The Comtesse

A Story of Terror and Female Domination

By

Maurice Huysman

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"The Comtesse"

By
Maurice Huysman

A female-led tribute to the great Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

Vincent – Knightsbridge – Early-Evening - 1984

The date will forever be burned into my memory.

October 17th, 1984.

It is the day… and the night of that same day …in which an existence that had become joyously carefree - with the finality of my divorce after eight growingly miserable years of a childless marriage, and the unexpected legacy I received not days from the final notices having been delivered – became…

Something…

Quite different.

I suppose you're asking what kind of a man is it who could be so lighthearted after the death of a marriage in which, surely, there must have been love at some point?

A question only those who haven't experienced or escaped a union gone bad could ask.

Yes, love had been present in the beginning, on both sides without doubt. But the passing years of close contact, and all the worldly pressures placed upon couples in domesticity, had played had played their part in underlying our fundamental differences of character. Rather than deepening and broadening those first feeling of lust, empathy, and optimism with which we had begun our journey as a wedded couple.

Coincidentally enough, the growingly extended and many times vicious fights and disagreements we had were pretty much all to do with money.

Or, to be more precise, its absence.

That and what she described as my, *"overbearing and dinosaur attitudes towards male/female relationships"*.

My wife, you see – her name was Tricia, for those of you who value such irrelevant knowledge – was not what you'd call… *prudent* …in any way, shape, or form, when it came to household economy.

Or economy of any sort, come to that; financial or physical.

Except, in respect of the physical in regard of me, in the later part of our union.

But, if she had no problem when it came to the spending of the money I fetched in from my HEO salary at the Ministry for Overseas Development, then she had even less of a problem bemoaning the inability of my hard-earned cash to keep her in a manner to which her Camberwell council-estate background, and poor but hard-working parents, had *never* accustomed her.

So, given that she had managed to keep the erotic body shape and inherent flirty-ness that had drawn the muggins writing this to her in the first place, it came as no surprise – even if I can't deny my ego took something of a hit – to discover she had gotten involved with a married neighbour. A none-too-inspiring advert for the male sex whose inadequacies served only to place my own failure as a husband in even more stark relief. A none-too-inspiring man, however, with whom she was willing to do the down and dirty in return for his wining and dining her on those occasions when work took me from home and his own, somewhat combative, wife could be persuaded to allow him from her sight.

That *"combativeness"* not helping Tricia any when the cheated upon wife discovered her husband's infidelity and took one of his Spalding Top Flite blades – I believe it was the five-iron – and put some serious harm on them both after returning unexpectedly early from a day's shopping and discovering the two of them in the bed whose sheets she had only changed for fresh that very morning.

The rest, as they say, is marital history; but, to go back to my earlier *"coincidentally"*, the wife did not kick her husband through the door and he had never the slightest intention of leaving her anyway. Which meant that my wife, having received very little from our divorce after having blown her way through most of the money that had been mine to begin with anyway, was forced to go back to her parents and take up that exact same existence she had known before hooking old muggins. A muggins who, as mentioned above, received a most substantial and welcome legacy that made him financially independent, if not a mover and shaker, not three weeks after the divorce was final.

A happy development I lost no time informing her of the next time I saw her in one of our old watering-holes with the latest in a line of likely cash-cows she was trying to cultivate with her still, highly shag-worthy, body and let-me-suck-your-dick lip.

My perfect grooming and expensive clothing leaving her in doubt that she had, as I gleefully told her, *"fucked herself off the train a few stops too early"*.

"Tough shit!" I remember thinking with the great pleasure that was schadenfreude, as I strolled from the bar with the glamorous and expensive escort I'd contracted for no other purpose than to let my spendthrift and lazy ex-wife just what she'd fucked away.

Well… perhaps with *one* other purpose in mind also.

And a second purpose that proved to be one of the more spectacular couplings this writer had ever experienced.

And, once she had agreed to spend the evening in the bedroom of his newly acquired London town-house, experienced three times!

Whatever.

"Two stops too early" had, as aforementioned, fucked herself.

Which brings me back to the moment.

October 19th, 1984.

The family home that had been bequeathed to me stood in a leafy square at the back of Knightsbridge. Left me by an uncle I had never met and never would. The estranged brother of my late and adored mother, Elise. My father having departed this cliched vale of tears not a year later to leave me, an only child with one uncle with whom I had no contact and nil in the way of cousins. An unmet uncle who, just the same, had stated in his final will and testament that his estate should go to the last, or at least the oldest, Bendix of this particular strand to be found living upon his own death.

Enter yours truly.

That *estate* consisting of a rather upmarket four-storey in Montpelier Square, a hop and a skip from Harrod's itself, and accompanied by a yearly annuity that not only met my financial needs but went way beyond them.

My mother having fallen out with my uncle after the death of her own father and some vague recriminations in regard of his treatment of my grandfather, there had been nothing in the way of contact between the two surviving branches of the Bendix family. The only scant information coming my way being a description of uncle Clement as a misogynist whose distrust and distaste for women had left him both lonely and childless.

Not to mention, if he were cursed with the usual male urges, at the mercy of his own hand.

There were certain snippets of conversation I overheard between my mother and father that seemed to hint at some family disgrace in the past – a disgrace, apart from the shame of his having taken his own life, and from the small pieces I could gather, that involved uncle Clement's grandfather, who had passed away not two days on from the sinking of the Titanic in 1912. But, as to the exact nature of our antecedent's fall from grace, no details ever made themselves forthcoming. And neither my mother nor, especially, my father, were of the kind who shared such intimate details with a son.

Though I was at least aware that my great-grandfather, along with his love of science and the logic underpinning it, had once fancied himself as something of a writer in the vein of a Le Fanu or Stoker.

Even if, from the snippets I had overheard, his love of logic and science prevented him being *totally* committed to his *second* passion.

And so it was, financially equipped for a new life without a cheating and faithless wife, that I settled in to my existence in the pricey and fashionable surroundings of London's Knightsbridge.

And loved every waking second of it.

Through no talent or gift of my own, I told myself I had been led to what was my destiny in life.

And had *no* idea how *absolutely* I was on the money.

Gone were the constant worries of bills and wifely demands – when she could bring herself to divert her attention from the cock of our worryingly, for me, unremarkable and physically unimpressive neighbour, that is.

All such concerns missing now, together with my unhappy tenure in a boring and very junior government post.

Worries of such a kind replaced by the happy reality of having money enough to be my own man and never having to be troubled about such prosaic but enervating trifles again.

Which brings me back, again, to this date.

October 19th, 1984.

Almost ten months into my new domicile and, for reasons still not plain to me, suddenly curious about the attic at the top of the house that had not interested me in the slightest until now.

Interest that was spiked, perhaps – along with a certain absence of purpose on that particular day - by my finding of the key to it at the back of a utensil-drawer in the kitchen that – not being a stickler for housework and too cheap to pay for help – I had only found earlier in the day.

A finding that, though I could not possibly have been expected to realise it, was about to shed light on my great-grandfather's disgrace.

And, in doing so, bring a latter-day version of it down upon my own head.

Alone in that attic for the first time, it was obvious it had not been visited for many years, possibly from since my great-grandfather's time and throughout my uncle's habitation of the house and his father before him.

Something I found strange but not unduly disturbing.

It was, as you may imagine, a veritable treasure trove for arachnophobe's and those curious souls who find the study of dust mites irresistible.

Only after much dusting and attendant coughing did I have a panama-chair serviceable for habitation under the low and flickering light that brought into relief the books and scientific papers, curios and memorabilia, that had once belonged to my mother's father's father.

I was also cursing myself for no having fetched up a glass of something with me as I felt my throat tighten up in the atmosphere of a room for too long enclosed.

Eventually, once the dust had settled and I could breathe at least relatively clean air once again, I took up the journal that had resided there unopened since, I suspected, its owner had made his last entry in it as late as 1912.

And will spend the rest of my fucking life wishing I hadn't.

It was titled:

"The Journal of Daniel Bendix".

And it was about to destroy forever my new and much-loved life…

Millbank's Lair – Paris - Evening - 1892

...My newly acquired friend, Theo Millbank, had lived without fanfare for the past fourteen years in Paris. The house of his choice in the Avenue Gabriel being a smallish, single-storey, dwelling in the 8th Arrondissement and little more than a skip and a hop from the Champs-Élysées and the Arc de Triomphe itself. Dwarfed by the more substantial dwellings either side of it, I always fancied that it had been there long before the avenue was constructed and that all else had sprung up around it without any effect, good or bad, upon their less palatial antecedent. The grey tiles were stained with lichens that bespoke of its longevity and the walls were likewise mildewed and discoloured with the evidence of its provenance.

Of course, when I describe it as being *"smallish"*, my use of the word must be taken in context with the buildings surrounding it. For, though it looked a small house from the street, it deepened upon entry, and through a long and wide corridor with rooms leading off of it, into a single long chamber at the back. A chamber that was spacious enough for Millbank too house that singular library of occult literature and the accompanying curiosities which served him as a hobby.

As well as an amusement for his, mainly, less than credulous friends.

A wealthy man of refined and eccentric tastes, he had spent much of his life and a good deal of his fortune in gathering together what was said to be a unique private collection of Talmudic, cabalistic, and magical works, many of them of great rarity and value. His tastes leaned toward the marvellous and the monstrous, and I have heard that his experiments in the direction of the unknown have passed all the bounds of civilization and of decorum. There was also a *large* element of the erotic comprising his collection, but to his English friends he never alluded to such matters and, in regard of the less... *sensational*...bulk of that collection, took the tone of the obsessed dilettante only too ready to speak at length – and at the drop of a hat - on such things as the worst excesses of the black mass and other occult instances of terror to be found in the books lining the shelves of his dark museum.

Millbank's somewhat corpulent appearance was enough to show that his deep interest in these psychic – and erotic - matters was intellectual rather than spiritual. There was no trace of asceticism in the heavy jowls giving his face the kind of look one might expect to see on a neglected jelly at a child's party as it fought a losing battle to defy gravity. However, there was much mental force in the huge and dome-like skull which curved upward from amongst his thinning locks, like a snowy-massif peaking above a fringe of fir trees.

His knowledge, most agreed, was greater than his wisdom and his powers by far superior to his character. The small bright eyes, buried deeply in his fleshy face, twinkled with intelligence and an unabated curiosity of life. But, most also agreed, they were the eyes of a sensualist and an egotist.

He was also...

No.

Enough of the man himself.

He is dead now, poor devil - though my compassion for him, given the nature of our acquaintance, is necessarily restrained.

And dead at the very time that he had convinced himself that he had at last discovered his… *freedom.*

Albeit at the expense of another's, and a freedom his guilt would ensure remained… *troubled.*

No.

For it is not with his complex, curious, and ultimately, terrified and duplicitous, character that I have to deal, but with the very strange and inexplicable events which had its rise in my visit to him in the early spring of the year 1892 and saw my own life take on a living…

Forgive me. I rush when I should be considered. Though I feel you, whoever you may turn out to be, will forgive me my impatience as my story unfolds. Such, at least, is my hope.

I had known Millbank in England, where my researches in the Assyrian Room of the British Museum had been conducted at the same time he was endeavouring to establish a mystic and esoteric meaning in the Babylonian tablets. A community of similar interests that had brought us together as chance remarks led to daily conversation and then to something verging upon friendship. No surprise, then, that I had promised upon next visit to Paris I would call upon him – a visit I had duly made while renting a cottage at Fontainebleau and, as the evening trains were inconvenient, accepted his offer of accommodation when he asked me to spend the night in his house.

At this time, I myself, being Daniel Bendix, had reached the unhappy age of forty-three. I say unhappy because only the year before I had lost my much-loved bride of sixteen years to the consumption all too common to that eclectic breed of self-described stoics who describe themselves *"Londoners"*. The loss of my beloved Ginny depriving our son, Samuel, of a loving mother also and explaining why he was, at the time of my visit to Millbank, in the care of my childless sister Esther and her husband Ted at their home in Windsor – my grief, I am more than a little shamed to say, having instilled in me a certain selfishness that did not cater for the needs of a motherless eight-year-old boy.

Hence my flinging of myself into my researches and other interests that I might be, somehow, distracted from my loss.

And explaining my willingness to take up Millbank's offer to visit with him for an evening.

"I have only that one spare couch," said he, pointing to a broad sofa in his large salon; "I hope that you will manage to be comfortable there. The other rooms I would use to entertain a guest are, I am afraid, full to the rafters with those books and curios the claim upon space ensures I am unable to display here."

I had nodded my understanding with a smile, though it was indeed, and beyond a doubt, a singular bedroom for a guest, with its high walls of brown and well-thumbed volumes. But, for all that, there could be no more agreeable furniture to a bookworm like myself. And there is no scent so pleasant to my nostrils as that faint and subtle reek which comes from an ancient book.

Consequently, I went on to assure him with words that I could desire no more charming a chamber, and no more congenial surroundings for the evening.

"If the fittings are neither convenient nor conventional," he had smiled, "they are at least costly," said he, looking round at his shelves with evident pride. "I have expended nearly a quarter million of my fortune upon these objects which surround you. Books, weapons, gems, carvings, tapestries, images—there is hardly a thing here which has not its history, and it is generally one worth telling."

He was seated as he spoke at one side of the crackling open fire-place, and I at the other. His reading-table was on his right, and the strong lamp above it ringed it with a very vivid circle of golden light. A half-rolled palimpsest lay in the centre, and around it was scattered many quaint articles of bric-a-brac.

One of these aforementioned being an object resembling a large funnel; such as is used for the filling of wine casks.

It appeared to be made of black wood, and to be rimmed with discoloured brass – as well as being placed, I would tell myself later, in such a way from where I sat that I could not help but comment upon it.

"That is a curious looking thing," I remarked, led by the nose and having no conception of my own gullibility in the face of a supposed friend's duplicity. "Is there a history to go along with it?"

"Ah!" said he, "it is the very question which I have had occasion to ask myself. I would give a good deal to know. Take it in your hands and examine it."

I did so, and found that what I had imagined to be wood was, in reality, leather, though age had dried it into an extreme hardness. It was a large funnel, and might hold a quart when full. The brass rim encircled the wide end, but the narrow was also tipped with metal.

And there was something… *else.*

Something… *disturbing.*

"What do you make of it?" asked Millbank, as I became aware of a sensation of light-headedness; the texture of the artefact beneath my fingers beginning to feel of a sudden… *sensuous.*

"I… I should imagine that it belonged to some vintner or maltster in the Middle Ages," I observed, unable to keep a slight tremolo from my voice as I also felt a most uncomfortable – and, yes… *exciting* …disturbance at my nether-regions. "I have seen in England leather drinking flagons of the seventeenth century - 'black jacks' as they were called - which were of the same colour and hardness – though not, it must be said, of so singular a design."

"The date would be about the same," said Millbank, "and, no doubt, it was also used for filling a vessel with liquid. If my researches are correct, however, it was a queer vintner who used it, and a very singular cask which was filled."

I stared at the object in my hand and tried to make sense of my reaction to it.

"What do you make of the spout at the end of the funnel?" Millbank pressed on, hopefully oblivious to my most uncharacteristic inner responses.

As I held the object to the light, fighting against the libidinous energy my handling of it sent surging through my body - this that I might not make an unholy display of myself before my host - I observed that, at a spot some five inches above the brass tip, the narrow neck of the leather funnel was all haggled and scored. As if someone had notched it round with a blunt knife. For only at that point was there any roughening of the dead black surface.

I cleared my throat and realised he was observing me keenly:

"Someone has tried to cut off the neck."

"Would you call it a cut, exactly?"

I looked more closely – well, as closely as I could, given the power of my baffling response to the piece.

"It is torn and lacerated," I observed.

"It is," he agreed. "But, rather than an attempt to widen the end, it looks to me rather like the attempt of someone who came later to ownership to engrave more contemporary initials to their property, possibly the owner of the time himself, or even his wife and a servant of some kind. Something that might explain the crudity of the attempts."

I nodded, taking no disbelief from his offered explanation that was in complete contrast to my own.

"It must have taken some strength to leave these marks on such tough material, whatever the instrument or the identity of the one wielding it may have been."

My eyes found his and delivered a mild rebuke intended to be accusatory but bantering,

"But what do *you* think of it in total?"

I smiled that he might see I was not in earnest and went on:

"I can tell that you know more than you say."

Millbank smiled then, and his little eyes twinkled with knowledge.

"Have you included the psychology of dreams among your learned studies?" he asked.

"I did not even know that there was such a psychology," I sniffed, cynicism tempered by my most baffling arousal.

"My dear, Daniel," he began, using my first-name with what I took to be mild rebuke, "that shelf above the gem case is filled with volumes, from Albertus Magnus onward, which deal with no other subject. It is a science in itself."

"A science of charlatans!" I cried, unable to prevent myself, even as I reached full tumescence beneath the, thankfully, loose-fitting and, I am told, fashionable trousers I had purchased from the salon of Monsieur Charles Worth only the day before.

Millbank simply shrugged, hopefully mistaking my high-colour to be caused by my total hatred of impostors and frauds:

"The charlatan is always the pioneer," he said, taking no heed if, indeed, he had divined my feelings on the subject. "From the astrologer came the astronomer, from the alchemist the chemist, from the mesmerist the experimental psychologist. The quack of yesterday is the professor of tomorrow.

"Even such subtle and elusive things as dreams will, in time, be reduced to system and order. When that time comes the researches of our friends on the bookshelf yonder will no longer be the amusement of the mystic, but the foundations of a science."

With an effort, I forced a lucid response:

"Supposing that is so, what has the science of dreams to do with a large, black, brass-rimmed funnel?"

As I asked this, despite feeling more than a little lightheaded at the departure of blood from my northern-most point to a location more southerly, I sensed an image begin to form at the back of my eyes.

A distinctly... *female* ...image.

An image, from the fleeting glimpse I took of it before my friend's voice intruded once again, that seemed... *pleased*.

"I will tell you," his voice, firm and resolute, pulled me back to the here and now.

I tried to focus on his face, stunned and, I am afraid to confess, terrified by the fleeting female image I had just seen staring at me with such malignancy and... *anticipation* ...from my unwanted reverie. The dome head and the heavy jowls below them seeming infinitely preferable to those of the comely but... *tainted* ...female features that had only just flitted across my consciousness. Though you may be sure I berated myself for my unmanly fear as well as my inexplicable... *excitement*.

"You know that I have an agent who is always on the look-out for rarities and curiosities for my collection. Some weeks ago, he heard of a dealer upon one of the Quais who had acquired some old rubbish found in a cupboard in an ancient house. A house at the back of the Rue Mathurin, in the Quartier-Latin. The dining-room of this old house is decorated with a coat of arms, chevrons, and bars rouge upon a field argent, which proved, upon inquiry, to be the shield of Comte Nicholas de la Reynie, a high official of King Louis XIV. There can be no doubt that the other articles in the cupboard

date back to the early days of that king. The inference is, therefore, that they were all the property of this Nicholas de la Reynie, who was, as I understand, the gentleman specially concerned with the maintenance and execution of the Draconic laws of that epoch – though, from what I can ascertain thus far from the old archives still available, he was in possession of a wife who was no less, and perhaps more, diligent in her desire to… *punish.*"

He seemed somewhat ill-at-ease as he mentioned this last fact, but it was my turn to shrug. His mention of a *"wife"* discomfiting me for reasons I could not quite fathom. And doing nothing to address the competing dilemma of a penis that showed no sign of wilting.

"What then?" I asked, willing my voice to be firm.

"I would ask you now to examine the upper brass rim of the funnel."

I did as he asked, wanting nothing more than to cast the accursed thing from me – even as I felt my hands stroking its smooth surface that I might luxuriate in its sensuality.

"Can you make out any lettering upon it?"

There were certainly some scratches upon it, almost obliterated by time. The general effect was of several letters, the last of which bore some resemblance to the letter 'S'.

"You make it out to be 'S'?"

"Yes, I do."

"So do I. In fact, I have no doubt whatever that the letter is 'S'."

"But the nobleman you mentioned would have had R for his initial."

"Exactly! That's the beauty of it. He owned this curious object, and yet he had someone else's initials upon it. Why did he do this?"

"I can't imagine; can you?"

"Well, I might, perhaps, guess. Do you observe something drawn a little farther along the rim?"

"I should say it was a crown."

"It is undoubtedly a crown; but if you examine it in a good light, you will convince yourself that it is not an ordinary crown. It is a heraldic crown—a badge of rank, and it consists of an alternation of four pearls and strawberry leaves, the proper badge of a marquis. We may infer, therefore, that the person whose initials end in 'S' was entitled to wear that coronet."

"Then this common leather filler once belonged to a marquis?"

Millbank gave a peculiar smile.

"Or to some member of the family of a marquis," said he. "Such as a wife. So much we have clearly gathered from this engraved rim."

"But what has all this to do with dreams?"

It was at this point, and I do not know whether it was from a look upon Millbank's face, or from some subtle suggestion in his manner, that a feeling of repulsion mixed with unreasoning horror came upon me as I looked at the gnarled old lump of leather and allowed my fingers to... *caress* it.

"I have more than once received important information through my dreams," said my companion in the didactic manner which he loved to affect. "I have, in my studies, made it a rule that, when I am in doubt upon any material point, to place the article in question beside me as I sleep, and to hope for some enlightenment."

Despite the strangely sensual preoccupation under which I laboured, I manged to convey to him a look that was many moons short of being credulous.

He was *not* deterred.

"The process does not appear to me to be so very obscure," he went on, almost accusingly. "though it has not yet received the blessing of orthodox science.

"According to my theory," he continued, somewhat sniffily, "any object which has been intimately associated with any supreme paroxysm of human emotion, whether it be joy or pain, will retain a certain atmosphere or association which it is capable of communicating to a sensitive mind."

Leaning forward, he looked into my eyes searchingly and I sensed he was looking for something more in my stare than concurrence with what I had already described to myself as a most fanciful theory.

"By a sensitive mind," he continued, eyes unblinking, "I do not mean an abnormal one, but such a trained and educated mind as you or I possess."

Aware I was being flattered, I at least answered respectfully in regard of his unproven - and, in my mind, unprovable - hypothesis.

"You mean, for example, that if I slept beside that old sword upon the wall, I might dream of some bloody incident in which that very sword took part?"

"An excellent example. Let us say that the sword on the wall was used in that fashion by me, and I saw in my sleep the death of its owner, who perished in a brisk skirmish, which I have been unable to identify, but which occurred at the time of the wars of the Frondists."

"I find such a thing," I began, casting about my internal thesaurus for the word *least* insulting to my host, "improbable. It is not, after all, that we have empirical evidence to support such... *happenings*."

"Then we must disagree," said my host, sniffiness now absent and with no sign of rancour. "If you think of it, some of our popular observances show that the fact has already been recognized by our ancestors - although we, in our so-called wisdom, have classed it among superstitions."

"I take it from your voice then. that you have the empirical evidence to which I referred? I can scarce believe you would be so trusting without at least *some* tangible evidence to support your belief in this?"

He nodded, slowly and emphatically.

Then:

In this instance, I slept one night with this funnel beside me, and I had a dream which certainly throws a curious light upon its use and origin."

"What did you dream?"

He paused, and an intent look of interest came over his massive face – together with something that struck me as sensual, frightened, and sly, at the same time.

"You are yourself a psychic subject - with nerves which respond readily to any impression."

"I have never tested myself in that direction. But what if I am?" I asked, placing the curio back on its resting place with, I must confess, a sense of relief to have its shiny black surface released from my grasp.

And – curiously, if not worryingly, at this stage – some small measure of loss.

"I propose that we test you tonight," he answered solemnly, unaware, or so I believed at the time, of my internal confliction.

Organising my faculties then, I studied his expression and thought, beneath the mask of curiosity and scientific detachment he was attempting to maintain, that I detected... *desperation.*

It was an impression I did not dwell upon for long, more interested and relieved by the feeling of foreboding that had left me the instant the artefact left my fingers, rather than any ulterior motive on the part of my friend.

Together with a receding excitement for which I, and my sense of propriety, were both relieved and grateful.

A sense of propriety, I was about to discover, that was about to be put to the test once again:

"Tell me, Bendix," he began, "what are your thoughts on the female of the species?"

I felt my face colour as the suspicion took hold that he was aware of my unbidden responses to the handling of the curio not moments before, together with the flashing, if somewhat indistinct, image of the woman inspired by my tactile inspection.

"You must trust that I would not ask such a personal question were it not of the utmost importance to both myself and my work in this field," he assured me, as if divining the discomfort I was both feeling and attempting to conceal at the same time.

"In the other-world to which my research has led me," he went on, realising I was still considering my answer and that I was not entirely convinced I should give one at all, "the will of the female is not only more dominant but utterly unimpeachable."

He made pause to stare into my incredulous eyes with such a depth of seriousness and passion I was almost tempted to change the beliefs of a lifetime and accept not just the fanciful notion of woman's dominion over man but the existence of this *"other-world"* also.

"It provoked in me the same emotions of shock and disbelief I see forming behind your own eyes," he observed. "Like you, my views of women and our interaction with them are predicated upon the received wisdom and behaviours of prior millennia. Millennia responsible for the status quo of public and private superiority we men enjoy, and intend to continue enjoying."
I began to feel uncomfortable.

More uncomfortable.

And, perhaps, in a way more disturbing than the physical anxiety inspired by the curio.

You see, I had known Millbank for long enough – and on terms of intellectual familiarity – to be certain he was *not* of a credulous nor easily influenced mindset. The empirical was *always* foremost to whatever line of inquiry his fertile mind led him to pursue. So why was he so bullish on behalf of some metaphysical fancy that could not possibly reveal results either pragmatic or tangible?

"Unless, of course," I told myself, *"that results of such a kind had already been produced!"*

A chuckle of self-disparagement almost escaped me at my most uncharacteristic if, thankfully, internal, credulousness.

"It is the reason," his solemn tones broke into my self-castigation, "that I need to hear your thoughts upon the female before I enlist your aid this coming night."

"I fail to see what my thoughts in regard of the fair sex can have in common with any line of scientific enquiry," I told him. "You know as well as I, that the woman with whom I chose to share my life and bear my son was taken from me a time back and that, though I was very much the head of my own household, Charlotte and I considered ourselves as equal to each other as nature and custom allows society to accept while still maintaining the proper degree of propriety."

"Then I would be right to regard you as a man of science who would find the idea of a woman ruling a man, in both the physical and the mental spheres, as an affront to both the nature and the custom of which you speak?"

My look, I told myself, must surely supply my answer to his question without the necessity of words; though I decided, given this most uncharacteristic approach of his own, it was not something best left to a facial expression alone.

"Our views, I recall, on those view times we have touched upon society and its workings," I responded with a little peevishness for what I considered the puerility of his question, "were always somewhat similar. Namely: that we both feel evolution has shaped the development of our two sexes and will continue to do so - with man in the natural position of command; while the female uses those abilities less known to the male to provide the touchstone of love and homely comforts. That love and comfort for which, in the main, he spends his life striving to support. I know you are familiar with my views on the relative merits of both male and female and how they should translate themselves in the marital condition; as I am familiar – or *have* – been familiar with yours to this point. What puzzles me is why you should ask such an unnecessary question?"

"You are right, my friend," Millbank agreed, looking not a whit put out at my mild rebuke of him. "I was simply contenting myself that nothing had happened since we last met to change your views."

I gave him a *"Hmmpth!"*, before answering more precisely:

"Really, Millbank, do you take me for so shallow a pond that the merest hint of a wind might relocate me to a location I find displeasing - on both aesthetic *and* intellectual fronts?"

"Not at all," he answered, unoffended by my displeasure with him. "It is your continued belief in logic and discipline, in fact, which makes me so anxious to enlist your assistance. That you are not one of *those* kind of men is vital to what I would have you do."

I felt my eyes crinkle at his inference and realised I was but one wrong answer from him to losing my oft remarked upon patience.

"How do you mean: not one of *'those kind of men?*" I interrogated him, teetering upon the edge of being flattered or indignant and still unsure in which direction the imbalance would take me – and especially as my ignorance of his meaning on this occasion was totally sincere.

His answer was instant and made with all the precise and incisive gravitas I had come to expect from him:

"I speak only of those men who do not share our common acceptance of either evolution or custom, and take pleasure from inverting the status quo of which we are in support. Men who take an unnatural and unholy sense of pleasure from baring their necks to the female heel and accepting her authority."

Still unsure as to his line of either thought or questioning, despite his clarity on the above matter and feeling strangely unsettled by the imagery his words inspired, I waited for him to take me further into his confidence; noting the seriousness of his expression as he added:

"Her authority in everything!"

"You mean...?" I began, not so shielded by my love of science and logic I had not heard of such men... *or of such women.*

"That is precisely what I mean," he finished for me, reading the line of my thought. "Were you the kind of man who could submit to a female in such a way - and allow his manhood to become something of the eunuch's in a seraglio, rather than that of the sultan in his palatial tent – what I am going to ask of you would be of no more value to me than the opinion of the wood I will soon be using to fuel the fire burning before us."

I was not mollified.

"I am insulted that you would need consult me on what should have been no more than a well-proven fact," I criticised him. "I grant that our friendship is not of a lifetime's duration, but you must surely know enough of me by now to make the asking of such a question... *superfluous.*"

"And you speak no more than the simple truth," he concurred. "But you will also recognise that we have not until now touched upon those needs and desires that inform our two distinct sexualities. For; while there are certain... *inconsistencies* ...in my own sexual make-up that go hand in hand with an inquiring mind and a thirst for experience; I am as certain as I can be that there are similar, if not the exact same, irregularities in your own."

At this point, I believe he thought I was about to take issue with him at this - though I recognised instantly the unassailable logic of his observation.

Explaining, perhaps, why he rushed on, almost apologetically, as if expecting me to call time on our budding discussion:

"Believe me, I intend no criticism of you – or myself, for that matter," he assured me. "I simply mean that our innermost thoughts and longings are not always consistent with our words and actions in a more... *secular* ...setting. I was simply supplying myself with that last assurance your... *tastes* ...were not of such a debased kind that the experiment I am soon to suggest would prove a complete waste of both our time and our energy."

"Be assured," I began a little stiffly, allowing him to see the affront I took from his suggestion my inner desires might be less than... *pure*, "that; while I am not so unworldly as to be unaware of such things as Mrs Berkeley's horse - or the sad men who pay to be strapped upon it that she may flog them; my own tastes when it comes to matters of romance between a man and a woman run in a more conventional and loving pattern."

"As I was convinced they would," he offered, arms wide in an attempt to ameliorate my sense of injury.

Then, obviously deciding I was not as put-out as my words, and a certain stiffness of expression, might have led someone without a knowledge of me to believe:

"I am sure you would agree with me, my dear friend, that we can never be entirely sure of these things in others and, knowing you for the honest and forthright individual that you are, I am entirely satisfied that such concepts as I have outlined are alien to you."

My smile assured him I was, this time, pacified by his assurances; though I was many ports from being *"aboard"* with his rationale, as the common vernacular has it.

"And why, pray, is this so important to you, Millbank?" I pressed, still, in truth, a tad affronted despite his conciliatory words.

His answer was instant and, had I been a little less trusting at the time, seems with hindsight a little... *rehearsed*:

"Because the nature of the experiment I wish you to undertake for me," he answered with surety, "insists that there be no susceptibility towards..."

He hesitated and, with my intellectual curiosity again stirred and still to realise I was being led, I felt compelled to supply the prompt:

"Towards...?"

He took a breath; then:

"Towards... female authority of such a kind," he said at last. "Or, indeed, of *any* kind."

"As I have already explained," I began, hackles on the rise once again, "my married life with Charlotte was based upon loving equality. But, bless her soul, she was never in any doubt of my role as head of the household or that I would have the final say on any issue over which we could not agree."

I saw in his eyes that he was now satisfied on this, rather personal, subject, and pressed him further:

"So, that being agreed, perhaps you would like to explain the nature of your... *'experiment?*"

"Yes... Of course, dear fellow. Let us get straight to it."

Rising to his feet, he stared down at me.

"The very great favour I am about to ask of you, is that, when you occupy the couch tonight, you will sleep with this old funnel placed by the side of your pillow."

Together with his inquiries into my interior life, the request seemed to me a grotesque one; but I had myself, in my own complex nature, a hunger for knowledge of the bizarre and fantastic – enough anyway, to not find his request off-putting to any degree likely to trigger alarm-bells.

For, though I had not the faintest belief in Millbank's theory, nor any hopes for success in such a metaphysical experiment as he outlined; it amused me, just the same, that the experiment should be made.

The fact I would be sleeping in his home this night, made an acceptance of his request less than onerous anyway.

Despite the already half-forgotten discomfort I had experienced from handling the artefact already.

A phenomenon I was already writing-off as no more than an overheated imagination brought on by the excitement of being in a new country and the stimulating and exotic objects and atmosphere of Millbank's lair.

Such was my false sense of harmless experimentation as I convinced myself it was surely no hardship on my part to agree to his request.

And especially when my first sighting of the curio had provoked my own scientific and historical interest.

It required but a nod from me to set my friend – and *it* - in motion.

Millbank smiled with what I described to myself at the time as over-exaggerated gratitude and, with great gravity, drew a small stand to the head of my settee, and placed the funnel upon it.

Then, after a short conversation, he wished me good night and left me.

Millbank's Lair - Experiment - Night - 1892

I sat for some little time smoking by the smouldering fire, and turning over in my mind the curious incident which had occurred, and the strange experience which might lie before me.

Sceptical as I was, there was something impressive in the assurance of Millbank's manner, and my extraordinary surroundings, the huge room with the strange and often sinister objects which were hung round it, struck solemnity into my soul.

There was also the troubling matter of my... *libidinous* ...reaction to the handling of the very curio my friend and host wished me to spend the night alongside.

Not to mention the fleeting image of the woman who seemed to be pleased with my reaction.

Finally I undressed, and turning out the lamp, I lay down and, after long tossing I fell asleep.

Let me try to describe as accurately as I can the scene which came to me in my dreams.

It stands out now in my memory just as clearly as anything I have seen with my waking eyes and was a dream that defined my life for the next twenty or so years...

...There was a room which bore the appearance of a vault. Four spandrels from the corners ran up to join a sharp, cup-shaped roof. The architecture was rough, but very strong and was evidently part of a great building.

Three men in black, with curious, top-heavy, black velvet hats, sat in a line upon a red-carpeted dais. Their faces were very solemn. On the left stood two long-gowned men with port-folios in their hands, which seemed to be stuffed with papers.

Upon the right, looking toward me, was a small woman with blonde hair and singular, light-blue eyes— the eyes of a child. She was past her first youth, but could not yet be called middle-aged. Her figure was inclined to a kind of matronly yet erotic stoutness and her bearing was proud and extremely confident.

Her face was pale, but serene... demure, even.

A curious face, comely and yet feline, with a subtle suggestion of cruelty about the straight, strong little mouth and chubby jaw.

Her magnetic eyes were fixed upon something and I realised with a thrill of horror that the object of her scrutiny was none other than myself.

She was draped in some sort of loose, white gown that, for some reason made her seem... threatening.

I suddenly realised that, before me, there was stood a thin, eager priest.

He was whispering in Latin that was too rushed and too sibilant for me to understand and continually raised a crucifix before my eyes.

Looking beyond him, I saw I was also being scrutinised by the three men in black, who were, I felt, my judges.

As I gazed, the three men stood up and said something, but I could distinguish no words, though I was aware that it was the central one who was speaking. They then swept out of the room, followed by the two men with the papers. At the same instant several rough-looking fellows in stout jerkins came bustling in and removed first the red carpet, and then the boards which formed the dais, so as to entirely clear the room. When this screen was removed I saw some singular articles of furniture behind it. One looked like a bed with wooden rollers at each end, and a winch handle to regulate its length. Another was a wooden horse. There were several other curious objects, and a number of swinging cords which played over pulleys. It was not unlike a modern gymnasium.

When the room had been cleared there appeared a new figure upon the scene.

This was a tall, thin person clad in black, with a gaunt and austere face. The aspect of her – for it was a woman - made me shudder. Her clothes were shiny with grease and mottled with stains, yet she bore herself with a slow and impressive dignity, as if, in counterpoint to her appearance, she took command of all things from the instant of her entrance. It was now her business – whatever that business was – and the room hers to command.

She carried a coil of light ropes over her left forearm.

The small lady with blonde hair looked her up and down with a searching glance, but her expression was unchanged.

It was… confident.

With the priest, however. It was very different.

His face had turned a ghastly white, and I saw the moisture glisten and run on his high, sloping forehead as he threw up his hands in prayer and stooped continually to mutter frantic words in the blonde lady's ear.

The woman in black now advanced to stand before me and, taking one of the cords from her left arm, she bound my strangely unresisting hands together as I, seemingly incapable of speech, held them meekly toward her as she did so.

Then she took my arm with a rough grip and led me toward the wooden horse, which was little higher than my waist, my fear rising with every step as I noticed in the background a comely young serving girl looking on with a face that seemed to speak of loss as well as of the horror provoked by the proceedings she was about to watch.

Suddenly, from nowhere, hands were laid upon me and I was lifted and placed upon with my face to the ceiling while the priest, quivering and gibbering with horror, had rushed out of the room.

Which was when I realised that my own lips were moving rapidly and, though the words leaving them were unintelligible to me in my growing terror, I knew I was praying.

My feet hung down on either side of the horse, and I felt the thugs attending me fastened cords to my ankles and securing the other ends to iron rings set in the stone floor.

My heart sank within me as I saw these ominous preparations, and yet I was held submissive and docile by fascination of the horror I knew was about to be perpetrated…

Upon me!

A man had entered the room with a bucket of water in either hand and another followed with two more which were laid beside the wooden horse. The second man produced a wooden dipper - a bowl with a straight handle – from one of the buckets and passed it to the shabby woman in black. At the same moment one of the thugs approached with a dark object in his hand, which even in my dream filled me with a vague feeling of familiarity.

It was a leathern filler.

"Before you enter into your lady's service," came the woman in black's ominous but beautifully enunciated words in my own tongue, which even in my terror I realised was completely at odds with her appearance and marked her as a woman who had at one time been of some quality, "it is necessary that you are acquainted with what you may expect should your service to her be less than totally pleasing."

"Service?" my thoughts raced. "To a woman?"

A hand at my waist, as it unfastened my trousers, pushed such thoughts from my head as I realised the shabby woman addressing me was now undressing me, and that soon my manhood would be visible not only to her thugs but herself and the blonde lady also.

My underwear being yanked down and the feel of her bony hands as they took my manly jewels in her grasp was enough to break through my compliance and I began to writhe and twist as best I could to evade her handling of me.

The scream that was drawn from me as she squeezed my testicles between unnaturally strong fingers I would have taken for a pained and terrified little girl's – had it not issued from my own terrified mouth.

"If you wish to perform your service to your lady in possession of these worthless items," the shabby one told me in tones that contradicted both her dress and her actions, relaxing her grip of my scrotum a little that she might lean forward and stare down into my horrified eyes, "you will lay perfectly still until your lesson has been delivered."

Suddenly, the blonde lady was looking down at me also.

But gone was the pale and demure visage I had looked upon earlier.

The face I looked into now was filled with the utter evil of decadence and perverse need.

The face of a person who not only enjoyed the threatening of another with pain but actually thrilled when that pain was delivered.

And, if not by her, then certainly in her presence.

It was also, if my enthralled reaction spoke truly, a face I found utterly mesmeric.

"It might be," the shabby one continued, addressing the younger woman, "that your new Master prefers her bondsman as a eunuch. Would that be your desire, Comtesse la Reynie?"

The eyes in that youthful face which stared into mine, held nothing of joyous youth but, instead, projected an infinity of dark desire born of lust and sadism.

Women or not, I, Daniel Bendix, was terrified in the presence of my two female captors.

More so when the shabbier of the two waved a thug forward and accepted from his grimy hand a vicious looking blade.

"It is your choice, Comtesse," I heard the dark lady remark, before my breath left my throat as the bony hand that held my manhood in its grip was loosened.

To be replaced by the no less commanding, but entirely shapelier and well-groomed hand of the blonde woman addressed as "Comtesse".

And now, despite my terror, I felt myself coming alive beneath her inspection of me, in a rush of such animal power and longing, my mind could find no room for other, more logical and scientific, thoughts.

"He is quite sturdily built, this one," she said, handling me with a complete and knowing confidence. Much more so than the other wretch of an Englishman currently in my service. So, I think..."

Her eyes burned into my own and I felt her unholy power for the first time, even as I asked myself if the other Englishman to whom she referred so disparagingly could be Millbank.

"I think... I will keep him intact. There is so much more fun to be had when a man is allowed to retain his virility. And especially when it remains under the power of his... Master."

"A wise choice, Comtesse. This one will, I am sure, will provide you with many years of devoted service before you tire of him. For, to be sure, the prospect of being the chattel of a woman – even one as eminent as yourself – fills him with much revulsion."

The blonde woman's eyes still burned into mine and I could tell the thought of having me bound and helpless before her was one she found incredibly arousing.

"I do believe you are right, Éléonore Sainte-Marie-d'Agneaux," she answered, using the full-name of the woman and bringing her shabby bearing and ill-kempt person into more puzzling relief with the supplying of such a grand and ancient name. "I sense many interesting years ahead with this one at my heel."

"Even if you must accompany him to his homeland to take advantage of all that he offers?" the shabby woman asked.

The blonde woman's laughter was a frenzy of slashing razors against a backdrop of windchimes, lacerating the senses even as it enchanted and inflamed them.

"What is a change of location to us, sweet Éléonore? Is the power and control I will wield over this male brute lessened any by the fact I find myself exerting it in a more northerly climate?"

The shabby woman seemed to think about this.

"Or is it made all the more delicious that a superior French-woman such as myself can make a slave of him in his own mind, in his own home, and in his own beloved and straitlaced country?"

As the cutting laughter of my putative owner was as least mitigated by the musicality underpinning it, the cackle spewing forth from this disgusting hag with the absurdly flattering name was no less than the shrill shriek of a long and filthy fingernail as it made progress down an equally ancient blackboard.

"Think of how delightful I shall find it to take long walks through his much-vaunted city, with him at my heels like the attentive and utterly servile attendant he will soon be. And how mortifying it will be for him to be shown in such a way to people who had once, no doubt, looked up to him as a man of strength, reason, and substance. Be they friends, family, colleagues or neighbours."

Her light sigh was that of a woman who had found paradise on earth and had no intention of either growing tired of it or of allowing inconvenient trifles, such as the suffering of another, to prevent her continued experience of such joy.

"That," she went on, continuing to handle my male genitalia with a proprietary familiarity that was at least made somewhat bearable by her relative gentleness and the bony-fingered cruelty of Éléonore Sainte-Marie-d'Agneaux, "and the perpetual availability of such a male-beast to serve the more physical senses, is the beauty that once made my secular existence so wantonly bearable and now brightens my eternity."

Her eyes did not leave mine as she said this and I knew she could read the horror such a prospect caused me. For no longer was I shielded from the terror by the confidence of my own logic I had displayed before Millbank an hour or so before. Something in those eyes assured me that, just as she had said it, so it would be, and, even if what she was describing as my future was both evil and

depraved, I could no longer fall back upon the faith of my own reasoning or the sureties provided by science to supply sound answers to the fantastic.

What she said next to her bony and shabby acolyte, eyes still holding mine with a gleam more fanatical than any martyr to a debased and immoral cause my fevered thoughts could imagine, made me even more desperate to be allowed a return to the former certainties inspired by my once unassailable belief in both logic and scientific rationality.

"And do not forget, my loyal and patient Éléonore, how much you yourself will enjoy him when I decide he is in need of… correction.

Even as the remnants of those two faculties outlined above attempted to re-assure me - that this was a dream of the kind Millbank had been confident I would experience were I to sleep in close proximity to the artefact and that I would soon awake – a different kind of certainty seemed to well up from the discarded dregs of my soul.

A certainty that, despite the even more advanced revulsion and disgust I felt for the prospect of further contact, physical or spiritual, with the bony woman known as Éléonore Sainte-Marie-d'Agneaux, assured me my experience at their hands would not be of the kind that ended when eyes fluttered open once again and reality intruded.

No longer, I told myself, would the seasons change, the larks sing, and the sun shine, power enough to elevate my spirit again.

The dream I was experiencing, I knew with a sudden and terrifying certainty, would not prove itself elliptical but, to me at least, a full-stop.

My life as I had once know it, had been stripped from me.

And it would not return.

Even if my new reality would.

When the dream that was growing more horrifyingly dreadful by the second ended, that is.

"For now, however, my loyal Éléonore, came the girlish voice I was coming to hate almost as much as I feared, "it will be as you say, and we shall give my new bondsman no more than a very small taste, by way of a lesson, of what he can expect if his diligence, respect, and obedience do not find favour with his French owner."

At this, the sound of the most piteous and craven begging filled the chamber and it was with some shame that I recognised my own, suddenly serviceable once more, voice.

To no avail.

As I screamed, and the blonde lady I now knew as the Comtesse de la Reynie, released her grip upon my genitals that it might be replaced by that of her decidedly unlovely Éléonore, I saw the older

woman swiftly loop a length of thin hemp around the base of my scrotum and tighten it enough to make my screams even more piercing and unmanly.

Then, thinking that perhaps the Comtesse had changed her mind and, with some unspoken command, decided that she would Indeed prefer that I serve her after the fashion of a eunuch, I saw one of the thugs approach me with Millbank's curio that had by now filled to the brim with water.

For a few seconds, puzzlement tempered my screams.

Until the curio's funnel was presented to my lips and the intent became clear.

Realising the "lesson" it was intended I learn, I immediately clamped my mouth shut.

Only for those bony and grimy fingers to pinch my nose shut and ensure the need for air made me comply with her infernal desire.

With no option but to swallow between the breaths allowed me, I took the water from the funnel into my stomach until it was emptied.

At which point the exercise was repeated.

And repeated again.

Until each of the three buckets of water the thugs had fetched with them were delivered to me courtesy of Millbank's funnel and emptied.

In this condition was I left as the effects of their treatment became apparent and were made worse by their short-cutting of my manly nature.

Looking down below my swollen stomach, and sensing rather than seeing the hemp that would make any easing of my agonies possible, my hair stood on end with horror as I knew what must surely come if I were not released to do as nature intended.

The agony of... of... fullness ...was excruciating and I could no longer find the wherewithal to even scream, so overcome with the agonies to which I had been introduced with such relative simplicity.

Which was when a slim and be-ringed hand, fingers long and shapely, appeared before my eyes and, again, I heard the voice of my "superior" French master:

"By placing your lips upon th back of my hand," she told me, lowering her face to mine that my all but unseeing eyes might see her intent, "you will acknowledge yourself my creature for as long as life remains to you or until I tire enough of your servile charms and decide to replace you with another..."

Millbank's Lair – Paris - Morning - 1892

...I recall finally breaking through the bonds of sleep and bursting with a shriek back into my own life.

I was on the couch still, the infernal curio at my side as I shivered with terror in the huge library, my body through my clothing covered with perspiration that was ice-cold.

With the moonlight flooding through the window and throwing strange silver and black traceries upon the opposite wall, I was, for a few moments, disoriented.

Until, that is, all the books, curios, and other familiar and expensive accoutrements of Millbank's lair began to exert a calming rationale that felt almost opiate-like to my beleaguered senses.

Oh, what a blessed relief to feel that I was back in the nineteenth century!

Free of that mediaeval vault and back into a world where women had caring and sensitive hearts within their bosoms.

I sat up on the couch, trembling in every limb, my mind divided between thankfulness and horror.

Thankful to have been delivered from the once tender embrace of Morpheus that had, until now, provided me with only the solace of fragmented but happy illusion.

Horrified to think that such things as my subconscious had shown me this past night could ever be done.

And done at the behest of women!

Guzzling directly from a carafe of water Millbank had thoughtfully provided before leaving me to my own devices, I felt my consciousness return to something like normal and – albeit without my usual certainty – assured myself that I had experienced no more than a nocturnal fantasy.

Resting upon my hands, I realised they were shaking still. And then, suddenly, my heart seemed to become light and the morning sunshine streaming in from one of the small fanlights above Millbank's lair lightened my spirits further.

Which was when I spotted the letter, resting upon the very stand, and in exactly the same position, occupied by the curio when I had first made its acquaintance.

My name was on the outside of the expensive vellum.

And in Millbank's hand.

I took it up gingerly, rising from the couch and taking myself to a point of the lair furthest from my host's accursed curio.

When I opened it fully to scan its contents, what I read sickened my soul…

…My Dearest Millbank,

You will be reading this now while in a condition of some shock. It is, after all, more than a little chastening to find that a lifetime's works and beliefs were, though not a complete waste, based upon a somewhat self-satisfied and egocentric assurance that only those phenomena which logic could explain and quantify was worthy of your intellectual interest and curiosity.

I make plain that the above description is not intended to be in any way a criticism of your many fine qualities, as I myself have had cause to wrestle with my own failings of credulity - this after having spent a night of supposed rest in the presence of the de la Reynie's artefact with which you are now most intimately acquainted *and* connected.

What I have now to wrestle with, is the craven and shameful way I have led a fine man into a perfect horror of abject and emasculating servitude.

Servitude from which, I suspect with knowing conviction, he will be unable to extricate himself.

That I, who suffered under exactly those same constraints of unwilling obedience to a member of, what is laughingly called, *"the fair sex"*, have effected an escape of my own, resides, I am ashamed to confess, not with my strength of will and greater moral fibre but with the exact opposites of those qualities you, my friend, possess in abundance. For it is only my lack of those physical and manly attributes - the former of which I know you to be, from our times at the baths after a morning in the reading-room and our most enjoyable conversations afterwards at Brook's, more than favourably endowed - that has assured the disappointment of the Comtesse with my… *efforts* …in her service and allowed me to persuade her to release me from the bondage in which she holds me so entirely.

Should, that is, I supply her with a replacement acceptable to her most intimate needs and desires.

My friend – and, yes, I still reserve the right to address you in such a way, despite my act of the most cowardly and self-regarding treachery – it will provide you with no consolation in your coming ordeal to know the deep and crushing sadness I feel at having confirmed a personal

spinelessness I truly did not once suspect myself of possessing. For, as the life you have known is now, to all intents and purposes, over, so is that which once was mine and can be for me no more.

I have left this place now and will only return at such a time as *she* is gone to sell it – and the books and curios contained within it. That time being when your new *"Master"*, as she wishes to be known, is no longer in her domicile of damnation and, instead, has taken up residence with you in London as she had told me she intends.

My head, you may be assured, will *never* be held aloft again.

And not solely because of the abominations I have known at *her* hands and feet – and in a manner my imagination was not fertile enough to envisage, let alone wish to experience.

No, my dear and treacherously used friend, it is my selling of you into this female ruled Hades that has ended the life of pride and self-respect I once maintained with such prideful pleasure.

I am dead, even if oxygen sees fit to inflate my lungs and feed my brain with blood that I might constantly despise myself. Never will my eyes be raised from the ground again, now the hands below them have seen fit to accept the soiled silver masquerading as freedom for which I sold you.

And to the very worst of executioners.

The female variety.

A female executioner whose main goal in both her physical and supranatural existence is that of crushing the soul of the man who comes into her possession until it is no more than dust beneath her heel.

As I stated in the opening of this, my final correspondence to you, I am no longer in the house and my servants have been let go, so I can no longer ask or have you asked as to the events of last night.

It is not necessary.

"The dreadful business". Or *"The torture of the water,"* as it was called in the genial days of "Le Roi Soleil". That is what you witnessed...

My pardon...

Experienced.

I held out only until the water of the third bucket began to fill the funnel.

Another disappointment for the Comtesse of sadism.

Though I have every confidence a man such as you held out until the very last possible moment before resigning himself to the hand of servitude and slavehood that was presented you.

No doubt you are wondering what it is you have seen and what is about to make your life one of abnegation and service.

It is the *very* least I can do to enlighten so fine a mind as your own.

If I am correct in regard of both ladies' identity, as well as the power, if not the provenance, of the curio itself, then my assuredness comes from the testimony of an erudite servant girl who fled the employ of her master and mistress after the event described.

The letter from which I quote was written in the French of the seventeenth century and mine is but a rough translation. You will judge for yourself whether that conversion is accurate or not...

"...The prisoner, the lover I was determined to marry, was brought before the Marquis Sainte-Marie-d'Agneaux in his Grand Chamber at the family home where he sat as a one-man court of justice for the lands he owned. The man before him had been wrongfully charged with the rape of the Marquis wife, Eleanor – the Marquise herself.

Charles Dreux d'Aubray, was the most handsome and caring of men and would not have given a once over to a woman as venal and self-centred as the Marquise, and the husband she dominated so completely was entirely aware of this. Yet the Marquis, having found him guilty, condemned him to the torture of the water until such a time as it proved too much for him or until he kissed the back of the Marquise's hand and pledged himself her chattel for so long as she deemed his, falsified, transgressions against her were satisfied and recompensed..."

...That you may be in no doubt the letter describes the exact events you experienced yourself, here is a sentence which must surely show you that what the terrified servant-girl recorded is one and the same...

"...The good Abbe Pirot, unable to contemplate the agonies which were suffered by his penitent, had hurried from the room. At which time, I was forced to watch in the background as my beloved had the water of three buckets transferred to the accursed funnel poured down his throat. So great

was my own fear for my pitiful life, I did not cry out once on his behalf or attempt to beg the hateful woman I served as my mistress to spare the man I loved above all others. Only when my love's torments finally overcame his courage and presented his lips to the back of her evil hand, and I knew that I had lost him forever, did my legs find the power to take myself from her accursed chateau as fast as my feet would carry me, and make the long journey back south to the relative safety of my parents farm in the Aquitaine..."

...The letter is dated, October 17, 1686.

I have still no earthly clue as to how the curio gained its powers or how it came to be in possession of the Marquise de Sainte-Marie-d'Agneaux, and the powers of that evil mistress then transferred to another. But I do know how it came to find itself in the hands of the Comtesse de la Reynie. In much the same way, in fact, as it came into mine. Though with more intent to satisfy the debauched and wanton sexual appetite stirred by power and absolute control on her part, than the thirst for knowledge that might improve man's lot that was my intention.

That I have opened a Pandora's Box of female depravity and sentenced an innocent and undeserving friend to a fate I myself could neither countenance nor endure is a shame with which I must live. Hoping, nay praying, that my betrayed friend himself will understand, if not forgive, something of my heretofore and unsuspected weakness of character when he himself is forced to endure the emasculation insisted upon by the needs of his new *"Master".*

A *"Master",* I must add, whose presence in your life will soon be as horrifyingly physical as it has been so disturbingly... *nightmarish.*

For this is the true hell. To be made aware one's servitude is real. No longer something that can be explained away as the figment of an over-active mind and its attendant imagination, but a thing of some infernal flesh and bone that seems to exist only to exercise its complete sway over the mind, body, and free-will of another.

Preferably, a man of your strength of manly character, rather than my own.

To have previously considered oneself a man and then to find oneself forced to serve a woman for whom one has no feeling, save that of the most profound revulsion, is, you will come to find, a hell of self-disgust and misery none but the truly debauched man himself can embrace.

On this score it adds even more agonies of remorse to my misery to see nothing but revulsion and self-disgust in the future of a man such as yourself I have regarded with nothing but fondness and admiration and will continue to do so.

To find oneself not only required to act with the most cringing and servile respect to a woman, but to be forced to bathe the body of one's *"female owner"* on a daily basis – and often times with no more than one's slavish tongue as the cleansing agent of choice – is, I assure you, enough to make a man contemplate the repose promised by suicide.

And to find oneself actively longing for the... *touch* ...of this monster in womanly form, whilst forbidden to touch oneself, if you take my meaning; even as she defiles you with her waste matter after your tongue has... *pleased* ...her degenerate womanhood and then insists you make this receptor of her base lusts dainty once more, and after *exactly* the same fashion; is to truly embrace the true weakness that must prevent any attempt at self-harm anyway.

Such is the fate to which I, in my own moral and physical debilitation, have consigned a far better man than myself and for which action I accept there is, nor can be, forgiveness, no matter which side of the headstone my life be lived from this point on.

And so, with as deep a sense of shame as one man can feel towards a brother he has delivered into the very breasts of hell, I say my goodbyes to you, Daniel.

Praying as I do so that you, like I, find a way to deliver yourself from the clutches of this blonde-haired Circe who would have you be her beast-of-burden.

Though I also pray you can perform this miracle and, unlike your treacherous friend, continue to observe your face in a mirror afterwards.

Yours in hope,
Theo Millbank.

...Reading that letter - this as I stood at the furthest point of Millbank's lair from the curio I now dreaded with a fear I would have once placed beyond me for something so... so... *prosaic* - I tried to tell myself it was some kind of elaborate practical joke my host had decided to play upon me. Somehow using the power of suggestion during our discussion of the night before to ensure my mind was open to such a disturbing dream. A dream which his own description of the curio, and a world in which the will

of a woman was paramount and all-powerful, pre-empted my subconscious mind in the hope its slumbers might latch onto it.

But why?

Why would a man such as Millbank perform a prank of the kind on a man who was not only a guest but one for whom he avowed much respect and considered a friend?

And, more worryingly, why would my reaction to the curio under the tactile inspection he, admittedly, had suggested I examine affect me in the way it had?

An examination that produced not only a fleeting image of the blonde woman I would later see in my dream but, even more disturbingly, a sexual reaction of such power it had been all I could do not to rush from Millbank's lair and find a place of solitude in which I could… *placate* …it!

The contents of his letter and its horrifying predictions as to my future were, I told myself with trepidation enough to trigger goose-bumps above the cold sweat congealing upon my skin, not prompted by a desire on his part to either hoodwink or torment me.

Neither of the latter sly effects, you understand, being inclusive to the nature of the man as I had come to know him.

No.

What it was, I interpreted, was some attempt on his part to force me to action.

He was, I told myself as I dressed hurriedly, urging me to flee this place just as his letter told me he himself had fled it.

It was a recognition I took swiftly to heart and acted upon.

With not a backward glance at the infernal curio at the root of my predicament, I snatched up my valise and made for the door at the end of the corridor that led to the fresh air of the Avenue Gabriel and the Jardin des Champs-Élysées at its western end; each step bringing me closer to my withdrawal effecting a sense of lightness and ease of breathing along a reduced thumping of the heart beating so rapidly in my chest.

And then…

Disaster.

I was some three yards from the door, and what I prayed would prove to be my freedom beyond it, when a door to my left opened and I stopped in my tracks as if I had walked head-first into the bars of a prison-cell.

With my eyes bugging from my head, made bulbous with a fear I had never thought to experience in our secular world, I watched as, first, a slender foot in laced black-leather boots to the ankle appeared beyond the door's lower lintel.

Fear that shrieked to more elevated levels when a pair of legs, unskirted and immodest in nothing but stockings, emerged shortly after; their undeniable shapeliness and their instant appeal to a part of my libido seemingly untroubled by my terror, doing nothing to lessen the horrors my more rational mind was experiencing.

When the nightmare made physical emerged into the corridor in all her blonde and fair fullness, I felt my breath catch in my throat.

She was wearing a black-basque to match both stockings and boots and the contrast against her smooth and flawless white skin was, as mentioned, breathtaking.

As was the décolletage of full breasts forced upwards towards her slender neck by the tightness of the basque itself.

A décolletage so narrow my beleaguered thoughts pronounced it impossible for anything other than the most wafer-thin sliver to invade and separate.

Which was when her eyes met mine with their full force and all the terror of the dream I had not long woken from returned to make my fear even greater.

No word came from her, and she simply stood motionless in the doorway through which she had entered, content to dominate me at this point, it seemed, with nothing more than the strength-of-will beamed towards me by her mesmeric and unblinking green eyes.

Through which I became aware of… *expectancy!*

And then it happened.

Without any volition in regard of action, completely unaware I was about to do as I did, I felt my knees buckling and my body lowering itself to the floor until all my own lowered eyes could make out – or, more like, fixate upon, were the shiny black toecaps of her laced and pointed boots.

Which was when her voice reached my ears for the first time in the living world.

A voice full of authority that promised severe penalties if that authority were to be flouted and, as her words in my dream promised, the Marquise de Sainte-Marie-d'Agneaux were called to... *correct* ...my disobedience.

My terror was so great at this point that I do not think I could have spoken if a command to do so had fallen from those full and beguilingly inviting lips as they curved with disdain for the chattel before her.

"You may look up from my boots now," came her order as my eyes rose instantly to hers without any awareness on my part of having ordered them to do so.

Her face was self-satisfied, beautiful, coquettish, and utterly malignant as she held my gaze with supreme confidence, ignoring the hatred which, along with my fear, she must have seen there, to tell me:

"Should you prove pleasing enough, you will be allowed to place your unworthy lips upon them as a token of your respect for their owner... and yours. But, in the meantime, I want you to, once again, and in the here and now, repeat the oath of service you made to me while you slept."

For a few moments, mind struggling with a frenzy of unwelcome and conflicting thoughts, I was at a loss as to her meaning.

Until the back of her slender hand, with its long fingers and perfectly shaped nail held itself a foot or so away from the lips its owner intended to enslave.

I have no idea how long I stared at what was intended as the symbolic starting point of my fate, hours, minutes, seconds, but, whatever the duration of time, I reached a point where I felt my head inclining towards her and my lips actively seeking the contact with her flesh that would complete my subjugation.

Then, as my body filled with sensations I can only describe as a mixture of shame, lassitude, submission and resignation, my lips indeed made contact with my fate...

Vincent – Knightsbridge – Evening - 1984

At this point in my reading, I broke off, my feelings angry and, I confess also, bafflingly aroused by what I had read up to now.

To my knowledge - and let's be fair, I should bloody know – I hadn't once been turned on by the prospect of having a woman dominate me in such a way.

Or in *any* way.,

Disappointment was present too.

If what I had read of the journal so far was my great-grandfather's *"great disgrace"*, the same *"family shame"* I had overheard my parents allude to, then I was less than impressed.

Come on!

A respectable man of both science and letters?

Brought low by a bloody funnel?

And by the younger bitch aided by an older bitch who'd sprang from it to torment him?

How gullible did my own parents have to be, when it came down to it?

I mean, it wasn't as if the family didn't know of Daniel Bendix's penchant for the writing of horror stories – perhaps as an antidote to his other, more straitlaced and puritan, passion for the real and explainable. He'd submitted short-stories to periodicals like the *"The Strand"*, for crying out loud! How could they not tell that this *"disgrace"* they spoke of was nothing more than some literary invention of his to make a rather dry old life that little bit more interesting to him?

A life that had become even drier after he had lost his wife and been unable to take care of his son for himself.

His loss – in marital terms anyway – meaning a sight more to him than mine ever had to me.

From what I'd read, my great-grandfather had actually loved, and was still in love with, my great-grandmother right up until the time of her passing.

My pepper-sprout of lust and deep feeling had started the slide into atrophy and eventually perished the moment I saw at first-hand just how shallow and self-serving my own choice of partner really was.

No surprise then, given all the above, that I was less than impressed with great-granddaddy's family disgrace.

What I'd read was no more than an amateur attempt at diversion.

There was no other way to take it.

Let's be honest, it doesn't take a leap of the imagination to picture a man of my great-grandfather's ilk returning home after what, to me anyway, must have been a dry old day poring over papers, bones, or curios, and want to lose himself in some approximation of a Le Fanu or Stoker fantasy.

All work and no play, don't yer know?

Nor was it too difficult to picture either his son or grandson coming across it and treating it, given the nature of the old boy's end, as some great family disgrace and mystery to be spoken of only in hushed tones.

And *never* in front of the young.

Though how both son *and* grandson could become virtual recluses because of the older man's flight of fancy – if it was the main reason – was inconceivable to me.

A specific defect in this particular branch-line?

Sounded more like it to me.

The evidence against what I had just read was, in one of the favourite words of the late Daniel Bendix…

"Empirical."

So how much more stupid would someone reading it have to be to allow the fear inspired by such an obvious flight of fancy make them retreat from contact with the real world?

Perhaps I was just a little more worldlier when it came down to it. This was 1984, for fuck's sake! What people could be brought to believe a century or so before had no relevance to a generation that had seen men placed on the moon and given heart-transplants. We even had a grocer's daughter as our Prime-Minister, god help us!

Like my great-grandfather, I was of the opinion there was nothing unexplainable.

Only mysteries that had *not* been explained *yet*.

All in all though, it was a little deflating, and the years of curiosity, and that special feeling one is given by having a family mystery, seemed badly let-down.

Come on!

If a family is going to have a disgraceful secret, then one can only hope it's one likely to provide at least something in the way of sensation.

With my eyes heavy from reading under the low and ancient overhead light, I was about ready to call it a night when I flipped through and noticed with mild surprise that there was only one further entry for me to wade through.

An entry that was dated some twenty years after the one I had just finished reading.

April 17, 1912.

Why so long a break?

Toying with the desire to leave the journal where I'd found it, locking up the attic, and returning downstairs to my bedroom to sleep, I finally opted for getting the chore over and done with and settled back to read that final journal entry.

It would prove a miscalculation I will regret until my last breath…

Daniel Bendix – Knightsbridge – Small-Hours – 1912

A final return to the journal I began after my first return from France with…

Even now, after so many years of her torments and sexual humiliations, I cannot bring myself to utter her name without inviting rage to set my body to raging.

A rage that would only prove pointless and set me to agonising over that which I have no earthy chance of changing.

No *earthly* chance.

It is almost 3.30 in the AM, and the physical manifestation of the female evil who owns my existence – or, to be more precise, the secular part of that reality; I am writing this after all, so it follows that my thoughts know a degree of freedom. Sometimes, when she is sleeping, as now, I can even find some small power of movement that does not involve her permission. Power of movement I intend, on this final occasion, to place my worldly misery behind me; having already secured my son's financial future with the bequest of this home he has known only infrequently and money in trust enough for him and any family who follow him to live comfortably.

All papers relating to this are now in the small bureau she allows me to keep downstairs and I am confident that, within the next hour or so, her physical presence will cease with mine and she will be in no position any longer to thwart my wishes.

I complete this journal from the attic at the top of the house to which she banished a lifetime of my writings and curios from the beginning of her… *tenure* …in my home.

A banishing that also included my trusty housekeeper Doris and any others with a responsibility for the maintenance of my home.

There had been, after all, no requirement for domestic help on her part.

Not when she had her very own, trapped and educated chattel on hand to execute such tasks for her.

And other tasks which, to this moment, cause me the most acute pain when I think of my beautiful wife whose loss precipitated my fall and the son for whom I have become a stranger.

Tasks no man with even the shallowest reservoir of pride and decency could contemplate without ending his life first.

An eventuality I find myself both stunned and mystified to have reached only now.

But, this early morning, I have reached the tethers end and will bring this nightmare to a close; surprised only that it has taken me so long to summon the necessary courage and strength-of-purpose required in order that I act.

When this entry is completed, and in full sight of the infernal funnel that led to its writing as it sits in repose until required by its owner again upon the shelf behind me, I shall lock the door behind me and take myself down the stairs for the last time where my loaded pistol awaits. Hopeful, that the wishes I have outlined in the papers contained in my bureau. A part of those wishes being that my son will leave this attic untouched that only future generations might learn of his father's disgrace and that the infernal funnel – which, fo reasons beyond me, I seem unable to even attempt to destroy – may not exert its wanton and sadistic powers over him.

Powers the writer of this journal has experienced and suffered under these past twenty years.

From the very first moment she returned with me to London, introduced, necessarily, as my new wife – and even before the last of the servants had been dismissed from my home – she had begun to school me in the… *needs* …of her body.

And, as hateful as I find this succubus in mortal form, what a body it was.

A body such as no man could resist.

And I was – am – and without shadow of a doubt, one of their number.

Truth being easy to put to paper in these my last moments, and as shamed as I am to make the confession, I can say no less than that, once in her presence; whether she be fully clothed or in déshabillé; my thoughts were consumed with my desire to deliver that body its unholy pleasures.

My desire to please made all the more urgent for knowing any release I myself might expect would be with her express permission and given only when she had pronounced herself happy with efforts of my servile tongue or the equally slavish penis that was forever bolt-hard in her presence.

A slavish penis she would ride tirelessly while staring down at me with nothing but the intense contempt she felt for the man she had mastered; slapping my face from time to time, almost as a dare to make me retaliate that she might punish me further.

Or have her nightmarish Marquise step in to do so for her.

Something she had insisted upon in our early days together; the punishments at the older and shabbier woman's inventively cruel hands serving only to deepen my servility and the diligence of my service – both domestic and physical – to my true owner.

My first punishment coming for a failure to show the proper respect and gratitude for being allowed to place my poor tongue at the worshipful disposal of my new owner's… derrière.

And, by *"derrière"*, I refer to not only the buttocks alone!

For almost twenty years I have performed duties no man, no matter what his station or the severity of his failings, should ever be forced to carry out.

No male body-servant to a cruel and uncaring Roman matron can ever have suffered as I have suffered in attending the needs of my very own female Caligula.

I have bathed her extremities with my tongue and worshipped her most intimate parts with that same organ I once used so persuasively to make instructive points in both conversation and lectures.

I have knelt upon all-fours at her feet for hours upon end as a footstool; this while she took her leisure with the racy and modern literature she so delights in reading; only to be rewarded for accepting my own emasculation by being accorded the honour of sucking upon her toes – either bare, or clad in the sheer modern stockings she says she adores.

I have walked behind her in the street like the flunky she has made of me - and in full view of neighbours and former friends who, mostly, shun me like the plague whenever they have the misfortune of coming close to my presence - though, thankfully, for them as well as I – the *"Comtesse"* was not of that breed of womankind who enjoy social gatherings; imperiously ignoring even the most cordial and courteous of salutations on those occasions she would have me follow at her shapely rear that I may be… *"exercised"*.

A disdain of society on her part I have found most welcome; meaning as it did that knowledge of my shame was necessarily limited and, while suspected, could only be guessed at.

Which discussion of my disgrace brings me to the event that has led me, finally, to this point-of-no-return.

And no, it was not the expression of nationwide grief that held the country in the grip of disbelief, bewilderment, and, in more intelligent quarters, anger, these past two days.

The sinking of the unsinkable, and the loss of lives in frozen waters of the White Star Lines flagship, S.S. Titanic, was, of course, near to the fore of my thinking; inspiring as it had, a flurry of letters between those two literary giants, Doyle and Shaw. The former portraying the sinking and the behaviour of its crew as no more than a seaborne panegyric to the glories of Britain and its empire, while the latter saw the episode as a disgraceful betrayal by those same forces of the passengers and crew who lost their lives through the absence of adequate lifeboat provision.

A literary duel that took me from my own troubles all too briefly as I came down heavily upon the side of Mr Shaw. Looking upon the exchange as an unequal combat between talent and genius respectively. Shaw's final letter to Doyle striking me in the way of an opera lover who had just sat through Salieri's *"Falstaff"* and waited through an interval to listen to Mozart's *"Die Zauberflöte"*.

Argument over.

As saddened by the disaster as I was, the event that triggered me to do what I should have dome many years before came about as I waited in the entrance hall of Harrod's, this for my female master to return from a perusal of the Millinery, or lingerie, or whatever modern form took her necessarily anachronistic fancy.

An *"event"* in the form of Professor Ambrose Pembroke, a proud and loud presence from the Royal School of Surgeons.

A fellow member – or former member, in my case – of Brook's, and a man known to both myself and my one-time friend and colleague.

The self-described coward and instigator of my ills.

Theo Millbank.

"You heard of your former friend, I take it?" he asked sniffily, as if he were being forced to talk with me while standing above a steaming, and particularly foul, heap of yet to be spread compost.

I felt my cheeks colour, chance encounters of such a kind almost as painful to me as those more… *intimate* …happenings in the privacy of the home. That same home that had once been mine and was now my property in name only. Surprised, I confess, that this eminently self-loving and utterly self-absorbed place-seeker had deemed fit to acknowledge me at all.

Better and more cerebral friends and acquaintances had, after all, cut me dead with not a shred of feeling before now.

And on many occasions.

"I have many *'former'* friends, as you say," I told him with an attitude of my own; grateful to expend anger when such an emotion was mostly denied me. "You will, I am afraid, require yourself to abstain from your usual giftless opaqueness and be more… *precise.*"

I went on then, and over his boiling cheeks; the outrage of such a pretentious popinjay of no moment to me:

"To which former friend do you refer?"

"Theo Millbank," he said tersely, taking me at my word, even if his own anger showed no sign of abating.

I forced my expression to remain blank.

"Yes. What of him?"

"He was fished from the Seine last week. Drowned. Took his own life."

His lip curled insufferably as I absorbed his news.

"Precise enough for you, Bendix?"

"Beyond all my hopes for you," I confirmed, part of me hoping that he would speak further on the demise of my former friend.

The pretentious and garrulous one did not disappoint:

"According to Lady Daventry, who was in Paris at the time and identified the body, the letter found in his home stated he could no longer bear the life he lived while knowing that his actions had consigned another to a hell he, nor anyone else, could ever deserve."

Despite my hatred of him for what he had done, I could not prevent some of my former feeling for Millbank from moistening an eye.

"The letter did not see fit to mention the name of the poor wretch he'd consigned to these metaphorical flames, and no one seems to have any ideas in the subject," he went on, earlier terseness unable to be sustained.

Normal and maddening manner resumed, in fact:

"Damn coward, if you ask me," sniffed the popinjay. "Never did like the man. No moral fibre. A poseur of the first order and a…"

The slap I delivered his cheeks – not a punch that would have allowed him to delude himself he was a man – reverberated about the entrance-hall like a pistol-shot and the eyes of male and female alike turned in our direction.

With all eyes upon us my own dared him to retaliate.

Unable to speak, and certainly too much of a *"coward"* to do what a man who was not a *"poseur"* would do, Pembroke simply turned on his heel and took his humiliation out onto the crowded pavements of Knightsbridge.

While I, a coward of a different ilk, stayed in place under the stare of the patrons who had witnessed my treatment of him and waited for the female master likely to give me far worse upon our return home.

And here I am. The courage to do, finally, what should have been done long before instilled in me by the knowledge my one-time friend had finally found the nerve to do the same.

It is where this journal must, for the final time in a hand that is mine, be closed.

I ask only that those who may read it in the future, be they family or stranger, take a not too dim view of either its writer or the one-time friend who provoked its writing.

Both the writer found wanting and his terrified muse are no more than those other reeds of human-kind who have found events beyond their given capacity to control.

And to you, my son, should you ever act against my wishes and read this, I assure you that your father did not once stop loving you throughout his unjust and morally despicable banishing of you to your aunt and uncle in Windsor.

Adieu, my son, and be happy.

With these last few sentence, I will close my journal, switch out the light, and lock the attic door upon the infernal funnel that precipitated my fall in the hope none shall open it.

And, if they do, my prayers that they not find my own fate in their discovery.

And now, I must go.

Before *she* wakes and can prevent my long overdue and much deliberated upon intention.

There is a pistol, loaded and ready to supply its solace, awaiting me in the small bureau downstairs…

Daniel Bendix
Knightsbridge
April 17th, 1912

Vincent - Knightsbridge - Night - 1984

It was with a start that I came to and found myself in the same position I'd occupied since earlier in the evening.

That attic that had once belonged to my great-grandfather and then his son before finally being bequeathed to the estranged brother of my mother and then me, who, by dint of my being the only Bendix of the line still living, had taken possession.

I had fallen asleep with the final page of the journal open on my lap and felt chilled when I came awake with a sudden jolt.

Disturbed also, in the way we always feel when leaving a particularly uncomfortable dream.

A dream in which I was the one strapped to some ancient horse while an old crone and a blonde woman watched a funnel inserted into my lips and…

My mouth was dry as a bone at the recollection and the thought of water freshly run from the tap was most appealing.

As was an escape from this long-ignored attic.

The dream, though, was not of a mind to leave me just yet.

In fact, the longer I stood there ruminating, the more vivid and disturbing it became as I recalled the dreamlike texture of the funnel as it was placed between my unwilling lips that the water inside it might fill my stomach.

The sound of my own interior screams filled my head as I recalled reaching my breaking point and wanting to beg.

Only to find my agony of fullness made coherent speech of any kind near on impossible.

I felt queasy as I recalled my lips finding the back of the blonde woman's hand and the crone cackling with triumph as…

I shook my head from side-to-side violently to banish the image and told myself to go back downstairs to the more comfortable sleeping arrangements that would be less likely to affect my dreams, rather than this drab attic and my great-grandfather's so-called journal.

I say so-called, because that was all I considered it.

A literary invention.

Not a statement of fact.

I closed the yellowing pages on each other with a finality intended to convey my intention never to read it again; my earlier convictions in regard of, despite the dream, still... *dismissive*.

I mean: *really?*

That was it?

The family disgrace?

No more, from what I'd just read, than a bored man's attempt to brighten his life with some horror tale mixed with sado-masochistic wish fulfilment.

Though I did promise myself to check with Somerset House and the registrar of births and deaths as to the exact cause of my great-grandfather's passing.

Even if I was convinced I'd find he died from more… *natural* …causes.

What harm could it do, after all, and it might provide me with a diversion for a couple of hours.

Whatever.

Non-existent family disgrace into the bargain, I was also convinced that good old great-grand-daddy was one sick puppy if material of the kind was what it took for him to get his rocks off.

As I rose, stiff with inactivity from the old rattan-chair I'd dusted off and parked myself in I got a glimpse of something… *familiar*.

The black surface of the funnel itself.

Resting, separate from the other curios and papers that had once belonged to my great-grandfather not a foot from where my head had just rested.

I shivered involuntarily.

It had been on the shelf behind me the *whole* time I had been reading.

And, more worryingly, while I had dozed off.

For one moment, panic overtook me.

After all, hadn't I just had the very same dream described in the journal?

Wasn't that just a little *too* coincidental?

Could it actually be that…?

Was there something more to the journal's words than an old man's attempt at diversion?

What if…?"

My jaw set suddenly with self-recrimination and I slapped my palm against my forehead, hoping to replace the remnants of my recent sleep with some sense.

Which was when I began to laugh at my own childlike and primeval fear of something so ridiculous.

Wasn't it bloody obvious when it came down to it?

Why *wouldn't* I have dreamt what I dreamt after having just read about it?

It hardly required a detective, let alone a psycho-analyst.

Still chuckling at my own childish susceptibility, I was about to move to the door and switch off the light when the hairs on the back of my neck began to bristle.

The door, you see, was already beginning to open.

Then, as if the text of the journal was being re-enacted, I watched as, first, a slender foot in laced black-leather boots to the ankle and low-spike heels below appeared over the threshold.

A boot and a foot that instantly immobilised both my ability to breath and the brain-power necessary to command action.

"No!" my thoughts screamed. *"It couldn't be!"*

As my lungs refused to do the work nature intended for them, I saw a pair of stockinged legs ease themselves into the attic.

Their shapeliness was so overwhelming, and their appeal to me so great, my fear found itself momentarily forgotten.

And then *she* entered fully.

The woman from the story.

And the exact same sadistic goddess I had just seen in my dreams.

Exactly as my great-grandfather had described her, she was blonde and full of body.

Voluptuously full and strikingly fair, the sigh from my now working lungs told both me and *her*.

Just as described in the journal, she was wearing a black-basque to match both stockings and boots and the contrast against her smooth and flawless white skin was, I agreed, breathtaking.

As was the décolletage of full breasts forced upwards towards her slender neck by the tightness of the basque itself, I thought, realising I was actually quoting my forebears own words from the journal.

All thought of what I'd read there being some literary fantasy totally absent now from my thoughts.

"...A décolletage so narrow my beleaguered thoughts pronounced it impossible for anything other than the most wafer-thin sliver to invade and separate."

The words reverberated inside my head as my eyes remained riveted upon her glorious breasts; prompting both words and accompanying actions from the journal:

"...her eyes met mine with their full force and all the terror of the dream I had not long woken from returned to make my fear even greater.

No word came from her, and she simply stood motionless in the doorway through which she had entered, content to dominate me at this point, it seemed, with nothing more than the strength-of-will beamed towards me by her mesmeric and unblinking green eyes.

Through which I became aware of... expectancy!

And then it happened.

Without any volition in regard of action, completely unaware I was about to do as I did, I felt my knees buckling and my body lowering itself to the floor until all my own lowered eyes could make out – or, more like, fixate upon, were the shiny black toecaps of her laced and pointed boots.

Which was when her voice reached my ears for the first time in the living world.

A voice full of authority that promised severe penalties if that authority were to be flouted and, as her words in my dream promised, the Marquise de Sainte-Marie-d'Agneaux were called to... correct ...my disobedience.

My terror was so great at this point that I do not think I could have spoken if a command to do so had fallen from those full and beguilingly inviting lips as they curved with disdain for the chattel before her.

"You may look up from my boots now," came her order as my eyes rose instantly to hers without any awareness on my part of having ordered them to do so.

Her face was self-satisfied, beautiful, coquettish, and utterly malignant as she held my gaze with supreme confidence, ignoring the hatred which, along with my fear, she must have seen there, to tell me:

"Should you prove pleasing enough, you will be allowed to place your unworthy lips upon them as a token of your respect for their owner… and yours. But, in the meantime, I want you to, once again, and in the here and now, repeat the oath of service you made to me while you slept."

For a few moments, mind struggling with a frenzy of unwelcome and conflicting thoughts, I was at a loss as to her meaning.

Until the back of her slender hand, with its long fingers and perfectly shaped nail held itself a foot or so away from the lips its owner intended to enslave.

I have no idea how long I stared at what was intended as the symbolic starting point of my fate, hours, minutes, seconds, but, whatever the duration of time, I reached a point where I felt my head inclining towards her and my lips actively seeking the contact with her flesh that would complete my subjugation.

Then, as my body filled with sensations I can only describe as a mixture of shame, lassitude, submission and resignation, my lips indeed made contact with my fate…

THE END