testifying bitterly

about how Mme. Pelletier had banished them from his bedchamber. “Why would she do that, if she had nothing to hide?” they accused.

Next, several of M. Pelletier’s former business associates testified, their animosity towards the victim evident. “He made it clear that he would not be making good on his payments,” one of them grumbled.

“Is that so?” M. Le Bec said, looking pointedly to the jury, who nodded in understanding.

When the local banker was called, he testified not only to M. Pelletier’s dwindling funds, but also claimed that M. Pelletier had shown him several threatening letters he had received, to justify why he needed his line of credit extended.

“Threats were made against the victim’s life?” M. Le Bec asked.

The banker nodded. “So he claimed.”

Some other interesting things came to light as well. A clerk from the *Hôtel Meurice* in Paris, where M. Pelletier had stayed during Christmas, described the box that had contained the cake from Mme. Pelletier. “Most definitely, I remember noticing that someone had pried it open and re-nailed it rather shoddily.” He looked disdainful. “It was held together with some twine.”

“That someone had tampered with the cake box can most certainly be gleaned,” M. Le Bec pointed out. “It stands to reason that someone might also have tampered with the cake.”

Anna found herself nodding along with the spectators. Such a thing was certainly possible.

After lunch, Mme. Pelletier was finally called to the stand, a piteous creature in black.

M. La Rousse posed the first question. “Madame Pelletier, tell us. Was your marriage a happy one?”

The crowd sat up straight, straining to catch every word.

Mme. Pelletier’s smile was tight. “I will admit that I was unhappy when Monsieur Pelletier and I first wed. My uncle had led me to believe that Simon was a friend of the family. It was only later that I discovered that my uncle had used the services of a marriage broker.” Her voice wavered. “He had no personal knowledge of my husband’s character when he agreed to the match.”

The prosecutor waved a stack of letters in her general direction. “In fact, you wrote many letters to your uncle in which you pleaded with him to annul the marriage.” M. La Rousse held up several sheets of paper. “Indeed, you sometimes wrote more than one a day, did you not?”

Always the feverish writing. The pleading in her eyes. 'Dearest Anna,' she would say. 'If you hurry, you can post this one as well. Perhaps they are not getting my letters.'

M. Le Bec stood up then. "I imagine you found your husband's manor to be very different from what you expected, is that so?"

"When I arrived, I discovered the 'manor' to be a shambles—a source of ridicule." Mme. Pelletier dabbed at her eyes, looking very much like a genteel lady. "Full of rats, it was! I have never seen such squalor!"

Perhaps noticing the scandalized faces of several jurors, the prosecutor switched tactics. "Why was your husband in Paris last Christmas, Madame?"

Mme. Pelletier sniffed. "He was attempting to negotiate some outstanding debts. He wasn't a very good businessman, I now understand."

M. La Rousse looked triumphant until the defense attorney interrupted. "For what purpose did your husband *tell* you that he was going to Paris?"

"He had promised me a special present. That is why I sent him the cake and a picture of myself, along with a letter, thanking him in advance for his kindness. You have *that* letter, too, I presume?" She asked, giving the prosecutor a hard look. "Has it been entered into evidence?"

The prosecutor frowned. "Yes, we have that letter in evidence." Again he switched tactics. "Why did you add gum arabic to your husband's food? There is no known medicinal value for doing so."

Mme. Pelletier shrugged. "My mother swore by it, as did many women in the community where I grew up. Ask anyone there. They will tell you that is so."

From the look on the prosecutor's face, it was evident he had done so and come up with nothing. Still he persisted with more questions. "How do you explain the traces of arsenic that the physicians discovered in that box of gum arabic?"

"I kept the box in an unlocked drawer by my husband's bedside," she replied. "There were many times I fell fast asleep, holding my husband's hand. Anyone could have added the arsenic had they so wished."

"Such as a servant?" M. Le Bec asked. "Perhaps one angry that your husband has not paid out wages in more than ten months?"

Anna felt her face flush. Out of the side of her eye she saw the apothecary glance at her.

"Perhaps," Mme. Pelletier answered. "But my husband had many enemies, as I've now learned. Given how long the Pequots have faithfully served my husband, I cannot imagine such

disloyalty from *them*.”

Seeing he wasn't getting anywhere, the prosecutor changed his line of questioning. “Can you explain, Madame Pelletier, why Dr. Roque discovered virtually no arsenic in the rat-poison paste we found all over the house?”

For the first time, something flickered in Mme. Pelletier's face. Guilt? Worry? Shame? “I may not have mixed it together very well,” she replied finally. “Maybe I used too much flour and water and it grew diluted.” She swayed a bit. “As I said before, I am unaccustomed to rats. It should not be surprising I did this incorrectly.”

She swayed again, causing the crowd to exclaim.

“I beg you, Your Honor,” her attorney implored the judge. “My client has answered all your questions to the best of her ability. Pray let her withdraw for a respite, lest we have two corpses to contend with, instead of one.”

The trial continued over the next week. Throughout, Mme. Pelletier was interrogated by the prosecutor and the judge, submitting to their repeated browbeating, often answering the same questions several times. Though teary and wan, she did not waver in her testimony.

Finally, Judge Binet declared that he was satisfied that guilt or a presumption of innocence could be determined, and each lawyer issued a closing statement.

The jury returned to their chamber to deliberate. Anna, like most of the spectators, remained in her seat.

Within thirty minutes, the jury had arrived at their decision.

They could not prove that Mme. Pelletier had poisoned her husband.

Verdict: Not guilty.

An hour later, Anna sat alone on a low stone wall in the Pelletier garden. Her parents had been relieved when she'd told them the outcome of the trial. “Still, it's odd,” her mother had said. Her father had just shrugged.

A crunch of sticks behind her caused her to turn around. It was Mme. Pelletier.

“You got me in a lot of trouble, Anna,” her mistress murmured, sitting down beside her.

“You knew?” Anna replied. “How?”

“Those wretched rats. I could see the rat-poison paste wasn't working. That's why I asked the apothecary for more arsenic. Imagine my surprise when he told me you had just procured a

whole vial the month before, not a half as you told me.” Mme. Pelletier’s voice hardened. “You started poisoning him then?”

Anna looked away. “It didn’t make him very sick.”

“You added the arsenic to the cake I made, too, didn’t you?”

“It was easy enough to pry open the box and reseal it after. I thought that he’d die in Paris.” Anna swallowed. “I hoped we’d never see him again.”

“Did you want me to be blamed?” Mme. Pelletier asked, sounding more curious than indignant. “Did you hope that I would be imprisoned, even executed?”

“No! When I saw you sprinkle the gum arabic on his food, I thought maybe it was keeping the poison from working. I asked mother about its purpose.” Anna sighed. “I didn’t expect that she would summon the doctor.”

Mme. Pelletier nodded. “I see.”

“He was a monster!” Anna exclaimed. “I hated what he did to my parents—and to me.” She rubbed the arm that he had broken when she was fifteen. She looked at Mme. Pelletier. “Why did you not tell on me?”

“As you say, he was a monster. I’d hardly turn on someone who had rid me of such a menace. Besides, I only had my suspicions. I could scarcely believe such a thing of you. Of your mother or father, perhaps.”

Anna’s heart lurched in her chest. “Will they be arrested?”

“Unlikely, given that your mother was the one who summoned the physicians. Besides, Monsieur La Rousse is convinced I am the murderess, so I don’t think he’d prosecute anyone else for the crime.” She put her lips close to Anna’s ear. “Of course, he’s not altogether wrong. I did add the rest of the arsenic to the gum arabic to finish what you had started.” She laughed when Anna’s mouth fell open. “Naturally, *I* cannot be tried again.” She stood up. “I am leaving now, to take up residence in Paris. As you can imagine, I am quite in demand now.”

“What will become of us?” Anna asked.

“I will sell the estate to pay off my husband’s debts, including the back wages due your family, with a special bequest to *you*.” Leaning down, she kissed Anna’s cheeks. “*Ma chérie*, this shall remain our secret. Let us hope our paths do not cross again.”

Anna frowned. “Shall I make you a meal before your journey?”

Mme. Pelletier smiled slightly. “I think not, my dear. I think not.”

HISTORICAL NOTE

The assize proceedings described in this short story were simplified for the sake of brevity and readability. In a French court of assizes, the President of the Court oversees the proceedings and is assisted by two *assesseurs*, or associate judges. In researching contemporary newspaper accounts and scholarly medical journals from the time period, which detailed similar criminal cases, I found that most only alluded to the President, referring to him commonly as the Judge, so I adhered to the same practice in this story.

S.C.

