

## **Boudoir of the Second Empire**

One late October afternoon I wandered around Soho, almost inviting temptation. It was a dark cold day, with freezing fog rolling down the narrow streets in patches, clouding the sight then clearing, leaving my overcoat damp and silvered.

I had walked past several establishments which offered sexual services. I would stop momentarily and wonder, but there seemed something seedy and disconsolate about them. Anyway, I told myself, I was not out to be tempted – just to get exercise, to savour the atmosphere, to allay my despair.

At the corner of one street the fog suddenly thickened. For a moment I could hardly see a foot in front of me. Then I made out a faint glow in the street to my right and turned in that direction.

The fog was gone. Without being sure how I had got there, I was standing outside a large, smart house. Unlike the more discreet providers of sexual comfort I had seen before, this one proclaimed in large gold letters on a red background ‘Le Boudoir du Deuxième Empire,’ translated in smaller letters below as ‘The Boudoir of the Second Empire.’ The picture of the scantily-clad woman on the sign left no doubt as to the business of the house.

Now, although the statesman in history who interests me most is Bismarck, the historical setting which most attracts me is Napoleon III’s Paris in the French Second Empire, which Bismarck toppled so ruthlessly in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870 - 1871. I would have loved to see the impressionist painters at work in those bright streets by day, and to walk down those gas-lit boulevards by night. Most of all I would have loved to invite one of those women in the full, flouncy dresses of the time to the opera, to admire her curls as they bounced down to her smooth bare shoulders,

to eye her ample décolletage secretly and, yes, to flirt and adventure with her. It was impossible not to push open the door and peep inside.

A bell tinkled, and from a small office on my left a girl in a nineteenth century French maid's costume looked up at me as I entered.