

THE DE SADE family had a long and noble history with one infamous exception, the Count Donatien Alphonse François, otherwise known as the Marquis de Sade. This 18th century author of scandalous novels had so shamed the family that they were still recovering 200 years later. So, when Professor Petit knocked on their door, claiming that their ancestor might have had a medical reason behind his sexual ravings, the de Sades were intrigued.

"There was a chemical imbalance in his brain," the bald, bespectacled professor said emphatically. "I've studied all the records from the asylums where he spent so much of his life. Now if I could just examine his private papers. They will confirm my theory."

"His private papers?" The current count frowned. "I'm afraid not. The family has done its best to keep his papers out of public hands. We once allowed a scholar into the bank vault to examine them. A month later, a newly discovered de Sade letter appeared at an auction house. Sold for quite a lot. We knew he'd stolen it. But we own thousands of these disgusting documents, very few of them cataloged. We couldn't prove it was ours."

The professor was crestfallen. And then he had an idea. "I can do my work right in the bank vault. Then every day as I leave, a guard can search me from head to foot."

Georges, the count's elder son, objected. "This is a trick. He's a thief, just like the other. The second he sees some document he can't live without, he'll stuff it up his sleeve."

Antoine, the younger son, disagreed. "Let's do it. If he can prove that the man who gave our family name to sadism was clinically ill, wouldn't that be worth a slight risk?"

The count agreed with Antoine and on the next Monday, the research began. Every morning, a guard at the Banque de Paris searched the professor, then ushered him into an inner room of the bank's highly secured vault. There he locked the professor inside with his briefcase and his lunch in a paper sack. Six hours later, the professor exited the vault and was searched again—lunch sack, briefcase, everything.

On Wednesday, the professor made an astonishing discovery. On Thursday, he showed it to the family. The guard did his usual job of searching the professor, then led him and the three de Sades into the vault's inner room. "Here," the professor said proudly and pointed to a letter, yellow with age but impeccably preserved.

"From Napoléon Bonaparte," Antoine said in awe. "To the marquis." The family huddled around the small page of newspaper. "Asking the marquis's advice about Napoléon's personal relationship with Joséphine. Amazing. This is worth a fortune."

The professor smiled. "The Emperor Napoléon asking the Marquis de Sade for romantic advice? I can't wait to publish this."

The count's embarrassment was mixed with pride. He thanked Professor Petit but steadfastly refused permission to reprint or sell the letter.

"Did you see the way he drooled?" Georges muttered as they left. "He knows the family will never part with it. We have to take precautions." That same day, Georges hired a private detective to check into the professor's background. He also warned the guard to be extra vigilant in his searches.

It was early the following Monday that the family received a report. "Professor Petit seems genuine," the detective informed them. "He is poor, even for a scholar. Although . . ." The detective cleared his throat. "Last Friday, his neighbors say he treated everyone to drinks at the neighborhood brasserie. They say he was spending quite freely."

"Friday?" Antoine said. "That's the day after he showed us the Napoléon letter."

"How did he suddenly get money?" the count asked. Before anyone could speculate, the phone rang. It was from the bank.

"The professor hasn't shown up this morning," the guard told them. "I telephoned his apartment, but there's no answer."

Antoine immediately set off for the professor's apartment,

while Georges rushed over to the bank. Entering the vault with the guard close behind, Georges went straight to the desk, set up in the middle of the inner room. He bent over to inspect the masses of paper. "Oh my Lord!" Turning around, he showed his find to the guard. It was the professor's calling card. On the blank side was a single handwritten word, "merci."

"Go call the police," Georges shouted. The guard obeyed, leaving Georges to search in vain for the missing letter.

As expected, the police didn't find Pierre Petit at his apartment. Hopes were not high on ever tracking down the absconding scholar. But then on Tuesday the manager of a seedy hotel in the Pigalle arrondissement unlocked Room 326 and found the professor. Strangled to death.

**Whodunit?** (1) Who killed Professor Petit? (2) Who stole the Napoleon letter? (3) How did the thief remove the letter from the vault?