

BOTTLES MAKE ME SICK

(Stendhal's Syndrome)

by Cecil Munsey

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The affliction

The bed was somewhat uncomfortable. It was early; the sun was streaming in through the east window of the large enclosed sunporch. I yawned and gradually opened my eyes to face the brightness of the early morning sun. I found myself amidst a massive collage of colors. My wife and I had gone to bed in the dark the night before only slightly aware that we were going to be sleeping in our host's bottle room. There were many shelves and hundreds of antique bottles of many colors filtering the rays of the powerful morning sun.

I was speechless and experiencing dizzying disorientation. It was a startling and beautiful sight to behold. I had a small collection of colorful antique bottles at home in a window but this visual experience was more breathtaking than any similar experience I had ever had at home. I felt a little sick and was strangely panicked.

It was the early 1960s; I had just graduated from college. My wife and I were invited to Boulder City, Nevada to visit an old high school acquaintance and his recent bride. Rurik Kallis was a fellow bottle collector who had been collecting bottles since he was 14-years old – we were all in our late twenties at the time of the visit.

As a Psychology major in college I was very curious about the experience I had that morning. I was really affected by waking up surrounded on three sides by multiple shelves of sun-enhanced old bottles of many sizes, shapes and colors.

The event had occurred in the time when library research consisted of searches of what seemed like yards of card catalogs, basements full of dusty old books and yellowed magazines. The gleaned material was recorded with a pencil on 3" x 5" cards. At the time I didn't find my curiosity about the unusual event worth the research effort. That day and the dizzying experience, however, has stayed with me all these forty-plus years.

My disorienting experience in Boulder City was vividly recalled again in 1970 during a conversation with the late Charlie Gardner of New London, Connecticut. He

described similar personal experiences he had in the early 1930s. He indicated that he had "insightful thunderbolts" [his words] which he suggested were epiphanies [illuminating discoveries]. He became so taken with glass bottles that he sold or traded his famous gun collection and began to seriously collect old bottles. His collection finally amounted to approximately 4,500 of the nation's finest specimens of antique bottles.

I always wanted to learn more about the psychology of and intense reaction to that morning in Boulder City, Nevada. My 1973 doctoral dissertation about the personality characteristics of collectors was a fascinating and intense effort. From that study I learned a lot about collectors and their personalities but still I had no handle to put on the mysterious experience I had in Boulder City and a similar one Charlie Gardner had in New England forty or more years before that.

In the late 1980s, I had all but given up any hope of understanding the illuminating experience I had had so many years in the past – that is, until I found myself the house guest of Dick and Elma Watson at their suburban New Jersey home. Like many bottle collectors, they had a bottle room. Once again I found myself in a glass-enclosed room full of bottles. Three sides of the room were all clear glass windows lined with shelves – the difference mostly was that these bottles were among the rarest in the land. Rurik's bottles were mostly common bottles he had dug-up himself. Dick's bottles were mostly bottles he had found or purchased or traded for over a 60-year period.

Left alone in the bottle room while the Watsons completed preparing the noon meal, I had a familiar attack. I became speechless, dizzy and disorientated. The colors of the bottles were a powerful and beautiful vision that, like my first experience in Boulder City, I have never forgotten. This time was different in that I brought to the incident greatly increased knowledge about bottle rarity and monetary value. I am sure that influenced my reaction some. I was strangely panicked and felt a little sick just as I had so many

years before. After lunch, the three of us spent the afternoon in the bottle room where the sun slowly moved across the sky and across the bottles. As we talked I was almost mesmerized by the stained glass Tiffany-window-effect that was engulfing us.

Later, we discussed the power of the bottles in the room. We all agreed that there was something almost mystical about the display. One thing I did file permanently in my memory was that Elma described how sometimes Dick would go to the bottle room by himself and sit for an hour or two just visually appreciating his collection. That only served to remind me of a similar activity I do with my bottles and a slight variation of the gazing activity Charlie Gardner described doing himself. [I imagine numerous collectors do similar things. It's almost, I thought, like sort of making love to the relics one has gathered and saved for posterity.]

More recently, on September 10, 2001, while touring Alaska my wife and I stayed at a wonderfully rustic lodge in Denali Park. I got up early and opened the drapes facing majestic Mount McKinley. I was startled at the unusually clear view of the mountain almost always shrouded in clouds. I not only had a perfect view of the reclusive mountain, the tallest in the U. S., but in what I later learned was "alpenglow" – a reddish glow seen near sunset or sunrise on the summits of mountains (see "visual postscript"). After I recovered my senses enough, I managed to rush outside to the meadow below our balcony and take a number of photographs of the mountain in



Figure 1

the rare colors that define alpenglow. As the wondrous sight quickly faded I found myself weak in the knees, a bit dizzy, and strangely but nicely panicked. A few minutes later I was sitting on the balcony of our room looking at Mt. McKinley, in regular morning light with a cup of coffee in my hand. It gradually dawned on me that the feelings I had just had were similar to those I had experienced at Rurik's home many years before and years later at the Watson's home. It had happened again. But this time the trigger had been nature not antique bottles. What could it be I wondered?

Stendahl's syndrome

I found the secret to the mystery of my unusual reactions in a casual brush with one of the newspapers I regularly read. I was reading by the fire one Saturday morning and in a section called "News of the Weird" when I came across this small news item:

"According to a December Miami Herald story, the condition of museum goers who grow faint or suffer anxiety attacks while viewing art (or viewing too much in a short time) has a name, Stendhal's syndrome, that although rare, has been studied for almost 200 years."

There it was right there in that little one-paragraph sentence. With the name and the fact that it was a syndrome, I was easily able to do some in-depth research and finally understand what I had experienced periodically. I was able to learn that while rare, that it really had happened to me and does happen to others.

According to my dictionary the phenom is defined this way:

"Stendhal's syndrome (sten.DAWLZ sin.drum, drohm) n. Dizziness, panic, paranoia, or madness caused by viewing certain artistic or historical artifacts or by trying to see too many such artifacts in too short a time."

Other research revealed that in 1817, a young Frenchman named Marie-Henri Beyle (1783-1842) – better known to us as the French novelist Stendhal [Figure 1] – visited Florence and soon found himself overwhelmed by the city's intensely rich legacy of art and history. When he visited Santa Croce (the cathedral where the likes of Machiavelli, Michelangelo, and Galileo are buried) and saw Giotto's famous frescoes for the first time, he was overcome with emotion:



A visual postscript: Figure 2 – Mt. McKinley photographed in alpenglow on September 10, 2001.

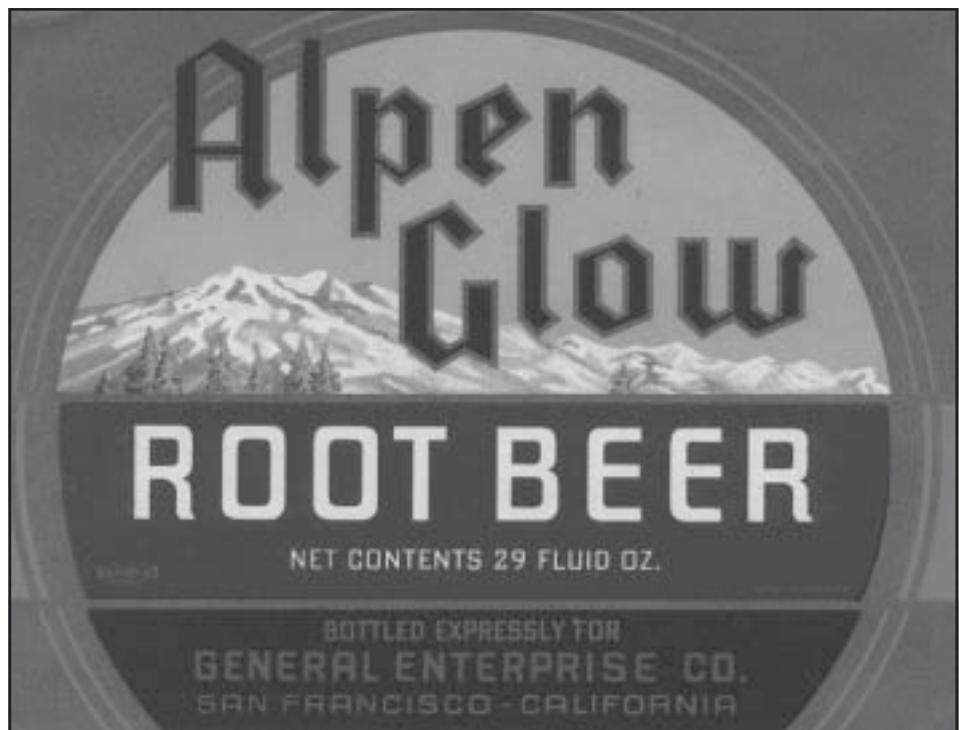


Figure 3. – Just for bottle collectors, I share a recent search of eBay that coincidentally turned up evidence of a **root beer** named "Alpenglow." The label indicates that the product was made for General Enterprise Co., San Francisco, California.

"I was in a sort of ecstasy, from the idea of being in Florence, close to the great men whose tombs I had seen. Absorbed in the contemplation of sublime beauty ... I reached the point where one encounters celestial sensations ... Everything spoke so vividly to my soul. Ah, if I could only forget. I had palpitations of the heart, what in Berlin they call 'nerves.' Life

was drained from me. I walked with the fear of falling."

In the late 1970s, 160 years later, Dr. Graziella Magherini, at the time the chief of psychiatry at Florence's Santa Maria Nuova Hospital, noticed that many of the tourists who visited Florence were overcome with anything from temporary panic attacks to bouts of outright madness that lasted several days. She remembered

that Stendhal had had similar symptoms, so she named the condition *Sendhal's syndrome*. (When she first applied this name isn't clear, but it may have been as early as 1979.) For decades, the malaise was known as the "tourist disease."

NOTE: A similar affliction is the *Jerusalem syndrome* (first used in 1987), which hits tourists who visit the holy city of Jerusalem and are overcome by the mental weight of its history and significance.

Have you ever experienced Stendhal's syndrome?

Except for Charlie Gardner, I haven't heard any bottle collectors describe incidents of Stendhal's syndrome. It would be very interesting to discover if/how others who have experienced the group of signs and symptoms that occur together and characterize this particular abnormality. Readers are invited to communicate any incidents of which they know personally or otherwise. If I get any responses, perhaps I could report any confessions in a follow-up article.

Substantiation and corroboration

According to www.touristie.com, there were 106 cases of Stendhal's syndrome studied in Florence in the 1980s. Most were women under 40 traveling alone. The site quotes Dr. Magherini as describing the syndrome's causes as "...impressionable personality, the stress of the voyage and meeting with a city like Florence, haunted by the phantoms of giants."

I did track the syndrome on the Internet and found the following comments from people reporting they had experienced it:

April 2, 2003: 'Cobalt' – "Always called this my *'Art Headache'* and was amazed to find this actual term today in my WordSpy newsletter: Stehdahl's Disease [sic]! As an artist, I always enjoyed going to the Art Institute of Chicago. But I had to monitor myself so I only stayed about two hours at a visit or I'd get an intense headache from the stimulation."

April 3, 2003: 'Noddy24' – "I've always called my syndrome of finite attention span and aching feet, *'Cultural Overload.'* I don't turn manic, just cranky. Being an English major, I refer to insights as *'epiphanies'*."

April 4, 2003: 'JoanneDorel' – "Yikes a

fancy name for what I always called *'Museum Fatigue'*..."

May 21, 2003: 'Denise Gerson' (associate director of the Lowe Art Museum at the University of Miami in Coral Gables) – "After an hour or two of concentrated looking, I really have to take a break and leave the environment to get something to drink."

July 2, 2003: 'Portal Star' – "Wow. It happened to me; I always thought I was, a freak or something."

July 3, 2003: 'Walter Hinteler' – "This term became very popular in Europe, after the film 'Stendhal Syndrome' was released in 1996. The thriller starred the director's daughter, Asia, as a policewoman with the condition. It has been called *'Cultural-Overflow'* as well."

August 26, 2003: 'TrackBack' – "I think I have this – and I think it's all because of Cirque du Soleil. I saw this show Saturday and I have never felt as happy as I was when I walked out of the big top. I felt like I was on fire by night's end. But the next and the day later, I just felt empty."

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Cecil Munsey
13541 Willow Run Road
Poway, CA 92064-1733
(858) 487-7036
cecilmunsey@cox.net

