

The Evil That Men Love

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The voices of the air no longer do they care.

The Evil That Men Love

Chapter One

Before the revolution of 1789, the farmers of Colville went about (as they had done for centuries) raising cattle and clearing the forest to make way for their farmhouses of grey stone. Skirting those dwellings was a pine forest whose crisp aroma contrasted with the stench of cow manure. Life in that village seemed to the passing travellers unremarkable—even monotonous. Yet if they were to stay a while longer, they would see the villagers' practice of hanging garlands of garlic around the doors and windows of the farmhouses.

God forbid if the traveller were to leave after dark, the farmers, with a look of fear, would say, 'Here, take this....'

They would place a bulb of garlic in the traveller's pocket. The farmers would bless themselves and say, 'Don't go into the forest.' They would whisper in his ear, 'That's where the *Bloofer Man* lives.'

The farmers would bless themselves again, after which the doors would be slammed and bolted shut.

Of course, the sceptical traveller would take no notice, but he would instead laugh, tossing the pungent garlic away as he entered the forest. Edging closer, he would see the mist like a nebulous stream descend from the mountain range, gathering at a graveyard. If he had any sense, he would go no further. However, like so many others, once he heard the Bloofer Man's voice, there was no escape... The following morning, the farmers would (as often happened) come across the traveller slumped over a headstone. When they rolled him over

and stared into his eyes, inflamed with ecstasy—with terror, they knew the Bloofer Man had claimed him.

While the farmers secreted the corpse away, their children (on the other side of the village) played amongst the haystacks hide-and-seek, except for the forlorn Christophe Blondin, who, at twelve, had given up such pastimes to do chores and care for his mother, Elyse. By sacrificing his childhood, Christophe had given up any hopes he may have had to escape from Colville. Although he could not leave, during his free time the child would read the novels that lined his mother's bookcase. In those books, he discovered the outside world was a veritable cornucopia of adventure, where princes rescued damsels from fire-breathing dragons. At bedtime, Christophe would fold his hands in prayer, asking for the speedy recovery of Elyse but also for an angel to rescue him from the never-ending housework that she expected of him. Yet, to the boy's chagrin, they remained unanswered.

Since his father's disappearance, Elyse had (as it seemed to the boy) sunk under the ocean of melancholia, for her auburn locks were dusted in grey. Christophe tried to nullify the woman's distress with a kind word or deed, yet her coldness spurned the child, causing him to flounder in the same melancholic ocean. The boy appeared to the world unaffected. Yet was he kidding himself? One thing was for sure: Christophe was resentful at surrendering his childhood to care for the woman he loved and, was ashamed to admit, disliked.

On beautiful days like this, Christophe begrudged her more because as he (with wet cloth in hand) washed the dirty windows, he saw with envy the children threading their way around the haystacks. He poked his head out from his bedroom window and gestured for them to wait. But they walked away, mocking him with their taunts, 'the Bloofer Man has got your daddy.' They pulled faces. 'You'll be next.' As the children scattered, Christophe's eyes followed them with wrath. He froze when he heard his mother staggering towards the kitchen, after a protracted silence she said:

'Christophe! Where are you?' His reticence rattled the woman. 'Damn you, boy....' Then she hollered in anguish. 'Come here...'

Daring not to upset her further, he dashed, almost tripping on the carpet's run, down the stairs. Her face was a worn moonstone, so he lowered his gaze and said:

'What, mummy?'

'Must I always tell you to feed the animals?'

'I-I forgot....'

'Monsieur Toussaint is expecting you to feed them.'

'I-I forgot.' Tears welled up in his eyes.

'Look, I'm sorry. Come here...' Elyse outstretched her arms, but the boy stood his ground. 'After your father's disappearance, we've been drowning in debt... Come here...' Moved by her despair, Christophe hugged her. 'Monsieur Toussaint has helped us.... When others would prefer that we starve.'

'I hate being poor.'

'Life isn't fair for us....'

'I don't care, mummy. I want to play games like the other children.' He fixed his gaze on the window leading to the outside world. 'I'll leave. And—and you'll have nobody.'

'Don't say that....' She sobbed. 'You won't abandon me as your father has done.'

Unlike the other children who cowered like puppies whenever their parents told the Bloofer Man's story, Christophe asked a barrage of questions to his mother's alarm, for his mind needed to be filled with facts.

'What's the Bloofer Man?'

She looked at him with a nervous glint in her eyes.

'Mummy, has anyone seen him?'

It seemed to Christophe that she dared not look him in the eyes for fear of betraying closely guarded secrets.

‘Did the Bloofer Man kill daddy?’

‘No!’

He moved away, looking at her with scepticism.

Elyse snickered, ‘Christophe, the Bloofer Man didn’t kill your father....’ She cut him off as he was about to speak. ‘It’s a stupid story to scare children. Help me to my room...’ she held out her hand. ‘I feel a dizzy spell coming on.’

‘Where is daddy?’

‘I wish to God I knew....’ Breathless, she leant against the doorframe. ‘Hurry... fetch my smelling salts.’

He dashed up to her bedroom, jerking the door open. This had been the first time in years that Christophe could enter her sanctum. A small table with a mirror was in the corner; hanging above was a portrait of his father, Maurice. He studied it, comparing their features. They had the same hazel eyes, the same auburn hair and pallid complexion. The difference (apart from age) was a scar on his father’s cheek. The enchantment the picture had generated was broken when Elyse shouted:

‘Christophe! Christophe!’

He skimmed through the room’s contents, overturning piles of letters and clothes that lay strewn on the blue divan, where he saw on its armrest, shimmering like an emerald in the shaft of morning sunlight, the smelling salts bottle. Christophe snatched it, scurrying out of the room and down the stairs into the kitchen, where he saw his mother slumped beside the fireplace.

He shook her. ‘Mummy! Mummy!’ There was no response, causing the child to wail. ‘I’m sorry. I’m sorry for being selfish.’

Quickly, he opened the emerald bottle, placing it under her nose. Christophe waited for what seemed an eternity for its stimulating effects to work, and then, to his relief, the woman awakened. He kissed her cheek.

‘Promise you’ll never leave me....’ The boy nodded, causing Elyse to sigh with relief. ‘Help me to my room.’ Christophe pulled her off the ground with all his might, guiding her up the stairs towards her bedroom. Elyse slumped onto the bed and said, ‘Don’t believe what the villagers say about the Bloofer Man killing your father.’ She paused, ‘It’s all make-believe...’ she caressed Christophe’s face, drifting into unconsciousness as she said in a muffled voice, ‘It’s all....’

He retreated, closing the door behind him. And as Christophe staggered down the stairs, the germ of curiosity, which until then had laid dormant, infected his consciousness. Why was Elyse reluctant to tell the Bloofer Man’s story? Why was it that the villagers avoided him and his mother? Rather than shying away, the child walked into the village, hoping to discover the truth. The children, who had previously mocked him, were summoned back inside by their stony-faced mothers. Even their pet dogs dashed back to the hay-scented barns. Colville was readying itself for a confrontation of which the boy was becoming aware as he drew closer. The stillness was punctuated with the bangs of doors and windows slamming shut.

From his kitchen window, Gérard Toussaint saw Christophe stride past, but rather than stop as he often did to say ‘hello,’ the child continued onwards. The man (as he later confessed to the boy) was afraid Christophe had broken a rule, which had kept the peace in Colville, that Elyse and her son were barred from interacting with the villagers. Gérard was in trouble with the farmers for helping the Blondin family, that if he were to intercede again, then an avalanche of animosity would bury them and him. As Monsieur Toussaint watched, he saw with dread Christophe edging closer to a group of men. Without thinking, Gérard

sprinted after him, but it was too late by the time he arrived, so he watched, preparing to swoop the child from danger.

Underneath a silver birch, Christophe saw five older men gathered around a table playing *Brusquembille*. When they saw Christophe approaching, they put their cards on the table.

‘Shoo, you spawn of the devil,’ said a brown bearded man.

To the men’s surprise, the child continued towards them, which provoked the bearded man to pick up a stone. The child was unfazed; however, Gérard fearing the worse drew closer.

He threw it at the child. ‘Shoo, devil’s spawn.’

It hit Christophe’s head, causing the child to fall back into Monsieur Toussaint’s arms. Blood streamed down the child’s temple, provoking Gérard to snap:

‘You’ve hurt this innocent child,’ he hesitated, gathering the wounded boy in his arms, after which he flashed a furious gaze. ‘You could have killed him. Damn you, you old whoreson.’

‘Innocent?’ He and the other men laughed. ‘Gérard, don’t be fooled by Elyse and her spawn. Unlike the rest of us, she doesn’t hang garlic around her place.’

‘Neither do I...’

‘Well, the Bloofer Man may give you a visit... Elyse is rumoured to be the devil’s strumpet.’ He pointed his wrinkled hand at Christophe. ‘Be forewarned, that boy is the devil’s spurious issue.’ As Gérard retreated with the unconscious boy, the older man pulled out a knife.

‘If he and his strumpet for a mother come near my family,’ his face was a red tomato, ‘I’ll slit their throats.’

Through the gap in the curtains, moonlight illuminated the bedroom in which Christophe slept. While the boy recovered, Gérard recounted the severity of what had happened to Elyse, who fainted. Monsieur Toussaint caught the wilting woman, placing her on the chair, after which he put the smelling salts under her nose, whose acrid aroma caused her to gasp and say, ‘Gérard, why would he go into the village?’

He looked at her with a dumbfounded expression. For a moment, they were silent before an epiphany struck the woman whose voice vacillated as she said, ‘Christophe’s been asking about his father,’ she paused, ‘and the Bloofer Man.’

‘What did you say?’

‘The truth...’

Gérard looked at her critically. ‘Which is?’

‘That Maurice abandoned his family...’

‘What did you say about the Bloofer Man?’

‘Well, the facts.’ She thought of what to say. ‘Christophe isn’t as gullible as the villagers.’

‘Don’t you see they suspect us...?’

‘How could they?’

‘You and I don’t use garlic to ward off...’

‘A non-existent vampire...’

‘They think my nightly visits here are those of the Bloofer Man...’

‘To the world, I’m married to Maurice...’ She reached out, drawing him close. ‘If we wait a few years, then Maurice will be declared dead...’

The sound of lively banter that emanated from downstairs roused Christophe, who was curious to discover what they were, and so he crept down the stairs, where he saw, to his horror, Elyse kissing Gérard.

‘How could you? How could you betray daddy?’ asked the child, whose fury flashed at them.

Without giving them time to reply, Christophe dashed out of the farmhouse into the moonlit night, where he snaked along the path until the pain of fatigue stung his legs. Tears welled up before flooding the earth. No longer was Christophe naïve, for the boy had been edified by Elyse’s betrayal that no amount of repression could expunge those images from his mind.

What was he to do? Go home or continue onwards? Christophe could not unsee what he saw or undo what he had done. Rather than returning, the boy continued along the moonlit path, which led away from the village and into the forest, whose presence foretold of danger for those (like the naïve child) who were to enter it. Christophe froze, for he sensed a spirit shadowing behind. He turned around. There was nothing. Yet, Christophe had been sure something was lurking in the background, watching him. The hairs on his neck stood erect. As he heard the tread of footsteps, his heart raced like a cheetah. He looked around—there was no one—except an irrational dread.

Christophe pricked up his ears because he heard a voice whispering to him. So ethereal was the sound that the boy concluded it must be that of an angel. Even if he wanted to, Christophe could not resist, so he continued to the graveyard in a somnambulistic trance, where he saw a tall figure leaning against a headstone. The stranger’s blue eyes beckoned the lad to come closer. Instead of being afraid, the otherworldly beauty of the figure captivated Christophe, for, in the moonlight, he could discern the angel’s features, a mop of black hair, a pallid complexion, and plump red lips, causing the boy to gasp:

‘Are you an angel?’

‘Alas, no,’ snickered the creature, whose pointed teeth protruded from his upper lip.

‘What are you?’ he hesitated, and then his voice vacillated as he asked, ‘Are you the Bloofer Man?’

‘I’m whatever you want me to be.’ His icy hand caressed Christophe’s cheek. ‘Surrender to death’s kiss.’

Instead of resisting like his other victims, the lad surrendered, which surprised the animal.

‘Aren’t you afraid?’ The boy shook his head. ‘You will be....’ The creature was inches away, exposing his pointed teeth, and from this proximity, the boy could smell his musky fragrance.

‘You remind me of someone I knew long ago,’ said the creature, who pushed the lad away. His blue eyes narrowed, focusing their gaze on Christophe. ‘You’ve got *his* hazel eyes...’ he paused and lamented, ‘You’ve got *his* auburn hair.’ Again, he pushed the boy away and said, ‘Go, before I change my mind....’

With lightning bolt speed, the animal dashed into the forest, leaving the lad bewildered. And as Christophe rose from the ground, he heard another man’s voice in the graveyard, who said in a harsh voice, ‘I’ve caught you, you devil’s spawn....’

The boy was silent, for he recognised the old man’s voice. Fearful, Christophe cowered behind a headstone, for he saw the glint of a knife that the man held in his hand.

‘Who were you talking to?’ The child dared not utter a word, which infuriated the man. ‘Answer me...’ he hesitated, then said with a chuckle, ‘Or I’ll slit your throat.’

There was a rustle of the pines, followed by something moving with great speed, like a gust of wind, knocked over the old man, who stumbled to his feet, brandishing his knife as he said,

‘What the hell?’

Without warning, the creature knocked the weapon from his hand, which caused the bearded man to dissimulate his fear by saying in a nonchalant voice, ‘Is that the best you can do?’

As a cat toys with a mouse before killing it, the animal chuckled, ‘Don’t play me for a fool, old man,’ he paused, ‘You reek of fear.’

The man snatched the knife off the ground, waving it about as he asked, ‘Are you the Bloofer Man?’

The creature edged closer, causing the man to flinch, for, in the moonlight, he could make out its globe red eyes leering at him.

Then the creature leapt onto his back, and while the man, like a bucking bull, tried to throw him off, the beast tore into the man’s flesh. To Christophe’s disbelief, the animal was enlivened each time it sank its teeth into the man’s neck. Exhausted, the bearded man slumped to the ground, inviting the animal to whet its appetite for blood. Once the man was drained, the creature snapped his neck like a twig.

‘When you’ve grown up,’ he smiled at the boy as his bloodstained lips mouthed the words, ‘I’ll return for you.’

The animal’s eyes glowed red, which had a soporific effect on the lad who slumped against the headstone, sinking under the waves of unconsciousness, as it said, ‘You’ll forget all that happened this night.’

Once Christophe was asleep, the creature fled into the forest, whose tips were fringed by a necklace of early morning light. And as the sun crept over the horizon, licking the landscape with its fiery tongue, the slumbering boy was unaware of the approaching tread of the farmers, who blessed themselves as they gathered around him. Christophe was untouched, unlike the Bloofer Man’s other victim, who lay crumpled against a headstone with congealed blood down his neck.

Puzzled why the animal would spare the boy, a bald man said, ‘He’s in league with the devil.’ He raised his pitchfork, preparing to plunge it into the boy’s heart. ‘We must kill him. Otherwise, it will return.’

Before he could despatch the boy, another man pushed him away.

‘Henri, if you kill this child, then the Bloofer Man may kill everyone in Colville.’ He hesitated and went on with a logical tone. ‘We’ll use him as a lure to capture the animal.’ He smiled, exposing his yellowing teeth. ‘Then we’ll kill the Bloofer Man.’

‘But François...’

‘Take the child to his mother’s.’

Reluctantly, Henri swung Christophe over his shoulder and carried him home. During this time, the other farmers secreted the corpse away, preparing it for the funerary acts of driving a stake through its heart followed by beheading, after which the body would be burnt. As Henri lumbered into Colville, a group of children ogled them, but the man’s glare caused them to scatter like leaves blown by the wind. Their mothers looked on from their respective windows with fear, triggering them in unison to holler for their wayward children. Moments later, he delivered the boy to Elyse, who thanked him, but rather than acknowledge her gratitude, the man, as he left, said, ‘Don’t let your son out of your sight.’ He hesitated, then said in a menacing voice, ‘Otherwise, I’ll deal with him.’

With that warning, the bald man left, after which she closed the door and waited a moment before she said, ‘Gérard, please come here.’ Like a rat, he scurried from the kitchen to her, where she handed him the child. ‘Take Christophe to his bedroom.’

A moment later, Gérard returned and slumped in the chair, gesturing with a flick of his hand for her to sit in the adjacent chair and then he said, ‘I’ll leave after dark.’ He paused and went on with a tremor in his voice. ‘If you want me to...’

‘Gérard, it doesn’t matter,’ said Elyse as tears wetted her lashes, so she wiped them and resumed, ‘Christophe knows... and when he wakes up, he might tell someone.’

‘And so what if he does?’

‘Those Colville yokels,’ she pointed to the window, where he saw villagers gathering twenty yards away. ‘Will have more reason to punish me.’

‘I don’t care a straw.’

‘That’s easy for you to say....’ She leapt from the chair, drawing the curtains together. ‘You haven’t been tarred and feathered with scandal as I’ve been....’

‘What do you suggest we do?’

‘That depends on....’

‘What?’

‘Whether Christophe says anything....’ Without warning, the boy screamed, causing the pair to flinch with surprise, so she said, ‘I’ll see to him.’

Before she staggered up the stairs, Gérard took from his pocket a bottle and handed it to her. ‘This will calm him.’

Her eyes narrowed on the bottle’s label on which was printed in large letters, *laudanum*. Elyse half-smiled and ascended the stairs where she saw Christophe looking at her in an affected way, which caused her to say in a reassuring tone, ‘There’s nothing to be afraid...’ she stopped, then said slowly, ‘You’ve had a nightmare... Monsieur Toussaint has given me something to help you rest.’

She led him back to his bedroom. ‘What’s upset you?’

The child was silent, so she asked, ‘Do you remember anything?’

Again, Christophe did not respond, so she lifted the blankets and patted the mattress. She opened the bottle and said, ‘Here, have some of this.’

He looked at her unnervingly, causing the bottle to almost slip out of her hand. Elyse raised it to his lips. ‘Drink... That’s a good boy.’ His eyes were fixed on her, causing Elyse to lower her gaze as she asked, ‘Do you remember last night? Do you remember sleepwalking?’ She bleated out a laugh. ‘Monsieur Toussaint and I searched everywhere.’ She stopped and then asked, ‘Where were you, Christophe?’

The boy looked at her with a newfound sagacity. ‘I was with....’ His eyes were weighed down with lethargy. His voice faded as he said, ‘the Bloofer Man.’

Startled by his divulgence, Elyse crept out of the room, closing the door. Never had she entertained the possibility that what Christophe had said about the Bloofer Man was true because (in her mind) they were a by-product of superstition. Regardless, Elyse lumbered down the stairs, slumping on the chair next to Gérard’s and said:

‘Christophe told me he was with....’ She paused and laughed a high-pitched, nervous titter. ‘You won’t believe this, Gérard.’

‘Try me.’

‘He saw....’ Her face was as pale as the moon. She pointed to a bottle of wine and two goblets. ‘Pour me a drink... I need it... Christophe told me he saw the *Bloofer Man*....’

The goblet slipped out of his hand, crashing to the floor. ‘The Bloofer Man?’

‘Of course, it’s poppycock. Yet, how Christophe looked at me.’ She stopped, then said with a quiver of uncertainty, ‘One could swear what he saw to be true.’

‘Did he disclose anything else?’

‘Don’t worry,’ she rose from the chair and said in a whisper, ‘he knows nothing about us.’

Later that night, as the moonlight streamed through Christophe's window, it was suddenly obscured by a bat whose wings tapped on the glass panels. The boy did not stir, for he was sinking into the quicksand of unconsciousness. In that dreamlike realm, he hovered over an open grave and then, without warning, a hand pushed him forward, where he spiralled downwards. Christophe's awareness of reality was like looking through a kaleidoscope where each impression was warped into myriad realities that had the potential to both terrify and thrill.

In one such existence, Christophe gasped for breath like a bird in a vacuum chamber, trying to break free, as the Bloofer man said, 'Have no fear.'

'I don't want this.'

'Have no fear.'

In that deadly embrace, Christophe felt the vampire's teeth pierce his neck, causing the lad to scream and tumble to the ground, after which his eyes jerked open, and he realised to his relief that he was lying on the timber floor of his bedroom. Warily, he raised himself off the floor, scanning the room to make sure that there was no one there, but then to his alarm, he heard a tapping sound, so his gaze turned to the window, where he saw a bat, whose eyes were illuminated by a preternatural flame. The lad crept towards the window and said with a quivering voice,

'You can't harm me,' drawing the curtains shut, 'If I can't see you.'

For a moment, this worked until the tapping grew so loud that Christophe feared the bat would break the glass, so he leapt out of bed and dashed down the stairs, but this time, he tripped on the carpet's run, nosediving to the ground.

Groggy, Christophe opened his eyes and saw two figures hovering over him, which caused the child to writhe in his bed and scream, 'Go away, Bloofer Man.'

'Hold him, Elyse,' said Gérard, pouring laudanum down the boy's throat.

'Go away.' Suddenly, the drug took hold of his excitable body, causing his voice to slur, 'Bloofer Man!'

Christophe collapsed onto the cushioned mattress, and the terror imprinted on his face was smoothed with calmness.

'He's mad,' she stopped and sobbed, 'my son is mad.'

Chapter Two

On the first of November, terrors, which had been repressed, burst forth from the cracks in Christophe's subconsciousness. No matter what he did, those nocturnal terrors (planted a decade ago by the Bloofer Man) were now bearing fruit that every time Christophe was about to sample it, he convulsed like a rabid dog. In that delusional state, Christophe heard the Bloofer Man say in a faint voice, 'I'm coming for you....'

Paralysed, he felt the creature's rough tongue travel from his neck to his lips, sealing it with a sinner's kiss. Love and loathing were laying siege to the castle that was the young man's mind, and with each emotional onslaught, his defences crumbled. To Christophe's horror, the Bloofer Man's lips drew apart, exposing his pointed teeth as he said in a whisper, 'I'll take you away from all of this.'

Without warning, the creature's mouth snapped shut like a jaw trap, tearing into Christophe's neck. He leapt out of bed in fright, but an invisible force pinned him down. Then his eyes shot open, and he gasped for air, searching the room for the Bloofer Man, who, to his relief, was not there. Sleep, like lead shutters, came down over his eyes.

Hours later, the stillness was interrupted by the tread of footsteps coming up the stairs, followed by the door slowly opening.

‘Christophe’s attacks,’ she paused. ‘Get worse on this night.’ She said in a drawl, ‘The only way to calm his mind... Is to give him more laudanum.’

‘There’re other alternatives.’

‘The madhouse won’t do....’ She stopped, lowering her voice as she said, ‘He’s my son... nothing will change that... not even you, Gérard, can alter that.’

‘I bear Christophe no ill will.... I think of him as my son... However, it’s time for him to leave the nest... It’s time for someone else to care for him.’

‘I won’t shirk my motherly responsibilities.’

‘What about me?’

‘Christophe needs me more than ever....’

‘Don’t you see... Your devotion is unhealthy... Not only to you but also to him.’

‘Unhealthy?’

‘Yes... When you won’t give Christophe a chance to live his life... Make his own mistakes.’ She looked at him with sadness. ‘I’m sorry I’ve upset you... However, I’ve been patient... Even to my detriment... I’ve awaited the day when we can be together.’ With a hint of despair, he asked, ‘Don’t you want that, Elyse?’

‘Yes, but...’

Gérard looked at her with scepticism. ‘But what?’

‘I won’t abandon Christophe like his father has done.’ She paused and said in a whisper, ‘Tomorrow morning, he’ll be right as rain....’

‘Till the Bloofer Man triggers another bout of madness.’ He looked at Christophe with a glint of jealousy. ‘What do you think his delusions are doing?’ She was silent. ‘They’re driving a wedge between us.’

‘Shush, Gérard.’ She opened the laudanum bottle, pouring it into Christophe’s mouth. ‘Drink *mon petit chou*... Tonight, you’ll be free of the Bloofer Man.’

The sound of a door slamming followed by dogs barking caused the lead shutters to rise from the young man’s eyes. Groggy, Christophe stumbled to his feet, got dressed, and lumbered down the stairs. To his surprise, he saw Elyse seated at the kitchen table, sobbing.

‘What’s wrong?’ She was silent, unable to look at him. ‘Please tell me, mother....’

‘Gérard won’t be coming here any longer....’

‘Why?’

‘He...’ Tears pricked her eyes. ‘Wanted me to send you away.... To the madhouse...’

‘Did he mean that, mother?’ Elyse nodded. ‘Did you sacrifice him in favour of me?’

‘Yes... Any mother would for her child....’ Christophe dropped beside his mother, comforting her with a kiss. ‘My one chance of happiness with Gérard.... And I’ve spoiled it....’

‘Mother, it’s not your fault....’

‘Like your father, Maurice, I’ve ruined us financially.’

‘Allow me to talk to Gérard....’

‘What good will that do?’

‘Gérard is a decent man....’ Christophe kissed her again. ‘If I speak to him... He’ll listen to reason... And maybe he’ll return.’

Christophe walked to the front door. His hand hovered over the latch. *Even if it means me leaving home... I can’t take back what I promised... Dear God, what will become of me?* Uncertainty spread across his body, destroying the foundation of his confidence; despite that, Christophe summoned the courage to open the door and search for Gérard.

...As he walked to Gérard's house, the afternoon sun lashed Christophe, causing his brow to be garland in sweat. His journey into Colville did not go unnoticed by the villagers who cast castigating stares. He ignored them, wishing they would lose interest. Unfortunately for Christophe, they followed him, hoping to provoke a reaction. He appeared nonchalant, giving them an occasional smile, but his heart raced like a cheetah. In front of him, he saw the bald man, Henri, raise his pitchfork, barring his way.

'Devil's spawn, where are you going?'

He pushed Henri away. 'To Gérard's house....'

'You won't find him home.'

'If he's not there, then where is he?' The bald man pointed his pitchfork to the road leading out of Colville. 'When did he leave?'

'Half an hour ago... I sold him one of my horses....' Christophe looked at him in disbelief. 'He'll be long gone by now....'

Determined to find Gérard, even if it meant hours of walking, Christophe trudged along the muddy road away from Colville, but when he was on the village's outskirts, he could hear the muffled sounds of laughter. Mile after mile, he slogged onwards, stopping now and then to sit on moss-covered rocks. The outside world fascinated Christophe, but it became frightening when the day surrendered to the night. The howling of wolves echoed in the arena of mountains that bordered the road. Christophe saw glimmering in the darkness the light of an approaching coach carriage, which, to his horror, was heading straight for him. He leapt out of the way, landing face-first in the mud. The ground reverberated with the pounding of horses' hooves, followed by the rear wheel coming off and the loud bang of the carriage overturning. Christophe sprinted towards the vehicle's wooden carcass, where he was confronted by the sight of horses writhing in agony. The darkness surrendered to the luminosity of an approaching lantern in whose light Christophe saw the face of a man with piercing blue eyes and a crop of short brown hair.

Christophe heard moans from within the coach, and the man said, 'Here...'. He handed the lantern to Christophe. 'Master... Give me your hand... I'll pull you out.' Two hands appeared, followed by the rest of the man's body. 'Bring the lantern closer... So, I can make sure my master, Lautréamont, is uninjured.' Christophe recoiled in horror when the light revealed Lautréamont's face – he bore a striking resemblance to the Bloofer Man. There was a tremor of apprehension in Christophe's hand, triggering the servant to say in a loud voice, 'Hold the lantern steady! Are you hurt, sir?'

'Only my pride,' said Lautréamont, whose eyes drifted from his servant to the petrified Christophe. 'Mathieu... Who's this handsome man?' Mathieu shrugged. 'Why young man, you're trembling... Fear not. We mean you no harm.' He looked away, triggering Lautréamont to turn his face to him. 'Have we met before?' Christophe hesitated, then nodded his head. 'I knew it... I never forget a face as handsome as yours.' Rather than fleeing, as any sensible person would, Lautréamont's reassuring voice disarmed Christophe of his fears. Lautréamont smiled as he asked, 'To whom do I have the honour of addressing?'

'Christophe... And you are?'

'Maldoror, Le Comte de Lautréamont...'

Mathieu eyed both of them with impatience. 'Ahem!'

'And this is my servant, Mathieu.' He paused. 'Is there a place where Mathieu and I can stay....' His icy hand brushed up against Christophe's arm. 'While my carriage is repaired... And I get fresh horses?'

Christophe pointed toward Colville. 'There's a village near here....' To the young man's relief, when Maldoror smiled, his teeth were unlike those of the Bloofer Man, for they were shaped normally. 'I guess my mother and I can take you in... That's if you enjoy sleeping on the floor... And eating simple food.'

‘My servant and I have experienced worse....’ He wrapped his arm around Christophe.
‘Lead the way, young man.’

In hindsight, Christophe’s actions were stupid, yet it was impossible for him to resist, because Maldoror’s magnetism would have affected anyone who had the misfortune of meeting the vampire. Magnetism and beauty were part of the vampire’s arsenal of weapons they used on their victims, so it did not surprise Maldoror that Christophe surrendered so quickly. As they plodded along the muddy road, Maldoror sensed an internal conflict within the young man who, according to the vampire, was attracted to and repulsed by him.

‘When was it we last met?’ asked Maldoror.

Christophe hesitated a moment before saying, ‘You’ll think me mad....’

‘Try me.’

‘I met someone who looks like you....’

‘And who’s my mirror image....’ Christophe was silent. ‘There’s nothing to fear... I won’t laugh....’

‘When I was a child, I encountered the Bloofer Man....’

‘Bloofer Man?’

‘He’s a....’

‘He’s what, Christophe?’

‘A... vampire...’

He said with a laugh, ‘Never thought I’d be compared to a vampire. Was he repulsive?’

‘Far from it... Although the Bloofer Man was a killer... And I feared him...’ he paused, gasping for breath. Once he regained his wits, he said with a hint of longing, ‘He was the most beautiful creature I’ve ever seen....’

‘Until you’ve met me... Have no fear, Christophe. I won’t be drinking your blood....’ He hesitated, then said with a snicker, ‘I’m, however, partial to a glass of claret.’

For two hours, they trudged onwards until they saw on the horizon a necklace of light from the farmhouses of Colville, and another hour later, they appeared on the outskirts of the village.

‘It hasn’t changed since I was last here,’ said Lautréamont in a faint voice.

‘When was that?’ asked Christophe, stopping to rest on a fallen log.

‘Let me see...’ he scratched his head. ‘It would have been twenty years.’

‘You would have been a child.... Perhaps your family knew my father, Maurice?’

‘What is his surname?’

‘Blondin...’

‘Well, it’ll be a pleasure to get reacquainted with him.’

‘I’m afraid to disappoint you... My father disappeared, leaving my mother and me alone...’ he waited, wishing Maldoror would shed light on Maurice’s disappearance. When this was not forthcoming, he said with anguish, ‘I hoped you might have had information about him.’

‘Sorry...’

‘I don’t understand Maldoror.... If you didn’t know my father, you wouldn’t have said “reacquainted” because that implies....’

‘Implies what?’

‘That you had already been acquainted with him....’

‘Please forgive my master.... It’s been a stressful day....’ Mathieu paused, looking at Maldoror with a nervous glint. ‘Half the time, my master doesn’t know what he’s saying....’

Maldoror laughed, playfully slapping his servant on the back. Christophe was, however, not convinced, so he tested them by saying, ‘Ouch, I’ve got a pebble in my shoe... The path ahead will lead you to my house... I’ll catch up....’

To the unsuspecting, the path seemed innocuous, but to Christophe and the villagers, it was unstable, known to cause the unwary to fall. His eyes widened as he watched them successfully navigate the perilous path. *He's lying. What else is he hiding?* Despite the inconsistencies in Maldoror's story, Christophe wanted to believe him. Regardless, the young man was becoming smitten by the aristocrat, so much so that he desired to escape Colville, escape his filial duties of caring for Elyse, and run away with him. Without giving it a second thought, Christophe sprinted along the path, slipping on its uneven surface where he collapsed among a bush of flowering red cabbage roses. Once Christophe had regained his composure, he got up and crept towards the shocked duo, whose eyes widened upon seeing the young man's bloody hands. For a moment, it appeared Maldoror would pounce on Christophe; however, he was restrained by the scruff of his neck by Mathieu.

'My master is affected by blood....' He held the writhing Maldoror. 'It causes him to be sick....' He paused, then said in a faint voice, 'Please go ahead, Christophe, while I calm him down....'

'Should I fetch a doctor?'

'No... No... Once my master's settled down, he'll be fine. Allow me a moment or two to speak with him in private.'

Reluctantly, Christophe agreed to Mathieu's request by walking towards his home, where he saw Elyse standing by the front door.

She gestured to his face. 'Dear God, what happened?'

'I'm fine... It's mud....'

However, when Christophe came inside and Elyse had gotten a better look at him, her eyes widened with concern. 'Your hands... They're bloody.'

'It's nothing but a couple of scratches....'

'I thought I heard you talking to someone... Who was it?' Nervous, he lowered his gaze. 'Was it Gérard?'

'No... Someone else....' She looked at him with confusion. 'Maldoror, Le Comte de Lautréamont... Her face whitened. 'And his servant, Mathieu.... I promised them....'

'I don't like where this is heading....' She retreated to an armchair, grasping its palmette as she asked, 'Promised them what?'

'I said they could stay here....'

'I see... But first, let me see Le Comte de Lautréamont...' His face developed a nervous twitch. 'Bring him to me, Christophe.' Before he dashed out the door, she said with a warning, 'I'll be the judge of whether he can stay... Not you, Christophe.... Is that understood?' He nodded. 'Could he be the same Lautréamont who visited here all those years ago? I'll be damned if he's the same man....' Elyse heard the tread of approaching footsteps. 'Be strong... I mustn't show any weakness in front of this man.'

The front door slowly jerked open. Christophe entered, followed by Mathieu and Maldoror, whose face mirrored that of an accomplished actor of subterfuge with his bashful smile. When Le Comte saw Elyse, he bowed his head in supplication, he walked over to her, took up her hand, and kissed it as if it were a holy relic. There was an awkward silence before Maldoror said in a cheerful voice, 'As your son, Christophe, may have told you.... My servant and I require your help....' She looked at him with penetrating eyes, which for a moment unsettled him before he opened his leather pouch. 'I'm more than happy to pay... Will two *Louis d'or* be sufficient?'

'That's plenty, monsieur....' Maldoror offered her the gold coins, but she withdrew her hand as she said, 'Before I accept it... I need to be reassured....'

'Of what?'

'Of whom you say you are?' Maldoror looked at her with bewilderment. 'Twenty years ago, a man like you entered my house....'

Mortified, Christophe seized her hand, trying to drag her into another room; however, Elyse remained planted on the ground. ‘Mother, you’re mistaken.... Perhaps you’re referring to Maldoror’s father....’

‘He made an indelible impression on me....’ Tears welled up in her eyes. ‘And that of your father, Maurice.’

Christophe gestured at Maldoror. ‘Mother, look at Le Comte.... He can’t be a day older than thirty.’ She uncoupled her hand from his. ‘Besides, mother, one’s memory can gradually change....’

‘Perhaps, but my memory isn’t clouded....’ Her eyes were fixed on Le Comte as she said in a murmur, ‘I’m certain of it....’

The longer Elyse looked into Le Comte’s blue eyes, the less likely she could escape his charm. However, the spell was broken when she heard Christophe’s cough, causing her to focus her gaze on her son, in whose face she saw ambivalence. Yet Elyse also saw acknowledgement about what she was saying about Maldoror’s dishonesty. At the time, Elyse did not understand the mixed signals her son was broadcasting; however, she would (to her detriment) learn he was (like his father Maurice) mesmerised by the aristocrat.

She asked with desperation, ‘Have you doubted him before, Christophe?’ She paused. ‘Has he spoken an untruth?’ He looked away. ‘He has, hasn’t he!’

‘Enough, mother...’

‘My servant and I will go....’ Maldoror retreated from the door. ‘I don’t wish to upset you, dear lady....’ He prostrated himself before Elyse, who folded her arms, for she was not convinced of his display of sincerity. ‘Or cause a rift between you and Christophe....’

While they left the house—submerging back into the blackness of the night—they heard the high-pitched shouts of mother and son quarrelling. Reaching the path’s edge, they sat down on a fallen log and waited for a few minutes for the noise to die down. It was a foregone conclusion that Elyse would give in and allow them to stay because money (which Maldoror had plenty of) could overcome the most challenging obstacles that a wary mother would put before him. To Maldoror’s delight, he heard Christophe scurrying towards them, beckoning for them to return.

‘Please come into the barn,’ said Christophe, gesturing to them to follow. ‘Mother doesn’t want you in the house....’ He pointed to the loft inside the hay-scented building with its dozing cattle. ‘For the time being, she agreed you can stay here....’ Maldoror smiled, embracing the young man. ‘The instant you violate my mother’s rule, you’ll have to go. I’m sorry, Maldoror... It was the best I could do.’

‘No need to apologise....’ The aristocrat kissed his mud-covered cheeks. ‘I understand, Christophe....’ Maldoror felt the young man’s throbbing heart. ‘One mustn’t upset one’s mother... Despite that, I’m honoured that you championed my cause....’ Maldoror reached into his pocket, pulling out his leather pouch. ‘Here, take these gold coins.’

‘That’s too much,’ said Christophe with a stunned expression.

‘Nothing’s too much for you, *mon chéri*.’

Maldoror encircled his arm around the young man, whose pulse raced with elation at being held by the debonair aristocrat. The terrors that the Bloofer Man had once engendered in Christophe were transformed into an erotic yearning for the creature’s mirror image—Maldoror. Such passions did not go unnoticed by Le Comte, who increased the flames of desire in Christophe by saying in a faint voice, ‘I love you more than life itself.’ He kissed the young man’s bloody hands, tasting blood. ‘You belong to me... As I do to you.’

Maldoror had been playing for God knows how long the part of a debauchee that he knew when his victims would offer themselves up to quench his thirst. In the beginning, the prey would resist Maldoror (further arousing the vampire’s desires), but with each successive attempt at seduction, the prey’s urge to repel diminished, until they were begging to be

engulfed in the hellfire of licentiousness. Yet paradoxically, Maldoror's desires were cooled with apathy when they surrendered, where the only option for him was to cut the thread which bound them to the living world. Each generation of prey who had the misfortune to be ensnared by Le Comte served the vital role of food and to relieve the vampire's boredom. Unfortunately for the prey, they could never negate the vampire's hunger or monotony.

Regardless, as Maldoror held Christophe, the vampire was struck by a sensation that none of his previous prey had stimulated in him, a feeling of naivety. The vampire craved Christophe's innocence, for like blood warmed him, making him momentarily forget he was a monster whose sole purpose was to deceive and kill. Ashamed of being thought of as a sentimentalist by Mathieu, who loitered in the background, watching, he pushed the young man away.

'You should go.'

'Have I displeased you, Maldoror?'

'No... ' He reached out, caressing his muddy cheeks. 'You've given me something....' He stopped and said with a smile, 'I once thought lost.' Christophe was about to ask what the aristocrat was alluding to when Le Comte said, 'Go inside... Have a bath, Christophe... You need it....'

Once Christophe had left the barn, Mathieu ask with concern, 'What's the matter with you....?' Maldoror crumpled to the ground, covering his face with his hands. 'I've never seen you this way, master.'

'Unlike you and I....' He looked up at Mathieu with a melancholic expression. 'Christophe is unsullied....' A tear tumbled down his hardened features. 'I find it refreshing....'

'Don't be an idiot, master....' Maldoror glared at him. 'It's a passing whim....' He stopped and said with empathy, 'You know as well as I that you'll never abide by that whim....' He slumped next to him. 'Because your thirst will drive you to kill....'

The servant encircled his arm around him, provoking Maldoror to say with scorn, 'During all these years, I've never tried to kill you....'

'No, master.... Because you've needed me....' He hesitated and said with a sullen tone, 'However when I'm no longer useful....' Mathieu kissed him, after which the manservant said in a whisper, 'You'll do it... Because that's your nature as a vampire....'

'Point taken, Mathieu.'

The servant gestured to the house. 'If you want Christophe.... You'll have to deal with his mother....' He said in a quivering voice, 'Do it quickly... Don't let the poor woman suffer....'

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