Luella Miller Revisited

A Revisiting of a Classic Tale From Antiquity as Seen Through a Female Dominant Perspective

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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 – characters such as "Milady" in the case of Dumas Pere and his Three Musketeers, together with La Marquise de Sade from the pen of the precocious Rachilde.

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 here 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 see the light of the world in which we live and must remain either written or perceived.

It is nature's consolation that we can at least imagine those desires upon which we cannot and *should not* act.

This must be enough.

Sandrine Bessancort
Honfleur

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Luella Miller Revisited

FROM A MARY WILKINS TALE

RE-IMAGINED
BY
SANDRINE BESSANCORT

LUELLA MILLER

It was around that time when a national resurgence of interest in the stories of Mr Edgar Allen Poe had seen the long deceased scribe catch the vogue and whet the public appetite with his superior tales of terror – enough anyway to ensure the ensuing demand had to outstrip supply of such an elevated quality - that my editor on the Baltimore Globe decided to do a weekly feature on tales from the local area that, as well as being purportedly true, possessed at least a hint of the strange about them.

Terror itself being a real bonus and guaranteeing a surge in circulation for the paper and a boost to the pay-packet of the reporter lucky enough to have uncovered or – in a few notorious cases – invented the *true* story in question.

My name is Samuel Copland and, being just such a reporter at the time, it was with a bulging pay-packet in mind that I found myself in the Fell's Point area to check out a story I was hoping would prove the charm for the Globe's circulation and my finances.

What I would find would exceed all my expectations and would supply, along with the strangeness and the terror that would indeed see my *"pay-packet"* swell, an element of what the propriety of the day refused me to entrust to print and what I can only describe now as sex of the most unholy kind.

The above being the kindest of the descriptions available to me.

The Point itself back then was a hive of shipbuilding and other maritime activity and it was not far from the harbour and close to the village street where the one-story house in which Luella Miller, a woman from the village with a reputation for evil I truly hoped would prove warranted, had once dwelt.

She had been dead for years, yet there were those in the village who, in spite of the clearer light which comes on a vantage-point from a long-past danger, half believed in the tale which they had heard from their childhood.

In their hearts, although they scarcely would have owned it, was a

survival of the wild horror and frenzied fear of their ancestors who had dwelt in the same age with Luella Miller. Young people even would stare with a shudder at the old house as they passed, and children never played around it as was their wont around an untenanted building. There was, in point of fact, something so tangibly *threatening* about the homestead that fear of some metaphysical retribution on the parts of those coming across it – whether they knew of its history or not – prevented the abuse usual in the case of buildings that had remained derelict for too great a length of time.

Not *one* window in the old Miller house was broken: the un-cracked panes reflected the morning sunlight in patches of emerald and blue, and the latch of the sagging front door was never lifted.

This although no bolt *ever* secured it.

Since the day Luella Miller had been carried out of it, the house had seen no tenant.

None, that is, except one friendless old soul who had no choice between that and the far-off shelter of the open sky.

This old woman, who had survived her kindred and friends, lived in the house one week. Then one morning no smoke came out of the chimney, and a body of neighbours, a score strong, entered and found her dead in her bed. There were dark whispers as to the cause of her death, and there were those who testified to an expression of fear so exalted that it showed forth the state of the departing soul upon the dead face.

The woman, despite her advanced years, had been hale and hearty when she entered the house, and in seven days she was dead.

She had, it seemed, fallen a victim to some uncanny power.

Of course, the minister had talked in the pulpit with covert severity against the sin of superstition and yet; still the belief had prevailed. Not one soul in the village; not even the hardened ex-seamen who now found their livelihoods on dry-land; would have taken its shelter over that of the alms-house and would probably have entrusted their carcasses to the open air rather than *that* dwelling.

No vagrant, no matter how hardy or desperate, would seek shelter beneath that old roof, unhallowed by nearly half a century of superstitious fear and no Mayor since had possessed the courage

necessary to put in place an order by which it might be demolished and replaced and, thus, risk bringing himself to the attention of the dwellings demonic and vengeful attention.

Of all the souls gathered without the confines of the house there was only one person in the village who had actually known Luella Miller herself and it was to this source that I directed my, self-confessedly, mercenary inquiries.

The person in the know was a woman well over eighty; though still a marvel of vitality and extant youth - at least in the acuity and sprightliness of her thoughts. Straight as an arrow, with the spring of one recently let loose from the bow of life, she moved about the streets, and she always went to church, rain or shine. She had never married, and had lived alone for years in a house across the road from Luella Miller's.

Though, marvel of youth and vitality or not, she had not so much as placed a foot on the paving stones outside the Miller residence since Luella's passing.

Nor did she intend to. – even if, as it turned out, that it was the memory of the female resident of the house and not any latent malignancy possessed by the residence itself that prevented such a trespass on her part.

This woman had neither the garrulousness of her age nor its sourness. But, that having been said, never in all her life, from what I came to learn, had she ever held her tongue for any will save her own. She was known far and wide as a plain-speaker who never spared veracity when she essayed to present it.

However, and unlike many of such a kind who are perfectly comfortable in the remarking of uncomfortable truths pertaining to others whilst taking mortal offence when in receipt of the same in regard of their own flaws, she was as easy in the acceptance of criticism as she was in the giving.

Above the mantel was a study in charcoal that could only have been her as a young woman and I could do no more than confess to myself that she had once been a handsome and – *very* – desirable woman.

She it was who bore testimony to the evil life, unwittingly or designedly so, of Luella Miller. More than this, she was a witness to the woman's personal appearance. When this old woman spoke—and she

had the gift of description, although her thoughts were clothed in the rude vernacular of her native village—one could seem to see Luella Miller as she had really looked.

According to this woman, Lydia Anderson by name, Luella Miller had been a beauty of a type rather unusual in New England. A slight, pliant sort of creature, as ready with a strong yielding to fate as she was as unbreakable as a willow. She had glimmering lengths of straight, fair hair, which she wore softly looped round a long, lovely face and blue eyes full of soft pleading and, at the same time, if you can imagine such a duality, an *inflexible* will.

To see her move, this spiky and spirited old lady told me, was to gaze upon the most wonderful grace of motion and attitude.

“Luella Miller used to sit in a way nobody else could if they sat up and studied a week of Sundays,” Lydia Anderson would often say when quizzed, as she often was she told me, on the subject that still exercised such a fascination over the people of the region.

“And to watch her walk was a sight to see. If one of them willows over there on the edge of the brook could start up and get its roots free of the ground, and move off, it would go just the way Luella Miller used to. She had a green shot silk she used to wear below a hat with green ribbon streamers and a lace veil blowing across her face and out sideways. Sometimes a green ribbon could be seen flyin' from her waist.

“That was what she came out bride in when she finally gave her assent and married Erastus Miller.”

This old lady, who even now exerted a powerful hold of my senses – though the difference in our ages cut the usual thoughts of a young man in his prime from the equation – answered my question, so sharp was she still, before I even had a chance to voice it:

“Her name before she was married was Hill,” she told me. “There was always a sight of “l's” in her name, married or single. Erastus Miller was older than her by a good eight years or so but he was good lookin', too. Better lookin' than Luella even. Sometimes when they were together I used to think that Luella wasn't so handsome after all. But then…”

She seemed to lose herself in her thoughts for a moment and it struck me that the mental sharpness I had complimented her for was shared its acuity with the usual forgetfulness and inability to focus, along with

other incapacities, I usually associated with age of such an advanced stage.

Then:

"…But then, she was always more… *compelling*."

Lydia Anderson's eyes held my own unblinkingly and I had to confess, earlier suspicion as to the incapacities of age banished, with no small compelling quality of their own.

"There was a depth to Luella not to be seen in Erastus and when she gave someone – man or woman – her full attention there was something… *uncomfortable*… in it."

"Not enough to stop Erastus wooing and marrying her though," I reminded her, realising my language had slipped back to a time and a kind she would recognise and be familiar with.

Enough, anyway, to make her smile.

"Erastus? Woo, Luella?"

She was laughing out loud now and I couldn't be sure if it was my antique wording and phrasing or the proposition it described that drew her merriment.

Both, it would turn out.

"When it came to men *'wooing'* her, as you quaintly put it," she began, "that weren't ever likely to happen. Any man thinking he could turn the charm on Luella to get his head under her skirts would only…"

My face must have expressed my shock that a woman – and one of such an age – could use such language because she broke off and shook her head.

"Mr Copland, don't tell me you, a reporter from the big city, are shocked because a lady three times your age mentions a woman's skirts and what lies under them?"

"Well, I…"

"You're a handsome one, though," she went on, my shock obviously neither here nor there to her, even though she had been the one to remark upon it; though the disbelief her next observation would etch upon my features would surely not be missed by even her. "Reckon I'd have sure let your head up under those o' mine had you been around at the time."

I could do no more than stare back at her, as trapped by her amused

and, it can be described no other way, lustful expression as the small rodent is trapped and made immobile by the stare of the reptile intent upon devouring it.

But *this* was no reptile!

This was a woman of over four-score years!

A woman of *eighty* and more who had just vouchsafed the pleasure she would have taken at having my head placed next to her…

Worse, I got the distinct impression it was a *pleasure* she'd not have forsworn had it been offered to her now.

You can well understand that, marvel of youth and vitality or not, it was not the kind of imagery in respect of a lady of her years likely to stir the passions of a young man still to reach the milestone of thirty.

The mere fact a woman of her age could still harbour such lewd thoughts, let alone be prepared to voice them in the presence of a stranger – and one who was a man into the bargain – put this city-boy on the back-foot and left him lost for words.

"Lewd" thoughts that appeared to be giving her too much pleasure for her to let up on me yet.

"Puttin' that young tongue where an old lady makes her water don't make any appeal to you now," she told me as the colour her previous words had brought to my cheeks left them in a hurry upon hearing those she was using now.

"I was your age now, though," she went on, "I'd have you performing tricks like you were my pet pooch so you could be granted the favour."

"Mrs Anderson!" I expostulated, suddenly finding my voice. "This… This is an outrageous way for any woman to speak. Let alone one of your…"

"Oh, save the posturin'," she sneered. "I only tell things as they are – or at least mighta been. And don't you go takin' no high moral tone with me, boy. You're here cos you know I got a story your boss back in the city going to love and you know it'll be putting plenty o' greenbacks your way. You so upset by my plain speaking you had better leave now, cos there be plenty more like it coming your way if you stay."

She was right on a number of things. I *was* a reporter, and one from the city at that, so I wasn't quite as *outraged* as my manner professed me to be. And you know already that I saw this story as a path to a little fame

and fortune. So the fact I remained exactly where I was and made not even the slightest attempt to leave was all the proof she needed to tell her she was right about my intentions.

But, even had I been as morally disgusted as she thought, my reporters nose was twitching and I *knew* there was a story here that could well turn out to be sensational.

Had twenty of those local ex-sailors roped me up and tried to haul me from Lydia Andersons sitting-room they'd have had a fight on their hands.

Thankfully, the lady in question took my continued presence as a cue to continue the story I had come to hear rather than an opportunity to try and shock more youthful sensibilities.

"Erastus just about worshiped her, though," she went on. "I used to know him pretty well. He lived next door to me, and we went to school together. Folks used to say he was waitin' on me, but he wa'n't. I never thought he was except once or twice when he said things that some girls might have suspected meant somethin'."

I didn't need to be a reporter, and the student of human-nature that profession required from those that followed it, to recognise the wistful look flitting over Lydia's aged but still somehow youthful cheeks as love thwarted.

"Lust", given the way she had already spoken to me on the subject, going hand-in-hand with the more wholesome disappointment, though I couldn't be sure if she hadn't known some success in the physical sense with Erastus to compensate for the absence of his finer feelings towards her and, if she had, she didn't appear willing to share the knowledge of it out.

Not yet, anyways.

"Anyhow," she continued, and if there was any malice for either Erastus or the woman he chose over her she hid it well, "that was before Luella came here to teach the district school."

She became thoughtful, as if at some minor puzzle she had been unable to resolve in the past and for which an answer was proving just as elusive now.

"Was funny how she came to get it, mind, for folks said she hadn't any education and that one of the big girls, Lottie Henderson, used to do

all the teachin' for her while she sat back and did embroidery work on a cambric pocket-handkerchief or read from a book of her own choosing she didn't care to share with her class. Lottie Henderson was a real smart girl, a splendid scholar, and she just set her eyes by Luella, as all the girls did. Lottie would have made a real smart woman, but she died when Luella had been here about a year."

Again the thoughtful look, more pronounced this time, as if at a puzzle of greater magnitude.

"Just faded away and died, she did. Nobody knew what ailed her. She dragged herself to that schoolhouse and helped Luella teach till the very last minute. Yet the committee who all knew how Luella didn't do much of the work herself just winked at it."

"When did she marry Erastus?" I piped up, not wanting her to think I was still shocked by her earlier… *indiscretions*.

"Not long after Lottie passed. I always thought he hurried it up because Luella weren't fit to teach. Lance Whitlock, one of the big boys, used to help her after Lottie died, but he hadn't much government, and the school didn't do very well, and Luella might have had to give it up, for the committee couldn't have shut their eyes to things much longer – as taken with her as they were."

"What happened to him?" I asked.

"The boy who helped her, you mean?"

I nodded and a look of what I knew to be genuine regret passed over Lydia Anderson's strangely youthful features. In the short time we would spend with each other I would come to know her temperament as a strange mix of the nurturing and the mercenary, the prim and the lustful, and the sadistic and the sensitive. This regret for the fate of Luella's *"boy"* being but one example of her multitudinous dualities.

"He was a real honest and innocent sort of fellow. An' a good scholar, too. Folks said he overstudied, and that was the reason he was took crazy the year after Luella married."

Her head shook from side-to-side and I could tell it was something she hadn't bought then and wasn't of a mind to be persuaded now.

"Was never so sure myself," she finished, looking thoughtful still and vindicating my suspicions as she did so.

"Though Luella never let on to me about any other cause and she was

always mighty fond of boasting to me on the subject of her… *triumphs.*"

Already, as she spoke, I could see a pattern emerging and I smacked metaphorical lips at the story of a female demon who brought doom to all who crossed her path. True, or a myth born of the gossip of fishwives, it made no difference to me. Fame and reward were enough in themselves without worrying too much on the score of veracity.

"Luella, you see, had a way of… *demanding*… devotion from those who wanted to be a part of her life… No matter in how *small* a way."

"And what about you, Lydia?" I asked.

She looked genuinely puzzled:

"What about me?"

"Didn't you ever want to be a part of her life?... You know, like the Lottie Henderson girl?"

Her expression was plainly teasing:

"That the kind of stuff you want to write about, is it?" she replied with a question of her own that, by misinterpreting my meaning put me onto the wrong-foot immediately. For, though it hadn't been on my mind, I knew exactly what it was she was accusing me of referring to and, hard-bitten reporter I believed myself to be or not, I felt my cheeks colour."

"No need to blush like a virgin on her wedding night," she laughed. "You ain't the first of your sex to have his juices flushed by the picturing o' two handsome fillies pleasuring each other."

The truth was, I *hadn't* been *"picturing"* it at all until she took the wrong end of the stick and mentioned it.

I was now though.

"I, hmm, simply meant that… that…" with such ease had this eighty-year-old lady with her lack of self-restraint and filthy mind gotten behind my mental defences I realised I had forgotten the question I had asked – or at least its original import.

Fortunately, she hadn't, and in realising she hadn't I also had to come to terms with the uncomfortable knowledge that I, the so-called worldly-wise *'city-slicker'*, was being teased and tormented by an old lady who, I happened to know, had not stepped foot outside of her small village since the day of her birth.

"For some reason," she went on, "whatever the effect Luella had on most people she came across it didn't work with me."

Relieved to be back on the surer ground of facts and placing the less news-worthy, or at least printable, imagery her words had inspired in me to one side – though even as I did I knew I'd be returning to them at some time in the not too distant future – I pressed on:

"Must have made her wary of you."

The question I had seen as a perfectly straightforward one seemed to puzzle the old lady with the lewd turn of mind and a light of puzzlement stilled the dancing of her still bright and alert eyes.

"How'd you mean?" she asked.

Not having expected to supply an answer of my own to such an obvious question I spluttered at such a length that Lydia Anderson had satisfied her own curiosity by the time I'd framed a reply and was about to deliver it.

"I s'pose being pretty much the only one in these parts who weren't affected by her enough to lose what I had of my own will did make her a bit cautious round me."

She had said this with a nod before raising her eyes to mine by way of verification:

"That is what you were meaning, weren't it?"

This time it was my turn to nod.

"Erastus though," she was continuing without any prompting from her big city interlocutor, "didn't have my immunity to her… *charms*."

Her head shook from side-to-side accompanied by an expression of the deepest regret and my earlier suspicion as to the nature of her feelings for the man Luella Miller had taken from her and made her own were confirmed.

"None at all."

"He wouldn't be the first to lose his head over a beautiful woman in such a way," I reminded her. "Nothing new in that."

"That's nothing but the honest truth," she agreed. "Nut you have to try and fix Erastus as he was in your head to get some idea of just how marked was the change his marriage to Luella wrought in him."

"You said he was a good-looking man," I chimed in, more to keep her on the subject than from any sense of pertinence, though it turned out my simple desire for continuity provoked a great deal more.

"Good looking?" she almost exploded at my description, despite my

echoing of the very words she herself had used to describe him, her whole being about as animated as it was possible to imagine anyone of such an age possessing the energy to be.

I waited as she shook her head at me as if I were the dullest piece of livestock on the holding and knew I had touched a nerve.

"Calling Erastus good looking's no more accurate than calling the sun yellow and contenting yourself you've provided a fair description."

I sat in rebuked silence as she mulled a more *'accurate'* description over.

Finally:

"There was so much more to him than just pleasing looks."

Knowing the silence that followed the sentence was no more than a means of collecting her thoughts that she may spew them my way with greater power, and pleased with myself for having led her to that condition from which indiscretions are unavoidable and young reporters fortunes are made, I was content to give her just as much time as she needed.

"He was the physical match of *most* any man – and I don't refer only to his striking features and manly posture. Even those sailors, hardened from years before the mast who fetched up here looking for work of a different kind, thought twice, and then again for luck, if it came to a point of conflict with him. Erastus was as well-served by physical prowess as he was by mental agility.

Her description pleased her and she smiled with satisfaction before going on:

"So don't go running away with the idea he was some kind of simpleton whose strength had outgrown his wits just cos he could beat the tar out of any man for miles around. Erastus was as smart as a whip and had been away to study law at the Maryland University before returning to take care o' family matters after his parents passed. 'Fore he met Luella he was ready to return to the city and start his own practice. Rumours had it there was a woman waiting there for him too, but Erastus never mentioned her and I can't be sure."

A look of what I could only take as sadness turned her eyes downwards reflectively.

"What I am sure of is the fact this woman, if she existed, *never* so

much as heard from Erastus again, let alone laid eyes upon him."

"Were the family from money?" I asked.

"As much as what constitutes being so around these parts," she answered. "Erastus's father owned the boat-yard and most o' the property round the harbour, so he was never going to do without."

"Must have made him even more attractive in Luella's eyes," I observed, back to my prompting.

Lydia Anderson was already shaking her head.

"Luella Miller never wanted for anything her whole life. To this day I can't say where it came from, but the money that kept her in the fine clothes she always wore and the finest city furnishings she purchased for her house never came from no schoolteacher's salary.

I was about to interject when:

"An' she had all of that *before* what belonged to Erastus became hers by marriage and…"

"And, what?" I urged as, in the maddening way people do when on the verge of letting slip a revelation, she stopped herself in mid-stream.

Her answer did not begin where I might have expected it to but was no less compelling for not doing so:

"Erastus Miller was a strong man, mental and physical, yet when he tied himself to Luella he became… something else."

"Was Luella a nag?" I asked, already knowing the answer to my own question and wishing only to provoke the old lady to greater revelations.

"Don't be an ass, young man," she chided me in a voice more weary than exasperated. "I've decided to tell you my story, even though it'll benefit you more than it ever will me, so you've no need to try and pry it from me with stupid questions."

The eyes she turned upon my own reduced me to the condition of schoolboy again and I knew silence was my only option if I wished her to continue.

"Luella – as you know full well from what I've already told you of her," she said, finally satisfying herself of my compliance and continuing; "did not *'nag'*."

Her still vivacious eyes held me captive as she added:

"She *commanded*."

It was, I told myself, seated opposite Luella Miller's one-time friend, a

capacity not lacking to any marked degree in Lydia Anderson herself.

"Apart from me and one other – and I've no clue why so don't bother to ask – I never saw the person who wasn't anything but totally obedient to her."

"Obedient?" I asked, earlier vow of silence eschewed immediately at what I could only regard as an old lady's hyperbole so intrigued by her assertion I overlooked her mention of this *'one other'*.

She would, however, get to this in due course.

"That's what I said," Lydia Anderson sniffed. "Even those who didn't like her felt compelled to do her bidding – seemed to be a gift with her."

"Sounds a dangerous gift to me," I said, unable to help myself. "The penalties for being accused of witchcraft are not so far in our past."

"And you want to know something else?"

She stopped and it wasn't until I realised she had ignored my observation completely and was waiting for the response I supplied with a nod that she continued:

"She *enjoyed* making 'em do it. Told me as much herself when she finally got used to the fact her… *wiles*… weren't going to work on me and got used to the idea of having someone as an equal and a kind of friend rather than another flunkey."

"A *'kind of friend'*?"

"That's right. Luella was far too… *warped*… in her ways to ever know or want to know true friendship or true love. She'd been given the choice of having me as a kind of ally and a confidant or another follower doing just what she wanted, she'd have taken the last o' the two quick as a flash. Having control over another person o' flesh and blood was what Luella lived for and nothing – *nothing* – flushed her juices more than making someone do something against their natural inclination just cos they knew it might please her. The more humiliating for 'em the better she liked it."

"That is, as you say, pretty *'warped'*," I agreed. "Yet you stayed her *kind of friend*?"

"*More* than that," she came back at me instantly, unconcerned by my mild sarcasm.

Now I'm not slow on the uptake; got a reputation that's exactly the opposite, you could say; but despite the way Lydia Anderson had spoken

to me earlier on the kind of subjects no woman of my experience would have dreamed of letting pass her lips, I didn't quite get what she was aiming at.

Not immediately, anyway.

Lydia Anderson was content to sit in silence as the message she had conveyed to me took root in my thoughts.

"You mean…?"

The laughter with which she greeted my dawning understanding was generated as much by her ability to shock supposedly more enlightened youth then the shock itself and even as images of a young Lydia and a young Luella making Sapphic love to each other stunned and, yes, titillated my thoughts I knew the woman was taking great pleasure from my discomfiture.

On a more mercenary note I also knew it would be the pleasure she took from recounting her story that would deliver itself into my hands and if, to feel it in my grasp, it was necessary to experience some shocking language describing events even more shocking from Lydia Anderson's aged lips, then so be it.

"There's only the two of us here," she went on, "and I can't see as you'll be in any hurry to leave and start spreading rumours about a poor old lady that will, more than likely, reflect worse on you than me. Not as if it's something your editor'll be about to print either, is it?"

On both counts, of course, she was totally right.

"To this day – not that much happens on that score these days - Luella was the most exciting lover I ever had," Lydia Anderson assured me with such a complete lack of self-consciousness I could – and still can – only assume it was the inhibitions shed with the passing of years that allowed her to do so in front of a complete stranger of a different sex and far earlier generation.

"In fact, I think it was only when she was in bed with me that Luella ever allowed herself to be an equal with another – though she never showed any inclination to experience the opposite side of the coin and be of a lesser status in regard of me."

When I think back to the look of bemusement that must have greeted Lydia Anderson's statement I realise how much my self-congratulatory appraisal of my own maturity and enlightenment was little more than

the posturing that goes hand-in-hand with youth, vitality and inexperience of that world we already see our vigour as having mastered.

It does, anyway, explain the look of pure amusement I had won from the lady in question.

"Come now, Mr Copland," she chided me. "You're not going to tell me such goings on have passed your notice in the big city?"

She was right. I was not. In point of fact, I had no desire to discuss goings-on of any such kind with her.

"Why, even in our little backwater we know of these things. Are you telling me you've never experienced the thrill of lowering your trousers and placing yourself across the sleek thighs of a woman you've offended before she corrects your behaviour with the palm of her hand."

My tongue had succumbed to a form of temporary paralysis at this as I instantly envisaged a younger version of Lydia Anderson bringing a relentless palm down upon my unprotected buttocks.

"You are picturing it now," she guessed correctly. "And if I was thirty years or so younger I could have you over my knee this instant and have that pert young backside o' yours smarting. Reckon I might stand a chance even now."

The smile I remember her beaming my way consisted, as I recall, of knowing contempt for the frailties of my sex and an offer she was convinced her advanced age would prevent me from taking up even as she made it.

Thankfully, her thoughts took her back into the story I had come to hear – if not the one I knew could never be printed – and prevented me having to give voice to a refusal that might, despite what I took as her resignation for it proving the case, have given her offence enough to eject me from her home with the story untold.

"It was Luella's philosophy," she went on, "that *'all human relations were based upon the primacy of one person over another'* – her words."

Still struggling with the stirring below stairs, the potency of which was made no less for having been inspired by the suggestive words of an octogenarian, I forced myself to a nod of understanding as, at this late stage, I realised that, such had been Lydia Anderson's effect upon me, I had neglected to write anything in the notepad that remained open upon my lap.

Not, I remember telling myself, that I was likely to forget *anything* in respect of our encounter anyway.

"The true joy for her was to bend – especially a man with strength of character to add to a superior will of his own – a person so completely that he or she became little more than a vessel through which her own desires could be realised. Even better if the creature in question was compelled to act out something that went right against the grain of their true nature."

"And Erastus Miller was just such a man," I heard a croaky and indecisive voice ask that I recognised as my own.

"Poor Erastus," she sighed. "He being so much older than she really made her ownership of him all the sweeter for her."

For a second I thought I'd misheard.

"Ownership?" I heard myself gasp, sure she was either jesting or had chosen the wrong word. This was a living breathing man, after all. A *real* man according the Lydia Anderson. Yet the way she was describing his relationship with Luella Miller sounded less like man and wife and more that of pet and master.

The *master* in this instance being the female!

My astonishment went unremarked upon.

"With Erastus, Luella truly found her soul mate."

Astonishment was joined by bafflement:

"But…? I thought…? So she did love him then?"

Again this moody and changeable octogenarian with her wits intact in their entirety laughed the laugh that told me I was no more than a foundling in comparison to her when it came to the more… *warped*… relations of men and women.

"If an owner can be said to love the dog it teases, torments and beats," she told me, then, yes, Luella loved poor Erastus."

This last I found all too incredible:

"Am I… Am I to take you literally on that?" I asked, appalled that a man, and one she herself had described as a man amongst men, could allow himself to be treated so. Contempt mingling freely with my disbelief now. This despite my earlier and inexplicable reaction to Lydia's own suggestion I might drape myself across her lap to feel the palm of her hand as it corrected my buttocks.

"You are telling me that she…? That she actually… *beat*… her husband?"

"And, if I tell you just that, you'll think him less of a man?"

"Well…"

"Despite the way your own cock came to life when I asked if you'd ever had the pleasure of correction from the hand of a strict female?"

Unable to reply, stunned once again by the presence upon such venerable lips of such a word and the knowingness behind it, I felt sure she must laugh again that mocking laugh and was surprised when she suddenly looked contrite.

Drawing herself up in her chair, scarcely looking sixty let alone eighty, she clasped her hands together on her lap and regarded me.

Then, benignly:

"Forgive me young fella," she begged, sounding sincere. "All this talk of Luella has taken me back to that time when we were closest and something of her own desires took root in me. It's a heady thing to control another person and it serves me no compliment that I too, for a while anyway, sought out the unholy pleasures to be had from behaviour of such a kind."

She again became thoughtful:

"Though I has to confess, those pleasures can be pretty habit-forming and even now I'm not immune to… *hankering*… after them."

"If… If that pleasure's a part of your story," I heard myself say, a strange unreality having settled upon me, "then that's what I've come to hear."

Her smile actually seemed grateful and I got the impression, novice that I was when measured against her, that she was warming to me:

"Not, of course, and understandably so, that you can write about everything I'm telling you."

"That, I must confess," warmed myself by her sudden softness with me, "would not be possible given the nature of the events you have described to me up to now; though those same events might find a publisher of a kind willing to publish them in Paris or London where I believe there's a… *call*… for stories of such a kind."

"Makes no difference to me Samuel," her smile was suddenly motherly, though I knew from the village woman who had directed me to

her dwelling that no offspring had ever made a kicking and screaming passage past Lydia Anderson's loins.

"You don't mind me calling you Samuel, I take it?"

"It's fine by me, Lydia," I smiled back, only to win a look of reproach.

"Now that's not very respectful, young Samuel," she reprimanded me, looking as if she meant it too. "I'm your elder and you're in my home. Not just that but I have something you want, so I think the least ways you can address me is with a simple *'ma'am'* or *'Miss Lydia'*."

The smile returned:

"That's not so unreasonable of me now, is it?"

"Forget Luella Miller," I remember telling myself. *"Her friend Lydia must have been a proper terror in her own right when in the full bloom of womanhood herself."*

I also remember telling myself a little *"respect"* seemed a cost I was more than willing to pay to hear the rest of her story that I might get it written up and have it to the good people of Baltimore and elsewhere; those same people whose desire for stories of strange and horrific origins was sure to fix me on the path to success.

"No, ma'am, it's surely not and I apologise if I've seemed too forward up to now."

"Well spoken, Samuel," she applauded me, smile widening. "It's been a long time since a handsome young man addressed me in such a deferential way and it's something I've sorely missed."

Her smile became a little… *teasing*:

"But then I do have something you want real bad, don't I? Even if it isn't this aged body that would once have had you grovelling before me in supplication just for the honour of placing your lips on the toes of my boots."

As she said this I averted my eyes and, as fortune would have it, they alighted upon the charcoal sketch above the mantel that showed her full-form seated pretty much as she was seated now.

The only difference I could see being the five decades or so we were removed from the time of the study.

I could not deny the command in the clear eyes that stared out at me and which the artist had captured so uncannily, nor the swell of her breasts in an hour-glass figure I had, looking upon the aged and real

version, no reason to believe was artistic licence.

But it was the pointed black toes of her boots as they peeped from beneath the hem of her dress that hit me like a hammer-blow and had me picturing myself in front of Lydia Anderson as she had once been with my lips pressed to them in exactly the posture of supplication she had described.

"I have a niece who lives in the city, you know?" she changed tack, words coming to me as if from over the sea as I fixated on the study of her in her prime and found myself in a state of excitement as I pictured myself in an abject position before her that had, before now, never occurred to me as a sexually arousing way to present oneself before a woman.

With my attention split between the Lydia of today and the version of her hanging above the mantel – not to mention the strange thoughts inspired in me by her indecorous words – I remained silent as she continued on.

"She's a lot like me, in looks and outlook" I heard and didn't hear. "Raised her after my sister passed when she was but an infant. "

Why the fact Lydia Anderson had a relative who was a lot like her and who lived in Baltimore should have excited me in such a way at the time I could only put down to the strange thoughts elicited in me by the words of the aunt and the charcoal drawing that, in a small way, brought what must have been her youthful comeliness to life for me and, somehow, made me yearn to experience it in the form of the niece from the city.

"I've a feeling Lorraine'd take to you real bad so remind me to write you her address in the city before you leave that you may go visit her."

"I, er…" I began to splutter, sensing somehow, certainty arriving with a provenance I was unable to explain or verify, that a meeting with the niece would *not* prove healthy to me.

"I insist," Lydia Anderson, told me, erect as a ramrod upon her seat and fixing upon me the full power of her still magnificent eyes. "Lorraine'd never forgive me if I let her go without the opportunity to meet so handsome and so… *respectful*… a potential suitor. Besides, she was one of the only people apart from myself Luella took something resembling a liking to and spent a lot of her early years in company with

her at the Miller house. Only person other than me I knew to be immune to her charms."

The old lady's smile seemed to be daring me to refuse the invitation.

"Be good for your story to meet up with her," she added as an inducement.

Not liking the description of me as a *"potential suitor"* one whit, still protective of my bachelor status and the freedoms that went with it, I winced; sensing somehow that the niece would be no better for my mental and physical well-being than Luella Miller herself had proved to be for the man whose last name she had taken.

Just the same, objective paramount, I found myself nodding as if I would like nothing more than to meet up with this niece of hers who I sensed would somehow be no good for me.

But then, such is the desire of youth to live in the moment, all later concerns were forced to the background as the old woman who had a story I felt sure could make my reputation and no small fortune to go along with it continued with its telling:

"From the moment Erastus and Luella tied the bond," she was telling me, the small matter of my meeting with her niece concluded in her mind it seemed, and *satisfactorily*, "he just grew weaker and weaker."

"Phys… Physically, you mean?" I asked, finally getting the word past a dry-throat on the second attempt.

"No. I don't," she answered with what I thought was unnecessary brusqueness. "Though he was, I can tell you, no more capable o' raising a hand to Luella than he was able to stop the tide rising up the harbour-wall."

She allowed herself an inscrutable little smile, as if amused by some private thought before deciding to let me in on it:

"Anyone raised a hand to the other in that marriage it wasn't Erastus, I can tell you."

Her eyes seemed to gauge me, as if assessing my readiness to hear what she had to say, then, probably realising she had said so much already that had shocked me to the core it made no difference, decided to go on:

"So happens, I was present on a number of occasions when Luella decided his behaviour was not of the respectful kind she demanded and

took him over her lap for a thrashing."

Of a sudden, I was spluttering:

"She…?

"He…?"

Lydia Anderson waited, enchanted it seemed by her ability to amaze the city-boy.

"He actually allowed her to…? To punish him?... And in front of a stranger?"

Her face clouded:

"Don't be witless, boy. You know already that I was no stranger. To either of them. And it weren't a matter of Luella being *'allowed'* by him. He had no choice. Not even after she had him draped over her knee and the thin cane she had taken to using on him fetched the blood to his ass cheeks and the tears to his eyes. Making sure he was heard to howl before she sent him to put his nose in the corner and think about his future behaviour."

At that moment I felt for the first time that, rather than the still vivacious eighty-year-old with her wits intact I had taken her to be, Lydia Anderson might just be weak in the head.

Even if nobody in the village had so much as hinted at the fact.

What she told me next did indeed give me serious doubts in respect of her mental health and gave me like concerns for the success of the enterprise that had caused me to visit her in the first instance:

"Feeling a mite sorry for Erastus as he stood with his nose pressed to the corner and his trousers around his ankles, striped buttocks telling the world he had just been chastised by his wife, made no difference when Luella took me by the hand and led me up to the bedroom."

I remember my breathing coming to a stop as the horror of what she was describing and was about to describe further impacted on thoughts already scandalised beyond all previous conceptions of such outrage.

"Right there," she went on, "on the marital bed Luella forbade Erastus from sleeping upon, insisting he curl up on the floor at her side like the faithful cur she saw him as, Luella took me with her tongue and I returned the compliment."

It was then, I know not why, that suddenly certainty descended upon my recently formed doubts and I knew the woman was speaking no

more than the simple and horrendous truth. That she, Lydia Anderson, had not only witnessed the beating and humiliation of a husband in his own home – a man I *knew* she had once held feelings for - and at the hands of his wife, but had actually found the experience so… *arousing*… she had indulged in an act of unnatural sex with the wife. This as the husband himself had remained obediently in place downstairs, nose to the wall.

"The strangest thing happened when we came back down mind," she was going on, speaking almost as if to herself as I forced some much needed air into lungs deprived of its necessity by pure incredulity.

"When Luella ordered Erastus to crawl over and beg her pardon for his offences and he turned to do so," she went on, "his cock – and it was pretty impressive, I have to say, even though Luella refused me the use of it – was as hard and thick as the boom on a schooner."

She shook her head.

"Still beats me how this strong and proud man could take on in such a way after being treated so badly."

Her eyes again fixed on me then, as if expecting an explanation of some kind.

"That," I told her – contradicting a disturbance of my own I was unable to explain, *then*, at least; "is about the sickest thing I've heard in all my years.

She simply shrugged.

"How…? How could you treat a man so? A man you yourself said was decent and good and one I reckon you had feelings for yourself at some time?"

Expecting a reaction from her at my outburst I wasn't prepared for the one she supplied:

"Don't think it didn't puzzle and disturb me for some time, Samuel. Even though Luella and I were already lovers by that stage it was the first time I'd ever experienced a fully grown man being put in his place by a woman in such a way. To this day I can't say from where the delight my cunny took in witnessing this man, strong and dominant in all other respects of his life, being humbled at the feet of his wife. A man, as you rightly say, I was more than a little taken with, came.

"What I do know is that all thoughts of righteousness and correct

behaviour were no match for the feelings it brought my way."

I snorted, still outraged:

"That explains your… *behaviour*… at least," I granted. "But what about his? Why would he consent to let himself be used by a woman – his *wife* – in such a way?"

To my discomfort, her eyes flickered towards my groin and the grudging reaction I was unable to prevent from being inspired by her words and, though it was hidden by the front panels of my jacket, I sensed she could see it as if I were sat before her bereft of all clothing.

"For that same reason," she began, about to confirm my suspicions, "that your young cock strains within the prison of your trousers at hearing me describe the way a, so-called, manly man can be brought to heel by a superior female."

"I… I…"

"Oh, do stop spluttering, Samuel," she scolded me. "Even as you sit there, all outraged and moral, you know full well that if I were to remain in any ways like the picture behind me you keep throwing longing looks towards I could fetch the blood to your behind and have your nose in the corner afterwards. And for no more reward than to let you lick my bare feet and, maybe, if you were to do it pleasingly enough, allow you to hump my leg afterwards."

Suddenly, story, fame and fortune or not, I had a feeling I needed to get out of that room and Lydia Anderson's presence for the sake of my own future sanity and well-being.

I had almost half-risen from my chair when I heard:

"Sit!"

I looked at her with all the comprehension of the mutt she had just described humping her leg and realised her staccato command had been aimed at a creature she perceived as being just that.

I sat, just the same, however.

"You came here for a story and you'll find when you get back to the city and meet my niece that you'll be getting a whole lot more, young Samuel," she told me, satisfied she had my full and obedient attention; though how she had gained it I could not say.

"First though," she went on, "you had better be hearing the story you really came to hear and the one you *will* be able to print up for the

readers back in Baltimore."

Strangely enough, despite the feeling this old lady was beginning to… *master*… me, her mention of the story and the realisation that once I had it I could escape back to the city settled me somewhat and I listened.

"From the very first moment they entered Erastus's house as man and wife, everything changed for him. The very first decision she made being to do away with his housekeeper – the same woman who had done for him and his parents since he had been a boy. Luella told him it was an expense they didn't need and, with the money coming to them from the boat-yard regular like, he would have little enough to do without being excused house and yard work.

"I think this was the first and only time Erastus tried to assert himself with Luella and it went badly for him. Luella never did tell me how she did it but, afterwards, he was like a lamb with her. He always got the breakfast and let Luella lay abed, did all the sweepin' and the washin' and the ironin' and most of the cookin'. He couldn't bear to have Luella lift her finger, and she let him do for her. She lived like a queen for all the work she did and even had Erastus's sister make her clothes for her – the ones she didn't have Erastus fetch for her from the city, that is. Lily Miller was a spinster who was also a gifted seamstress and Luella worked her like a dog to provide her with the kind of wardrobe she said it was only fitting a woman of her standin' should have.

"Course, I'd seen the same at the schoolhouse and watched first poor Lottie Henderson and then Lance Whitlock pine away from the wanting of her."

Again came the shake of the head I now took as indicative of things she herself found beyond her understanding.

"Make no mistake, Samuel, age was no defence against her… *charm*… and Lily Miller being in her fortieth year couldn't save her.

"Besotted she was. Worked her fingers raw just to please her. I've even seen her give Luella foot rubs when Erastus wasn't around to provide them and Luella said how badly her feet ached from having been sat on her backside the whole day long."

Lydia Anderson had laughed at her own humour and I stayed quiet, sensing she was reaching a crucial stage in the story.

"Lily would look at Luella the way I'd seen so many look at her and,

spared such a fate myself, knew would end badly. Sometimes, I would catch Lilly staring at her brother's wife when she thought she couldn't be seen. She would run a tongue over her lips in the way of a man ten miles into the desert who yearns for a cooling draught and I knew that same tongue had tasted Luella and prayed for the day when she could do so again."

Shake had turned to nod now, as she found herself on ground more… *explicable*.

"This was Luella's power. And all the while she exercised it, poor Lily was fading. For, despite hardly being in her first youth, she had been a most robust and blooming woman; rosy-cheeked, with curls of strong, black hair overshadowing round, candid temples and bright dark eyes. You can believe I'm not exaggerating when I say plenty o' men round these parts, and others, had wanted to sample her wares down the years and none had succeeded.

"In fact, when it came to men it seemed Erastus and her late-father had been the only examples of the breed to excite any interest, let alone passion, in her. My sister, who had been to school with Lily, told me before she passed that there were plenty of rumours amongst her classmates at the schoolhouse when it came to her preference of boys or girls.

"It being, I'm sure you've guessed, "was always the fair variety that won the day."

She nodded to herself.

"Rumours her reaction to Luella, despite her being the wife of her brother, proved all too correct. In fact, I'm not sure her obsession for her sister-in-law didn't outstrip that of Erastus'. Not if the way she pined and faded after Luella took to tormenting her spoke true."

It was all becoming too much for me and my journalistic detachment was receding, it seemed, with every debauched word to fall from Lydia Anderson's lips.

"Leaving your own behaviour aside for the moment," I piped up, revulsion for what was being described allowing me to find my voice finally; "which is *questionable* to say the least; the woman you describe to me – Luella Miller, I mean – sounds of a kind purely evil."

Lydia Anderson's response was a shrug.

"Not one example," I went on, emboldened, "have you given me of an act of kindness or fellow feeling on her part that could go at least some way towards making her seem less… *monstrous*."

"Perhaps I haven't done so because I don't recall one," she told me.

"Yet you were her… *lover*. Does that not shame you?"

My journalistic training and the need to listen without becoming involved had, as I've mentioned, all but deserted me in its entirety now and I couldn't seem to regain the dispassionate mindset with which I had first entered into the woman's presence.

Not that she seemed concerned.

"We are what we are and react only through that with which we are made. Shame and guilt do not come into it. Would we be having this conversation now if Luella had been a person wholly good? I think not. Her praises would be sung and thanks given for her goodness. Why, then, should the opposite of that coin be reacted to any differently? She was who she was and, rather than find joy in providing the same to others, she took her satisfaction from ruling their lives and making them as wretched as it was in her power to make them."

I fell silent at this, completely lost for a refutation to that which I knew deserved to be refuted and feeling somehow… *less*… for finding myself wanting.

"When Luella began doling out her affections – something she achieved in the first place by allowing Lily to toil and run errands for her – more sparingly the effect on the woman was instant. It wasn't long before her rosy colour faded and her still pretty curves became wan hollows. White shadows began to show in the black rings of her hair, and the light died out of her eyes, her features sharpened, and there were pathetic lines at her mouth, which yet wore always an expression of utter sweetness and even happiness whenever Luella deigned to allow her into her presence. So desperate did she become at the loss of Luella's favour that she turned to poor Erastus in the hope he might intervene for her."

"A hope that must have proved vain if the description of the man's behaviour you have supplied up to now is accurate," I observed a little sniffily, unable to quiet a feeling of no small contempt for the weakness of the man of which I'd heard tell up to now.

“If Erastus were here before us as he was then,” she assured me, “I doubt you’d acting so dismissive of him. I promise you, whatever kind of domesticated and obedient animal Luella made of him, he remained a man more than capable of answering an insult. I’ve seen him whip the hide from more than one ex-sailor who thought his… *behaviour*… around his wife was something for another man to mock. Enough times anyway to know he’d have dealt with you in just the same fashion.”

Not being what you could describe as a *“fighting man”* I felt unable to contradict her on this score.

“An’ I tell you something else,” she went on with a little gleam of malice adding even more brilliance to her eyes; “unlike Erastus, you’da been so small in the way of a challenge to Luella I’m not sure she’d even have bothered.”

The look with which she then favoured me, I confess, was no less than… *chilling*.

“Though I sure would have.”

I tried – unsuccessfully – to moisten a mouth as dry as I could ever remember it being and was on the verge of croaking out a request for some water when the woman continued:

“Just like the Henderson girl and the Whitlock boy before her, Lily began to sicken an’ go soft in the head. Erastus wanted to have her nursed but Luella would have none of it and insisted it was something her brother should do for his sister – and this on top of the other household chores she made sure to pile on his head. But she did allow her Aunt Abby Mixter to come stay.”

The smile Lydia Anderson gave me might just as well been delivered across the table at a friendly game of cards:

“Bet you can guess what happened without me troubling to explain.”

I could.

“In less than a week, the wretched Lily had passed and poor Aunt Abby had taken her place alongside Erastus as Luella’s chattel and dogsbody.”

Again came that hallmark shake of the head.

I can see her now. She was a real good-lookin' woman, tall and large, with a big, square face and a high forehead that looked of itself kind of benevolent and good. She just tended out on Luella as if she had been a

baby, and when her married daughter sent for her she wouldn't stir one inch. She'd always thought a lot of her daughter, too, but she said Luella needed her and her married daughter didn't. Her daughter kept writin' and writin', but it didn't do any good. Finally she came, and when she saw how bad her mother looked, she broke down and cried and all but went on her knees to have her come away. She spoke her mind out to Luella, too. Told her that she'd killed her cousin Lily and everybody that had anythin' to do with her. Even went so far as to threaten her if she didn't leave her mother alone… Which weren't very wise of her."

This seemed like a contradiction to me and I told her as much.

"I thought you said you and your niece were the only two who weren't affected by Luella? Seems like Aunt Abby's daughter shared the trait. Went even further, from what you say."

"If a tiny outburst she regretted the instant it was finished - an' believe me, Luella fixed her with a look cold enough to make the devil take on extra clothing - means she shares our trait then I s'pose you're right. But what happened to her on the way home suggests otherwise."

The old woman paused, enjoying the power of being in possession of a knowledge I didn't have and wanting me to ask for it.

"Well?" I asked, giving her exactly what she wanted. "What happened to the daughter?"

"I told you: she went home."

"And?"

"Perhaps I should've said she *tried* to go home."

"She didn't make it?"

"Got as far as the first mountain pass over which her coach had to travel when she threw open its door and flung herself over the edge into the abyss. When the driver and his man came back with help her body, or what was left of it after the wolves had taken to it, was found on some rocks at the bottom of the ravine."

"And with all these deaths mounting, and there being but one common denominator linking them, you're telling me nobody thought to investigate Luella Miller?"

"I'm telling you no such thing," came her contradiction. "The Maryland Legislature sent one o' there best and most important men to look into it."

"And?"

Lydia Anderson's laughter was the epitome of girlish merriment and anyone listening in on our conversation would have found it hard to believe it was the laugh of a woman of eighty years and stemmed from a discussion on the subject of what was nothing less than multiple murders of some kind and in some inexplicable way.

"Was all that could be done to get the man to return to Maryland. In the end Luella herself had to order him back to the city. Believe me, he was not a happy man to go."

"And of course he found nothing untoward?"

She shrugged.

"What was there, after all? As you rightly mentioned, we no longer live in the age of superstition and the belief in witchcraft. The authorities were hardly likely to drag what seemed like nothing more than a mighty attractive and respectable housewife off on the say so of some suspicious fishwives and their folk – even of those brave or foolhardy enough to be seen to speak out against Luella."

"So things carried on in the same way, with Luella ruling the roost and treating Erastus as if he'd just been delivered to her in chains from the hold of a slave clipper."

"Pretty much, Samuel and that's a very apt description of the way Luella saw Erastus," she nodded. "That's indeed how it stayed. At least until *he* came, anyways."

Sensing the climax of her tale approaching, my ears pricked and my senses keened.

"Was when poor Aunt Abby finally took sick just like the others and was at the last knocking, so used up was she by Luella's constant demands that only Erastus seemed able to bear up under. I was there when he arrived to see her. His name was Jed Abbott and he had been Aunt Abby's son-in-law before her daughter took herself from her carriage and into the ravine."

She looked reflective and it struck me that the memory of this man was not a hardship for her.

Sure enough:

"If I'd ever thought Erastus Miller was a striking looking piece of manhood, then Jed Abbott was an altogether superior variety of beast."

Again she paused to reflect on her memory of the man.

Then:

"Luella saw it too and I'd never to that day or in the short time that remained to her since seen her react in such a way. Poor Erastus noticed it too and I could see the anger rising in the fine features those of Jed Abbott had put into eclipse as Luella began to act around him in a way I was more used to seeing from men when first introduced to her.

"With her husband present and enraged to be witnessing another man provoke in his wife a passion he himself was unable to spark, no matter how he denigrated himself for her favour, Luella Miller – there's no other word – fawned over this godlike young man with a stature overshadowing even that of Erastus, his dark and moody looks topped with thick hair that was so black it looked blue when caught by the light.

"'Make Mr Abbott up a bed, Erastus,' she ordered the man she had married and domesticated, fetching a look of the purest dismay and shock from him for not only her order but the sweet and coquettish mile she turned upon the man after she had directed him.

"But…"

"No, *buts*, Erastus!" she had snapped with a venom I'd not heard from her up to then, her commands up to that time having all been delivered in quiet calm tones, confident enough in the power she wielded to know she would be obeyed without the necessity of raising her voice.

Lydia Anderson's smile was one of wonder now as she recalled the scene:

"I won't never forget the look on the handsome face of Jed Abbott as Erastus Miller said no more but went away to do the bidding of his young wife. Everything about him bespoke a man of authority an' I could see that witnessing a woman order another man around – and a fine specimen like Erastus into the bargain – was not something he was used to experiencing."

She was nodding now.

"An' it was at this point that my own powerful inclination for the man led me into making the offer that would see me shown from Luella's house accompanied by a muttered curse at the door of what would happen to me if I ever crossed her path again. A curse of such vehemence and power it ensured I was terrified enough never to darken her door or

occupy the pavement in front of it again."

Her eyes met mine and sensed my thoughts:

"I know what you're thinking, young Samuel Copland," she told me. "If Luella's brand o' malignant magic was useless on me what did I have to be terrified about?"

I could only nod agreement at having my thoughts divined so exactly.

"Give it some mind, boy," she sighed, not for the first time a little exasperated by what she plainly saw as my innate slowness of thought. "She might not have been capable of harming me but there were plenty around, men, women *and* children, who were obsessed enough with her to be persuaded to do just that."

It struck me that she was right to be annoyed by my slowness and it was indeed an obvious point.

"But what was this offer that led to her sudden enmity?" I asked, inquiry made from genuine interest and a desire to get away from a line that had found me wanting.

"I said that, rather than put herself and Erastus to any trouble, Mr Abbott could spend the night at mine."

The head was back to shaking now.

"The times we had spent together up in her room, exploring each other's bodies with our tongues while Erastus waited with his nose to the wall, might just as well have not happened if the look she sent spearing towards me spoke true.

"'There'll be no need for that,' she spoke in a voice as cold as any I'd heard her use, and believe me, I'd heard it *cold*. 'In fact, Mr Abbott here has come to see us on a matter of a personal kind and, as you are not family, it would be as well if you left.'"

She snorted:

"An' so, our… *friendship*… was at an end."

She snapped her fingers.

"Just like that. From then on we never spoke a word to each other and I never once – and haven't to this day – crossed to the same side of the street upon which stands her house."

She let out with a snort.

"But I knew all too well what went on in that house after I left, just the same, and had no need to be present to be able to tell you exactly

what happened there in the weeks that followed."

"Jed Abbott became the latest of her victims," I said, nodding at my own sagacity.

Prematurely, it turned out.

"You're really not the brightest, are you, Samuel?" she observed with an expression of faint disgust. Did you not hear a word I said?"

"Well…"

"For once, it was Luella who was the smitten one – some might say obsessed. An', if she wasn't a victim exactly, the nature of the passion the two provoked in each other was of such a kind to ensure the both of them became just that."

"Erastus?" I asked, the pieces suddenly falling into place.

"Erastus," she agreed.

"Jed Abbott was the first man with whom he had been required to share Luella and it was too much," I mused, sensing a chance to redeem her opinion of my mental capacity and utilising it.

"Pretty much," she agreed. "Though it could never be said a man like Erastus, who Luella fed with scraps when it amused her to do so, could ever have been said to *'share'* her."

Pausing a few moments to collect her thoughts she began what I sensed was a winding up of her tale:

"Those *'scraps'* he had once accepted as all he was about likely to get from the woman who infatuated him so bad he was prepared to skivvy for her; even to the detriment of his reputation here and thereabouts; began to get harder to swallow when he found himself forced to do so in the presence of another man in the home he owned. A man who was not only more handsome and more physically powerful than he, but one who shared Luella's passion for inflicting cruelty and whose presence there in the first place had shared nothing with the demise of his wife or a concern for that wife's ailing mother. Though it had everything to do with some legal affairs for which he needed Aunt Abbey's signature and from which he stood to gain financially."

Having rushed Fells Point and Lydia Anderson's home on the strength of rumours concerning the late Luella Miller, and not having had the time to ascertain the backdrop to the story or how it ended, I sensed, nonetheless - how could I not? - the approach of tragedy and doom.

“The crisis that tipped the situation over the abyss from which it could make no return was prompted one night some two weeks after Jed Abbott had taken up residence in the same house where his ailing and bed-ridden mother-in-law lay - Aunt Abby being as obsessed with the lady-of the-house as Erastus himself.

“This came about when Luella, not content to flaunt the influence she had over her husband for her new lover’s pleasure simply by having Erastus wait on them both as if he were a manservant rather than the master of the house, decided to show her new man the *true* extent of the power she wielded.”

I realised my breathing had stopped once again as I waited for her to continue.

“On the pretext of some chore he had done that was not to her satisfaction, Luella ordered Erastus up to the bedroom from which he was now excluded and upon the mattress of which lay a naked – and unconcerned by it – Jed Abbot.”

My lungs remained devoid of air.

“Once there, he was commanded by Luella to remove his trousers and undergarments to receive his punishment.”

Forcing a breath into starved lungs, I could not even begin to even imagine the humiliation such a demand, let alone obedience to it, could inspire in the breast of a proud man.

I had considered it bad enough that such treatment could have been handed out to him in the presence of the old woman recounting his story to me, albeit in a more youthful incarnation. But this? Even at such a late stage in her story and despite evidence to the contrary, I prayed that Erastus had found the willpower to defy this she-demon and eject both her and her equally despicable lover from his home.

It was not to be.

“Erastus became angry at first,” Lydia Anderson continued. “Then he attempted to reason with Luella. When this failed, he pleaded and begged, all to the amusement of the man on the bed who had supplanted him. Which was when, after Luella had toyed with him enough and actually had him on his knees with his lips on her feet that he may persuade her otherwise, that she fixed him with that look he had never been able to gainsay and told him to do what she asked.”

“She beat him in front of her lover?” I heard myself ask in a voice breathless with wonder and revulsion of the most nauseous kind.

“Worse than she’d ever beaten him,” Lydia Anderson assured me. “So bad he could be heard sobbing and screaming like a girl from my upstairs bedroom across the street.”

“You…? You actually heard him?”

“As if he were bawling right there in the room with me… But that weren’t the worst that lay in wait for him on that fateful night.”

“There was worse?”

“Oh, yes,” she said emphatically. “far, far worse the ways I look at it.”

“It’s hard to imagine how anything could be,” I said sincerely, what had been described of the humiliation of Erastus Miller up to then confounding my ability to imagine becoming any more dire.

“Just think how it would feel to be a proud man like Erastus,” she invited me, “and to be reduced to a blubbering wreck under a cane wielded by your wife in front of the man who had taken her affections – such as they were – from you.”

She allowed me a few seconds, no more:

“Then imagine how much worse it would be to find yourself ordered to kneel at the side of the bed, naked, as your wife spreads her legs and allows herself to be taken by a cock that isn’t yours in a place nothing of your own, save your tongue, has been allowed to visit.”

“How…? How could he…?”

“He couldn’t,” she interjected before I could splutter out my obvious question. “While they were too far gone with their own passions to notice he was no longer at their side, he’d gone downstairs to the kitchen for a carving knife and, returning to find Luella with the cock of her lover buried to the hilt in the mouth he had so often begged to kiss and been denied, sliced Jed Abbot’s manhood from his body while her lips were still wrapped around it.”

I gasped and winced at one and the same time.

“He then plunged the same knife through Luella’s heart before strangling what remained of the life from the man he had just castrated.”

There was long silence as I took in the words and, despite my desire not to, attempted to picture the scene as the old lady had described it.

Then:

"And…? And Erastus?" I asked. "What became of him?"

"He was found the next day. Hanging from a beam in the barn."

She smiled, just as if she had finished delivery a Sunday-School a mild little homily warning of the perils of naughty behaviour before quoting a saying I now know to be Arab in origin but still have no idea where she picked it up:.

"*This too shall pass*."

And that, obviously, was the end of her story.

Or should have been.

Something, though, just wasn't sitting quite right with me.

"But how, exactly," I began, "could you know all this?"

Lydia Anderson was unperturbed by my mystification and immediately explained as if she had been waiting for my question all along:

"At about just before midnight that same evening, there was an almighty banging upon my front-door. When I rushed down and opened it, poor Aunt Abby all but fell into my arms and I had to carry her into the room and lay her on the floor. She was incoherent with hysteria and it was only after propping up her head with some cushions and getting some brandy down her that she told me what had happened. How she had heard Erastus's cries and the swish of Luella's cane as it descended on his buttocks and how she had dragged herself from bed to peep through a crack in Luella's bedroom door before Erastus raced from the room and returned with the knife; so enraged and blood so molten he didn't even see her as she cowered there. The rest you know."

"As you say, but that don't explain why only you know the story and how it never came to the attention of the proper authorities."

"Then perhaps when I tell you that Aunt Abby died in my arms that night, before the doctor I'd sent Lorraine to fetch arrived, you'll have some idea."

"You didn't think to tell the Sheriff of Police?"

"To what end? Humiliating enough for the memory of Erastus that a handsome and proud man like he should find his wife… *stepping out*… on him. Without all and sundry knowing the life Luella truly led him."

I had to admit it made a sort of sense.

"Least this ways people would remember him as a man who died

avenging his honour – even though Luella had killed what honour he had many times over prior to Jed Abbott's arrival pissing over its headstone."

For the first time I was unaffected by her forthright language and she sat back in her chair and allowed it to support the back she had kept ramrod straight since my arrival, leaving me to sense she was relieved to have unburdened herself of the terrible secret she had carried with her for so long.

Her next words confirming that impression:

"Apart from my niece Lorraine you're the only person I've ever told the real story of that night and I do so knowing your editor wouldn't let you repeat it in his paper even if you wanted to. But it's a good story for all that and, even without the more… *sensational*… aspects of it, I'm sure in your imaginative and capable hands it will exert a fascination over the fashionable Baltimore set."

And this was the story that the old woman, Lydia Anderson, told, and which I would subsequently write up for my editor.

After asking me to wait a few moments while she did something in another room, Lydia Anderson returned and showed me to the door.

This old lady, who was a strange and compelling mixture of the decent and the reprehensible and who seemed utterly unrepentant for her past sins and beyond the grasp of that guilt most of us take as but the normal expectation for behaviour we know to have been unjust or just plain wrong, pressed a scrap of paper in my hand.

When I looked at it I noticed, written in a neat and precise hand was an address in the Western region of Baltimore.

I looked at her questioningly, having forgotten her words of earlier – understandably so, I think, in the face of what she had just described of the happenings across the street from her all those years ago.

"I'll write and tell her to expect you."

"Expect…?"

"My niece," she reminded me.

"Your…?

"She's older than you but she's got just the firm hand I reckon you need."

Then without a word of goodbye, Lydia Anderson's door closed in my face and I knew that my first laying of eyes upon her would also be my

last.

It was only when I had made it back to my tiny lodgings near Baltimore's inner harbour and was taking a break from attempting to type up – mainly re-inventing – Lydia Anderson's story, that I came across the scrap of paper with the niece's address upon it.

I was about ready to throw it to the floor containing the balled-up paper from earlier efforts that hadn't pleased me when I stopped myself and stared hard at it again.

Though Lydia had written her niece's address down in neat and joined up letters, above it she had printed the name itself and it was to this that my attention seemed riveted.

LORRAINE ANDERSON

I don't know how long I stood and stared at that name but, for some reason, it seemed to exert some kind of fascination over me.

So much so that it was only some while later that I managed to laugh at myself and prepare once again to ball up the scrap of paper and discard it.

Only to stop myself once again.

My reason this time being the monstrous disturbance at my groin that made me dizzy, such was its power.

This time, *folding* the paper with the address on, I placed it carefully in the inside pocket of my jacket.

END