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The Curious Case of a Man Without Moderation

By Olivia Bell

Late 1807, Charenton Asylum (Saint-Maurice, Paris).

'At last the poet reached... God in heaven!... he reached his destination... my pen falters, it refuses to inscribe the detail of the horrors which awaited this tragic lover. Oh, devils from hell! Appear and lend me your vipers, that it may be with their glinting fangs that my hand shall trace the terrible events which remain for me to tell!'

The Parisian taciturnity was interrupted only by the scratching of the tip of a quill against crumpled parchment, underscored by the baritone humming of a 67 year old nobody. In the street, helicopter seeds dangled like ripe pustules from claustrophobic trees, and drifted, languorously, between iron bars standing to attention as the chill night wind peeled them from their source.

In the sepulchral darkness of residential cell number six, two tarred boots swung back and forth, back and forth like an incessant pendulum against the window ledge. With each collision rang a clipping sound, like an ice-pick against bone. The stars above shone only to distinguish one languid smile from the sepulchral gloom, egg-shell teeth glinting with a celestial deviance.

Across the square from the asylum, a prostitute stumbled through the alley like a wraith. The Marquis wondered if she had noticed that she was being followed — by the same group of tatterdemalion fainéants he'd caught sight of during his stroll through the gardens, no less, while the sun was still high in the sky. In any case, she didn't turn around, her tattered crimson pelisse (circa 1779) clutched tightly around her shoulders with cotton-sheathed hands. *That would make a fine novel*, the Marquis pondered. *A whore in virgin's clothing*. Pensive, he continued to write.

'Indeed, it is with great regret that I permit those events to unfold to which you will soon be party. Alas, such things must be related – if, for no other purpose, as a precautionary tale, to those who may be tempted to pursue the same vices which hath condemned this man to an eternity of suffering.'

'For there are some souls whom nature creates only so that they might stumble from one misfortune to another, for the whole of the brief span that they must spend upon this earth. Not all individuals can lay claim to the same portion of happiness, and must inevitably bow to the will of heaven.'

How positively *fustian*. The figure snorted at his own pretension as he read his work aloud, at the same time brandishing his quill like a rapier against an invisible opponent of wind and condensation. The townscape outside swarmed as if through a fish-eye lens, and each warped iron bar bisecting it appeared to slide one fathom closer. The Marquis struck a match; lit a cigar, inhaled, and framed the waxing moon with an oval-shaped vapour 'O'. As if by witchcraft, the woman in the street brushed out of sight, and into the darkness beyond.

'Each footstep that resounded as the poet approached the edge of the rooftop was like the hammering of iron nails into a coffin, the ominous chiming of his own funeral bells. My dear reader, avert your eyes now if you would choose to retain your high opinion of this man, rather than witness the awful tragedy of his fate... He lifted one of his legs over the railing, and then the other, and, crying out for his beloved, plunged of his own accord into the ashen depths below.'

Quaint, if unoriginal. The 67 year old nobody signed the manuscript, *de Sade* etched proudly in a blue-black scrawl. Satiated, he folded the completed pages together into a crisp, starched line, tossing them delicately to the side with Machiavellian flair. At the end of the day, prose was prose – it mattered little how sophisticated. The novel would have to be published anonymously, regardless. Such was the burden of genius. The Marquis was all too painstakingly aware that certain revolutionary ideologies have a tendency to inflame the average traditionalist – as such, it was a great travesty that Napoleon and his censors were among the latter order.

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Abruptly, a figure materialises from the bushes, peers like an omen over the window-ledge; the shadows of the mottled iron bars cut shaded grooves into his youthful face. He scuttles forward in the half-darkness as if he is the most wanted man in all of Charenton-Saint-Maurice. In recent years, such visitations have become a regular occurrence. A transactional rendez-vous – a symbolic transfer of intellect.

The Marquis stands, turns and slots his manuscript through the bars with languid fingers. He has taken care to blot out his signature with a blue-black pool in the meantime. He speaks with his unsanctioned visitor, briefly – although it is difficult for a convicted lunatic and a printer's apprentice to make much conversation – and, a true playwright, he notates the dialogue mentally, like a performative spectacle. **de Sade:** My most recent masterwork.

unnamed boy: *extends a hand through the bars.* I'll see to it that it is delivered to the publishers – with your discretion. I assume that you'll learn enough about the rate of success through the mill. I've heard that everything here is accomplished by means of deception.

dS: I ardently await that insight. I wish you a safe journey back. Those manuscripts are among my very finest. *at once, his face contorts into a ghoulish pantomime smirk.* You must indulge a little with the proceeds – visit a whorehouse, if you will. Else, buy a little something for your... young lady, perhaps – if such sentiment takes your fancy. I have it on good authority that the *magasin de jarratière* serves both purposes with positively *rapturous* success.

Alarmed, the boy draws back, folded manuscript clutched tightly against the bruised lapels of his jacket. At once, he turns heel and blurs back into the bushes – in the blink of an eye, he too is gone.

Exeunt omnes. Marquis, alone.

A pair of nonplussed eyes peer through the empty window-frame, tracking the boy's figure as it dematerialises. A cigarette simmers in the grip of one calloused hand, like a sixth digit.

Momentarily, the Marquis allows himself to consider whether his as yet unpublished novel will prove to be of comparable success. And yet the acclaim of those preceding leaves no room for doubt.

Give the mass what it craves, and the mass will crave you in return.

The Marquis breathes in, reclines back against the windowsill, exhales smoke. He no longer has the luxury of time — although he continues to swing his boots and the brittle bones within them against the stone ledge, back and forth, back and forth, he does not move with the effortless mobility of his youth. Another breath of helicopter seeds trickle through the bars as he picks up his quill once again; anthropoid nightcrawlers blur though the streets outside, his distant kin. *There can be no rest for the wicked* — or so the poets say.