Ancient Sorceries Revisited

The Classic Tales of Antiquity
Re-told Through an Erotic and Female Dominant Perspective

By
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Adapted From the Algernon Blackwood Short-Story

An SFPG Publication

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First Edition

By SFPG Publications

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Introduction

Looking back to my time as a little girl, growing up in a tiny village in the foothills leading to the Mont St Victoire, I realise that the darkness keeping me such imaginative company in the present was no less vibrant in my unformed past; a *darkness*, I firmly believe, brought about by the advanced reading age that led me (when I could access them at such an age) to those titles of a more adult nature.

Not pornographic, I hasten to add as, without being judgmental, such material is of little or no interest to me.

No, my adolescent interest was piqued by titles from writers as diverse as Dumas and Hugo to Rachilde and Pierre Louys; each of whom could be guaranteed – if only in miniature in the case of the former duo – to populate their tales with a strong female character.

Thus was my interest in reading stories with a strong commanding heroine born and, those stories being few and far between, my re-imagining of many such tales from a female-led, so to speak, perspective. A tinkering for my own pleasure that has led to the pleasure of friends (yes, I do have them and this darkness I give air to is but a necessary correlative to the decency I find imperative in my day-to-day life) and, now, and hopefully, to the pleasure of a wider range of readers with a passion for stories of strong, commanding and dominating, women who enjoy nothing more than to rule the lives of those men who fall into their toils.

Hence my revisiting of these classic tales from the masters of antiquity.

When we domesticate the imagination we lose the joy of life.

But, sometimes, our more private thoughts should *not* be acted upon and should remain either written or perceived.

But *always* as *imagination.*

Sandrine Bessancort
Honfleur
2012

Prologue

There are, it would appear, certain wholly unremarkable persons, with none of the characteristics that invite adventure, who yet undergo an experience so strange that the world catches its breath and then…

Looks the other way!

The world, of course, asks for some plausible basis to which it can attach credence—something it can, at least, pretend to explain. The adventurous type it can understand: such people carry about with them an adequate explanation of their exciting lives, and their characters obviously drive them into the circumstances which produce the adventures. It expects nothing else from them, and is satisfied. But dull, ordinary folk have no right to out-of-the-way experiences, and the world having been led to expect otherwise, is disappointed with them, not to say shocked.

Its complacent judgment has been rudely disturbed.

"Such a thing happened to *that* man!" it cries." A commonplace person like that! It is too absurd! There must be something wrong!"

Arthur Vezin was just such a man and just such a breathtaking adventure came his way so many years distant from this description of the avenue down which – despite his natural circumspection – he was led and, for all we know, still remains.

A timid, if not weak, man for whom the opposite sex held the appeal of something exotic and desirable and in having such an effect placed itself beyond the wherewithal of poor Vezin to take that necessary forward action that would bring him into contact with the objects of his… *dreams*.

The wherewithal necessary for that *"contact"* to be made wold be supplied, it turned out, by *someone* and *something* else.

For the unlikely leading man in our tale, the spying of a well-turned ankle below hour-glass hips and the swell of a full and womanly chest above; presided over by a face of character – simple prettiness did not interest him to any extent; was unlikely to lead, as it did with most men, to attempts on his part to make acquaintance with the latest damsel to take his eye. An inability to act in accordance with the time-honoured rituals governing male-female commerce that led, subsequently, and as may be expected, to ingrained bachelorhood. As well as many solitary and wistful imaginings on the subject of the fairer sex.

Though not lacking in either virility or lustful desires, Arthur Vezin found it easy to persuade himself that nature had decided he was not a kind to partake of marriage and family and looked for compensations elsewhere; a transference of energies ensuring he applied great diligence to his career and rose – if hardly dazzlingly – within the ranks of Foreign Office bureaucracy to a position of respect and responsibility, if not power.

“An adventure?” those who knew him would scoff on those rare occasions when his name came to the fore. “Vezin? Poor, commonplace, Vezin?” The laughter greeting such a preposterous assertion being, you may be assured, a general reaction. “There is a man, mark my words, who is fore-ordained to live and die according to the scale of his own excessive caution.”

But, whatever his method of death was, or is likely to be, Vezin himself certainly did not “live according to scale”.

Not, at least, so far as this particular event in his otherwise uneventful life was concerned.

To read his account of it, which is about to related to you here, is to have the pale delicate features he describes brought to life and hear his voice grow softer and more hushed as his tale proceeds. The fact, even as he writes, that he is a man under the influence who, despite knowing the nature of his affliction can no more overcome it than he could lop off his own head, is self-evident. For even a stranger to the man when reading his journal would recognise instantly that this was a man in shackles.

And shackles, moreover, of the most irrevocable kind.

The bondage of either metal or rope providing with it, at least, the hope of deliverance from that which is visible to us; while the chains certain superior creatures can fasten about the thought processes of those poor souls placed upon this earth to service their desires – those same unfortunates whose only hope of deliverance is *never* to encounter one of their number - are never tangible. And neither are they susceptible to the liberating attentions of either locksmith or saw.

The events described in his journal being made all the more curious – at least to our unlikely hero – by the fact he was already more years beyond forty when it occurred than he felt happy confiding to the less than tight-lipped care of the paper which he confided to your narrator after it had arrived upon the desk of his Foreign Office colleague – and the closest Vezin had to a friend – some time on from Vezin’s non-appearance from his yearly walking trip to northern France and the villages of its borders with Belgium.

Likewise his unfamiliarity – if not in his imagination – with the fair sex was not a lack he would feel comfortable trumpeting to the world at large. Though, it must be said, it was probably the desire for these wondrous beings, the same desire that saw itself thwarted by his natural timidity in such matters of human commerce, that led to his being delivered already in manacles and leg irons to the woman – little more than a child really – who…

Apologies.

The fault is mine and I beg your indulgence that I may compose myself.

I rush away with myself and beg your forgiveness for endangering an un-commonplace tale with commonplace impatience.

I must steel myself to concentrate on first matters first; lest I murder our story in its infancy after the fashion of those wives, mothers, sisters and girlfriends who kill a tale in its re-telling by interrupting to reveal its ending while it is yet in its infancy and, thus, kill that enjoyment to which the listener is understandably justified in anticipating and its teller happy to impart.

Thus we begin again:

I

He had been on the way home when it happened.

Arthur Vezin, that is.

Crossing back into northern France from Belgium on some hiking trip or other where he buried himself solitary-wise every summer. He had nothing but an unregistered bag in the rack, and the train was jammed to suffocation. Most of the passengers, to his dismay, being unredeemed holiday English.

His dislike of them did not stem from the fact of their being fellow-countrymen but because they were noisy and obtrusive, obliterating with their big limbs and tweed clothing all the quieter tints of the day that brought him satisfaction and enabled him to melt into insignificance and forget that he was anybody at all. These crass and unselfconscious English clashed about him like cymbals from an unrehearsed brass band and made him feel vaguely that he ought to be more self-assertive and obstreperous. That he did *not* claim insistently enough all kinds of things that he didn't want and that were really valueless, such as corner seats, windows up or down, and so forth.

So uncomfortable did he feel in the train that he wished the journey were over and he was back again living with his unmarried sister in Stockwell.

And when the train stopped for ten panting minutes at the little station in northern France, and he got out to stretch his legs on the platform, and saw to his dismay a further batch of the British Isles debouching from another train and making toward his, it suddenly seemed impossible to him to continue the journey. Even *his* flabby soul revolted, and the idea of staying a night in the little town and going on next day by a slower, emptier train, flashed into his mind.

The guard was already shouting "*en voiture*" and the corridor of his compartment was already packed when the thought came to him.

For once, he allowed the spirit of spontaneity to move him and rushed to snatch his bag.

Finding the corridor and steps impassable, he tapped at the window (for he had a corner seat) and begged the Frenchman who sat opposite to hand his luggage out to him, explaining in his wretched French that he intended to break the journey there.

The exact point, according to the journal, at which this elderly Frenchman gave him a look, half of warning, half of reproach, that to his dying day Arthur Vezin could never forget.

As the man handed the bag through the window of the moving train he managed, at the same time to pour into the ears of Vezin a long sentence.

It was spoken rapidly and low and Vezin was able to comprehend only the last few words:

"*à cause du sommeil et à cause des chats*."

Far from considering him a crank or jester, the man had impressed Vezin favourably from the beginning, though without his being able to explain why. They had sat facing one another during the four hours of the journey, and though no conversation had passed between them – for Vezin was timid about his stuttering French - he confessed that his eyes were being continually drawn to his face, almost, he felt, to rudeness, and that each, by a dozen nameless little politeness's evinced the desire to be kind. The men liked each other and their personalities did not clash, or would not have clashed had they chanced to come to terms of acquaintance.

The Frenchman, indeed, seemed to have exercised a silent protective influence over the insignificant little Englishman, and without words or gestures betrayed that he wished him well and would gladly have been of service to him. Which, perhaps, was precisely the intent behind his strange sentence of what Vezin could only take as words of warning.

"À cause du sommeil et à cause des chats'?"

"Because of sleep and because of the cats," runs Vezin's own helpful little translation.

But the rest of the sentence - all the first part – Vezin could not understand. Just snatches. A warning not to do something. Not to stop in the town? Or at some particular place in the town, perhaps?

That was the impression it made upon him before, fatefully and before he could question the elderly French gentleman further, the train rushed off and left Vezin standing on the platform alone and rather forlorn, before, with nothing by way of another option, he hefted his bag from the platform and turned towards the town.

More than just the town alone, though he could be forgiven for not knowing it at this time, he turned towards his… *destiny*.

II

The little town the French gent had appeared to be warning him of climbed in straggling fashion up a sharp hill rising out of the plain at the back of the station. A hill crowned by the twin towers of the ruined cathedral peeping over the summit. From the station itself it looked uninteresting and modern, but the fact was that the mediaeval position lay out of sight just beyond the crest. And once he reached the top and entered the old streets, he stepped clean out of modern life into a bygone century.

The noise and bustle of the crowded train seemed days away and, so soothing did the normally circumspect Vezin find his surroundings, it was not long before the words of his older companion receded to the lower level of his memory where we, to our cost, bury those items likely to inconvenience that pleasure we take in the moment.

The spirit of this silent hill-town, remote from tourists and motor-cars, dreaming its own quiet life under the autumn sun, rose up and cast its spell upon him. Long before he recognised this spell he acted under it. He walked softly, almost on tiptoe, down the winding narrow streets where the gables all but met over his head, and he entered the doorway of the solitary inn with a deprecating and modest demeanour that was in itself an apology for intruding upon the place and disturbing its dream.

At first, though, Vezin noticed very little of all this. The attempt at analysis came much later. What struck him then was only the delightful contrast of the silence and peace after the dust and noisy rattle of the train. He felt soothed and stroked like a cat.

“À cause du sommeil et à cause des chats'?”

He had laughed at himself as he sensed the warmth and the stillness and the comfort of the place make him purr almost.

It seemed to be the general mood of the whole place.

Then.

The inn, a rambling ancient house, the atmosphere of the old coaching days still about it, apparently did not welcome him too warmly. He felt he was only tolerated, he said. But it was cheap and comfortable, and the delicious cup of afternoon tea he ordered at once made him feel really very pleased with himself for leaving the train in this bold, original way. For to him it had seemed bold and original. He felt something of a dog. His room, too, soothed him with its dark panelling and low irregular ceiling, and the long sloping passage that led to it seemed the natural pathway to a real Chamber of Sleep—a little dim cubby hole out of the world where noise could not enter.

It looked upon the courtyard at the back.

It was all very charming, and made him think of himself as dressed in very soft velvet somehow, and the floors seemed padded, the walls provided with cushions. The sounds of the streets could not penetrate there. It was an atmosphere of absolute rest that surrounded him.

On engaging the two-franc room he had interviewed the only person who seemed to be about that sleepy afternoon, an elderly waiter in possession of Dundreary whiskers with a somewhat beaten look about him and what Vezin could only describe to himself as a kind of *"fearful courtesy"*. The man had ambled lazily towards him across the stone yard; but on coming downstairs again for a little promenade in the town before dinner the man was gone and Vezin encountered the proprietress herself.

A woman who made an *immediate* impression upon him.

This was a *large* woman. A woman, moreover, whose hands, feet, and features seemed to swim towards him out of a sea of person. They *emerged*, so to speak - though she had great dark, vivacious eyes that counteracted the bulk of her body, and betrayed the fact that in reality she was both vigorous and alert.

To his immense surprise he also decribed her to himself as… *erotic*. A description a certain… *disturbance*… beneath his walking-trousers could do nothing to contradict.

A *disturbance* experienced as his face reddened and he felt certain somehow that the large lady regarding him was aware of her… *effect*… upon him.

When he first caught sight of her she was sitting in a low chair against the sunlight of the wall and something at once made him see her as a great tabby cat. Dozing yet awake. Heavily sleepy and yet at the same time prepared for instantaneous action. A great mouser on the watch occurred to him.

And yet, for all her bulk, her effect upon him in… *that*… way was - no avenue of denial being open to him given his response to her – as galvanic as it was shaming.

She took him in with a single comprehensive glance that was polite without being cordial and seemed to understand exactly the nature of her effect upon him. Her neck, he noticed, was extraordinarily supple in spite of its proportions, for it turned so easily to follow him. The head carried by that neck nodded in his direction with contradictory flexibility given the size of its owner if without, he took in, anything resembling deference towards a prospective guest.

But when she looked at him - Vezin confided to his journal in such a way one can almost see that little apologetic smile in his brown eyes for *that* which had risen, thankfully unseen, to greet her – he felt her presence make entry into the secure vault that was his inner soul and busy herself in the discovery of those little nooks and crannies with which even he himself was, thus far, unfamiliar.

Along with the faintly deprecating gesture of the shoulders that was characteristic of him, the odd notion came to him that really she had intended to make quite a different movement, and that with a single bound she could have leapt at him across the width of that stone yard and pounced upon him like some huge cat upon a mouse.

A prospect that both horrified him and, for reasons unknown or not, infused his cheeks with yet more colour as the response at his groin became more urgent and, he could only pray - despite the uncomfortable suspicion she already knew of his… *difficulty* - remained hidden beneath the folds of his jacket.

Very soft and yet very active she was, for all her size and mass, and Vezin felt she knew what he was doing even after he had passed and was behind her back.

She spoke to him and her voice was smooth and running as she asked after his luggage and if he was comfortable in his room.

Vezin, even at this early stage of his acquaintance with the woman and struggling with the disturbance below decks his first sight of her had compelled, was finding it difficult to find his voice and realised he felt……

Intimidated.

"Dinner is at seven o'clock," she told him in perfect English, swivelling upon her chair to fix him with eyes that seemed to say they had mapped the very contours of his unadventurous soul and now had his measure. "We are very early people in this little country town and we value order and discipline greatly."

At the word *"discipline"*, Vezin noted she had paused a moment before finishing her sentence, almost as if she intended him to take some lesson from the word.

"I… I am an early person myself, hmm, Madame," he told her, barely able to meet her eye as she continued to drink him in with what he felt was an all-knowing appraisal that was most chilling to him, given what he was hiding beneath jacket and, more crucially, trousers. "I'm sure you will find me most… most… obedient to your ways."

The word *"obedient"* had come from nowhere and Vezin, who had intended to use quite another, was made all the more perplexed when the face of the proprietress broke into a smile that seemed, he could not help but admit, even as he described himself as fanciful… *triumphant*.

"That is good to hear, my man," she told him in a familiar way he felt most unbecoming from host to guest but was far too in awe of the large woman to take her to task on account of it. "Obedient men are always welcome here and you will soon find yourself much valued."

Vezin was still wondering what on earth she could possibly mean when she added:

"If you stay with us, of course, that is."

There was a smugness to her as she added this afterthought that gave Vezin the impression she was in no doubt a stay of some duration would indeed be his decision of choice.

By voice and manner she seemed to give him the impression that here he would be "managed," and that everything would be arranged and planned for him.

He, Arthur Vezin, would have nothing to do but fall into the groove and obey. No decided action or sharp personal effort would be looked for from him.

All this he felt as he bid his proprietress a bon jour and went off to explore the town, amazed already at the out of character… *illogicality*… of his thoughts and soon putting it down to the strange words of the elderly French gentleman and *nothing* more tangible.

The monstrous erection (for, despite his lack of success with the ladies, Vezin was not a *small* man) he attempted to put to the back of the mind the moment it subsided to a dimension not so demanding of his attentions and so debilitating to his thought processes.

The town, to this quiet, contemplative and unassuming man, was the very reverse of the train and, as he walked quietly out into the street, he felt soothed and peaceful; the puzzlement and discomfort of his encounter with his proprietress swiftly receding to little more than a vaguely troubling and barely audible buzz at the back of his skull.

It took no time at all for him to realise that he was in a *milieu* that suited him and stroked him the right way. He felt, in fact, as if he purred and that all the town purred along with him.

About the streets of that little town he meandered gently, falling deeper and deeper into the spirit of repose that characterised it. With no special aim he wandered up and down, and to and fro. The autumn sunshine fell slantingly over the roofs. Down winding alleyways, fringed with tumbling gables and open casements, he caught fairylike glimpses of the great plain below, and of the meadows and yellow copses lying like a dream-map in the haze. The spell of the past held very potently here, he felt.

The streets were full of picturesquely garbed men and women, all busy enough, going their respective ways; but no one took any notice of him or turned to stare at his obviously English appearance. He was even able to forget that with his tourist appearance he was a false note in a charming picture, and he melted more and more into the scene, feeling delightfully insignificant and unimportant and unselfconscious. It was like becoming part of a softly coloured dream which he did not even realise to be a dream, though it did strike him as odd – only a little, mind, as it was not so pronounced as to be entirely obvious – that the activity he witnessed about him was all accomplished by the men while the women…

There was no other way he could describe it to himself.

…*supervised*.

It was a small oddity, however, and one he did not connect to his still fresh experience with the proprietress.

Yet.

On the eastern side the hill fell away more sharply, and the plain below ran off rather suddenly into a sea of gathering shadows in which the little patches of woodland looked like islands and the stubble fields like deep water.

Here he strolled along the old ramparts of ancient fortifications that once had been formidable, but now were only vision-like with their charming mingling of broken grey walls and wayward vine and ivy. From the broad coping on which he sat for a moment, level with the rounded tops of clipped plane trees, he saw the esplanade far below lying in shadow.

Here and there a yellow sunbeam crept in and lay upon the fallen yellow leaves, and from the height he looked down and saw that the townsfolk were walking to and fro in the cool of the evening. He could just hear the sound of their slow footfalls, and the murmur of their voices floated up to him through the gaps between the trees. The figures looked like shadows as he caught glimpses of their quiet movements far below and, again, the fact it was only the female voices he heard and not those of the men accompanying them struck him as only mildly odd.

After all, was it not well known to all nations – and even to one with as little experience of them as he – that the fair sex enjoyed the sound of its own chitter-chatter.

Smiling to himself at thoughts that calmed him somehow and made the situation seem somehow more… *natural…* he sat there for some time pondering, bathed in the waves of murmurs and half-lost echoes that rose to his ears, muffled by the leaves of the plane trees.

The whole town, and the little hill out of which it grew as naturally as an ancient wood, seemed to him like a being lying there half asleep on the plain and crooning to itself as it dozed.

And, presently, as he sat lazily melting into its dream, a sound of horns and strings and wood instruments rose to his ears, and the town band began to play at the far end of the crowded terrace below to the accompaniment of a very soft but deep-throated drum.

Vezin, you should understand, was very sensitive to music and knew about it intelligently. He had even ventured, to such acquaintances as he kept, upon the composition of quiet melodies with low-running chords which he played to himself with the soft pedal when no one was about; so this music floating up through the trees from an invisible and doubtless very picturesque band of the townspeople wholly charmed him. He recognised nothing that they played, and it sounded as though they were simply improvising without a conductor and with no definitely marked time running through the pieces - pieces which ended and began oddly after the fashion of wind through an Aeolian harp.

It was, he told himself, part of the place and scene, just as the dying sunlight and faintly breathing wind were part of the scene and hour, and the mellow notes of old-fashioned plaintive

horns, pierced here and there by the sharper strings, all half smothered by the continuous booming of the deep drum, touched his soul with a curiously potent spell that was almost too engrossing to be quite pleasant.

There was a certain queer sense of bewitchment in it all. The music seemed to him oddly… *organic*… and made him think of trees swept by the wind, of night breezes singing among wires and chimney-stacks, or in the rigging of invisible ships.

Similes leapt up in his thoughts with a sudden sharpness of suggestion:

A chorus of animals, of wild creatures, somewhere in desolate places of the world, crying and singing as animals will, to the moon, seemed to assail him.

He could fancy he heard what sounded to him like the wailing, half-human, cries of cats upon the tiles at night, rising and falling with weird intervals of sound, and this music, muffled by distance and the trees, made him think of a queer company of these creatures on some roof far away in the sky, uttering their solemn music to one another and the moon in chorus.

It was, he felt at the time, a singular image to occur to him, yet it expressed his sensation pictorially better than anything else. The instruments played such impossibly odd intervals, and the crescendos and diminuendos were so very suggestive of cat-land on the tiles at night, rising swiftly, dropping without warning to deep notes again, and all in such strange confusion of discords and accords. But, at the same time a plaintive sweetness resulted on the whole, and the discords of these half-broken instruments were so singular that they did not distress his musical soul like fiddles out of tune.

He listened a long time, wholly surrendering himself as his character was, and then strolled homewards in the dusk as the air grew chilly.

All earlier presentiments such as those experienced in the presence of the large proprietress and the intensity of his… *sexual*... reaction to her were forgotten as his stirred imagination caused other impressions. For, as he walked back to his lodgings, the spell of the place began to steal over him in a dozen, all intelligible, ways – even if there were other things – minor things - he could not account for in the least during the early stages of his visit.

Barely incidents, really, and no more when he gave thought to it than a lot of vivid sensations crowding in upon his mind for which he could trace no cause.

It was just after sunset and the tumbled old buildings traced magical outlines against an opalescent sky of gold and red. The dusk was running down the twisted streets. All round the hill the plain pressed in like a dim sea, its level rising with the darkness. The spell of this kind of scene had always moved Vezin and it was so that night. Yet he would later say that what came to him had nothing directly to do with the mystery and wonder of the scene itself.

And certainly not the subtle transformations of the spirit that come with beauty.

No.

The impressions came from somewhere else.

For instance, down the busy main street where men and women were bustling home from work, shopping at stalls and barrows, idly gossiping in groups, and all the rest of it, and Vezin saw that he aroused no interest and that no one turned to stare at him as a foreigner and stranger.

He was, in fact, utterly ignored, and his presence among them excited no special interest or attention.

And then, quite suddenly, it dawned upon him with an unshakable conviction that all the time this indifference and inattention to his presence was merely feigned.

Everybody as a matter of fact was watching him closely.

Especially the women.

Every movement he made was known and observed by them and ignoring him was all a pretence.

An *elaborate* pretence."

He asked himself how he *knew* this and soon gave it up as useless. But the *fact* of this female scrutiny of him remained in his head – even if it could not be explained. It was a discovery that gave him something of a shock but, before he got back to the inn, another curious thing rose up strongly in his mind and forced a recognition of it as true.

This too, it must be said at once, being equally inexplicable to him.

Vezin had been in a shop when it came to him first - though the idea must have been at work for a long time subconsciously to appear in so complete a form all at once.

He had wandered in to buy socks with his dreadful French, when it struck him that the woman in the shop did not care two pins whether he bought anything or not.

She was indifferent whether she made a sale or did not make a sale.

She was, he felt convinced, only pretending to sell.

It was to be this very small and fanciful incident that created the spark that lit the line of powder and ran along to the big blaze in his mind.

The whole town, he suddenly realised, was something other than he had so far seen it and the real activities and interests of the people were elsewhere and otherwise than appeared.

Their true lives lay somewhere out of sight behind the scenes. Their busy-ness was but the outward semblance that masked their actual purposes. They bought and sold, and ate and drank, and walked about the streets, yet all the while the main stream of their existence lay somewhere beyond Vezin's ken, underground, in secret places.

And that *whole* existence was driven by the women.

In the shops and at the stalls they did not care whether he purchased their articles or not.

At the inn, they were indifferent to his staying or going and their life lay remote from his own, springing from hidden, mysterious sources, coursing out of sight, unknown.

And yet, for all their seeming indifference to his person, he knew he was watched, and followed, and, incredible as it first appeared to him… *coveted.*

It was all a great elaborate pretence. Assumed for his benefit. Or possibly for purposes of their own.

Though what purposes they could be was a feat of divination beyond his, as we have touched upon, straitened imaginative capacities.

What he was sure of, however, was that the main current of their energies ran elsewhere and he almost felt as an unwelcome foreign substance might be expected to feel when it has found its way into the human system and the whole body organises itself to either eject or absorb it.

The town and its people… the town and its *women*… were doing this very thing to him.

It was this bizarre notion that presented itself forcibly to his mind as he retraced his steps back to the inn, wondering wherein the true life of this town could lie and what were the actual interests and activities of its hidden life.

And, now that his eyes were partly opened, he noticed other things too that puzzled him.

The first of those things being the extraordinary silence of the whole place.

The town was positively muffled and, although the streets were paved with cobbles, the people moved about silently, softly, with padded feet, like cats.

Nothing made noise.

All was hushed, subdued, muted. The very voices were quiet, low-pitched like purring. Nothing clamorous, vehement or emphatic seemed able to live in the drowsy atmosphere of soft dreaming that soothed this little hill-town into its sleep. It was like the woman at the inn—an outward repose screening intense inner activity and purpose.

Demonic purpose?

Yet, and despite the above, there was no sign of lethargy or sluggishness anywhere to be observed.

The men, for instance, were active and alert.

Yet…

Their fecundity was transmuted into something less frantic by a kind of magical and uncanny softness that lay over them all like a spell.

At this point, I think we may imagine Vezin passing his hand across his eyes for a moment as though the memory had become very vivid, pen laid down as if the telling of such a bizarre story was a task he both liked and hated.

When he returned to the inn and dined, he felt a new strange world about him.

The old world of a trusted, if rather dull, reality had receded. Here, whether he liked it or no, was something new and incomprehensible and he regretted having left the train so impulsively. All his senses told him an adventure was imminent and Arthur Vezin loathed adventures as foreign to his nature.

Moreover, this was the beginning apparently of an adventure somewhere deep within him, and in a region he could neither check nor measure.

The peace and tranquillity he had experienced earlier had vanished entirely by now and a feeling of alarm mingled itself with his wonder - alarm for the stability of what he had for forty years recognised as his *'personality'*.

That night in bed, he dreamed of cats, and soft-moving creatures, and the silence of life in a dim muffled world beyond the senses.

He dreamed also of his proprietress.

And, after he had finished *dreaming* of her, he felt ashamed.

More troublingly, he felt… *disturbed*.

III

Despite his concerns and an underlying intent to leave, Vezin stayed on from day to day.

Much, much longer than he had intended.

He felt in a kind of dazed, somnolent condition. He did nothing in particular, but the place fascinated him and he could not decide to leave. Decisions were always very difficult for him and he sometimes wondered how he had ever brought himself to the point of leaving the train. It seemed as though someone else must have arranged it for him, and once or twice his thoughts ran to the elderly Frenchman who had sat opposite.

If only he could have understood that long sentence ending so strangely with "*à cause du sommeil et à cause des chats*."

He wondered what it all meant.

Meanwhile the hushed softness of the town held him prisoner and he sought in his muddling, gentle way to find out where the mystery lay, and what it was all about. But his limited French and his constitutional hatred of active investigation made it hard for him to buttonhole anybody and ask questions. He was content to observe, and watch, and remain negative.

"You are very quiet," his proprietress told him one morning after he had eaten an excellent breakfast. "Very respectful. It is something we women here value in our men and I, for one, find excellent."

She had walked away after that and saved him the necessity of a reply – had he been capable of framing one – and it was only later that he would ponder the strangeness of her remarks.

Why, after all, would he, as a well brought up Englishman, *not* be respectful to a member of the fair-sex?

At the time of her remark, however, the monstrous and inexplicable erection that tented his trouser-front and prevented him rising from the breakfast table – the same erection this immensely large woman inspired in him upon all their meetings – ensured coherent thought at that moment was beyond the grasp of faculties struggling with competing, and more imperative, sensations.

And still, in the town, in that hotel and in his charming little room, presided over by a proprietress who had a most puzzling, not to mention unfortunate, effect upon him - and despite vague if growing misgivings - he remained. The weather held on calm and hazy, and this just suited him. He wandered about the town till he knew every street and alley. The people suffered him to come and go without let or hindrance, though it became clearer to him every day that he was never free himself from observation.

The town watched him as a cat watches a mouse – though it struck him that the men observed him in a way different to the women.

Were he forced to put a name to the nature of their scrutiny he would have been obliged to describe it as a mixture of envy and… *pity*.

Almost, it seemed to him, as if they were captured birds of paradise forced to live out their lives with an ankle tethered to the perch, envying him his liberty even as they felt pity for what he had in front of him and the cage that awaited only his presence inside it before it was slammed shut behind him to secure against his freedom.

And still he got no nearer to finding out what they were all so busy with or where the main stream of their activities lay.

This remained hidden.

The people, he thought, with a metaphor he could only imagined was inspired by the warning of the Frenchman of the train, were as soft and mysterious as cats.

Hidden purpose or not, that he was continually under observation became more evident from day to day.

For instance, when he strolled to the end of the town and entered a little green public garden beneath the ramparts and seated himself upon one of the empty benches in the sun, he was quite alone.

At first.

Not another seat was occupied; the little park was empty, the paths deserted. Yet, within ten minutes of his coming, there must have been fully twenty persons scattered about him, some strolling aimlessly along the gravel walks, staring at the flowers, and others seated on the wooden benches enjoying the sun like himself.

Most of them women.

None of these females appeared to take any notice of him; yet he understood quite well they had all come there to watch - to keep him under close observation. In the street they had seemed busy enough, hurrying upon various errands or supervising the men. The same men who, Vezin could not help but think, appeared to be at their disposal and in their charge, so deferential, almost frightened did they seem of these wives, lovers and acquaintances who seemed to govern their daily existence. The moment he found himself alone, however, the activity with which he had seen these women engaged upon not moments before was suddenly forgotten and of no moment as they decided there was nothing to prevent them from lolling and lazing in the sun along with him – if not, *with* him - their duties unremembered.

Minutes after he left, the garden would again find itself deserted and its seats vacant.

But in the crowded street it was the same thing again. He was *never* alone.

Even on the few occasions he was away from their sight he sensed he was *ever* in their thoughts.

By degrees, too, he began to see how it was he was so cleverly watched, yet without the appearance of it.

The people did nothing *directly*.

They behaved *obliquely*.

In fact, he laughed in his mind as the thought thus clothed itself in words, for the phrase exactly described it. They looked at him from angles which naturally should have led their sight in another direction altogether, movements oblique and stealthy even as they took immense pains to ensure they appeared… *natural*. The straight, direct thing was not their way evidently.

They did *nothing* obviously.

If he entered a shop to buy, the woman walked instantly away and busied herself with something at the farther end of the counter, though answering at once when he spoke, showing that she knew he was there and that this was only her way of attending to him.

This, it struck him – thoughts again returning to the feline - it was the fashion of the cat she followed.

Even in the dining-room of the inn, the be-whiskered and courteous waiter, lithe and silent in all his movements – if somewhat… *agitated.*.. when performing his duties under the eye of the proprietress - never seemed able to come straight to his table for an order or a dish. He came by zigzags. Indirectly. Vaguely. So *obliquely* that he appeared to be going to another table altogether and only turned suddenly at the last moment to turn a smile upon Vezin that seemed to the Englishman like a warning and a cry for help at one and the same time.

We can imagine Vezin smile curiously to himself as he described how he began to realize these things for his journal – at least in the early stages of its composition.

Of other tourists?

There were none in the hostel, but he recalled the figures of one or two old men, inhabitants, who took their meals there, recalling how fantastically they entered the room in a similar serpentining fashion to the waiter. First, they paused in the doorway, peering about the room, and then, after a temporary inspection, they came in, as it were, sideways, keeping close to the walls so that he wondered which table they were making for, and at the last minute making almost a little quick run to their particular seats.

And again he thought of the ways and methods of cats.

Other small incidents, too, impressed him as all part of this queer, soft town with its muffled, indirect life.

Not least the way some of the people appeared and disappeared with extraordinary swiftness, leaving him bereft of any clue or idea as to where they had vanished to or how they had been able to effect such a miraculous vanishing act.

This, as it would for any of us, puzzled him exceedingly.

It may have been all perfectly natural, he knew, yet he could not make it out how the alleys swallowed them up and shot them forth in a second of time when there were no visible doorways or openings near enough to explain the phenomenon. Once he followed two elderly women who, he felt, had been particularly examining him from across the street—quite near the inn this was—and saw them turn the corner a few feet only in front of him. Yet when he sharply followed on their heels he saw nothing but an utterly deserted alley stretching in front of him with no sign of a living thing.

And the only opening through which they could have escaped was a porch some fifty yards away, which not the swiftest human runner could have reached in time before he was upon the scene and espied them making their getaway.

In just such a sudden fashion also, people appeared - and when he never expected them.

And, again, from locations that were remained a complete mystery to him

Once when he heard a great noise of fighting going on behind a low wall, and hurried up to see what was going on, what should he see but a group of girls and women engaged in vociferous conversation which instantly hushed itself to the normal whispering note of the town when his head appeared over the wall. And even then none of them turned to look at him directly, but slunk off with the most unaccountable rapidity into doors and sheds across the yard. And their voices, he thought, had sounded so like, so strangely like, the angry snarling of fighting animals.

You will not be surprised of the identity of the animal springing to Vezin’s mind.

Nor its gender.

The whole spirit of the town, however, continued to evade him as something elusive, protean, screened from the outer world, and at the same time intensely, genuinely vital.

An evasion that, since he now formed part of its life, that puzzled him not half as much as it irritated him.

Worse:

It began rather to frighten him.

Out of the mists that slowly gathered about his ordinary surface thoughts, there rose again the idea that the inhabitants – the *female* inhabitants - were waiting for him to declare himself, to take an attitude, to do this, or to do that; and that when he had done so they in turn would at length make a direct response, accepting or rejecting him.

Yet how he could be expected to divine exactly what form such a declaration should take – and he was entirely unsure if he wished to make such a commitment anyhow – without being given neither word nor hint on the course of action expected from him.

Once or twice he purposely followed little processions or groups of the citizens in order to find out, if possible, on what purpose they were bent; but they always discovered him and dwindled away, each woman going her own individual way.

And going their individual way with a man in tow, walking, in a bastardisation of Eastern protocol, a respectful three or four paces behind either wife, mother, girlfriend, sister or acquaintance.

It was always the same: he never could learn what their main interest was. The cathedral was ever empty, the old church of St. Martin, at the other end of the town, deserted. They shopped because they had to, and not because they wished to. The booths stood neglected, the stalls unvisited, the little *cafés* desolate. Yet the streets were always full, the townsfolk ever on the bustle.

"Can it be," he thought to himself on one occasion, yet with a deprecating laugh that he should have dared to think anything so odd, *"can it be that these people are people of the twilight, that they live only at night their real life, and come out honestly only with the dusk? That during the day they make a sham though brave pretence, and after the sun is down their true life begins? Have they the souls of night-things, and is the whole blessed town in the hands of the cats?"*

The fancy somehow electrified him with little shocks of shrinking and dismay.

He affected to laugh and tell himself that the respect, deference and, indeed, *obedience*, he saw extended to the women of the town from its menfolk was nothing more than evidence of a local custom of gentility and respect more than a few towns back home in England could benefit from copying.

Yet he knew that he was beginning to feel more than uneasy. Strange forces, both frightening and, he could do no more than confess though it shamed his propriety to confess to it, *erotic*, were tugging with a thousand invisible cords at the very centre of his being. Something utterly remote from his ordinary life, something unsuspected in the recess of a soul unused to either dark or adventurous thoughts and dreams, began faintly to stir in his soul, sending feelers abroad into his brain and heart, shaping queer thoughts and penetrating even into certain of his minor actions.

Without even the necessity of framing the feeling with unspoken words, he felt certain that something exceedingly vital to himself, to his soul, hung in the balance for as long as he remained in the town.

He felt as if the event or person who would decide his fate would soon be revealed and, though he felt fearful enough of such a prospect to pack his few belongings and repair to the station, it was as if the weight and grasp of an all-powerful metaphysical hand had him by the wrist to prevented any intention on his behalf of leaving.

His fate, he would soon discover, and the event or person deciding it, would not be long in revealing itself.

And then he would know *real* fear.

Amongst other sensations.

IV

It was, he recalled in his journal, on the fifth day of his stay - though in this detail his story sometimes varied - that he made a definite discovery which increased his alarm and brought him up to a rather sharp climax.

Before that he had already noticed that a change was going forward and certain subtle transformations being brought about in his character which modified several of his minor habits. And he had affected to ignore them. Here, however, was something he could no longer ignore; and it startled him.

At the best of times he was never very positive, always negative rather, compliant and acquiescent; yet, when necessity arose he was capable of reasonably vigorous action and could take a strong-ish decision.

The discovery he *now* made that brought him up with such a sharp turn was that this power had positively dwindled to nothing and he found it impossible to make up his mind.

No matter how great his desire or how hard he tried.

For, on this fifth day, he realised that he had stayed long enough in the town and that for reasons he could only vaguely define to himself it was wiser *and safer* that he should leave.

Which was when, of course, he found that he could not leave!

This was the state of impotence he had reached. All the spying and watching had, as it were, spun a net about his feet so that he was trapped and powerless to escape. He felt like a fly that had blundered into the intricacies of a great web; he was caught, imprisoned, and could not get away. It was a distressing sensation. A numbness had crept over his will till it had become almost incapable of decision. The mere thought of vigorous action - action towards escape - began to terrify him.

It seemed to poor unworldly Vezin as though a window deep within his being would presently open and reveal an entirely new world.

"Is this why they wait and watch?" he had asked himself with rather a shaking heart, *"for the time when I shall join them—or refuse to join them? Does the decision rest with me after all, and not with them?"*

And it was at this point that the sinister character of the adventure first really declared itself, and he became genuinely alarmed.

The stability of his rather fluid little personality was at stake, he felt, and something in his heart turned coward.

Why otherwise should he have suddenly taken to walking stealthily, silently, making as little sound as possible, forever looking behind him?

Why else should he have moved almost on tiptoe about the passages of the practically deserted inn, and when he was abroad have found himself deliberately taking advantage of what cover presented itself?

And why, if he was not afraid, should the wisdom of staying indoors after sundown have suddenly occurred to him as eminently desirable?

Why, indeed?

"It is," he had told himself, *"simply that I fear something might happen to me unless I keep a sharp look-out."*

Finding himself unable to leave, though he wished for nothing more, the thoughts he once scoffed at in himself as no more than the paranoia induced by finding himself in an unfamiliar town in a land of which he was not native, became both more frequent and more powerful. He got the impression that the whole town – the female part of it, at least - was after him. It – *they* - wanted something and they got it from him he should lose himself.

Or at least the *Self* he knew.

He was, however, not a psychologist and could describe his fears to him with no greater knowledge and insight.

Though events were about to provide this insight – even if it would bring him no closer to an understanding.

It was while lounging in the courtyard half an hour before the evening meal, as Vezin pondered his situation and the powerlessness that seemed to prevent him removing his person from it, that Vezin felt goose-bumps of fear appear upon the back of his neck. Fear so disabling, and for no apparent reason, that he at once went upstairs to his quiet room at the end of the winding passage to think it over alone. The yard itself was empty and secure enough, true, but there was always the possibility that the big woman whom he dreaded would come out of some door and sit watching him.

It had happened on several occasions and on each of them his body had betrayed him in her presence that he was unable to move from his own seat for the fear she would notice his… *excitement.*

And yet the smug look – she alone of the town's women seemed willing to meet his eyes – the proprietress fixed upon him seemed to say she knew of the effect she had upon him and enjoyed her capacity to induce it.

As mentioned, this had happened several times, and he could not endure the sight of her; still remembering as he did his original fancy, bizarre though it was, that she would spring upon him the moment his back was turned and land with one single crushing leap upon his neck.

Nonsense, of course, but by such fanciful imagery can we haunt ourselves if we but dwell upon it long enough.

For an once an idea occurs on a regular basis it has ceased to be nonsense.

It has, in effect, clothed itself in reality.

So he had taken himself off upstairs accordingly. It was dusk, and the oil lamps had not yet been lit in the passages. He stumbled over the uneven surface of the ancient flooring, passing the dim outlines of doors and rooms along the corridor - doors that he had never once seen opened and rooms that seemed never occupied. He moved, as his habit now was, stealthily and on tiptoe.

Half-way down the last passage to his own chamber there was a sharp turn, and it was just here, while groping round the walls with outstretched hands, that his fingers touched something that was not wall—something that moved. It was soft and warm in texture, indescribably fragrant, and about the height of his shoulder; and he immediately thought of a furry, sweet-smelling kitten.

The next second, he knew, it was something quite different.

Instead of investigating, however - his nerves must have been too overwrought for that - he shrank back as closely as possible against the wall on the other side and the thing, whatever it was, slipped past him with a sound of rustling and, retreating with light footsteps down the passage behind him.

A breath of warm, scented air was wafted to his nostrils.

Vezin caught his breath for an instant and paused, stock-still, half leaning against the wall, and then almost ran down the remaining distance and entered his room with a rush, locking the door hurriedly behind him.

And yet, despite the earlier goose-bumps and presentiment of foreboding downstairs, it was not fear that made him run.

It was excitement.

Pleasurable excitement.

His nerves were tingling as a delicious glow made itself felt all over his body and, in a flash, it came to him that this was just what he had felt twenty-five years ago as a boy when he was in lust for the first time.

Warm currents of life ran all over him and mounted to his brain in a whirl of soft delight and his mood was suddenly become vibrant, alive and… *needy*.

The room was quite dark, and he collapsed upon the sofa by the window, wondering what had happened to him and what it all meant. But the only thing he understood clearly in that instant was that something in him had swiftly, magically changed. He no longer wished to leave, or to argue with himself about leaving. The encounter in the passage-way had changed all that.

The strange perfume of it still hung about him, bemusing his heart and mind.

For he knew that it was a girl who had passed him, a girl's face that his fingers had brushed in the darkness, and he felt in some extraordinary way as though he had been actually kissed by her.

Kissed *full* upon the lips.

Trembling, he sat upon the sofa by the window and struggled to collect his thoughts. He was utterly unable to understand how the mere passing of a girl in the darkness of a narrow passage-way could communicate so electric a thrill to his whole being that he still shook with the sweetness of it. Yet, there it was!

And he found it as useless to deny as to attempt analysis.

Some ancient fire had entered his veins, and now ran coursing through his blood; and that he was forty-five instead of twenty did not matter one little jot. Out of all the inner turmoil and confusion emerged the one salient fact that the mere atmosphere, the merest casual touch, of this unseen girl, unknown in the darkness, had been sufficient to stir dormant fires in the centre of his heart and rouse his whole being from a state of feeble sluggishness to one of edgy and tumultuous excitement.

After a time, however, the number of Vezin's years began to assert their cumulative power and he grew calmer – calm enough that, when a knock came at length upon his door and he heard the waiter's voice suggesting that dinner was nearly over, he pulled himself together and slowly made his way downstairs into the dining-room.

Everyone looked up as he entered, for he was very late, but he took his customary seat in the far corner and began to eat. The trepidation was still in his nerves, but the fact that he had passed through the courtyard and hall without catching sight of a petticoat served to calm him a little – though in his state of agitation he ate so fast that he had almost caught up with the current stage of the table d'hôte.

At which point a slight commotion in the room drew his attention.

His chair was so placed that the door and the greater portion of the long *salle à manger* were behind him, yet it was not necessary to turn round to know that the same person he had passed in the dark passage had now come into the room.

He felt the presence long before he heard or saw any one.

Then he became aware that the old men, the only other guests, were rising one by one in their places, and exchanging greetings with someone who passed among them from table to table.

Greetings that were, he thought, despite his lack of fluency in the French in which they were made, excessively deferential; almost as if a personage of royal lineage had graced them with its attention and they were overcome with gratitude for such unexpected attention.

Not being one for deference much, even if he placed great store by courtesy and good manners, Vezin felt his hackles rise a little at the sound of such servility.

Hackles that retreated instantly when he finally raised head from plate and turned to take in this newcomer who could spark behaviour of such a kind in two elderly and, no doubt, worldly wise gentlemen.

What he saw was the form of a young girl.

Lithe and slim.

She was moving down the centre of the room and making straight for his own table in the corner.

The breath caught in his throat.

Her eyes, from which he was quite incapable of removing his own, held him with utter confidence as walked and he felt the blood leave his face, so great was her effect upon him.

She moved wonderfully, with sinuous grace, like a young panther, and her approach filled him with such delicious bewilderment that he was utterly unable to tell at first what her face was like, or discover what it was about the whole presentment of the creature that filled him anew with trepidation and delight.

“Ah, Ma'mselle est de retour!” he heard the old waiter murmur at his side before, incredibly, bowing at the waist before this young girl who was at least a two-score and some years his junior.

Vezin was just able to tell himself that she must be the daughter of the proprietress, when she was upon him and he heard her voice.

She was addressing *him*.

Something of red lips he saw and laughing white teeth, and stray wisps of fine dark hair about the temples; but all the rest was a dream in which his own emotion rose like a thick cloud before his eyes and prevented his seeing accurately, or knowing exactly what he did. The

prettiness he had once found uninteresting in a female now acted upon him all the more powerfully for being infused with a definite and unmistakable backdrop of the *character* he *did* find appealing. He was aware of a part of him that proclaimed itself annoyed one so young could have such an effect upon a man of his advanced age. She was a number of years from reaching her first score while he, Vezin, was nearer the waiter's age. Yet, so overpowering was her effect upon him, he could neither act upon his irritation or do anything other than gaze upon her with a frank and… *desperate*… longing.

As he looked on in admiring silence, the girl greeted him with a charming little bow that lowered her beautiful large eyes so that they fair beamed into his own. The perfume he had noticed in the dark passage again assailed his nostrils as she bent a little towards him and leaning with one hand on the table at this side. An *assailment* that unmanned him with at least as powerful a facility now as it had not minutes before upstairs.

Her actions were graceful and sensuous and – again with an eye toward his age – he told himself this could be no more than her natural way rather than any attempt on her part to…

Had he not been so concerned with other competing sensations Arthur Vezin would have laughed at himself for even thinking of such a preposterous likelihood.

…An attempt on her part to… *seduce*.

Him!

She was quite close to him - that was the chief thing he knew - explaining to his barely receptive ears that she had been asking after the comfort of her mother's guests, and now was introducing herself to the latest arrival.

"M'sieur has already been here a few days," he heard the waiter say; and then her own voice, sweet as singing, replied:

"Ah, but M'sieur is not going to leave us just yet. I sense it. He wishes to stay."

At this presumption in regard of his intentions, the girl stared into Vezin's eyes with an even greater intensity so that any he thought he might have had by way of contradiction – of which he had not any – was likely to remain unspoken.

She laughed deliciously:

"Yes. I am here now and M'sieur shall be looked after in exactly the way he deserves."

Vezin, struggling with his emotion and a desire to be polite, half rose to acknowledge the pretty speech, and to stammer some sort of reply, but as he did so his hand by chance touched her own that was resting upon the table, and a shock that was for all the world like a shock of electricity, passed from her skin into his body.

His soul wavered and shook deep within him, his conscious thoughts astounded that he could be affected in such a way.

And by a girl of such an age!

He caught her eyes fixed upon his own with a look of most curious intentness, and the next moment he knew that the girl was already half-way across the room and that he was trying to eat his salad with a dessert-spoon and a knife.

Longing for her return, yet dreading it for reasons he could not quite determine – though the tenting of his trousers beneath the fortunate camouflage of a quaint gingham tablecloth offered some small explanation - he gulped down the remainder of his dinner, and then went at once to his bedroom to be alone with his thoughts.

There is enough committed to the journal in regard of his later dealings with the girl, her mother, and others, for us to allow the solitary behaviour that took place behind the locked door of his room that shamed him so much, and which he yet felt compelled to place upon paper, to go unexplored by a scrutiny made judgmental by hindsight.

Suffice it to say, that strange fancies filled his brain, and once in the room, with the door securely locked, he did not light the candles, but sat by the open window thinking long, long thoughts that came unbidden in troops to his mind before he removed his clothing, placed himself upon his back on the mattress and succumbed to the inevitable.

V

It is a either a credit to the regard for truth or a testimony to the influence under which he struggled that Vezin felt compelled to impart this part of the story to the journal – and so *vividly*.

He could not in the least understand – and to his dying day, no doubt, will remain in a state of ignorance - how the girl had managed to affect him so profoundly.

This even before he had set eyes upon her - for her mere proximity in the darkness had been sufficient to set him on fire.

And her effect upon him, he felt convinced, was only likely to become more powerful.

And in a way, he somehow sensed, that would *not* be good for him.

Arthur Vezin, as we have mentioned, knew nothing of enchantments, and for years had been a stranger to anything approaching tender relations with any member of the opposite sex, for he was encased in shyness, and realised his overwhelming defects only too well, so such attention from a *girl* of such a type could hardly fail to make him uneasy.

An intimation of foreboding that would turn out far worse for him than the diminished imagination in his possession we have also spoken of was capable of divining and, perhaps, avoiding.

Yet this bewitching young creature came to him deliberately, brought to him without any of the male tricks of seduction with which, anyway, he was a stranger. Her manner was unmistakable, and she sought him out on every possible occasion. Never less than courteous, there was, nonetheless, an imperiousness in her bearing that was hard to explain in the daughter of a simple hotel proprietress.

She was also, and undoubtedly, frankly inviting.

Unused to being the object of such admiration – if it was that, and from one so young – Vezin had found himself utterly conquered from that first contact of her shining eyes with his own – had, in fact, been in such a condition from that first meeting in the darkness of the upstairs landing and the overpowering aura of her invisible presence.

Yet, despite the obvious fact he was drawn to her, the smitten Vezin could not bring himself to describe her as *"good"* and would, sitting alone and contemplative in the sanctity of his room, acknowledge certain qualms.

In fact, so far from feeling she was a wholesome presence, a conviction grew upon him that there was something about her that was…

Unholy.

He did not describe it as impurity in any sense – though he would come to a different conclusion, but something indefinable that – as well as making him feel guilty for harbouring such uncharitable thoughts on behalf of one so young - gave him a vague sensation of… *horror*.

The girl drew him and at the same time repelled him, as if she were a Siren to his Odysseus and the hide securing him to the ship's masthead was slowly coming loose.

Nothing like it had ever come to him before or since, he had concluded with lame confusion. The closest he could come to an explanation was an enchantment of some kind. An enchantment, if his inability to leave the town even *before* the girl had put in an appearance was to be believed, that had been working upon him for some time.

At any rate, he could only admit that he would stay in that strange little haunted town for years if only he could see her every day, hear her voice, watch her wonderful movements, and sometimes, perhaps, touch her hand.

He was, without knowing it at that point, and just as the pitying looks of the town's other menfolk had suggested, *doomed*.

An explanation of wherein lays the magic of the girl who had ensnared him was totally beyond Vezin's ken and all he knew was that the mere knowledge the slip of a girl who had bewitched him was living and sleeping in the same house filled him with an extraordinary sense of delight to go with a lust that matched his delight for intensity and went beyond into realms Vezin's ultimately prosaic imagination found itself too limited to describe.

One thing he did know:

She seemed to sum up and synthesise in herself all the strange hidden forces that operated so mysteriously in the town and its inhabitants. She had the silken movements of the panther, going smoothly, silently to and fro, and the same indirect, oblique methods as the townsfolk. Screening, like them, secret purposes of her own.

Purposes he felt sure had *him* for their objective.

She kept him, to his terror and delight, ceaselessly under observation, yet so carelessly, so consummately, that another man less sensitive or less prepared by what had gone before, would never have noticed it at all. She was always still, always reposeful, yet she seemed to be everywhere at once, so that Vezin never could escape from her. He was continually meeting the stare and laughter of her great eyes, in the corners of the rooms, in the passages, calmly looking at him through the windows, or in the busiest parts of the public streets.

If, Vezin told himself, the sexual effect upon him of the mother – which, as we have seen, was impressive enough – were magnified a thousandfold it would be somewhere close to the state of near sexual hysteria to which the daughter's proximity raised him and what Vezin, in his lust, saw as their *"intimacy"*, grew very rapidly after this first encounter which so violently disturbed the little man's equilibrium.

He was naturally very prim, and prim folk live mostly in so small a world that anything violently unusual may shake them clean out of it, and they therefore instinctively distrust originality. But Vezin began to forget his primness. For, as forthright and seductive as she was with him, the girl somehow managed the effect upon Vezin of always being modestly behaved and, in so being, drew from him that behaviour more akin of his fellows when pursuing the courtship of a sweetheart.

That this *"sweetheart"* was so many years his junior and he was behaving in a way that would have made him a laughing stock with his fellows at the Foreign Office (your narrator included, perhaps) occurred and was dismissed, so pervasive was the girl's effect upon him.

"Age be damned," he had told himself, thoughts uncharacteristically vulgar. *"Why shouldn't a spirit of camaraderie spring up?"*

She was, he assured himself, young, charmingly pretty and French.

And, more to the point:

She liked him.

Never having experienced the phenomenon, Vezin knew, just the same, exactly what was happening to him.

He was falling in love.

It was as obvious to him as the slight greying at his temples that was yet another reason to make the likelihood of any liaison between them a thing of substance and deterred him not one jot.

And yet…

At the same time as he recognised the growth of his obsession and allowed it to grow (not that he had a choice in the matter), there was something indescribable, a certain indefinable atmosphere of other places, other times, that made him try hard to remain on his guard, and sometimes made him catch his breath with a sudden start. It was all rather like a delirious dream, half delight, half dread, and more than once he hardly knew quite what he was doing or saying, as though he were driven forward by impulses he scarcely recognised as his own.

Though the thought of leaving presented itself again and again to his mind, it was each time with less insistence, so that he stayed on from day to day, becoming more and more a part of the sleepy life of this dreamy mediaeval town where the women seemed to manage *everything* and the men appeared as simple instruments of their wills – both collectively and individually.

It occurred to him that he was losing more and more of his recognisable personality and soon, he felt, the Curtain within would roll up with an awful rush, and he would find himself suddenly admitted into the secret purposes of the hidden life that lay behind it all.

Only, by that time, he would have become transformed into an entirely different being who, like the pitiful excuses of manhood – as such he had come to view them – who allowed nature to be perverted so and consented to have themselves ruled petticoats and slender ankles and soft words of promise to be drawn if their behaviour was found servile enough.

And, meanwhile, he noticed the various little signs of the intention to make his stay attractive to him: flowers in his bedroom, a more comfortable arm-chair in the corner, and even special little extra dishes on his private table in the dining-room, were not so forthcoming as they had been in the early days of his stay when his enchantment had been light and other means of inducement had been required.

Conversations, too, with the mother of *"Mademoiselle Ilsé"* became more and more frequent.

Disturbingly so.

Of all the developments that troubled him the requirement to engage in dialogue with the girl's mother was the one he dreaded most. Not least because – despite the level of his passion for the daughter – the reaction that was *always* inspired whenever he was in the large woman's presence remained unabated.

Even if it was nowhere near the reaction compelled by the daughter.

Also, their conversations could not really be described in such a way.

She spoke and *he* listened.

Worse, her words were of a kind to make the most experienced of men blush and Vezin, as we have ascertained, could certainly not be described as being among their number.

Sensing him a captive of the daughter and, by extension, herself the mother had grown bolder with him:

"You have the full trousers again for the mother of Madamoiselle Ilse?" she would ask upon encountering him, no lightness of tone even attempting to mitigate words that he found beyond mitigation anyway. "Have you no shame, Monsieur?" she would chide him. "Can this be right and correct for an English gentleman?"

He could find no answer to this outrageous rudeness – the more so for the fact her assertion by way of a question was true. Vezin would simply stand before her and take in words and assertions in his regard he would not have expected to fall from the most ill-bred and carnally minded of fish-wives. Unsure whether his compliance stemmed from the fact he would be ejected from the very hotel he at least shared in part with the young girl entrancing him, or a fear of the imposing woman who regarded him with the kind of desire he had seen on the faces of young children torturing and setting fire to insects.

A regard of him that seemed utterly confident of its… *power*.

And still he could not bring himself to leave, though his senses and the more cautious nature that had guided him through his life to this point screamed at him to do so.

Not even after the *incident* with the elderly waiter.

It had been one morning at breakfast, Vezin having barely touched his, that his mild and obsequious servitor had removed the milk from his table and turning quickly, for him anyway, had bumped headlong into his employer and split the contents remaining in the little jug over the cotton shirt struggling to contain her massive breasts.

The proprietress had neither moved nor uttered a word of reproof for her retainer's clumsiness, but the panic, bordering on hysteria, with which the man reacted left Vezin amazed and appalled at the level of fear the woman must inspire in him. Fear that explained his efforts to make good the stain slowly spreading across the shirt covering those womanly balloons he knew he dared not touch with the cloth he had at the ready. Fear that ensured he could only wave ineffectually at the offending stain as he continued to offer his profuse apologies and beg the most humble pardon.

Such horror in a man for a woman – reconciling that of his own for the woman as simple *unease* in her presence – could not fail to inspire in Vezin a certain contempt for the member of his own sex weak enough to give into it and he could only shake his head in wonder as the proprietress pointed towards the door and the old-ish waiter, crestfallen and trembling, dismissed himself from her presence.

The eyes that fixed themselves upon Vezin appeared to be daring him to say something on the matter and, in truth, and despite his contempt for the man's behaviour, he had been about to point out that it was no more than an understandable accident that could have happened to anybody.

That Vezin said nothing was an indication, even if he refused to acknowledge it in such terms at the time, of his own dread of the woman.

But a fuller understanding of the man's behaviour that was, to Vezin's mind, near to terrified would come later.

That very evening, in fact.

It was the rhythmic sound of what appeared to a somewhat slow and heavy handclap that drew Vezin towards its source at the end of the landing as he made to enter his own room.

Curious, he wandered towards the sound and found it was coming from an open door to a room he had neither entered before nor knew existed.

But it was the sight waiting to greet him as he placed his head to the side of the doorframe in order to peer inside that sent his system into shock and rooted him to the spot.

Inside, sideways to the door itself and unable to see Vezin, were the waiter and the proprietress.

Not an unexpected combination to be found in a room belonging to a hotel.

Or it would not have been had the waiter not been naked from the waist down, trousers at his ankles as he lay draped across the massive thighs of his employer and she used the palm of her hand to punish and correct his clumsiness of the morning.

Apart from the slap of palm against buttock and muted sobbing from the man across the woman's knees, the play was being acted out in silence and Vezin found himself transfixed at the rhythmic rise and fall of the woman's hand as it reddened the waiter's behind and fetched yet more humiliating and muted sobs from the older man.

Vezin, of course, was not totally unknowing of the ways of men and there had been whispers at the Foreign Office of more than one senior ranking official who took his enjoyment from the paying of a certain kind of prostitute to inflict pain.

But this?

The man across the proprietress's lap was of an age that surely deserved a degree of respect enabling him to maintain his pride – lowly waiter or no. Yet there he was, sobbing like an infant under the correction of a mother or aunt, trousers around his ankles to humiliate him further. And there was *no* question that this man was *not* paying his employer for the pleasure.

Unable to bring himself to move, even though he knew to stay in position was to invite discovery, Vezin watched his monstrous landlady deliver the last of those rhythmic slaps to the waiter's behind and then roll him, quite contemptuously, as if he were of no more account than a chastised and disobedient dog she were dismissing, from her lap to the floor.

And then, as Vezin gazed on a state of pure disbelief, the elderly and still sobbing man arranged himself into a kneeling position before his chastiser and lowered his head to kiss the toes of her boots.

It was not seconds later, at the wave of a hand dismissing him, that the waiter made a somewhat ginger passage to his feet, re-arranged his clothing, and headed towards the door.

Only to stop in his tracks as he came face to face with Vezin.

Never, Arthur Vezin, confided to his journal, had he seen such misery and hopelessness on the face of a fellow human being and, despite the contempt he felt for the man allowing himself to be abused in such a fashion, his heart went out to the waiter as he hurried past the witness to his humiliation to escape down the landing, progress marked by a dumbstruck guest.

When Vezin next turned his gaze back to the room, the Madame was not two-feet from him – and if she was embarrassed to have had her treatment of the poor waiter witnessed it was not to be discerned in the amused look she trained upon her *guest*.

"I explained to you when you first arrived here," she told him.

Having no clue as to what she referred, Vezin waited.

"We expect obedience from our men," she went on. "What you just saw is the discipline those in our charge can expect if that… *obedience*… is not considered satisfactory."

Unable to speak, Vezin found he was just as incapable of movement as the monstrous woman – the same woman he had just seen spank a man so badly he had sobbed before insisting he place his lips upon her shoes to show her he accepted her right to do so – step past him and head off in the same direction as her recent victim.

He had no idea how long he stayed there, questions forming in his head and going unanswered to be replaced by fresh questions that were met with the same lack of success.

But what he was sure of the one aspect of the incident above all others that disturbed him most.

An aspect that was, at that moment, tenting his trousers with an urgency he had neither experienced to that point nor believed possible.

VI

"And was M'sieur shocked by what he saw last night?" she said softly in his ear, sitting herself down beside him in the sunny yard as he waited to be called for lunch, finding him, much as she expected, pensive and troubled after the events of the night before; the walk he had taken in order to avoid – or at least put off - just such a confrontation as the one she had instigated now having done nothing to allow him to come to terms with what he had seen.

Despite having warned himself that just such a scene was likely to occur when he returned, the question startled him, following upon his own thoughts as it did, and he looked up quickly to see she was upon him and seated before he could take himself from her presence without being *too* obvious. More disturbingly, her warm breath upon the inside of his ear produced, almost automaton like, the usual response from his nether regions. She had spoken with a pretty and out-of-character laugh, a piece of hair straying across one eye as she turned and peered at him half roguishly; yet the words, and her manner, no matter how light and surface gay, frightened him.

For how could they not?

Only last night, during the incident she referred to, he had seen her take a man who was her senior across her lap and spank him until he sobbed before insisting that same man…

The outrage inspired by the recollection freed the tongue that was normally tied in her presence.

"What I saw was an abomination of nature, Madame," he told her. "That any man should be treated in such a…"

"Men need to be… *governed*," she overrode him, it not taking any great prescience on her part to know exactly where his words were going next.. "Far from what you saw being an *'abomination of nature'* it is the natural role of woman to ensure man's baser instincts are domesticated while, in the so doing, making of him something useful to her."

"That… That…" he spluttered with such outrage his tongue felt thick and unwieldy and utterly wanting when it came to the verbal task ahead of it, "is the most palpable nonsense I have heard fall from the lips of one person to the ears of another. The teaching of history is as normal a practice in France as it is in my own country and it is scarcely credible that men – whose efforts down the ages are responsible for the world in which we now live - can be belittled in such a fashion. Not only are your assertions an insult to my gender they are a slap in the face of history itself. They are, in fact, ridiculous."

This was about as passionate a statement of rebuttal as poor Vezin had made in his life to that date.

And completely wasted upon the object at which it had been aimed whose smug appraisal of him at once became disdainful.

“On the contrary, little man,” the proprietress began condescendingly, reddening cheeks opposite affirming that her patronising description of him had hit home; “it is history itself that is ridiculous and re-written in the image of men rather than those first strong women who shaped it. What you laud as man’s achievements are no more than the slow decline they have made of life since the sisters of antiquity were first made to give way in the face of nothing more inspiring and superior than brute male force. For as the grace and independence of the cat is superior to the bestial wilfulness of the dog that is so *easily* domesticated, so is woman superior to man.”

Here reference to the cats that had informed his thoughts from the moment of the Frenchman of the train made his warning took Vezin back a little but he struggled on gamely:

“And that is what you practice in this woe-begotten little town is it? The superiority of the female over the male? For if it is then I, for one, find nothing that is either *‘inspiring’* or *‘superior’* in what you have fashioned for yourselves here and for two farthings I should…

“That would be the simple solution if you do not like it,” she agreed, saving him a prefix and cutting into his words, the strange force of her nature rendering him, despite his uncharacteristic heat, instantly silent before her.

That the leaving he had been about to mention was a solution he had considered more than once and been unable to act upon, unable to help him refute her as he saw she appeared to be waiting for his next response.

“I… I…” He cleared his throat. “It is true that I find it difficult to leave,” he stammered, losing his fortitude in the depths of eyes that, while not as striking as the daughter’s, possessed the power to… *manage*… him. “And especially now that Mademoiselle Ilsé has come. It… It is not… *meet*… that one so young and pure should remain in a house where such… *things*… are permitted.”

“And you would take my daughter away?” she asked, much amused.

Vezin felt himself colour, knowing all too well from experience when he was being mocked but, with an effort of will, pressed on anyways:

“With all my heart. No young girl of such a quality should live amongst such…”

“But what if my young girl of such *‘quality’* does not share your plans for her future and decides leaving is not to her taste? What then?”

To this he remained silent – it was, after all, an obstacle he himself had considered.

“What if,” the monstrous Frenchwoman went on, allowing the full and uncanny power of those eyes that had disconcerted him from the first time he had allowed his own to meet them to unman him as she drew her words out ominously.

“What if, she does not wish *you* to leave either?”

VII

"It is our way here, Monsieur," Madamoiselle Ilse assured him. "A very old way."

"But… For a man of his years to be treated in a manner so… so…"

"Humiliating?"

"Exactly so, Ma'mselle," he agreed taking her grasp of his thought as agreement with them. "It is not right and neither is it…" he smote about his mind for an apposite and acceptable – she was a girl of tender years, after all, despite the calibre of his feelings in her regard, "…*natural*."

Instead of answering, she rose from her seat at his side and he watched her cross the courtyard to greet the monstrous mother who was fast becoming a figure of much revulsion for him. His revulsion placed to the side for one moment as he watched the daughter moving with all the grace and lightness of the feline race, her simple black dress clothing her, he thought, exactly like the fur of the same supple species. She turned once to laugh back at him from the porch with the glass door, and then stopped a moment to speak to her mother, who, and as was usual for her, regarded her English guest with her habitual mix of smugness and disdain.

But how was it then, that, despite his revulsion, the moment his eye fell upon this ungainly woman in conversation with the daughter who had captured both his heart and his loins the pair of them appeared suddenly as other than they were? Whence came that transforming dignity and sense of power that enveloped them both as by magic? What was it about that massive woman that made her appear instantly regal, and set her on a throne in some dark and dreadful scenery, wielding a sceptre over the red glare of some tempestuous orgy? Cruel, remorseless and utterly uncaring of the feelings either physical or emotional of the male subjects prostrate at her feet as they awaited her pronouncement upon their individual fates?

And why did this slender stripling of a girl, graceful as a willow, lithe as a young leopard, assume suddenly an air of sinister majesty, and move with flame and smoke about her head, and the darkness of night beneath her own feet?

Vezin caught his breath and sat there transfixed. Then, almost simultaneously with its appearance, the queer notion vanished again, and the sunlight of day caught them both, and he heard Ma'mselle Ilse laughing to her mother about the *soupe à l'onion*, and saw her glancing back at him over her dear little shoulder with a smile that made him think of a dew-kissed rose bending lightly before summer airs and placed the monstrous apparition at her side as no more than a slightly distracting afterthought.

And, indeed, the onion soup was particularly excellent that day, because, upon entering the dining-room, he saw another cover laid at his small table, and, with fluttering heart, heard the chastised waiter of the previous evening murmur by way of explanation that:

"Ma'mselle Ilsé would honour M'sieur to-day at *déjeuner*, as her custom sometimes is with her mother's guests."

So great was Vezin's excitement he did not pick up on the pity in the older man's eyes, as if the man were saying to him:

"Last night you witnessed my shame and subjection. But it will not be long before you join me in my shackles and find yourself treated similarly."

In his current state, however, it is hard to imagine Vezin would have been receptive to such an unspoken warning and certainly not after she actually sat by him all through that delirious meal.

She spoke quietly to him in an easy French of which even he could understand every word and saw that he was well looked after, mixing the salad-dressing and even helping him with her own hand. And, later in the afternoon, while he was relaxing in a courtyard free for once of the pervasive presence of the proprietress and longing for a sight of the girl who had become his idee fixe as soon as her duties were done, she came again to his side, and spoke with her usual softness.

"It is time for you to know more of the beauties of our little town."

There was something strangely compelling about her, as authoritative and demanding as the mother in fact, but diluted with an ineffable sweetness, as if his acceding to her wishes would bestow great honour upon her.

"Come, M'sieur. Ma'mselle Ilse will be your guide?" she continued, speaking in, for reasons he could not fathom, the third-person. "Her family has resided here for many generations and she can show him everything."

Without even being aware of his compliance with her request – though later he would confess to himself it was far more an order – he realised he was moving with her. Indeed, she already had him by the hand and, before he could find a single word to express his pleasure, led him, all unresisting, out into the street.

And yet, despite the dream quality of the whole episode, it seemed perfectly natural that she, his junior by many years, should lead him in such a way and do so without the faintest suggestion of boldness or immodesty.

Her face glowed with the pleasure and interest of it, and with her short dress and tumbled hair she looked every bit the charming child of seventeen that she was, innocent and playful, proud of her native town, and alive beyond her years to the sense of its ancient beauty – though even at the back of all these impressions Vezin, when he analysed the episode, could hear a muted voice in the distance warning of the darkness inherent even in one so young and apparently… *light*.

So they went over the town together – though he had been over every inch many times during his stay - and she showed him what she considered its chief interest: the tumble-down old house where her forebears had lived; the sombre, aristocratic-looking mansion, now derelict, where her mother's family had dwelt for centuries, and the ancient market-place where several hundred years before the witches had been burnt by the score.

She kept up a lively running stream of talk about it all, of which he understood not a fiftieth part as he trudged along by her side, cursing his forty-five years and feeling all the yearnings of his early manhood revive and jeer at him. And, as she talked, England and Stockwell seemed very far away indeed, almost in another age of the world's history. For her voice touched something immeasurably old in him, something that slept deep.

A voice that lulled the surface parts of his consciousness to sleep in order to allow what was far more ancient to awaken. Like the town, with its elaborate pretence of modern active life, the upper layers of his being became dulled, soothed, muffled, and what lay underneath began to stir in its sleep. That big Curtain swayed a little to and fro.

Presently it might lift altogether to reveal....

He began to understand a little better at last. The mood of the town was reproducing itself in him. In proportion, as his ordinary external-self found itself muffled, that inner secret life, that was far more real and vital, asserted itself. And this girl was surely the high-priestess of it all, the chief instrument of its accomplishment. New thoughts, with new interpretations, flooded his mind as she walked beside him through the winding streets, while the picturesque old gabled town, softly coloured in the sunset, had never appeared to him so wholly wonderful and seductive.

And only one curious incident came to disturb and puzzle him, slight in itself, but utterly inexplicable, bringing white terror into the child's face and a scream to lips from which the laughter bubbling upon them had been instantly removed.

He had merely pointed to a column of blue smoke that rose from the burning autumn leaves and made a picture against the red roofs, and had then run to the wall and called her to his side to watch the flames shooting here and there through the heap of rubbish.

A simple and everyday occurrence for them both to observe, he would have thought.

And yet, at the sight of it, as though taken by surprise, her face had altered dreadfully and she had turned and run like the wind, calling out wild sentences to him as she ran of which he had not understood a single word, except that the fire apparently frightened her, and she wanted to get quickly away from it, and to get him away too.

Yet five minutes later she was as calm and happy again as though nothing had happened to alarm or waken troubled thoughts in her, and they had both forgotten the incident.

They were leaning over the ruined ramparts together listening to the weird music of the band as he had heard it the first day of his arrival.

It moved him again profoundly as it had done before, and somehow, seating himself upon the wall, he managed to find both his tongue and his best French as the girl leaned across the stones close beside him.

No one was about and, driven by some remorseless engine within, he began to stammer something - he hardly knew what - of his strange admiration for her.

Almost at the first word she sprang lightly off the wall and came up smiling in front of him, just touching his knees as he sat there.

She was hatless as usual, and the sun caught her hair and one side of her cheek and long slender throat.

The effect of her there before him, little hands resting upon his knees, made him feel light of head as she paused to gaze into his eyes for a few moments and then, as if having read his soul and divined him ready, the hands were removed and brought together to make a soft clap.

“I am glad!” she cried, again clapping her little hands softly in his face. “The moment I laid eyes upon you I knew it would be so. Destiny may be postponed but it cannot, ultimately, be denied and you are, once again, back in that place from which you once, unwisely, escaped.”

Immediately, and despite the wild sensuousness the *child* was inspiring in a bloodstream already at molten temperatures, a part of Vezin regretted bitterly having lost control of himself. For something in the phrasing of her sentence chilled him. He knew now, and for the very first time, the fear of embarking upon an unknown and dangerous sea.

“You are mine once again,” she told him softly, manner now indescribably coaxing as though she noticed his shrinking and wished to consolidate the hold she had gained over him. “You have come back to me.”

Already this slip of a child seemed to dominate him and he felt her power coming over him more and more. Her talk of his escape and having returned meant nothing to him but something emanated from her that stole over his senses. Something that made him aware her personality, for all its simple grace, held forces that were stately, imposing and august. Not for the first time, he saw her again moving through smoke and flame amid broken and tempestuous scenery, alarmingly strong and with her terrible mother by her side.

Dimly this shone out to the entranced and befuddled Vezin through her smile and appearance of charming innocence.

“You will again accept your place at my feet,” she told him, holding him with her magnificent and compelling eyes.

They were quite alone up there on the ramparts, and the sensation that she was overmastering him stirred a wild sensuousness in his blood to add to the potency already infusing it. The mingled abandon and reserve in her attracted him furiously and all of him that was man rose up and resisted the creeping influence while, at the same time, acclaiming it with the full delight of his forgotten youth. His forgotten and *regretted* youth.

An irresistible desire came to him to question her, to summon what still remained to him of his own little personality in an effort to retain the right to his normal self, for the girl had grown quiet again, and was now leaning on the broad wall close beside him, gazing out across the darkening plain, her elbows on the coping, motionless as a figure carved in stone.

He took his courage in both hands.

"Tell me, Ilsé," he said, unconsciously imitating her own purring softness of voice, yet aware that he was utterly in earnest, "what is the meaning of this town, and what is this escape and return of mine of which you speak? Why is it that the people watch me from morning to night? Tell me what it all means?" he asked, curiosity once released ensuring his questions came tumbling down around her ears as rocks from a sudden avalanche.

"Tell me," he rushed on before she time to address any of the concerns already mention, passion unmistakable in his voice, "what…? What *you* expect of me?"

She turned her head and looked at him through half-closed eyelids, her growing inner excitement betraying itself by the faint colour that ran like a shadow across her face.

"It… It seems to me," he began, faltering under her gaze, "that I have a right to know…"

Suddenly she opened her eyes to the full and, there was no other word to describe the effect, *transfixed* him:

"You love me, then?" she asked softly, something incomprehensible behind her gaze warning Vezin this was not the simple question it appeared.

A warning unable to deflect him from the course he was now on and one that had been, he sensed, set for him.

"I swear," he cried impetuously, moved as by the force of a rising tide, "I never felt before… I… I have never known any other girl who…"

"Then you *know* without requiring telling," she said with a tone and authority beyond her years – beyond his even."

She paused to gauge his reaction and a thrill like fire ran swiftly through him. Her words lifted him off the earth, and he felt a radiant happiness, followed almost the same instant in horrible contrast by the thought of death. He became aware that she had turned her eyes upon his own and was speaking again.

“The real life I speak of,” she whispered, “is the old life within, the life of long ago, the life to which you once belonged and served, and to which you still belong and will serve again.”

A faint wave of memory troubled the deeps of his soul as her low voice sank into him.

With a channel of water dividing him from his own land and conversing in a language with which he was *not* fluent, he knew nonetheless that what she was saying he somehow knew instinctively to be true.

Even though he could not as yet understand its full purport.

His present life seemed to be slipping from him as he listened. Merging his personality in one that was far older and greater. A loss of his present self that brought to him, again, the thought of death and his own mortality.

“You came here,” she went on, “to seek the purpose you once had and I gave you. The women here feel your presence and are waiting for you to commit once more to the authority from which you escaped.”

Her words, in this respect at least, made little sense to him and it was only the eyes that remained fixed upon his own, face beginning to change, growing larger and darker with an expression of age, that kept him in place to hear them.

“It is their thoughts constantly playing about your soul that makes you feel they watch you for they do not watch you with their eyes. The purposes of their inner life are calling to you and seek to claim you. To ensure you return to your former position of obedience and respect to your superiors some inner and contrary demon compelled you to once forswear.”

She paused to endow her next words with a greater reverence:

“They now demand your return. And so do I. And return you shall.”

Vezin's timid heart sank with dread as he listened. How could *she* and the women of this strange town he had not set eyes upon a until a short time before *‘demand’* his return? The whole adventure had begun as fantasy and was now, through the dimensions of its absurdity, surpassing such a condition.

And yet, the girl's eyes held him.

Compelled his presence with a net of joy so that he had no wish to escape.

She fascinated him, as it were, clean out of his normal self.

“Alone, however, the people could never have caught and held you,” she resumed. “For they are not the main purpose behind your return and the motive force was not strong enough; it has faded through all these years.

The smile playing about her lips seemed to Vezin somehow triumphant.

But I…?"

She paused a moment and looked at him with complete confidence in her splendid eyes.

"…I possess the spell to conquer you and hold you: the spell of old love and service. I can win you back again and make you live the old life with me, for the force of the ancient tie between us, if I choose to use it, is irresistible."

Vezin's breathing at this point was coming in great audible gasps as he sought to justify the strength of his passion for the young girl with the fear inspired by her words and what they might mean for him.

"And I do choose to use it. I still want you. I was a weak master to you and, sometimes, servants find will enough to shed bonds so loosely applied."

She pressed closer to him so that her breath passed across his eyes, and her voice positively sang.

"But this time there will be no such escape. For fate has returned to me and you are utterly at my mercy."

Vezin heard, and yet did not hear; understood, yet did not understand. He had passed into a condition of exaltation. The world was beneath his feet, made of music and flowers, and he was flying somewhere far above it through the sunshine of pure delight. He was breathless and giddy with the wonder of her words. They intoxicated him. And, still, the terror of it all, the dreadful thought of death, pressed ever behind her sentences. For flames shot through her voice out of black smoke and licked at his soul.

Was that what he was to her… a servant?

Was that what the elderly waiter was to the monstrous mother?

Could he, Arthur Vezin, expect to find himself draped across the dainty lap of his little mistress if he displeased her as she disciplined him with either hand or the back of a hair-brush?

And the answer when it came appeared to be yes – and this without words. She was communicating with him now simply by the power of her thoughts alone and what he described to himself as a process of telepathy, for his French could never have compassed all he said to her.

"That is right," he heard the answer to his question reverberate against the walls of his skull. *"Your desire for me has placed back in that place from which you were ill-advised enough to have me removed. And this time my presence and influence will remain for the remainder of your mortal coil"*

So great was his disturbance at this point that poor Vezin would have fallen backwards from the wall upon which he was still seated had her tiny hands not taken his own with a grip of surprising firmness and held him in place, eyes still beaming into his own.

"You are back in that place from which you should never have left and did not have my permission to leave," her voice echoed in his skull. *"For that insult and impertinence you will need to be chastised after a manner of my choosing."*

"But this place is Foreign to me," he cried aloud. "I came here wholly by chance!"

"No," she cried with passion, voicing her words this time. "You came here because I called to you. I have called to you for years, and you came with the whole force of the past behind you."

Her grip on his wrists, he had already noted as surprisingly firm, seemed to intensify and she drew his head closer to hers that he may gaze into her eyes and witness the full force and authority of them from closer quarters.

"Ilse," he began in a voice he barely recognised as that of Arthur Vezin of the Foreign Office, the dull and unsurprising man to whom nothing of any note *ever* happened.

A *"Shush!"* reverberated in his head and truncated all protest almost before it had formed.

When she was assured of her prey's attention the young girl continued, again speaking her words out loud:

"You had to come, Arthur Vezin, for I own you, and I claim you."

At this, she released his hands and leaned in so close to him he could smell the sweetness of her youthful breath infusing his nostrils.

She was, it came to him through his conflicting feelings of lust and terror, looking at him with a certain insolence in the face.

An insolence from a source all too easy for him to guess at.

It was, he knew, the insolence of *power*.

VIII

The sun had set behind the towers of the old cathedral and the darkness rose up from the plain and enveloped them. The music of the band had ceased. The leaves of the plane trees hung motionless, but the chill of the autumn evening rose about them and made Vezin shiver.

There was no sound but the sound of their voices and the occasional soft rustle of the girl's dress. He could hear the blood rushing in his ears. He scarcely realised where he was or what he was doing. Some terrible magic of the imagination drew him deeply down into the tombs of his own being, telling him in no unfaltering voice that her words shadowed forth the truth.

And it was at this point that this simple little French maid, speaking beside him with so strange an authority, altered for him into quite another being.

As he stared into her eyes, the picture in his mind grew and lived, dressing itself vividly to his inner vision with a degree of reality he was compelled to acknowledge.

As once before, he saw her tall and stately, moving through wild and broken scenery of forests and mountain caverns, the glare of flames behind her head and clouds of shifting smoke about her feet. Dark leaves encircled her hair, flying loosely in the wind, and her limbs shone through the merest rags of clothing. Others were about her, too, and ardent eyes on all sides cast delirious glances upon her, but her own eyes were always for One only, one whom she held by the hand. For she was leading the dance in some tempestuous orgy to the music of chanting voices, and the dance she led circled about a great and awful Figure on a throne, brooding over the scene through lurid vapours, while innumerable other wild faces and forms crowded furiously about her in the dance. But the one she held by the hand he knew to be himself, and the monstrous shape upon the throne he knew to be her mother.

The vision rose within him, rushing to him down the long years of buried time, crying aloud to him with the voice of memory reawakened.... And then the scene faded away and he saw the clear circle of the girl's eyes gazing steadfastly into his own, all pretence gone now and able to be with him exactly as she wished. The voice she seemed able to project into his head whispered all kinds of… *repugnant*… things to him now. Things that he knew, despite the revulsion the mere mention of them could have upon his sensibilities, he would find himself compelled to act upon.

She was no longer the pretty little daughter of a monstrous innkeeper but had become his keeper and master – a relation between them, according to her, that was not unfamiliar and one, *this* time, from which he would find no escape.

“I am indeed your princely master,” she said, underlining her access to his thoughts should she wish to do so, “and you will show me from now on all the deference owed to my position.”

She drew herself up beside him with an air of dignity.

“For I am a princess and my mother…”

As she paused, Vezin waited for the words he did not need psychic abilities to divine.

“…and my mother is a queen.”

At this, the little girl melted into Vezin’s chest and the man utterly lost his head. Delight and trepidation in equal measure tore at his heart and swept him into an ecstasy that was only equalled by an intimation of coming subjugation. To hear that sweet singing voice, and to see those adorable little lips utter such exciting, terrifying, and wildly contradictory things, upset his balance beyond all hope of control. He took her in his arms and covered the unresisting face of the girl who insisted she was both a princess *and* his master with kisses.

But even while he did so, and while the hot passion swept him, he felt that she was soft and loathsome, and that her answering kisses stained his very soul so that, when, presently, he knew not when or how, she had freed herself and vanished into the darkness, he stood there, leaning against the wall in a state of collapse, creeping with horror from the touch of her yielding body, and inwardly raging at the weakness that he already realised must prove his undoing.

No! he asserted to himself with some force.

Had proved his undoing.

IX

As he took advantage of her absence to take account of that which had happened between them, he knew that the mark she had left inside his head, this as she read his most intimate thoughts and moulded his future actions, was irresistible and as the ring upon Ovid's stone had been worn by use so, Vezin knew with certainty, would his subservience to his young female owner.

For a long time Vezin leant there against the wall, alone with his surging thoughts and emotions, understanding at length that he had done the one thing necessary to call down upon him the whole force of this ancient past under which he had laboured his whole life, without conscious awareness of its existence.

For in those passionate kisses he had acknowledged the tie of olden days, and had revived it. And the memory of that soft impalpable caress in the darkness of the inn corridor came back to him with a shudder. The girl had first mastered him, and then led him to the one act that was necessary for her purpose. He had been waylaid, after the lapse of centuries—caught, and conquered.

Dimly he realised this, and sought to make plans for his escape.

But her voice resounded in his head and he knew the commands she had placed there were not to be gainsaid. He was powerless to manage his thoughts or will, for the fantastic and horrifying madness of the whole adventure mounted to his brain like a spell and, as much as rebelled against the shackles in which he was being secured, he gloried in the feeling that he was utterly enchanted and moving in a world so much larger and wilder than the one he had ever been accustomed to.

For the first time, as the unspoken commands she had planted in his head compelled him to act upon them, he truly felt that the girl had not been exaggerating whens he had stated that:

"I own you.!

As he rose from the spot where she had left him to contemplate his return to an older captivity that would prove more severe than last experience of it he had managed to escape from, the moon, pale and enormous, was just rising over the sea-like plain, slanting rays drawing all the houses into a new perspective, so that their roofs, already glistening with dew, seemed to stretch much higher into the sky than usual, and their gables and quaint old towers lay far away in its purple reaches.

The cathedral appeared unreal in a silver mist and only added to his sense of… *Otherworldliness.*

He moved softly, keeping to the shadows – though for the life of him he knew not why when all cards were now laid face up upon the table of destiny.

The streets were all deserted and very silent anyway; doors closed and shutters fastened.

Not a soul was astir.

The hush of night lay over everything and he felt as if he wandered a town of the dead.

A town that was nothing more than a churchyard with gigantic and grotesque tombstones.

Thoughts running thus, he made his way to a back door that entered the inn by means of the stables, thinking thus to reach his room unobserved, aware as he did so of a purpose he must make good upon but, for the moment, escaped him.

He reached the courtyard safely and crossed it by keeping close to the shadow of the wall and sidled down it, mincing along on tiptoe, just as the old men did when they entered the *salle à manger* and was horrified to find himself doing this instinctively.

It was at this point that a strange impulse came to him, stemming from the head but catching him, somehow, in the centre of his body in a way that compelled instant obedience to its dictates.

To his complete and utter horror – aware of what he was doing even as he was unable to prevent it - he dropped upon all fours and crawled the rest of the way to his room; praying as he did so that neither guest, servants or proprietress passed by to witness his strange and mortifying compulsion before he reached the safety of his room.

It was prayer not to be granted him.

"Why, if it is not Monsieur Vezin," came the voice of the proprietress as he reached the head of the stairs. "Or perhaps it is not time to address you with a simple *'Vezin'*."

She laughed as her words from earlier in the day came back to him:

"…as the grace and independence of the cat is superior to the bestial wilfulness of the dog that is so easily domesticated, so is woman superior to man."

The words she had not stopped speaking as he recalled her earlier utterance interjected themselves into his thoughts:

"…Now that you have been shown the true purpose to your life here with your superiors."

With his head lowered and quite unable to raise his eyes to meet the mockery he knew would await him upon the face of the monster innkeeper, all that was visible of the woman her daughter had described as a *"queen"* were her *bare* feet and – he felt himself blush – exposed ankles.

It was a sight that – as the gentleman he still considered himself to be – compelled him from a sense of decency he knew was undeserved by the woman to lower his head further.

The laughter bubbling forth from her lips at this was of unmitigated satisfaction for having him in such a position.

And it was to get worse.

For poor Vezin, anyhow.

“Follow, Madame to her room now, Vezin,” he heard. “It has been a long day and you must soothe her to sleep before going to Ma’mselle Ilse.”

From his, frankly unbelievable, presence upon all-fours upon the upstairs landing, Vezin took heart from the fact that he would be *“going to Ma’mselle Ilse”* even as the import of what the mother was asking of him filled his senses – if not his groin – with horror.

Surely she could not mean what he took her to mean?

Crawling to do her bidding without being aware of willing his body to do so, Vezin entered the bedroom of the proprietress for the first time to find himself with frills and excesses in the way of décor and furnishings that was at complete variance with the physical and emotional aspects of the woman herself.

“Here, Vezin boy!” came the demeaning call from the oversized bed itself, his eyes as they raised themselves to what awaited him upon it bulging from their sockets at what greeted them.

Naked, she looked even larger and more intimidating than when clothed.

Far more intimidating.

And yet, while she simply looked grossly fat and overweight in clothes, her body when denuded of cover was not fat at all and, instead, was nothing less than an exact replica of Venus herself.

Albeit a Venus on the large side.

Some three sizes larger, in fact.

“Here, boy!” he heard again, even the Vezin dropped now as she sensed it would humiliate him still more to be commanded as if he were no more than a domesticated household dog.

A description of him which, it would later transpire, was no more than the way his presence was perceived.

Unable to do anything but obey, perspiration coating his forehead and running into his eyes as he made strenuous and superfluous efforts to regain possession of the will ensuring command of his own movements and actions, Vezin found himself moving ever nearer to her feet as they dangled from the edge of the bed upon which she lounged while resting her bulk upon her elbows. His humiliation was compounded by the, thankfully, unseen erection that seemed instantaneous in her presence and was only surpassed when he was in the near vicinity of the daughter. For the legs to which he crawled may well have been massive but they were perfectly shaped.

Models, in fact, of oversize perfection.

“Up, boy!” he heard as he reached her feet, eyes not inches from them and saved by her command from an inexplicable need to place his lips upon her toes in a show of fealty.

An inexplicable need that paled into insignificance when he made it to his haunches to be confronted by her spread legs and his first sighting, despite his forty-five years, of a female pussy in the flesh and close-up.

“Sniff, Madame,” came the order.

In a condition, almost, of hypnotic trance, Vezin did as he was commanded and felt the urgency at his groin become something almost painful as the scent of his former landlady and now a queen entered his nostrils and he became familiar with the aroma of a woman’s arousal for the first time in his life.

It would not be the last.

“That is a nice, obedient, boy,” came damning praise from the smug upper lips of the second of his master’s. “Madame smells good, no?”

Amazingly, Vezin found himself nodding and his concurrence fetched a giggle that was almost girlish from the gargantuan goddess commanding his obedience.

The command that sent his senses into sensuous overdrive flowed shortly after and was delivered with the utter confidence born of the assurance of another’s obedience:

“Lick!”

IIX

As he attempted to sleep that night in his new abode images of the indignities heaped upon his person in the hours preceding Ilse ordering him into the woven basket at the bottom of her bed filled poor Arthur Vezin with emotions of such gut churning anguish he would surely have taken his own existence – had he been allowed that is and the perverted gratification he had taken from being used so by mother and daughter not weakened his resolve to do so.

A picture of him upon his haunches with tongue lapping at the hairless labia of the gargantuan proprietress as she taught him what she liked and urged him to greater efforts as he worshipped at her surprisingly tight shrine in the guise of the canine she intended him to be.

Many times she had reached what he knew to be orgasm, screeching entreaties to the bedroom ceiling as his aching tongue brought her again and again to the crisis until she pronounced herself sated and ordered him to crawl to the end of the landing and the new sleeping quarters awaiting him.

The aforementioned basket and blanket at the foot of Ilse's own bed.

The seventeen-year-old had been waiting for him as he entered upon all-fours, the scent of the proprietress and her arousal fresh upon his humiliated cheeks and coating the buds of the tongue she had insisted he use to show his acceptance of both her as his superior and how he intended to worship her from now on.

Ilse, as likewise denuded as her monstrous mother, pointed to her feet that he may place his lips upon her toes in the gesture of fealty only an order from the proprietress to place his lips elsewhere had prevented him making earlier.

The young girl, he told himself as he took in the magnificence of a body that was both womanly and elfin at one and the same time, was utterly gorgeous and equally as evil.

She was also, he could do no more than confess, completely irresistible.

"Tonight," she had told him, "before you go to the basket in which you will spend your nights from this moment on, your tongue will reacquaint itself with my whole body. By the time the sun rises in the morning you will again be familiar with the taste of the sweat that coats my feet and the perspiration that bathes my armpits."

For poor Vezin, as humiliated as he had been by the girl's mother and held fast by the enchantment under which the girl had placed him, it was a perversion he could not countenance.

Even as he knew he would have no choice in the matter.

The breath had left his lungs with a whoosh then as the girl had turned her back upon him and lowered herself into a kind of semi crouch before, with both hands, spreading the cheeks of her buttocks to reveal… *that*… place.

Poor Vezin was convinced he must pass out from both the shame of what was being inflicted upon him and, more so, from his eager anticipation of it.

“Worship the arse of the master you once had the temerity to leave,” she told him, no evidence of the softness and warmth she had shown earlier remaining as she awaited the feel of his servile tongue upon her anus. “For tomorrow your life here begins anew.”

With no sensation of possessing a will of his own – and unsure that he would have exercised it at that point had he been in command of his own actions anyway – Vezin buried his head between the parted pillows that were the girl’s buttocks and, as if he had been born to the task, inserted his tongue into her anus and wiggled it to impart the maximum of pleasurable sensations to his young owner.

It is to be understood at this point that, if the words of his young owner as they travelled down to him carried less resonance than perhaps they should, then Vezin himself could hardly be blamed:

“You may rest assured,” she told him, “that there will be no repetition of the leniency of last time on my part towards you that was received with such ingratitude.”

Ma’mselle Ilse could not be sure if the muffled grunt travelling upwards to her was one of assent or simply her slave’s way of concentrating upon the task at hand.

It goes without saying that she was enjoying the sensations of her lackey’s tongue too much to diminish them by peeking inside his head to find out.

Afterword

Why Arthur Vezin was allowed free-will enough to keep a journal of his servitude in this unnamed French village of imperious women and subjugated men, let alone be able to send it to his colleague and only friend occupying the desk next to him at the Foreign Office, may be guessed at just as accurately as by the next man given the unknown quantities of the situation and what can only be imagined as the supreme self-confidence of the monstrous women into whose hands he fell and, for all we know, remains fallen.

But send it he did and, in doing so, opens our eyes to the possibility of other worlds existing side-by-side with ours that, while neither as fair nor just as our own, remain equally as real.

Poor Vezin, apart from the contents of his journal which only I have read and confide to you here, has, to this date, remained absent from both the Foreign office and the Stockwell home he shared with his devoted spinster sister who continues to be frantic over his absence.

A sister, moreover, your narrator feel unable to familiarise with her brother's journal – an action Vezin himself in his journal expressly forbids.

Yet, the stripping away of Arthur's freedom, you will no doubt be saying, is an example of injustice of the most inhumane kind and should be brought to the attentions of not just the frantic sister but the authorities themselves.

Perhaps.

It rather depends how one feels about being mocked for putting forward such a… *fantastic*… premise and, more importantly, how one approaches the fate that has befallen the man.

On the one hand, he was in his own land equally as much a bondsman as he finds himself in this unknown French village; the one difference being the less *explicit* – not to mention carnal – aspects of the servitude under which we so-called civilised and sophisticated members of a modern and enlightened culture operate.

It strikes your narrator that Arthur Vezin, as draconian and absolute as his servitude to these women may be, could well find himself a sight more fulfilled and happy being about their bidding than ever he was as just another colorless and unadventurous face making up the homogenous mass we have settled upon calling… *society*.

Is there not, at least, in his subjection to the female something more open and honest than the enslavement under which we suffer that proclaims itself – even as it drags us into conflicts that oblige us to risk death and dismemberment and other more prosaic horrors on its behalf – to be *freedom*?

It is as at least worth considering.

In closing, you may rest assured that there is one *curious* fellow Foreign Office colleague of Arthur's who has, and will continue to do so, begun taking his summer vacations touring by foot and train the northern villages of France and the Belgian borders.

A fellow Foreign Office colleague who is, as you may have already divined, *envious* of his unadventurous friend.

END

More tales from antiquity as seen through the erotic and female-dominant perspective of Sandrine Bessancort to follow shortly