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Deadly Sins

Written by Nicholas Coleridge

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DEADLY SINS

Nicholas Coleridge



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Miles Straker, resplendent in his favourite lightweight summer suit and myopically patterned silk tie, stepped outside on to the terrace and surveyed the scene. He took it all in, noticing everything … the perfection of his herbaceous borders, the David Linley garden gate in finest limed oak which stood at the head of the yew walk, the view along the Test valley, surely the finest in all Hampshire. He drew a deep breath of satisfaction, knowing that he had created … *all this,* this English Arcadia … which only taste and energy, and advice from exactly the right people, and a very great deal of money constantly applied, could make possible.

For a moment he stood there amidst all the activity of the lunch-party preparations. Waiters and waitresses from the catering company were spreading tablecloths on the two-dozen round tables in the marquee and laying out cutlery and wine glasses; florists were arranging armfuls of flowers bought that morning at Covent Garden; two gardeners up ladders with lengths of twine, shears and a spirit level made final adjustments to the yew hedges; further glasses, for cocktails and champagne, were set up on tables outside the orangery for pre-lunch drinks.

He stared along the valley, spotted the cars parked on the horizon, and frowned. How very odd. They were parked up by old Silas's cottage – a couple of jeeps and two other cars, it looked like – and Silas never had visitors. Miles hoped they would soon leave. He didn't like the way the sunshine bounced off their bonnets.

Inside the tent he saw his wife, Davina, in conversation

with the event organiser, examining some detail of the table setting. Miles wondered whether his wife looked quite her best in the summer dress she had put on, or whether he should send her inside to change.

Sensing they were being observed, Davina and the event organiser, Nico Ballantyne of Gourmand Solutions, spotted Miles on the terrace and hurried over to him. Miles often had that effect. People instinctively recognised that he was far too important and impatient to be kept waiting.

'There you are, darling,' said Davina anxiously. 'Nico and I were discussing whether it would be better to have salt flakes or salt crystals on the table. The salt cellars are red glass.'

'We rather felt crystals could be nicer,' Nico said, in a tone that left the door open for dissent, Miles being the paymaster.

Miles considered the question. 'I think flakes, actually.' And so flakes it was.

Miles Straker was regarded, certainly by himself but by a good many others besides, as the most attractive and charismatic man in Hampshire. At the age of fifty-three, he was fit, handsome, socially confident, abominably smooth and, above all, rich. As chairman and chief executive of Straker Communications, the public relations consultancy he had founded twenty-five years earlier, he was also widely viewed as influential. You had only to look at the roster of his clients (and he mailed out an impressive glossy brochure every year, to as many as four thousand neighbours and opinion-formers, listing them all) to get the measure of his reach. His corporate clients included Britain's third-largest supermarket group, second-largest airline, an international luxury hotels chain, an arms dealer, an energy conglomerate, a Spanish sherry marque and, *pro bono*, the Conservative Party. In addition he was privately retained by half a dozen FTSE 100 chairmen and CEOs, either to enhance their public profile or else keep them out of the newspapers altogether. It was rumoured that the Royal House of Saud paid Miles a stupendous annual

retainer for reputation management, as did the Aga Khan Foundation. But Miles would never be drawn on these special arrangements, if they did in fact exist.

From Monday to Friday the Strakers lived in a tall, white stucco house on a garden square in Holland Park, which they had owned for eleven years. If there was a faintly corporate feel to the place, and particularly to the large taupe- and nutmeg-coloured drawing room with its many L-shaped sofas, this was because Miles regularly used the house as somewhere in which to hold work-related receptions. This had the advantage of enabling him to write off most of the expensive decoration against tax. Each morning Miles was collected at six fifty a.m. precisely from the house to be driven to one of the three hotel dining rooms he used for breakfast meetings with the great and the good, before being dropped at the mews house behind Charles Street, Mayfair, which was his corporate headquarters. For as long as he had been able to afford it, Miles had made a rule of maintaining an independent office above the fray, private and secretive, rather than sitting himself in the same building as his nine hundred London-based employees. 'I probably have the smallest office in London,' was his boast. 'There's scarcely room for the seven of us to squeeze in together: that's me, the three girls, two analysts and my driver.' Needless to say, Miles's own senatorial office within this toytown Regency townhouse occupied virtually all the available space.

But it was the country house in Hampshire that he felt best reflected his stature and gravitas. Seven years after buying the place from the Heathcote-Palmers, whose ancestors had built the house almost three hundred years earlier, Miles liked to imply that his own family had been settled there for rather longer than they had. This was put across in many subtle ways, such as the leather-framed black-and-white photographs of Chawbury Manor dotted about the Holland Park house, and in the Charles Mews South office; a tasteful

engraving of Chawbury on the letterhead of the country writing paper; and the substantial conversation pieces hanging in both the country and London entrance halls, showing Miles and Davina and the four Straker children painted in oils on the terrace, with the trophy house looming ostentatiously behind them.

It was generally agreed that Chawbury Manor was one of the loveliest setups in the county; not only the house itself, with its Georgian proportions and knapped-flint-and-brick Hampshire architecture, but for its crowning glory, its views. It stood at the head of a steep private valley almost a mile long, bounded its entire length on one side by mature woodland, and on the other by rolling downland. The floor of the valley, through which the river Test meandered, was overlooked by the several raked and balustraded terraces of Chawbury Manor, and grazed by a flock of rare Portland sheep.

From the wide top terrace, which opened out from French windows in the drawing room, the television room and from Miles's own wood-panelled study, you could see the full pitch of the valley, and it was here, when the Strakers entertained, that guests gathered for drinks before lunch or dinner, exclaiming at the view.

'Is this all you?' people would ask, staring into the distance.

And Miles replied, 'Actually it is, yes. Our predecessors used to finish at the fence just before the far wood, but fortunately the wood came up a few years ago and we were able to buy it. Which makes one feel much more secure, with all these alarming changes in planning regulations from the ghastly Michael Meacher.'

'Now tell us about that pretty little cottage. What's that all about?'

The cottage was a tiny flint-and-lathe labourer's hovel on the horizon, surrounded by a tumbledown barn and several other semi-derelict outbuildings, including an ancient *pigeonnier*. At such a distance from the manor it was impossible to

see the cluster of buildings very clearly, because they melded into the fold of the hill. And yet you could never look down the valley without being aware of them. The cottage acted as a picturesque eye-catcher in landscaped parkland.

'Well, as a matter of fact that's the one and only thing that isn't us. I hope it will be one day. I have an understanding with the old boy who lives there that he'll offer it to me first and to no one else.'

'So it is still lived in? It looks rather abandoned.'

'I think only about two rooms are habitable. He's a strange old character; the place is collapsing around his ears. Silas Trow his name is – looks about a hundred and ten. It's reached by an unmade track from the Micheldever road. God knows how he manages out there. Collects his weekly giro and that's about it, I think.'

'What'll you do with the cottage when you get it?' people often enquired. 'It has so much potential.'

Then Miles would shrug. 'Well, Davina always says she wants it for her painting studio. We'll see. There's any number of uses we might put it to.'

In the back of Miles's mind was the prospect of one day installing one of his mistresses there, once it had been repaired, as a weekend trysting place. Too risky, too reckless, too close to home? Perhaps. But he thrived on risk. He assumed Davina had known for years about the existence of other women and long ago accepted it, but perhaps she didn't; it wasn't exactly something he could ask her.

2

The Straker summer lunch party was held on the second Sunday in June for the sixth year running. Strictly speaking it was a corporate event, and certainly every last penny of the cost was written off against tax, including several disputable elements, such as the entire annual upkeep of the garden, which would have raised questions from the Inland Revenue had it been presented to them in quite that way. Certainly the raison d'être of the party was to entertain clients and would-be clients of Straker Communications, and the invitation list bristled with the chairmen and chief executives of the largest accounts and their wives, as well as more favoured and presentable marketing directors.

As Miles reviewed the guest list for the final time, he saw that four senior representatives from Pendletons, the supermarket chain, were coming, including his neighbours Lord and Lady Pendleton of Longparish. James Pendleton was one of the four Pendleton brothers, family shareholders of Strakers' biggest client. Also on the guest list were the managing directors of British Regional Airways, Trent Valley Power 4 U, Eaziprint – the photocopy to digital services conglomerate – and several strategically useful executives from Unilever, Allied Domecq and Compaq. Miles doubted some of these guests would be a social asset at the party, and they were to be seated as unobtrusively as possible at the extreme edge of the tent; he was confident they would already be sufficiently flattered to be invited down to his private house, given his reputation and profile. Miles nevertheless made a point of memorising all their names, for it was a matter of pride that

he should acknowledge every guest personally, and he would not tolerate name badges at Chawbury Manor.

The client side taken care of, the Strakers liked to embellish their lunch parties with as many of their more glamorous neighbours as possible, as well as acquaintances from further afield who would raise the game. So the local Conservative MP Ridley Nairn was there with his wife, Suzie, as were half a dozen senior Tories from Central Office for whom Miles was one of three favoured advisors. A deputy chairman of the party, Paul Tanner, with whom he breakfasted every six weeks at the Ritz, had been invited with his third wife, Brigitte, and would sit at the top table with James and Laetitia Pendleton, along with several of their jollier and more prominent neighbours. In the interest of political balance (for Miles could never allow his company to be exclusively associated with the Conservatives, given the way things stood), a couple of known Labour donors were invited, including the home-micro-curry tycoon Sir Vishandas Gupta, whom Miles anticipated would soon become a client.

Shortly before the arrival of the first guests, when he had satisfied himself that everything was perfectly ready, Miles mustered his wife and family in the hall for a final pep-talk. Whenever they gave a large party he insisted all four children be present and prepared to pull their weight entertaining the guests. Today he ran his eyes over them and grimaced. Davina at least now looked more appropriate, having changed into something pretty and flowery, and Samantha was undeniably attractive, despite the four inches of midriff on display and a sulky expression. Six foot tall, with straight blonde hair and the best legs at Heathfield, Samantha at seventeen was a source of mild anxiety. Stunningly pretty, spoilt and petulant, she was also Miles's favourite child. Today she made no secret of the fact she'd rather be up in London at her friend Hattie's party than doing her bit at the Chawbury lunch.

'For heaven's sake, Peter, can't you put a tie on? And those

chinos are grubby. You can't possibly wear them for lunch.' Miles glared at his eldest child.

Peter, at twenty-three, was the only one to be working for his father at Straker Communications. Not for the first time, Miles wondered whether his son was cut out for the business of public relations. But, then again, there seemed to be nothing else he had any aptitude for, so they had created a job for him in research, which kept him out of mischief.

'Surely I don't need to wear a tie, Dad? No one wears ties.'

'Nonsense. Look at Archie; he's got a tie on. In fact, one of mine if I'm not mistaken. Did you take that from my dressing room?'

'Just borrowed it, Dad. I'll put it back.'

'You'd better.' But Miles looked approvingly at the son who reminded him most of himself. Archie was quick, bright and extremely attractive to girls. He was also glib and unscrupulous but, unlike his father, had not yet learned to conceal these attributes behind a carapace of sincerity.

'As for you, Mollie, haven't you got something less funereal to put on?' He stared critically at his plump younger daughter, with her plain, serious face and droopy brown skirt and top. 'I thought you said you'd buy something new for today?'

'I did. This *is* new.' Mollie had travelled into Basingstoke especially, but found the shops in the High Street scarily trendy and hard-edged, and bought the first thing that looked neither obtrusive nor sexed-up, without trying it on.

'Sam, haven't you got something you can lend Mollie? There must be something buried in that heap of clothes on your bedroom floor.'

'*Da-ad*,' replied Samantha. 'Get real. As if she'd fit into anything of mine.'

The discussion was cut short by the crunching of tyres on gravel outside, and the arrival of the first guests.

*

One of Miles's great skills as a host – in fact, great skills in life – lay in his ability to greet newcomers with an overwhelming show of warmth and enthusiasm. He was a grasper of hands, a hugger of both men and women. When he shook hands with a client, he gripped their palm and held on to it for longer than was quite comfortable, while maintaining a glittering eye contact. His pleasure at meeting and re-meeting people of importance – and people of only tangential importance to his life – was remarkable, something he had first learned, then assiduously practised over many years. Not naturally tactile, even with his family, he had exerted himself, realising that if he could establish this first impression with conviction, it would carry him more than half the distance. The advice he gave in his professional life, for which he billed so handsomely, was strategic and clinical, but he understood the importance of 'connecting' with the world, and these extravagant greetings were the outward manifestation.

Today he positioned himself outside on the terrace, just beyond the open drawing-room door, through which the guests were being directed, having first collected a glass of champagne from the line of waitresses standing with outstretched trays. So they had already passed through the flagstoned hall with its sweeping staircase and family group portrait above the fireplace, and through the drawing room with its many sofas and paint finishes, and then out again on to the terrace where the picture-perfect Straker family awaited, the six of them formed up in their ties and pretty dresses, marred only by Peter's grubby chinos, and behind them the famous long view of the valley.

It was shortly after they had all sat down for lunch, and the many waitresses from Gourmand Solutions were bringing out the first course of langoustines and scallops on multi-coloured glass plates, that Miles again became aware of activity on the horizon. Unmistakably, next to Silas Trow's cottage and the derelict barn, he could see three parked cars.

Even at this distance he could tell they were four-by-fours, Land Cruisers or Cherokee Jeeps by the size of them. And there were several people poking about in the outbuildings. Miles found it perplexing. Who were they?

As lunch progressed and the waitresses served a main course of guinea fowl in a wild mushroom sauce with tiny broad beans, he found himself glancing again and again towards the cottage. Each time it was more troubling. He thought he could see two figures measuring out distances with a tape. One of the four-by-fours drove off and later returned followed by a truck from which several men clambered down and strode about purposefully. As soon as lunch was over and everyone had left, he would go over and discover what was going on.

Another of Miles's skills was being able to conduct several conversations simultaneously, so he kept up a lively discussion with Laetitia Pendleton about the English National Ballet's forthcoming programme (Laetitia was a trustee), and with her husband about the impact of Wal-Mart's recent acquisition of the Asda supermarket group, while tuning in to Paul Tanner's confident broadcast to the table that, in William Hague, the party had a leader with the ability to instil sufficient party discipline to win, and how their latest private doorstep polls were consistently registering a six per cent uplift over Mori and YouGov. But even as Miles flattered and eavesdropped upon his neighbours and clients, he peered at the cottage on the horizon.

It wasn't until well after five o'clock that they were shot of the final guests. Every year, it was the ones you were least happy to have in your house who lingered the longest and wanted to engage Miles in conversation, often about work-related issues, which made it difficult to cut them short. The partner of the marketing boss of Trent Valley Power 4 U – a shocking bottle-blonde with a wedge haircut and evidently the worse for drink – had mislaid her handbag in the garden

and couldn't remember where, and then, having eventually located it, asked, 'Can I use your toilet?' and wandered about the house for ages, instead of using the Portaloos behind the orangery, until they worried she might have passed out in the cloakroom. Meanwhile, an adhesive couple from BRA – British Regional Airways – stood by the open door of their BMW making fatuous conversation instead of leaving, and thanking the Strakers 'for the lovely meal and we must get you over to us one day soon; I'll give you a bell next week and make a plan.' Miles shuddered. The downside of these lunches was that there were always people who didn't understand the ground rules and wanted to reciprocate. Obviously they'd be stonewalled by the girls at the office, for ever if necessary, but it was still an imposition.

Free at last of guests, and leaving the caterers dismantling tables and stacking chairs, Miles strode over to the stable yard. Although he had never so much as sat on a horse until his thirty-sixth birthday, he had recently become a keen rider. The Strakers kept half a dozen thoroughbreds at Chawbury, looked after by a pair of girl grooms from New Zealand. One of their duties was to keep the horses permanently tacked-up at weekends, in case the family should decide on a whim to go riding.

As he approached the stables he saw Samantha, already changed into jodhpurs and riding boots, preparing to set out.

'Hang on, Sam, I'll join you. I want to ride over to Silas's cottage. There's something going on up there.'

Soon, father and daughter were clattering across the cobblestones on their chestnut and bay mounts, heading past the wall of beech hedges that lined the path to the valley floor. They crossed an ornamental bridge over the Test and entered a wide, springy meadow, more than half a mile long, which Miles had decreed be kept perpetually free of nettles, thistles and ragwort. To this end, the two Chawbury groundsmen spent hours every month circling the field on quad bikes, zapping the smallest growth with noxious chemicals.

They were riding parallel to the river and powered up first into a canter, then a gallop. Miles experienced the near-exhilaration he always felt when crossing his own land at full pelt on his own horse, hooves thundering across his immaculate nettle-free acres. At the midpoint of the valley, he slowed and turned to catch sight of Chawbury Manor from the prospect he knew to be its finest. Ten yards ahead, Samantha's blonde hair flowed behind her in the breeze as she pushed her horse faster and faster. He felt a surge of pride that his eldest daughter was so indisputably attractive and classy. He felt it reflected well upon him. As a man who had built his reputation and fortune on his ability to enhance the surface of every situation, Miles instinctively understood his own life in the same way. He saw himself riding his thoroughbred horse with his thoroughbred daughter, and the distant prospect of his thoroughbred house, and knew his life must be as near-perfect as it was possible for talent, money and hard work to secure.

The ground now rose towards a bun-shaped knoll which overlooked Silas's cottage, and Miles and Samantha slowed to a halt. From here they could see the whole decrepit property with its subsiding tithe barn and *pigeonnier* missing half its roof slates, and a fetid, slime-green pond filled with the rotting branches of dead trees. The cottage itself had cascades of bramble clinging to the roof, the garden choked with bindweed. Parked across the track between cottage and barn were two four-by-fours and a builder's lorry, and men with clipboards could be seen with surveying equipment.

Miles rode down the hill, trailed by Samantha, and stopped in front of a small group of workmen. 'Mind telling me what's going on here?' He spoke peremptorily, glaring down from his horse.

'And who's asking?' replied one of the men. He was a wiry character in his late-forties, with a Midlands accent and suede jacket.

'Miles Straker,' replied Miles. He announced his name in a tone that implied it should mean something. 'I happen to own this valley, and I'm asking what you're all doing up here. This is private property. And where's Silas Trow?'

The wiry man replied, 'The old fellow who used to live here? Passed away several months ago, I believe.'

'Silas has *died*? No one told *me* that.' Miles felt wrong-footed, disliking the sensation of being under-informed; one of his principles in life was that he should always be better briefed than everyone else. 'And what are you doing here anyway? Isn't there a foreman or someone in charge?'

'There's no foreman, because I haven't appointed contractors yet,' replied the wiry man. 'But you can talk to me. I recently bought this place. Ross Clegg.' He shot out a palm towards Miles, who found his fingers crushed by the force of the handshake.

Now Miles was seriously confused. Was this bloke in the suede jacket really telling him he'd bought Silas's cottage, the cottage Silas had as good as promised him, more than once? Why the hell hadn't anyone informed him about this? Why hadn't he known Silas was dead? He hadn't even realised he'd been ill. As for the cottage being on the market, he hadn't heard a damn thing about it, when he was the obvious purchaser. It was true he'd been travelling a lot recently, in the States, in the Emirates, Tokyo, but that was no excuse. There were such things as faxes and telephones. His furious mind searched for scapegoats: his secretaries, his housekeeper and, above all, Davina. For heaven's sake, she spent four whole days a week down at Chawbury, didn't she? She had the whole of Monday and Friday there, as well as weekends. Why hadn't Davina known?

Ross Clegg was approaching Samantha to introduce himself. He walked with a slight limp, one leg dragging behind the other as he crossed the ground. Miles also saw Ross was a more confident man than he'd initially realised; physically he

wasn't much to speak about, but there was an unmistakeable presence.

Ross stuck his hand up to Samantha, towering above him on her horse, and said, 'Ross … Ross Clegg. And you're a very lovely sight, if you don't mind my saying so. Do you often ride by this way?'

Samantha replied in a brittle voice, 'Actually we live at Chawbury Manor. And I do often ride through our woods, when I'm home from school.'

'Looks like we're going to be neighbours, then,' Ross said. 'We've got kids more or less your age, so we'll have to get you all together once we're in and settled. But that won't be for the best part of a year probably, when the builders are done and dusted.'

Miles felt a second shock of the afternoon. 'You're not building on, are you?' he asked Ross. He had a sudden vision of a hideous extension on the side of Silas's hovel, with additional bedrooms and bathrooms.

'No way, mate,' Ross replied. 'We're doing the job right and bulldozing the place. No good trying to patch up a mess like this; better to start over. That way, at least you end up with something that works for you. This will be our second newbuild in five years. Dawn and I built our present property in Droitwich and learned a lot of hard lessons in the process.'