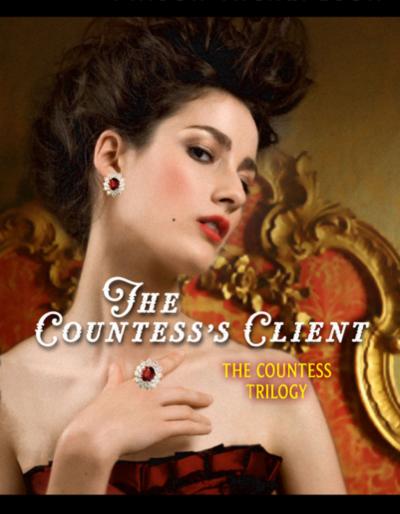
## Alison Richardson





## The Countess's Client

## Book 1 of The Countess Trilogy

Alison Richardson



The practice of genuine virtue leads to a life of odious boredom—of that there can be no question, and I cannot imagine that there is a woman alive who honestly aspires to the unhealthy ideal of true feminine chastity. The appearance of virtue, however, is a very useful thing. Scandal is a noblewoman's enemy; it robs her of her freedom and her place in society, and it ought to be avoided at all costs. As the only daughter of Frederick the Great's most famous general, I have always known what Prussian society expects of me, and given the constraints placed on young women like myself, I have never doubted that a certain amount of deception is essential to my personal happiness. To actually be as virtuous as narrow convention demands is far too high a sacrifice for any woman to make; to appear virtuous, however, requires only a small measure of ingenuity and a little luck.

Until the age of twenty, I could boast that I had lived a perfect life of apparent virtue, enjoying all the pleasures that are every woman's natural birthright without the slightest injury to either my status or my

person. I have now, however, had one notable failure, and I feel compelled to record the story of this unhappy event, so that others might avoid the snares that caught me.

Let me first explain more clearly the general principles that have guided me since my youth.

It became evident to me at a young age that if a woman wishes for herself a degree of independence in her erotic pursuits, she must take care that the men in her life remain discreet and tractable. Achieving this state of affairs is no easy task, and the institution of marriage is, as the turbulent history of my own family attests, no solution to the problem. Accorded a greater degree of free movement than women, men are correspondingly more difficult to keep silent and still, and this fact introduces a great many complexities when you are seeking to gain some measure of control over them. The male's natural loquaciousness and desire for gratuitous self-display only adds to the problem. Secrecy is a woman's greatest boon, publicity a man's first desire, and in understanding that fact, you have understood the origins of the war that rages between the sexes.

Fear of death is of course an excellent inducement for a man to hold his tongue, and if you are lucky enough to find yourself in a situation in which the man would forfeit his life should he reveal his true relationship with you, then you find yourself well placed indeed. If you, like me, live in a garrison town, the ready availability of soldiers offers excellent

possibilities in this regard. Everyone knows that fucking the general's daughter is a hanging offense in the Prussian army, and because of this wise policy, I have been entertained by countless recruits without the slightest harm to either my reputation or theirs.

This healthy and useful diversion, such a source of consistent enjoyment throughout my youth, was sadly no longer available to me when my family decided to send me to Paris to live with my aging aunt and my cousin Robert, and it was in this new city that I made my first misstep.

At this point in my life, I had been recently widowed after a brief and uneventful marriage to a man much older than myself, and my father had decided that closer ties to my late mother's relatives in Paris would be useful both to me and to the family. When the roads cleared in the spring, I left Berlin with a small staff and my belongings for an extended stay in the French capital, accompanied by my deaf and nearly blind aunt, who talked of nothing across all of Germany but her eagerness to see her son. My cousin Robert did his best to make his mother and I welcome in his Paris house when we arrived, and as a man of wide-ranging philosophical interests, he was a pleasant and diverting companion. I spent many fruitful hours watching him at his delicate experiments, and we discussed Bailly and Lavoisier over dinner every evening with great enthusiasm.

Unfortunately I could find little else to do for amusement in my cousin's house, all of Robert's male servants being either old or ill-formed.

Robert had always been fond of me, and he was happy to have me and his mother with him. That I did not doubt. But during my early days in Paris, there was sometimes a certain tension about him that made me wonder if the sudden introduction of two women into his household had not altered his solitary habits in ways that he sometimes found straining.

I arrived home early one afternoon from my walk in the park to discover that that was indeed the case. My deaf old aunt was off taking chocolate with some other ancient countess, and our manservant opened the door with a look of unusual nervousness. I would have noticed his odd manner, had my mind not been distracted by an injury my little dog had sustained during our walk. He had scraped his paw against a rough stone while playing in the grass, and given the calamity that had befallen my darling, I was deaf to the pressing suggestions of the loyal old man that I wait in the front room for a glass of wine to refresh me after my walk.

After ordering the man to send up hot water and some rags for my poodle, I ascended the stairs to my bedroom, but decided, halfway up, that I wanted a book to entertain me if I was to spend a quiet afternoon alone with my poor pet, and I turned to enter the library.

I crossed through the door to find Robert reclining on his new red velvet divan with his breeches around his ankles. A very strong and energetic girl was taking her pleasure across his lap, and he was holding her ass very tightly, his eyes focused with concentration on her generous bouncing breasts.

She was astonishingly well-formed, the girl in my cousin's lap-plump, pretty and blonde, and also entirely naked, and she was riding his cock with great vigor, which spoke well of the seriousness with which she approached her chosen profession.

I complimented my cousin on his taste in whores and asked him if he knew where his librarian had put the copy of Héloïse, now that it was back from the binders.

Robert had been flustered by my precipitous entry, but when he noticed that I was not at all upset by the condition in which I had found him, he let out a hearty laugh and said he was pleased to discover that we shared a taste for more than philosophy.

He also revealed that the social appointment he kept with such insistent regularity every Thursday evening was in fact a visit to a local brothel, the place that Claudette (that was the name of the plump blonde in his lap) called home. He confessed himself relieved to know that despite having spent my early years in a desolate, hopeless backwater like Prussia (his words, not mine), I had not been quite as sheltered as he had assumed. Indeed, my cousin, in his kind and goodnatured way, was so happy to be relieved of the

unpleasantness of secrecy, which can be such an ugly source of discord in a home, that he gallantly suggested that if I had nothing better to do I should come along on his Thursday visits.

The brothel of Madame Barthez, my cousin's favorite house of pleasure, was equipped with an ingenious set of peepholes so that clients and their women might be watched with complete anonymity at any time, and through these little holes, placed discreetly through oil paintings or within the patterns of wallpaper, one could observe the favorite sport of the French aristocracy in all its vice-ridden variety. Unfortunately, despite its unquestionable visual interest, Madame Barthez's house could give me no actual *physical* pleasure, save what I could give myself. The brothel had no men on offer, and I have never been able to expand my tastes to girls, though I know that this is a damning mark of my provinciality (one for which Robert has often rebuked me).

Even with this additional source of diversion, my situation in Paris was still not what I would have wished for myself, and I was beginning to fear that I might well be confined to the modest pleasures of voyeurism for the foreseeable future. After all, there are only so many situations in which one can arrange to have fear of imminent death working to keep a man's lips sealed, and no such lucky occasion had presented itself to me in a while.

Then, on a slow Thursday at the brothel, an evening on which there happened to be very little for me to watch, I was sitting in the private room that the girls used when they were waiting for more clients to arrive, and a new opportunity presented itself to me.

The girls had gotten used to my visits over the weeks, and on this particular evening, they took little notice of me. Though I think that most of them had no real liking for me, they tolerated my presence amicably enough, mostly, I think, because my cousin was such a good customer-young, rich and full of harmlessly perverse desires that helped run up his tab. One might expect that these girls would have preferred easy, simple jobs, but that was far from the case. They had all the disdain of aristocrats for the men who came to the bordello wanting nothing more than a short, satisfying fuck. Such straightforward, uncomplicated sexual urges they considered a mark of bad taste, and they felt ill-used when all a client asked of them was the use of their pussy for a quarter hour.

It was this fastidiousness that provided me with a solution to my difficulties. There was one man in particular who was the constant object of their scorn, a commoner of some unspecified trade who, like my cousin, was always there on Thursdays. When Madame Barthez came to say that this man had arrived, the girls always squabbled over who would be sent to him. (Madame never said his name; she only announced with a severe eye, "He's here. One of you has to go.") She usually had to choose someone herself in the end, and the unlucky girl always left grumbling.

When asked why they disliked this client so much, the girls talked about his appallingly bad French (the man was a foreigner—an Englishman or Irishman, probably Irish), and they talked about the lack of ornament on his clothes; but the most common complaint was the simplicity and brevity of the services he required.

"He always arrives right after the theater lets out, so you're sure to miss a better client when you have to go to him, and then he takes his pathetic quarter hour and that is all you earn for the night."

"I think he's used to fucking cows on some English farm, the vulgar bastard."

"He doesn't even bother to undress, and when you walk in he hardly looks at you. He only tells you to get down on all fours on the bed, and then he just takes out that big horse's dick of his and rams it in, like some horny country boy."

"I tried loosening his breeches myself once, to see if I could get him to take a little more interest, but the stupid peasant just pushed my hand away and said that he wasn't paying extra for any theater."

"Cheap bastard."

"I moaned once, and he slapped me on the ass and told me to shut up."

"He's beneath us. Madame thinks so, too—he should just go and find a girl on the street. But he is a *client* of the Duke de Brecis, so Madame can't send him away."

girls understood the web of social obligations that bound together the French aristocracy and their dependents better than most ladies-inwaiting.

It was a Thursday, and Madame Barthez had just ordered Claudette to go to this detested cheap client when the plan came to me, already fully formed, as if I had been considering it for weeks. A whole crowd of young Russian noblemen had just arrived in the fover, and Claudette was complaining that she had been with the dreaded Irishman just two weeks ago, and arguing that it wasn't right to make her miss a chance at the Russians. The other girls were begging her to stop resisting, since none of them wanted to have to go themselves.

"How is he to look at, this foreigner?" I asked, speaking loudly in order to be heard over the bickering.

The girls all shrugged and said grudgingly (I could tell they hated to say anything nice about him) that he was not unappealing, if one did not mind the crudeness of his clothes.

"Does he have all his teeth?" They all gave little sighs, vexed to have their argument interrupted by such a stupid question, and then told me that he did in fact still have all his teeth as far as they knew.

"I'll go, then," I said matter-of-factly, standing up from the lounge.

Madame Barthez laughed nervously, "Ah, *la jeune comtesse* is witty."

"I am not joking," I answered, pulling off my gloves and my jacket. "And I'll pay you for the time; then you'll have double the fee for this Irishman, plus whatever Claudette can tease out of the Russians."

"But, *Comtesse...*" Madame was clearly worried about what my cousin might think of my allowing myself to be used in this manner.

"Someone get me a dress." My own dress, I knew, would betray me; no one, even the stupidest commoner, would mistake it for that of a prostitute.

The girls were all staring at me with wide eyes (it is no small feat, I think, to shock a room full of whores)—all except Claudette, who pulled a gown out of the wardrobe and held it out toward me, smiling reassuringly as if worried I might change my mind.

I had no intention of changing my mind. I could see no reason this unpopular client should not be made to provide me with some relief from my forced chastity. I do not know why this simple solution had not occurred to me before. Men flocked to this place every night, and not all of them traveled in elevated circles. I had no Irish aquiantances, and no English ones, at least not in Paris; this man would never know that I was not just another one of the many girls Madame Barthez had in supply. He would have no cause to tell anyone about our meeting, for no one boasts about sex with a whore. The girls would not begrudge me the satisfaction, and

the man would never know he had done something about which it would be worthwhile to brag.

A few of the girls had recovered now from their surprise and rushed forward to help me dress, realizing that my strange inclination was to their advantage. Madame Barthez still did not look happy as she led me up the stairs, but when I whispered to her that I would pay her double for the time, her expression softened.

As my hand was on the doorknob to the room where this stranger waited for his hired company, I wondered what I would do if their account of him had been somehow misleading and I walked through the door and saw someone that I knew.

To my relief, the man was in fact unknown to me, and the girls had, as it turned out, undersold his charm. The simple cut of his clothes was not a detraction. Plain linen looked well on him; his thick, wellmuscled body would have looked awkward in a satin waistcoast. His jacket was off, and he had loosened his shirt at the throat; with his collar hanging open like that he looked like a gardener waiting in the kitchen for his supper. His wavy, red-blond hair had the same disheveled look as his clothing, tousled and disorderly, though short like an artisan's. There was indeed something gorgeously crude about him, a quality all the more striking given the affected and extravagant fixtures of the room.

I do not know if you have ever had such an experience yourself, but I can tell you that it is quite an interesting sensation to be so suddenly faced with an unknown man who expects you to give yourself to him without the slightest preparation.

The man had been standing at the window, staring out into the night. "*Tu es nouveau*," he said brusquely after he had glanced over at me. The girls had been right; his French was appalling.

"Yes, sir, I'm new," I answered in English, not wanting to hear any more of his French, and he gave a small start of surprise.

"Are you English, lass?"

Not Irish, I noted. A Scot.

"No, I am German," I said truthfully, deciding selective honesty would be simpler than invention.

He looked away quickly when I met his eyes. "Take off your clothes and get on the bed," he said, brusque again now that his surprise had passed. My hands were trembling with excitement as I fumbled with the clasps of my borrowed gown. Luckily prostitutes' dresses are meant to be easily shed, and I had left my undergarments downstairs. In a few moments I was naked. I walked over to the bed still trembling, and then paused for a moment at the edge, unsure of what to do next. It seemed comical to get on all fours right away, even though I knew that that was what he would ask of me. I sat down on the bed, instead, and tucked my legs over to one side. Since it seemed to make the man uncomfortable when I looked him in the eyes, I averted my gaze while I waited for him to join me.

I saw out of the corner of my eye that he was walking toward the bed, loosening his breeches as he approached. He told me to turn around, and now I got on my hands and knees, facing away from him. The bed sagged as he climbed onto it, and he settled right behind me, his knees on either side of my legs, his lowered pants falling over my bare calves. He reached between my thighs to open the folds of my pussy and pushed his cock inside me just like the girls had said he would, shoving it in all at once, and it was so large it made me gasp. Grabbing hold of my hips with his large, callused hands, he started to fuck me.

I struggled to keep my breathing steady as I neared climax, knowing instinctively that the man would find it strange if he noticed that I was enjoying myself so much. But I think that he must have felt my muscles contracting around him, because as soon as I came, he did, too, crying out as he thrust inside me one last time, pulling back on my thighs so that my bottom was cradled against his hips.

He stayed like that behind me, pressed tight against my ass, for almost a minute, but once he moved he stood up from the bed quickly, and when I turned around his back was to me and he was fastening his breeches. I was not entirely sure of the etiquette involved in leaving after this sort of assignation. Making my best guess, I stood up and said, rather like a lady's maid, "Will there be anything else, sir?"

That was evidently not the proper question to ask, because he laughed. "No, lass, nothing else."

He stepped back toward me and took my chin in his hand, turning my face first to one side and then the other, inspecting my profile rather as one might look over a horse. The gesture irritated me, and he must have seen the displeasure in my eyes, because he quickly took his hand away and said roughly, "Tell Madame Barthez you're to come to me again next week. I've had my fill of French girls."

The next week went almost exactly like the first, and our third meeting was not much different, either, up until our final exchange. This time when I asked him (in the same lady's-maid manner) if there was anything else he required, he gave me a long stare and asked me where I had learned to speak English like that. I was, I regret to say, flustered by the unexpected question, and I did not answer right away.

"What do you mean, sir?" I asked, stalling for time.

"How does a German whore learn to speak English like a bloody duchess?" he asked more bluntly.

Now I saw my mistake. Since I had learned English through congress with my relatives on that island, I sounded like them when I talked, and the speech of the English, I remembered, varied a great deal with their station, much like the Germans. Had I thought of this potential problem sooner, I might have spoken to him only in French. "My mother was in service to a family who had an English governess," I said quickly, offering the first story that came into my head, "and I learned by copying the way that she spoke."

"Then you're a good mimic," the man said. "Next week you'll have to talk to me some more, Duchess."

"Of course, sir," I said, and curtsied, which was a ridiculous thing to do, given that I was naked. I knew that it did not quite strike the right note, this tendency of mine to imitate an English maidservant when I spoke to him, but I could not find any other plausible model, especially since it was clear that he had no particular love for French whores.

He laughed at my stilted answer, and I looked away, embarrassed and still flustered at my lie. I had not anticipated that this man would ever want to speak with me, or I would have thought out a better story in advance.

"What's your name, girl?" he asked me next.

"Anna." I said my real Christian name without thinking, hurrying now to step back into my dress.

I had just pulled the gown over my shoulders. To my disconcertment he reached out and fastened the front clasps for me. His large, thick fingers were surprisingly nimble, and there was an odd, unexpected intimacy in the gesture that I found unnerving.

"Very well, Anna," he said, stroking the side of my breast with his fingertips. "I'll see you next week."

"Yes, sir." I was still a lady's maid, despite my best efforts to refrain from curtsying, and I heard him chuckling as I left the room. I was half-certain as I left that day that he had somehow figured out my real identity, and I had half decided not to go back to him.

As the week passed, my fear faded, and the next Thursday when I entered the room where he was waiting, I did not find my client staring out the window, as I had before. He was seated on one of the couches. A carafe of wine was set next to him on a table, and he held a glass in his hand.

Surprised by that small, unexpected sign of extravagance, I stopped just a few steps inside the door.

"Take your clothes off and come over here," my client said. He spoke without smiling, but his voice was not as brusque as it had always been before.

This change in habit made me wary; I disrobed and walked toward him with my eyes cast down, looking, I am sure, every bit like a hesitant virgin.

I stopped about a foot away from him, expecting him to stand.

"Come closer," he said, and I could hear amusement in his voice.

He was watching me again with the same horse trainer's eye he had used before, looking up and down the length of me as if searching for some flaw. When I came within arm's reach, he reached out and grabbed hold of my hips. "How are you tonight, Anna?" he asked teasingly, pulling me closer so that my pussy was only inches from his face.

I was blushing furiously; it made me horribly nervous to have to speak with him. "I am well, sir—Oh!"

He had leaned forward and bitten me lightly on the thigh, and it had taken me by surprise. Now he was chuckling at my reaction. He turned me around now so that my back was toward him, pulling me closer so that I was standing between his knees. Though I could not see him, I suspected that he was looking over my backside with the same farmer's gaze he had just applied to my front, and I was both aroused and indignant, finding myself so appraised.

He was fondling my buttocks as he looked at me, and when he leaned in and nipped me on the bottom with his teeth, I started like a nervous colt, which made him laugh once again. It was a natural response to pull away, annoyed as I felt by his amusement, but he did not let me go. He pulled me down onto his lap and pinned me back against his chest. "Tell me again how you are tonight, Duchess," he murmured against my neck.

I realized that hearing my accent aroused him; it was not hard to understand that a commoner would find it pleasing to imagine that he was in bed with an aristocratic woman.

"I am well. Very well," I said, a bit breathless. "And how are you, sir?"

"Exceedingly well," he said, his voice a low rumble against my back. "I have been looking forward to having more of that tight cunt of yours all week, Anna. And I got some good news today, something you'll have to help me celebrate."

That made me wonder for the first time what profession this man practiced.

"What sort of news have you had, sir?" I asked, turning to look at him. I was curious to hear what merited celebration in the life of an artisan (if that was indeed what he was).

"Do you know what a telescope is?" he asked, bringing one hand down

between my thighs to stroke my pussy.

I was distracted, or this first question would have surprised me more. I paused a moment before answering to ask myself whether a prostitute might plausibly know what a telescope was. I decided that in Paris anything was possible and answered, "Yes."

"I've been given a commission to build a new telescope for the king."

"Oh!" That startled exclamation escaped my mouth before I could stop myself.

This Scotsman, it seemed, might not be so far beyond my circle of acquaintance as I had thought. For my cousin had just been saying at breakfast that he hoped that the favor of fitting out the new Royal Observatory would be granted to him, and he thought that the king's minister was leaning in his direction.

The man did not seem to think my reaction odd. I suppose he must have assumed that I was impressed to hear that he had business with the Crown.

"That sounds like a fine honor, sir," I said, recovering from my surprise. "I am sure that it is a great testament to your skill." My cousin and his

Italian lensmaker would spit nails when they heard it. Who on earth was this man?

He was laughing at me again. "I believe you could be presented at court without incident, my dear, with the lovely English you speak," he said, which was rather ironic, since I had indeed been presented at the English court, entirely without incident.

"Anna?"

"Y-yes, sir?"

"I want you to suck on my cock for a while," he said. "Can you do that for me?"

I slid out of his lap to the floor and unfastened his breeches. I had never touched his penis before, and I must have made some small sound of admiration when I first took it in my hand, because he laughed and said, "Do I please you, Duchess?"

"Yes, sir," I whispered and met his eyes, and this time he did not look away, as he always had before. He held my gaze as I leaned in to run my tongue along his cock.

I did my best to be a credit to my feigned profession; I used every trick I could think of to tease his prick until it was hard and straining. My client seemed to appreciate the effort. He leaned back against the sofa with his eyes closed, occasionally giving a low murmur of approval, and I was coming to realize that the smallest noise of pleasure from this man signified more than a shattering groan from another.

"Come here," he said finally, pulling at my arms. "Come up here and fuck me now." I straddled his lap on the sofa, and he yanked his shirt up over his head and then settled my hands on his chest. He seemed huge underneath me, his chest twice the width of my shoulders, the muscles in his arms flexing as he gripped hold of my thighs. When I started moving on top of him, it was hard not to let the great pleasure it gave me show on my face, but I struggled to keep my features as calm as possible.

A moment later he took my face roughly between his hands and said, "I'm tired of your modesty, Anna. I want you to moan this time when I make you come, do you understand?"

I sucked in a breath of surprise at the command, so at odds with what the other girls had said that he liked. I had no objections, of course; I much preferred giving myself over completely to the task of riding his cock, without having to divert my energies into pretense.

"Go on, then," he prompted.

He let me work his wide, hard prick in and out of my pussy at exactly the angle that I wanted, and soon I was half out of my head with pleasure.

"Yes, that's right, Duchess," he said with a low, thick laugh. "That's how I want you to fuck me."

I was close to orgasm, dripping with sweat, when he grabbed hold of me and flipped me onto my back on the sofa. He began thrusting into me now, pushing my knees back toward my shoulders to tighten my pussy around his cock.

"My name is James," he said, his voice rough and labored. "I want you to say it."

"James," I moaned, my climax beginning as I said his name. "Oh, James..."

He slumped onto me when he came, falling over to one side, his face pressed against my neck. For a moment I forgot that he was not really my lover, and I slipped out of character. I lifted one hand to smooth his hair back from his drenched forehead and turned to press a kiss against his brow, but as soon as my lips touched his skin, I wondered whether such a caress might not be out of place between a prostitute and a client.

I pulled my hand away from his cheek, but James grabbed hold of it and kissed me on the wrist, grinning. "Go and tell Madame Barthez I want dinner," he said.

"Y-yes, sir," I said, blinking a little stupidly as I struggled to become a lady's maid again.

Madame Barthez was shocked when I told her he wanted dinner, and she had just said that she wanted to know what I kept in that cunt of mine when she remembered who I was and began apologizing profusely. I laughed and told her that it had nothing to do with my merits; the man had just gotten a big commission from the king.

On hearing that, one of the girls suggested a little testily that if this Irishman had recently come into money, perhaps he would want additional company. and I said I would ask, although I had no intention of doing so. I knew already that the answer would be no, and it was rather odd, the pride I felt at that conviction,

considering that it is in fact completely inappropriate for a woman of my station to be pleased to know that a commoner thinks her a capable whore.

So his name was James.

It occurred to me as I followed the dinner back upstairs that if I wanted to know more about him, I could always just ask.

"Take that dress off and come and sit in my lap," the man—James—said to me as he sat down at the small table where the serving boy had laid out the meal.

I smiled at him hesitantly as I settled across his knees, and he smiled back. He could barely reach the table with me on his lap, so I took up a piece of cold meat and offered it to his lips. The food was all this sort, of a shape and kind easily offered by fingers without the bother of a knife and a fork (I am sure by design), and I had had practice enough at this sort of task that I could do it with grace and confidence.

The man was, I think I can say without undue arrogance, thoroughly charmed at being fed in such a manner, catching my fingers sometimes with his tongue or between his teeth, as if he hoped to find that these too might be edible. When he finally appeared much more interested in my fingers than the food, I decided that he must be sated.

It seemed to me that if I wanted to question him about himself, it would be easiest to speak to him as if we had met in normal company. For the purposes of convenience, I thought it allowable to ignore the fact that I was naked.

"Have you been in Paris long, sir?"

He was preoccupied with gnawing gently on my index finger when I asked him this, and he answered me with it still between his teeth. "A few months now," he said.

"And do you enjoy yourself here?" The formulation of that question was not exactly right, I suspected. German reflexive pronouns had a habit of sneaking in where they did not belong in my English.

"Here I enjoy myself enormously," he answered, grinning up at me. "But you are one of the only things I have found in Paris that I like."

How can that be, I was about to joke, when everyone says that there is no better city for a man with philosophical tastes? But I stopped myself just in time

I found it murderously difficult, the most difficult thing I had had to do so far, to pretend to be ignorant as he talked to me. He was from Edinburgh (he told me that as if he did not expect me to know where that was), and he had been apprenticed to an apothecary who made instruments for the professors at the university there. That was how he had gotten his start; now he was in Paris being paid to teach the Duke de Brecis experimental philosophy, which was the Duke's latest passion. Once James began talking, it was clearly a relief to him to unburden all his frustrations to an almost-countrywoman. He seemed to think that being German I must find the French as irritating as he did, and he was not entirely wrong. He disliked aristocrats, too, most strongly, particularly ones who dabbled in natural philosophy, which meant that he especially disliked my cousin Robert, and was consequently very happy that he could now boast such a fine victory over him in the matter of the King's telescope.

Halfway through his account of how he had won over the King's minister through some particularly clever demonstration, he stopped abruptly and told me that he was tired of talking, and then picked me up and carried me over to the bed.

After his extended dalliance with my fingers, he was apparently eager to find out how the rest of my anatomy felt between his teeth. He had a rough, ardent way of touching me that was skillful without being mannered, and by the time he finally pushed his cock inside me again, I was as ready to be taken as a woman could be. He had me not once, but twice, and he fucked me with such slow extravagance that I could only think that the King's commission must have been quite a large one indeed.

I should admit that when I first left the room that night, I was being rather stupid about what had happened, thinking myself lucky that my scheme had gotten me not just a serviceable weekly lay, but a lover of no little skill and enthusiasm.

Only when I entered the downstairs parlor did I start to reflect again on the potential difficulties that

had also made themselves apparent over the course of the evening. My cousin was waiting for me, lying stretched out on a divan with a girl lying between his thighs licking his cock, and he looked up with a laugh when I walked in the room.

"You naughty girl. Madame Barthez told me what you have been up to these past few weeks."

I had not told Robert about my assignations on the preceding three Thursdays. By the time he had been finished with his girls, my client had been long gone, and I had been worried that the venture might be a little too bold, even for his libertine tastes.

Luckily he seemed amused. "This is marvelously daring of you, cousin," he said. "It's a shame that women aren't allowed to brag."

"I think I may have been less clever than I thought, cousin," I said, sinking down into a nearby chair. "I believe you might know the man I've been servicing these past few weeks."

"Who is he, then?"

Scotsman named James who makes philosophical instruments."

"James McKirnan? That showman the Duke de Brecis brought back with him from Edinburgh to teach him how to use his new air pump?" Robert stood up, pushing aside the girl in his lap.

I shrugged and said I didn't consider it likely that Paris was home to more than one philosophical Scotsman with that particular Christian name.

"That man's no philosopher," Robert said derisively. "He's nothing but a clever mechanic. And he aims above his station, coming to a brothel like this one." This observation got a murmur of approval from the girls in the room.

"He likes it when I speak to him in genteel English," I told Robert with a smile, "and calls me Duchess while he's fucking me."

That information sparked a great deal of amusement; my cousin almost cried in his mirth.

"It's good that you told me about this," Robert said.
"This Scotsman seems to be coming into fashion of late, and I was thinking of inviting him to visit me. It would have been awkward for you to run into him in the hall. You remember that commission I was speaking of this morning?"

I nodded, remembering the bad news I had for him.

He went on before I could speak. "I thought I might ask this McKirnan to join Ernesto in working on the glass, since he seems to have gained a few admirers for himself at court."

"Oh, cousin, you won't be happy," I said, sorry to have to tell Robert that he had lost out to this commoner. "He's already been given the commission on his own. That's why he kept me with him for so long tonight."

Robert's face dropped into a scowl, and he sent his brandy glass hurling against the wall with one smooth, sullen gesture. "Damn it, what would make them choose that charlatan over me?"

I told him everything that James had said to me about his demonstration before the minister. Robert flopped down into the nearest chair with a bitter laugh. and said, "As gullible as peasants, the French monarchy." He motioned to the girl who had been lying between his legs before. "Come here, you."

Robert leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes as the girl opened his breeches again. "Well, I hope he makes a mess of it," he said. "And I hope that you plan on seducing him to excess and ruin, cousin,"

"That will be difficult," I said with a laugh. "All the girls say he's painfully frugal."

"How long did he stay with you tonight?" Robert asked, and I did not know the answer.

"Three and a half hours," one of the girls said sullenly. Now that this client had loosened his pursestrings a bit, some of them were obviously perturbed at me for taking away his business.

"I hope you gave him his money's worth," Robert said. "How is our mechanic with his pants down?"

"Really in every way admirable," I said honestly.

I considered staying away the next week, but Robert thought there was no serious risk in seeing James again. "Some of the philosophers invite him now, when only men will be present, but you won't see him in a salon," he assured me. "Besides, who would believe his story if he told it?"

That was a good point. If a nobleman had told such a tale, he might have been believed, but who would listen to a commoner who said he had bedded a countess in a brothel? I decided there was no reason to deny myself.

My client was sitting on the couch again, and this time he smiled at me when I walked through the door.

"Good evening, sir," I said, smiling back, much less nervous than I had been before. I was sure now that he had no suspicions about me, and no small slip was likely to make him question my identity now.

"Good evening, Duchess," he said, leaning back with his hands clasped behind his head to watch me undress.

"Take your hair down," he commanded as I put my dress onto a chair, and he smiled at me again as my hair fell around my shoulders.

I crossed the room and settled between his feet, reaching up to stroke his penis through his breeches, mimicking a pose I had seen Claudette take with my cousin. "Shall I suck on your cock for a while, sir?" I asked, knowing that he would like hearing my genteel voice pose such a vulgar question.

"Yes, Duchess," he answered with a grin, leaning down and taking hold of my hair in one fist. "Suck on my cock for a while."

I opened his pants, and he held on to my hair with both hands as I bent over his lap. "That's good, lass," he murmured as my mouth closed around his prick. "Take it all the way in, just like you did the last time."

After a while he said, "Anna, you must like sucking my dick, to do it so well."

"I do, sir," I answered. "I'm happy to know that I please you." Truth be told, I was beginning to enjoy playing my role, now that I had worked through the first awkwardness of it. I had never been so deferential to a man before, and I took the same pleasure in this novel behavior that another woman might have felt at being demanding.

"You please me very much." He pulled me up into his lap and laid me out across his knees. "What do you do to keep this pussy of yours so wet?" he asked with a smile, plunging two fingers inside me. "You're dripping whenever I touch you."

I gasped in surprise at both the question and the intrusion. "It's not artifice, sir."

He worked his fingers in and out of my cunt until I moaned and arched up against his hand.

"Don't lie to me, lass," he said, chuckling. "I know a great deal about chemistry."

"I promise, sir," I said breathlessly. "It's not artifice that makes my pussy so wet for you."

He smelled his fingers and then licked them, and laughed, realizing I was telling the truth. "You like it when I fuck you, don't you, Anna?"

I nodded, and he pulled me closer to his chest.

"Tell me," he commanded in a low voice.

"I like it when you fuck me, James," I said, and he kissed me, full on the mouth, the first time he had done so. It shocked me at first, but the feel of his greedy mouth wasn't unpleasant, so I kissed him back.

He took hold of my hair, winding it around his palm, and pulled my head back so that he could kiss my throat. His other hand was working again inside my pussy, and as I leaned back while he bit into my neck and my shoulders and then bent down to suckle at my breasts, I thought that being a whore was really not such a bad life, when your clients take such trouble over you.

This time he fucked me standing up while I lay on my back at the edge of the bed, and he looked magnificent doing it. Without any conscious intention to flatter him, I heard myself telling him how handsome he was, and he answered back that I was a very pretty girl and that it made his cock hard just to look at me. When he finished he lay down next to me on the bed and took me in his arms, kissing me on the mouth again, and on my cheeks and my neck.

"You know, Anna," he said after a while, running his fingertips over my stomach, "I could feed you for a week for what it costs me to spend two hours here."

That almost made me laugh out loud, wondering what he would think if he knew what I spent weekly on wine alone.

Had I actually been a woman of the trade, I would have anticipated what was coming next, but as it was, it took me completely by surprise.

"Come and live with me, Anna," he said. "I'll take good care of you—I make a decent living with my work."

I was stunned. I was also, strangely enough, vaguely insulted that he had begun such a conversation with a reference to economy. So he thought it would be cheaper to feed and board me himself, did he, rather than to pay for me by the hour?

What does one say to such an offer?

"I am sorry, sir, but I couldn't—"

He held his fingers up to my lips, frowning. "Don't think that I can't provide for you just because I don't walk around in satin breeches like these ridiculous Frenchmen. I'm not without resources."

"It's not that, sir. It's just..." What on earth could I say? "I'm not allowed to leave, sir. I owe Madame Barthez for my clothes and my board, and I have to stay until I've worked off the debt." That was a good, prostitute-worthy excuse, I thought as I said it.

It did not work.

"I'll pay your debts with Madame Barthez, Anna. You needn't worry about that. Come and live with me. Let me take care of vou."

Pushing away from him in my discomfort, I stammered that I was sorry, but I couldn't come and live with him, and I couldn't explain, but it simply wasn't possible, and after a frozen moment of shock, he stood up from the bed.

What he did next didn't surprise me at all—he called me a vile slut and said he hoped I died in a gutter, and then stormed out with his breeches half-tied and his shirt in his hand.

I waited a few minutes, and then went downstairs to tell Madame Barthez that I would not be returning the next Thursday. Robert found the story amusing when he met me an hour later, but I must admit that I was irritated to have had my convenient arrangement spoiled by James's ridiculous histrionics.

"You know, dearest, if you were in fact a whore," Robert pointed out as we rode through the quiet Paris night toward home, "it would have been a fine compliment. You ought to feel flattered."

I said I supposed he was right.

"Really, you've had an impressive career. It's what all those girls are hoping for, to become someone's kept woman, and you got an offer when you'd only been at it a month. Of course," he added, "I believe that one usually aims to become the mistress of some dissolute younger son of the nobility, but since you were new to the trade, you can be excused for your bad judgment in seducing a mechanic, instead."

I was not finding all this witty banter nearly as entertaining as he was.

"Of course, your mechanic might have had his advantages," Robert said. "Unlike a nobleman, a commoner might have married you in the end if you played your cards right, and made an honest woman of you."

At that, I threw my gloves across the carriage, but unfortunately missed his face.

"Cheer up, darling," Robert said. "Just think how tormented your poor Scotsman has been these past few weeks, imagining all the countless other men who were also paying you to spread your thighs for them."

At least that thought was amusing.

After that night I thought the only unpleasantness that awaited me was a return to my earlier boredom. I was unfortunately mistaken.

A few weeks after my last meeting with James, my cousin and I attended the theater with one of Robert's aging uncles, the Duke de Thouen. I was watching the floor as we moved through the foyer, taking care not to tred on anyone's gown, when someone grabbed me by the wrist. A second later I was yanked flush against a wide, hard chest; I looked up and saw to my horror that the man who was accosting me was my mechanic from the brothel. James.

"I see you took a better offer, Duchess. Wise of you. I couldn't have bought you such a fine necklace," he said through clenched teeth.

I recovered my composure almost at once. My face was a mirror of startled, confused surprise, and I said in French, "You mistake me for someone else, sir. I am not a duchess."

My feigned ignorance seemed to enrage him even more, and he shoved me roughly away. "I know you're not a duchess. You're nothing but a common whore." He glared over at the elderly duke, who fortunately did not understand English, and said, "I'd say you made a poor trade in one respect—I can't believe he fucks you as well as I have."

My companions, who had been momentarily startled into silence, were now roused to indignant protest. Robert, always useful at such moments, leaped forward and struck the man across the face with the blunt head of his walking stick. "Go stumble into a gutter with the rest of your drunken friends," he said as James slumped against the wall, surprised by the sudden blow. "My cousin does not know you, and if you speak to her again, you'll be dead before morning."

There was blood trickling from the corner of his mouth when James looked up again, a hand pressed to his injured jaw. He blinked at Robert, realizing for the first time who he was. "Your cousin?" he repeated.

"Yes, my cousin, you pathetic charlatan," Robert said. "The Countess von Esslin, a woman I'm very sure you have never met. Now make your apologies and get out of our way." Robert's pompous fury was really masterfully convincing. I could have cheered.

Our elderly companion leaned forward now to take my hand in concern. "Are you all right, Anna, my dear?"

Until that moment, I believe that James was beginning to think himself genuinely mistaken. On hearing my Christian name, however, he let out a short laugh and said, "Your family has strange habits, Duke," and then pushed his way through the crowd away from us.

Robert and I were deeply troubled by this exchange, and we talked of nothing for the next few

weeks but how to deal with this unruly commoner we had both unwittingly enraged. Given his antipathy toward Robert, it seemed likely that James might try to use the information he now possessed to harm us both in some way, and we tried in vain to come up with some simple plan to silence him. Bribery seemed an option, but approaching James with an offer, we knew, would be fraught with danger, and neither Robert nor I risk additional unpleasantness wanted to bv propositioning the brute ourselves.

We decided that we would do nothing for the time being, feeling that we could reasonably hope that the inherent implausibility of his story would lead James would hold his tongue a little longer.

In the meantime James's fortunes in continued to grow, and we discovered with great alarm that he had been asked to perform some of his recent electrical experiments before the Thursday salon of the famous Marquise de Comté, a weekly social and literary gathering of considerable reputation. This was dangerous news indeed, for this salon, a hotbed of philosophical radicalism, was famous for its open disregard for the conventions of ordinary morality (and hence was one of my cousin's favorite haunts), and it was just the sort of place in which James's fantastic story might be told to great advantage and, possibly, given its erotic potential, willingly believed.

Robert and I decided that we should attend the salon that night ourselves and meet the danger directly. It is always harder to insult someone to his face, we reasoned, than behind his back, and once the entire *salon* had seen me treat James publicly with cold and distant indifference, they would be less likely to believe that there had been some previous connection between us.

The marquise was standing with her new Scottish favorite to greet us as we entered, and I wondered if James had placed himself in the aging beauty's good graces through more than just his scientific prowess. He was wearing, I noticed, silk breeches and a much more elaborate cravat than had been his previous custom, and he stared at me quite blatantly, his eyes half angry and half expectant.

"Have you met Mr. McKirnan?" the marquise asked once we had exchanged our initial warm greetings with our hostess.

"No," I said coldly, resting my eyes on his face only briefly and refraining from giving him my hand. "Is it true that Luc Valont will be reading his poetry tonight? *That* we did not want to miss."

My cousin smiled behind his gloves.

This promising start to the evening was followed by disaster.

As soon as most of the guests had assembled, there was a belated fanfare from the front door, and a messenger from Versailles hurried into the room. Robert's presence, the courier reported, was urgently needed at court; some delicate problem with the Prussian ambassador had emerged, and because of my

cousin's family connections in Berlin, the king had ordered Robert be brought to him without delay.

Once the marquise had promised that she would see I was safely returned home, Robert had no choice but to comply with the messenger's orders and leave me alone, bereft of my greatest ally.

Nervous to see him go, I followed him out onto the front steps. We dismissed the servant waiting at the door and stood for a few moments together, taking each other's counsel privately. After a few last whispered words of reassurance and comfort, he said goodbye.

I had just crossed the threshold when I noticed that James was descending the stairs from the second floor. He was alone, and the hall was entirely deserted.

With swift, rough force, he grabbed me around the waist with both hands and dragged me unceremoniously into a sheltered corner behind the bend in the stairs.

I struggled in his arms and ordered him to let me go.

He did not obey.

"Why are you now too high to speak to me, Countess?" he hissed in my ear, both arms clamped firmly around my waist. "You used to disrobe at my command."

I ground the heel of my shoe into his foot in hopes of securing my release, but I might as well have thrown feathers at a giant. My assault evoked no reaction at all. (I have heard it said that the lower classes are less sensible to pain than we are, and advance this event as further evidence of that.)

"Tell me, Countess," he said. "How many other clients did it take a night to keep you satisfied?"

I took a deep breath. "I met no one but you," I answered, trying now to speak obligingly, hoping that since he did not obey orders and force was useless, persuasion might work, instead. I did not want anyone to find us in our current pose, nestled behind the stairs.

"And how did I earn that honor?" he asked sharply. "To be asked to pay good money for a woman who wasn't a whore?"

I found this complaint unfathomable. To this day, I do not understand why a man should be so angry to learn that his favorite prostitute was actually a countess, and I am always left to reflect on the fact that they have minds that are limited and strange, these bourgeois.

"You were a man of no social standing," I explained, hoping that my reasonable tone would placate him. "I thought it unlikely we would meet in public."

"I should have known you weren't a whore," he muttered, tightening his arm around my waist. "No one screws with that much enthusiasm just for money."

"I can't see that you have any cause for complaint," I said stiffly. "You seemed satisfied at the time that you'd been well served."

"Well served indeed," he answered roughly. "But no more so than you."

Under the circumstances, I had no desire to flatter his vanity.

"I paid as well," I told him. "Double the usual rate." I assumed that this additional information would help him see that no one had attempted to cheat him. but it seemed to only rouse his anger further.

"You little bitch," he said furiously, his mouth pressing behind my ear. "What right did you have to play such games with me?"

I was suddenly very afraid that he would reveal his story to the assembled salon as soon as he returned upstairs, only to spite me. He seemed angry beyond all reason, and utterly unpredictable.

"What do you want from me?" I asked, hoping that perhaps his silence could be bought. He must have had some end in mind, I assumed, when he grabbed me and dragged me into that back corner.

He slid one large hand down over my hip and gathered up the fabric of my skirt in his fist. "You know what I want, Anna."

He was wrong; I was not at all sure what he wanted. Revenge? My public humiliation? A return to our previous arrangement?

seized on the last of these as the least objectionable possibility and said hesitantly, "We...we could meet again, the way we used to."

I felt his arms slacken around my waist, and I thought for a moment that he was going to release me. Instead, he spun me around and pressed my back against the wall, both hands gripping hold of my waist.

"Oh, Anna, my love," he groaned huskily, his lips very close to my own, "I thought you were lost to me."

Then he kissed me fervently, crushing my body back against the wall with such force that it was difficult to breathe.

"I knew you couldn't really be cold to me," he said, taking my cheek against his palm and leaning his forehead against mine. "Not for long. You were just cross with me, weren't you, darling, because of the way I left you."

I was beginning to suspect that he had misunderstood the terms of my offer. I was perfectly willing to let him fuck me again, seeing as he did it so well, but I did not envision any relationship between us that would involve him calling me *darling*.

"Come home with me tonight," he whispered.

I told him that I had no intention of coming with him to whatever boardinghouse he called home. I had meant to suggest that we could meet again at the brothel.

"At...at the...," he stuttered stupidly. "Why there?" Then he frowned. "I won't have you as my mistress by half measures again, Anna. I want to have you in my own bed."

"I was never your mistress!" I snapped, irritated by the liberties the man was taking, behaving as if we had been true intimates rather than merely passing acquaintances. We were hardly well hidden, there behind the stairs, and I knew that this interview needed to end soon. "Let me go. If you don't want to meet me at Madame Barthez's, there's nothing more for us to discuss."

For some reason he let out a low laugh. "Did you like it there," he asked with a slow smile, "pretending to be a whore?" He leaned down to kiss my neck, holding me so tightly that my efforts to push him away were futile. "We can play any game you like, my darling Anna, once we're together in my chambers. You can be anything you want for me."

James was without question the most irritatingly thick-skulled man I had ever met in my life. He nudged my thighs apart with his knee and pushed his silk-covered cock against the curve of my lap. "Four long weeks it's been since I've taken you, Anna. I won't go that long without you again. You're coming home with me tonight, my love."

"Who do you think you are to dictate terms to me?" I sniffed. The soldiers back in Potsdam had known their place; I didn't know what to make of this man who had the temerity to keep speaking of me as his love, when to do so clearly violated all the rules of social decency.

"Don't be so proud, little one," he said with another laugh.

"I am not proud," I told him, frustrated. "Are you too stupid to know when you are in the company of your betters?"

That comment he did not seem to find amusing.

"Do you mean to let me into that little aristocratic cunt of yours again, or don't you?" he asked bluntly.

He was clearly too dim-witted to understand the distinction I had tried to impress upon him. I explained once more that I had no objection to fucking him on occasion—secretly, discreetly, and at times of my choosing—but I had not yet reached such a stage of wanton disregard for propriety that I would become the permanent mistress of some lowborn Scottish mechanic.

He did not like that answer. "I'm not for hire, Countess," he said coldly.

Since I had not offered to pay him, I am not sure what he meant by that retort.

"Come upstairs with me now," he demanded harshly, taking hold of my elbows. "With your hand on my arm."

Appearing in public with him in such a way was absolutely out of the question. He was being an unreasonable idiot, and I told him so in no uncertain terms.

His face hardened. "Why should you care if those powdered courtiers know that you are giving yourself to me?"

I told him that the answer to that question should have been obvious, if he had any brains in his head.

His face had now lost all hint of the boyish earnestness it had so recently displayed. "What good does it do me to bed a noblewoman," he challenged, "if no one knows of it?" He grabbed hold of my wrist and placed a threatening kiss against my palm. "What

would all of those fops upstairs think if I told them all how easily and how often you came for me?"

"No one would believe you," I replied haughtily.

"Maybe not," he said, dropping my hand. "But the story would be a pleasure to tell."

"My cousin will have you beaten within an inch of your life if you breathe one word about what we did together," I threatened, frightened now that he really might speak. "You haven't risen so high that you're beyond his reach."

James glared at me, and after consigning me and my foul cousin to the ninth circle of hell, he turned and stomped abruptly back up the stairs to the *salon*.

After taking a few minutes to collect my wits and straighten my clothes, I followed him. I entered the *salon* to find that James had already begun his demonstrations. He was standing behind a large table crowded with instruments of his own invention, which, when properly manipulated, produced all sorts of wondrous effects. Under other circumstances, I would have deigned to find his experiments interesting, but in this case, my only reaction was a certain wry amusement at the awkward explanations he was offering in his execrable French.

"I say," said a young viscount standing to my left, when James had finished his demonstration. "That was marvelous."

"Yes, marvelous indeed," I said, speaking loudly and clearly to be sure that everyone within hearing range would not miss what I was about to say. "Such skill in the lower classes is just like the ingenuity of the bees, isn't it? Manual cleverness must be akin to the elaborate habits of animals. They also construct quite complicated things without the benefit of real intelligence or understanding."

James's French was better than I had thought, because he glared at me as if he had understood the insult clearly. He mastered his anger quickly, however, and asked if the assembled ladies and gentlemen would like to see a demonstration of mesmerism now that he was finishing showing them the wonders of electricity.

The techniques of Dr. Mesmer had recently been all the rage in Paris, but my brother assured me that the claim of mesmerism—that a person could be brought under the power of another through the manipulation of their bodily magnetism—was nothing more than the grossest kind of fraud. Since Robert was not there to expose James for the empty showman that he was, I decided to take my cousin's place as the voice of reason.

"Have you brought some fellow charlatan here tonight," I asked derisively, "to help you perform your little magic tricks?"

"Don't you believe in mesmerism, Countess?" James asked with false deference.

I told him that of course I did not.

"Perhaps you would like to serve as my first subject," he answered with a little bow, "so that you will be more easily convinced of its power."

I had no desire to put myself forward in this way, but the entire salon was so taken by this attractive challenge that they all insisted I comply.

James had me sit down in a chair, and taking his place across from me, he took hold of my thumbs and looked deeply into my eyes. I remember thinking the posture patently ridiculous; after a few moments, he began running his hands around the outlines of my figure, keeping them some little distance from my body.

That was the last thing I remembered for about a quarter of an hour.

Some months later, a letter came into my hands that described the incident that followed, and though I myself cannot confirm its accuracy, I offer it to you as the best account of the event that I possess:

## Paris. 17 Mai. 1785

I recently enjoyed a spectacle in the salon of the Marquise de Comté that I must share with you, though it goes against our common custom to do so. It is a shame that you were not here to see this delightful entertainment in the flesh—once you have read my account of it, I am sure that you will think so, too.

You know, of course, the Countess von Esslin, who is as famous in Paris for her tiresome virtue as she is for her beauty. Though she has unnaturally little taste for

male company, she does seem fond of literature, and she has been, these past three months, a periodic guest in the *salon* of the Marquise, and it is said that they have become great friends (though one wonders at the pairing).

[The Duke now relates the circumstances of James's challenge; since these details are already known to you, I will skip ahead to the part of the letter that contains news you have not yet heard].

The countess was visibly agitated, almost angry, when the minstrations began, but after this artisan-philosopher had spoken for some time, running his hands at a little distance from her body, the lady sat calmly, staring straight ahead without blinking.

Would that I had learned the art from watching! Our friend the mechanic stepped away from the countess now and said, "You are to listen to me very carefully, do you understand?" And the countess nodded, pliant as a child.

You can imagine that there was no little expectation in the room. "You feel a great constriction around your chest, and it is hard for you to breathe," was the first thing he said, and the lady did indeed begin to shift in her chair, gasping for breath, her hand fluttering to her bosom.

"Loosen your dress, and the feeling will be gone," he told her, and she took her hands to her bodice and obediantly unfastened the clasps of her gown, breathing more easily as she loosened each bond.

"Keep your hands there," he said sharply as she began to lower her hands again to her lap. "Push the fabric aside and show me your breasts"

A slight mumur went through the small audience at the boldness of this command. but as the countess obeyed it immediately, there was no time left for anticipation.

Her breasts were lovely, by the way pouting, and full enough to fill a hand but no more.

Now he told her to get down on her knees, and at that some of the ladies protested, but the marquise quickly waved away their objections, as eager as the men, I think, to see her pious friend put to such uses. The artisan-philosopher only stood there smiling throughout the entire exchange as if he had no concern for its outcome, and when the issue was decided, he turned back to his subject and instructed her to open his breeches.

Like the rest of us, too, he was already hard, and his member stood up like a post when it was free of his breeches. He told her to take it in her hand, and to our delight, she did that obediently, looking up at him with docile eyes for further direction. He told her to kiss the tip of it, and then to lick it, and she pressed her lips against the crown of his cock, and then ran her pretty little tongue along the shaft, without so much as a murmur.

Next he told her to take it into her mouth. I should say, before going on, that this mechanic of ours had an exceedingly fine cock, one of the largest I have ever seen, but in her altered state that seemed to cause the countess no trouble. She closed her mouth at first just around the crown, and he spoke to her again sharply, saying, "No, take it in further." She opened her mouth more, taking in his stiff cock halfway down, and again he said, "Further, Countess. All the way in." And to our amazement, the entirety of that enormous phallus disappeared into her mouth until her lips were pressing against his groin.

He kept giving her instructions, and we all had the pleasure of watching that delicate little mouth work this artisan's huge cock with all the skill of a whore, sucking on it and laving it with her tongue as she took it in and out of her mouth. Indeed, the sight gave us all pause to wonder if the countess was

indeed as innocent as we all believed—I do not quite think that mesmerism could create such skill de nova (though perhaps she learned the art chastely, during her brief marriage?). The mesmerist kept his hand on the lady's head as she sucked on his cock, stroking her hair with his fingers, saying low words of encouragement when she did something that particularly pleased him.

Before he had taken his pleasure, he ordered her to stop, and she pulled away, her face upturned again, waiting for instruction. The man sat down now in the chair where the countess had been seated before, his pants open and his stiff red prick standing up in his lap, still glistening with the moisture of her mouth. He told her to come to him, and she got to her feet and took the several steps to the chair, stopping just at his knees. The countess was wearing a very simple gown, in the new classical style, and it was no hindrance at all for the mechanic's talented hands; he reached up underneath her skirts had and in undone moment undergarments and taken them down around her ankles. At his command, the lady stepped gracefully out of the linen underclothes, and stood waiting before the knees of her master.

The mechanic pushed her thighs apart and pulled her forward until she was straddling his lap. Then he reached underneath her skirts again and grabbed hold of her hips.

The lady let out only a small gasp as he pushed his cock inside her, but the other women in the room were quickly growing indignant.

The artisan, showing more self-restraint than I would have under similar conditions, told them that if they would be quiet, he would bring the countess out of her trance.

The look on her face as she came to her senses and felt this commoner's hard cock between her thighs was one of sublimely comical horror, and I believe that it was this reaction that had been the man's entire aim, though I am not sure I completely understand his motives. He must have been very proud, our mechanic, and very vexed over her insult, to prefer this moment of revenge over the pleasures of orgasm.

His hands were still under her skirts, and he gripped her hips and held her down on his lap as she struggled to rise, saying in a taunting tone, "It is unkind of you, Countess, to leave before the gentleman is finished," and in response she shoved away from him with surprising force. She tipped over backward onto the floor, sprawling on her bottom with one hand clutching the bodice of her open dress. She was a delectable sight, so disheveled

From here I can tell the story myself, and it was not, I must confess, one of my finer moments. I spat back, "You are no gentleman," but the insult carried little force under the circumstances, and the arrogant bastard only laughed and said that he was sure I had known that the moment I first saw him.

I was angry to find myself bested by a mere artisan, but there was little I could do to save face. My first desire upon realizing my position was to flee, but I have never liked to leave a room full of people when I suspect that I will become the topic of conversation as soon as my footsteps fade in the hall, so I did not leave the gathering at once. I thought perhaps I would see some way to salvage the situation if I stayed—to pick myself up, as it were, from the floor.

The musicians had begun to play again now that our little spectacle had ended. The couples in the room had all turned their attentions to each other—whatever had happened in those minutes I had lost had left the men in a state. They were all of them amorous now, urging their mistresses' hands to their laps, none of them in the mood for conversation. With no other choice left to me, I settled into a chair some little distance away from James.

When I had regained enough composure to be disdainful, I looked over at him and asked with a raised eyebrow if he did not also need to relieve his discomfort. He answered that some pleasures were sweeter than lovemaking, and that tonight he had been completely satisfied.

We sat there like two antagonistic diplomats, eyeing each other across the short distance between our chairs while the room around us filled with moans and murmured pleadings.

I would have to go, I realized after a few moments more of reflection. Everyone needed to think me devastated and scandalized. It was, after all, better to leave and let them talk.

In recalling this evening now, I am moved to reflect, just as I was then, on the volatile and unpredictable nature of the lower orders. A young woman of position may often find it necessary to seek entertainment in the arms of some attractive, lowborn brute, but such promiscuous socializing with ill-bred men has distinct dangers, as I learned all too well myself.

In the end, my decision to flee the *salon* was a good one. I left Paris for an extended stay on my cousin's country estate, and though the rumors that circulated after that dreadful evening were not pleasant, I was not nearly as compromised as I had feared. My sucking on a commoner's cock for an audience had the odd effect of making me appear more virtuous in the eyes of *le monde*, not less, since my supposed innocence enhanced the erotic interest of the story and made the virility and power of the mesmerist even more marvelous. As the story was repeated, James's

influence stretched out from those few lost minutes until it occupied the entire evening. The Comtesse d'Esslin, they said, had been mesmerized when she accepted the dare; the mesmerist had lured the famously virtuous beauty into the performance by using the powers of animal magnetism. This specter of showmen inducing innocent, defenseless women to perform scandalous acts caused no little anxiety, I am told, among the more conventional members of polite society.

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The Countess's Client

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