Sadim

As a young man, I confess, I came to know certain parts of our great capital city better than perhaps I ought to have done. It was one of my greatest pleasures to stroll down the Haymarket and to stand for a while in Leicester Square, watching the world, especially that half-world the French so descriptively call demi-monde. It was not long before I, too, was drawn into its delights. Before I reached the age of twenty I had experienced many of the best 'Rooms' and Casinos of London, was known by name at the Café Royal, the Argyll Rooms and many others.

I developed a taste for the London Salon, run by a French woman by the name of Madame Laurence. Indeed for several months of the year 1864 I went nowhere else. There was much about the Salon that pleased me. There was, for example, no pretence at being a dancing hall. I have no taste for dancing and despised the hours I had spent in certain places jostling with large numbers of bodies jammed into an inadequate space. More than once had I been caught in some silly fracas born from such a tetchy and ridiculous heap of bodies bouncing about on the floor. I hate violence.

No, Madame Laurence kept a quiet, friendly, intimate salon, in the French style. We rarely saw the police and never were we exposed to that ridiculous sight, a minister of religion striving to save our souls, sermonising and preaching, doing his rounds like some Music Hall act that must finish in one theatre and dash off for the late performance in another. No souls were saved chez Madame Laurence, of that I am sure!

Peace was maintained by a combination of Madame Laurence's presence, imposing but not intrusive, the wit of the girls and the broad, tattooed arms of 'Dog', an ex-boxer who roamed menacingly from hall to landing, doorway to stairs, rarely needing to demonstrate his renowned upper-cut.

It was at the Salon that I first saw Sadim, I was struck by a sense of mystery, which frightened me, though I could not say why. I was by then a regular visitor to Madame Laurence's London Salon, along with scores of my contemporaries, young bloods learning the pleasures of the body at no small expense. We saw the costs only in terms of money and blessed our advantages of birth. Only years later did the full, the real costs... but I digress.

I spoke earlier of the girls, and to be sure it was here that the London Salon excelled. My favourite was Molly, an Irish red-head who spawned my taste for "ginger" hair and the delights it offered elsewhere on the body. And it was largely through her that I learned of Sadim and his horrible secret.

My first sighting of this strange man, which I referred to moments ago, was on an evening in '64. I was ensconced in the lounge, my debaucheries paused for brandy, flirtation and bawdy conversation. Molly was on my knee, and three of my friends sat around similarly recuperating, with various female adornments, now throwing back their heads with laughter, now running their hands inside our largely unbuttoned shirts, or filling our empty glasses. Madame was drawn from her corner armchair, where she sat knitting, by a long ring at the door. Charlie and Rex howled their disapproval at the continued din, the unnecessarily demanding announcement of a new arrival. And then we all laughed again, loud and drunkenly.

When he entered, I spied him through the parted curtains, but my friends were by now engaged on other things. He was small, and finely dressed from top hat to white spats. He pulled off his gloves and lay down his cane and his hat, and I noticed how Laurence seemed to dart away from him as he leant forward to do this. It did not strike me as odd, as there was something repulsive about him; was it the unnumbered wrinkles, or the whiteness of his skin, or the veins in his bald skull? I did not know, but I shuddered at the thought of one of "our girls" being with him. Molly must have noticed my interest, because she pulled my face around to her direction and kissed me full on the mouth.

"Don't worry about him, love. He's called Sadim. Funny name, isn't it? He never does anything. Just watches. Sod 'im, that's what I say!"

And she giggled. My mind turned to more enjoyable matters, and soon Molly and I retired to our room.

I payed many happy visits to the salon, alone or with my friends, and had the pleasure of all the girls there. More often, though, I would ask for Molly. Oh, they were all beautiful and loving, and had that special skill such girls have of making you feel good about yourself. But she, Molly I mean, she had a passion in her body that moved her here, moved her there, made her dance over you, rolling her eyes, and then sing such agonies as her ecstasy approached. Did she sing like this for all the customers?

"No, Joseph. Only for you!"

And I believed her.

One night in the following Spring I turned up very late, past midnight, after an evening's "serious conversation" with my father about "joining the army", or "going into the City" or... well just generally getting off my backside and earning some money instead of spending his all the time. I must say I sat down exhausted at the table in the lounge. I was alone, and became a little alarmed when Jenny, one of the girls, rushed through in tears. She ignored my solicitations and I sat down again. When Madame Laurence appeared, she seemed to be calming people behind the curtains.

"It'll be all right. You just put it out of your mind. All right?"

She turned to me and smiled with her mouth, but her eyes spoke fear and misery.

"Is there anything...?"

"No," she interrupted. "Everything is fine. The girls are a little upset. A bereavement. So we're closing early."

"You mean..."

"I'm afraid so. But drop in tomorrow night, we'll be back to normal."

"Are you sure there's nothing I can...?"

"No, really. Nothing."

"And Molly...?"

"What?"

"Can I see her for a moment?"

"No! No!"

She panicked briefly and suddenly regained her composure. It impressed me.

"She's probably leaving us. Back to Ireland, you know. But don't worry. I have another red-head coming in tomorrow; Anita. She'll be just as good. You'll see!"

I was ushered out, my coat and scarf still over my outstretched arm, and as I left I caught a glimpse of an old hag of a woman crying in a dark corner of the hallway. I noticed her really because of her ugliness, and the wrinkles and the whiteness of her skin reminded me... reminded me... yes, it came to me! Of Sadim! And the door closed.

I did return the next night, and Molly had gone.

"Back to Ireland!" they said, many times that evening, till the phrase began to nag at me. And I tried Anita, who was pretty and fun, but who was not really a red-head, as I discovered to my great disappointment when exploring her lovely, rounded body. Shortly afterwards she took to dying her Venus hair too, but by then she had already lost my interest.

The atmosphere at the salon had changed. Some of my friends, unable to resist the paternal pressures that I had been rescued from by a stroke of luck of massive proportions, drifted away. With Molly gone, and one or two new girls who lacked the social skills she had displayed (they talked so much about themselves!), and a tension in Madame Laurence that even prevented her knitting (she sat in the corner, watching, sometimes feigning a laugh) I began to tire of the salon, though out of habit I kept going. Habit, yes and... something puzzled me. The change had been stark if not entirely sudden and seemed to date from the day I first saw Sadim. Indeed, I saw him again twice, or at least I heard the interminable announcement of his arrival and took it that he was the cause of Laurence's leaping to her feet, rushing out, making sure the curtains concealed the new arrival. I think I spied him once through a chink, all white and wizened.

The habit died. I found other places to expand my experiences and indulge my changing tastes. I would spend hour after hour at Evans's in Covent Garden or at The Garrick's Head, just off Bow Street. At Evans's I had my own private box, could wine and dine and indulge my interests to my heart's content. The London Salon became a memory, a part of my past, my growing up.

Two years later, I remember well the year, 1867, because of a notorious trial that I attended with a young actress friend, May Morrison, Sadim reappeared in my life. The trial took place in the Old Bailey and concerned a Mrs Leverson. This woman was accused of having swindled a widow, a Mrs Borrodaile, of huge sums of money, on the pretext of helping to arrange a marriage between the widow and the celebrated Lord Ranelagh. There was no finer sport or funnier comedy to be had in London at that time, and May and I delighted in the sordid details of the case as they unfolded. Mrs Leverson was the proprietor, I believe, of a cosmetics shop, which served as a meeting place for secret assignations. It would not surprise me if many a half-decent lady had fallen foul of this old hag and been too afraid to tell. Suffice it to say that Mrs Leverson had managed to extract hundreds of pounds from the widow who, in her turn, believed she was passing money to her "lover", Lord Ranelagh, or at least financing the wedding plans. Letters were read out in court, letters which attested to the blind stupidity of the lonely, gullible widow. May and I were astonished at one point to see Lord Ranelagh himself join the proceedings, not as a witness but as the guest of the court, sitting in a place of honour. And laugh as I did I felt a little disgust at the way he, too, joined in the mocking and baying that emanated from the public galleries as each of a long line of stupidities was brought out into the open by Mrs Leverson's merciless defence counsel.

Mrs Borrodaile looked ghastly, it must be admitted. I wondered who had advised her upon her appearance, for surely it was unlikely to appeal to the more solid citizens making up the jury. She looked ill, and of course the blame for that cannot be laid at her own door. But to cover her palour with so much rouge and to turn out with dyed yellow hair. She looked like some common trollop who might stand in the Haymarket any Friday or Saturday night.

As the trial continued and the sorry saga was set before us all, my eye was distracted by movement in one corner of the courtroom where a whole bench had been reserved and kept empty. As all other eyes were on Mrs Borrodaile and her hideous looks a small gentleman dressed in black, carrying in his hand a cane and a top hat, eased his way into the corner of the empty bench. There was no one around him, but a large, rotund and scar-faced companion positioned himself at the end of the seat, so that none could pass. I stared at the old man's face. It was so white it seemed to shine, and so wizened it appeared that it could fall apart at any moment. His eyes were like tiny lumps of coal. His hands, resting atop the cane in front of him, were long, boney and ugly. It was Sadim!

I could scarcely take my eyes from him. He, however, immersed himself in the case before us, smiling when the public laughed, wincing when the widow played for sympathy, snorting when the swindler demanded justice. I gazed so long at his hideous form that I am sure that, could I but draw, I would have had no difficulty in setting down every line, every twisted feature of the mis-shapen and distorted little monster.

My attention was taken for a while by the jury's report of their deliberations. They, and who could blame them, could not reach a decision and in the pandemonium that followed I lost him, for when I turned to look Sadim and his minder had gone.

Spurred by this chance encounter I resolved to re-visit the London Salon. I was greeted by Madame Laurence like a long-lost son, and soon fitted in to the milieu despite knowing hardly anyone there. To be frank, the conversation in the lounge was dead, and I sat with a pretty little blonde called Dora on my knee. Two other men were there and five or six girls. The men were asleep, and I was running my hand up Dora's thigh, and she leant over to allow my hand to caress her. The long ring at the door did not disturb the two men, but Dora closed her legs and huddled into me, in a lovely way that girls have when they are frightened. Laurence leapt to her feet.

"Alice, it's you tonight and no need to complain. Remember what I've said."

"Yes, mum," said Alice softly.

"You do as we've agreed and it'll be all right."

By this time the two had reached the curtain, and leaving it slightly parted they opened the door. The ringing ceased.

In he strode, as the women parted, stepping back briskly. Off with his hat and gloves, down with his stick, and with a glance at Alice he walked to the private rooms. Alice followed slowly.

There was something about Laurence's "It'll be all right!", the way she said it, perhaps, that brought back to me that night when the air seemed full of panic, when... when what? And it drew out from my memory that other phrase, "Back to Ireland". They ran together round my mind and with my hand easing Dora's legs apart, now that her fear had subsided, I thought of Molly and her red-haired bush.

"Don't let him touch her!"

A voice at my shoulder startled me. I turned and saw an old hag I half remembered... Had I really seen her before?

"Don't let him!" she ranted, and when Madame Laurence returned she hurriedly shooed her away to another room. But the old crone's words had upset me. I stood up, and Dora nearly fell to the floor.

"'Ere Joey, what's up?" she laughed.

"Just give me a minute," I replied, and feigned to go to the lavatory. Once through the curtain, I turned and went up the stairs. I had an idea I knew which room they'd be in, and as I approached it my heart began to pound heavily. My hands sweated, and I had to dry them on my jacket. What on earth was I doing? I looked back along the dark landing. No one had followed me.

The doors had no numbers on them, but each was a different colour. I went straight to the red door and put my hand on the knob. I could hear nothing from the inside. I knew that all the rooms were the same. Inside there would be a small "vestibule", separated from the small inner room proper by thick curtains. I turned the knob, which slipped in my sweaty palm. It was a quiet door, and as I went inside I could see through a parting in the curtains that the occupants were undisturbed. I moved closer to the curtains and could see the strange scene inside quite clearly. In the small room sat Sadim, in one corner, with his hands on his knees. He stared, but without moving and without showing emotion on his shiny white and creviced face. Alice stood opposite, naked. She had a chair, and posed this way, that way, the object of her movements being clearly to display her body to their greatest effect and in a variety of ways. She too showed no emotion and seemed careful to keep the three or four feet distance from Sadim.

For my part, perhaps it was the brandy, or the strange effect of the catch phrases that still lumbered my mind, "It'll be all right!" and "Gone back to Ireland", or some latent puritanism, I do not know, but I felt a repugnance for this unnatural scene that I could not control. As Alice took a particularly blatant pose, her hands on the floor and her legs wide apart, I charged in.

"Look here, you offensive old goat..." I began, ready to protect an honour that had surely departed long ago, ready to insist on normality... maybe just drunk! For I blundered against Alice, who, unbalanced and inelegant, fell screaming towards Sadim. He held out his hands by instinct, and Alice kept up her screams: "Keep him off me! You fool! You bastard! Keep him away...."

But it was too late, and I watched a writhing, naked, beautiful young woman transformed before my eyes. Her smooth and luscious skin began to crack and to crease; blotches of pale brown and pink appeared all over her. Her hair fell in clumps to the floor. What remained turned white. Her flesh fell in folds about her thighs and buttocks, her soft undulating belly flopped. Her breasts, which had been small mounds, holding out high with their crowns of reddish brown, melted on to her chest, empty of life. And her lovely face was soon a hideous, toothless and haggard caricature! Alice rolled round, screaming on the floor.

I was repulsed. My stomach was churning as I looked at her, and the shock and the alcohol caused me to vomit violently over her already revolting body. She screamed and screamed, swore at me relentlessly, and Sadim, who had retreated to another corner, made to leave.

"What have you done to her, you fiend?" I cried at him, just as Madame Laurence and other inmates arrived to view the horrible scene.

"Bon Dieu! C'est arrivé encore! O mais non! Mais non!"

She looked at me, then at Sadim, who was cowering in his corner.

"Again?" I screamed.

"Oh yes, this has happened before."

My answer came from the old hag I had seen earlier.

"You don't remember me, but once you loved me. Once you'd run your hands over my body, and gaze on my red hair like a baby at a bright light. Don't you remember...?"

"Molly?"

"Yes, yes. I am Molly."

She began to sob.

"The cursed devil touched me. He touched me. Sadim touched me! He mustn't touch anyone, ever!"

My head swam, and I could feel my stomach beginning to churn again. Through my tears and amid the wails of Alice and the sobs of Molly and Madame Laurence, I reached into my inside pocket, where I kept my one-shot pistol, my protection in London's dark and dangerous streets. I remember Sadim's face as I pointed it at him and pulled the trigger. It was not a face of fear or fright; it was one of relief, even of gratitude. I scarcely heard the report for the din of the women present.

I fell to the floor and sat exhausted as Molly dragged Alice from the room.

I gather they were all gone when the police arrived. Only Sadim and I remained, perched each in his own corner. He smiled on his dead face, a small neat hole in his forehead, a narrow red line running down over his nose, his lips, his chin.

"Why did you do it, then, sir? Jealous rage, was it? Fall out over a woman?"

I have not been able to convince the police of the true course of events. They have been unable to trace Madame Laurence, or Alice.... or Molly. I suppose she must have gone back to Ireland.

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