

*The Thrilling Adventures of
The 18th Century Club*

*Written by
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Chapter Sixteen

A Living Abarimon.

Darwinians and Creationists alike might have seen their debatable theorems made flesh in that uncanny metamorphosis. What shape was this that seemed to evolve, yet spring fully formed upon our retinas, from that fiendish inferno?

A cackling troglodyte? A shambling half-man, spawned from a volcano's spluttering sludge?

A living Abarimon? God forbid - an Ape!?

As the fumes cleared, the creature, at first hunched and shuffling, rose and expanded to its full impressive height, flinging its arms wide, fingers spasming, eyes rolled back, mouth agape.

All of this was but the matter of a moment as we lurched sideways with the locomotive's convulsions.

I venture it was the relative solidity of his purchase upon the footstool that imbued Ironface with the prerequisite sliver of stability to grasp the situation most fully, for it was he, and none other, who spoke:

"Well bugger me, it's Bartington!"

"Bartington!" cries I, " You abject maniac!"

"My dear fellows" replies the noble doctor, brushing smuts from his bloodshot eyes and begrimed tailcoat, "Once again I have the honour to welcome you aboard! From sub-aquatic serpent to iron horse, eh? What larks! Pray, follow me do, into my somewhat soupy compartment. By way of enticement, there's a wily cove within, with whom you are all well acquainted."

And so saying, he turned and disappeared into the still smoking carriage.

Naturally, we made the leap, and pursued.

There will be those amongst you, I am sure - thrill seekers, adherents to the fantastical - who had half-hoped that we were all about to come face-to-face with our ape-ish nemesis in the aforementioned encounter, to whom I can address only this: I can record events only as they transpired, unadorned with poetic frivolity; and I trust that my dry and tempered prose will not choke the gullet pre-disposed to sensationalism.

Having said that, you might yet be bold enough to hazard a supposition as to the second occupant of Bartington's coach - and you might well be right. For there, unshaven and bedraggled, with one hand holding an extinguished taper, and with the other the shattered remnants of an Erlenmeyer flask, stood the smoke shrouded figure of our most dear friend, the former Viscount.

"Ah, Gentlemen!" says he, dropping both items and adopting an expression of mildly amused contrition, "We appear to have made rather a mess."

"Good Lord." pronounced Lord A, as we sat, sometime later, around the sooty skeleton of what had been Bartington's dining table, "What a singular series of unlikely coincidences."

"Indeed," says I, "one can barely credit it. Bartington, pray go over it once more so that I've got it all aligned in me noggin. And pass me one of them cheroots."

"Hold hard sir," retorts the Surgeon, "them's ain't for smoking. It's me moxibustion kit. I was about to attempt an experiment on the Former Viscount here, when..."

"I'll wager we've had enough experimentation for one day" inserts Lord A, glaring about the dilapidated and cinder-coated walls of the compartment.

"Indeed." growled Ironface from over by the drinks cabinet, where he was vainly engaged in the pursuit of something acceptable amongst the scattered jumble of Bartington's obscure elixirs and suspect tonics.

"Look you, Bartington, is there anything in this poxified place fit to drink or smoke that won't poison a chap, or blow his damned brains out?"

"Pimm's, third shelf on the left" offers the Former Viscount, "a trifle warm, perhaps, but you know where you are with it. And I wouldn't spark anything up just yet. Let the air clear a bit, what?"

"Ugh."

"Very good," says I. "Now, Bartington - if you'd care to continue..."

"A moment, sirs," says he, rising from the scorched Chippendale, "Don't worry F'iscount, it's perfectly safe I assure you."

And with that he produced a peculiar contraption from one of the piles of wood, steel, and brass instruments which lay strewn about the carriage. Recognising a quality lucernal microscope when we saw one, the assembled company (save Ironface, who was pouring the drinks and muttering about lemons) immediately set about clearing some space, pulling

on the drapes, and arranging chairs, the viewing of images for the use of.

"I say, Shuteye," cajoles the Surgeon, "remind you of anything?"

"Hah! I forgot you were there that night! I say chaps, did we ever tell you about the time we were stranded at the Monk's when he was still in the seminary? We fired up his praxinoscope after he'd retired to his cot. Fiendish stuff, sirs. Ding dong! And to think they were nuns! I recall he'd smuggled in this malevolent doxy who took quite a shine to the Brigadier..."

"Ahem!"

"Sorry, old boy. Not another word."

"Drinks is served m'luds."

"Thank you, Ironface. Stand at the back, will you, I can't see a demmned thing."

"Are we sitting comfortably?" intones the Surgeon, "then let us commence. As you can see, I've modified the standard George Adams model to allow us all the luxury of multiple unimpeded viewing by means of a refracting expansion lens attached to..."

"Oh do get on with it dear boy."

"Of course, Brigadier.

So, this first image you will no doubt recognise as an extreme close-up of the letter Lord A received at the Club. My own research, in conjunction with the F'iscount, and telegrams received from the aforementioned Monk, confirm that the material is indeed a derivative of the *Adansonia digitata*, or baobab tree, colloquially referred to as the Monkey Puzzle. Further, I can also confirm that the ink used is in fact a soluble graphite composite - not, in fact, ink at all, but more the sort of thing one might find in a Derwent 6B, though here the compressed graphite core has been subtly blended with a tincture of..."

"Jet!"

"Correct you are, Brigadier. In short, both paper and script are of a piece. Further, the scarlet pigment with which the lettering is imbued reveals itself to be a distillation of the bark of the *Liquidambar styraciflua*."

Blank looks all round.

"The American Sweetgum, gentlemen. Who's spiky fruit, you will be astonished to hear, languishes under the popular appellation of..... the Monkey Ball."

"Sink me!"

"Indeed, Shuteye. It seems that every aspect of this correspondence is tainted with the paw of the simian. Brigadier, you wished to interject?"

"Oh, nothing really. Just your passing reference to the Derwent 6B. Reminded me that I have a fabulous set at home. Never use anything else. Did you know I was born in the Lake District?"

"I did not sir. Penrith?"

"Cockermouth."

"Now, why doesn't that surprise me?"

"Much as I appreciate the stiletto-like accuracy of your wit, Bartington, do press on with your damned lecture, there's a good chap."

"More drinks, anyone?" suggests Ironface, ever the convivial.

A chorus of "Don't mind if I dos" issues from the assembled.

"Now," says Bartington, when we are again settled, "for this next image I pass you over to my worthy colleague, the Former Viscount."

"Thank you, gentlemen," says he, rising and approaching the projection apparatus with the confident swagger of the irrevocable rake.

"You know by now that the Cardinal has been in touch with his findings from the extensive library at his disposal. His invaluable bibliometric expertise and graphological research has uncovered one or two points of particular note, worthy of your esteemed consideration."

He turns a dial on the machine to reveal the next image - a serpentine blur.

"Behold. As you cogitate on the picture, ponder also the following: You recall no doubt that we have been unable to trace the precise location of the Prosecutor General, ascertaining only that his alleged client of the moment betrayed certain ape-like connotations in his *nom de business*?

Consider also that the Viceroy of Kebababad was lately despatched to locate the Earl of Foulmouth, and that these fine fellows too had both been the recipients of pernicious Hominoidean correspondence. What does that tell us?"

Silence.

The Former Viscount produces a fine Partagas from his weskit pocket, snips the end with a gilt cutter and sparks up. The cloud drifts over us like an autumn breeze from the Caribbean.

"It tells us this, chaps - that whomsoever despatched these epistles was intimately acquainted with our membership. They knew whom to find, where to find them, and even when. In short, only a member of our Society, an employee, or some confidant thereof, can possibly be responsible!"

"Hogwash!"

"Outrageous!"

"Poppycock!"

"Gentlemen, please. There is more. I draw your attention back to the image..."

"Blast the image, Viscount!" The Brigadier is out of his chair and pacing back and forth with a degree of agitation I had not seen since that fateful afternoon at the Club.

"Blast the image to shribbons I say! What the devil are you implying? That I sent the damned letter myself? Or Shuteye? Or poor old Function, back in his hovel on half-pay, with fourteen children and a chronic addiction to gin and the ponies? Nonsense. Then again.. no, no, it's preposterous..."

"He don't have it in him." says I. "Thoroughly decent chap, Function."

A voice booms suddenly across the compartment:

"I say, quieten down now, look you!!"

We all turn as one to look at Ironface, who stands, a vision of solemnity, at the back of the gently swaying carriage; one hand braced against the wall, the other white-knuckled about the Pimm's.

"Former Viscount, old boy," says he, his voice soft now, like the brush of a rabbit against a moonlit daffodil, "Just then, when you were talking.... you didn't mention.... The Laird."

"No," says the Gentleman Commoner, "I didn't."

