

*The Thrilling Adventures of  
The 18th Century Club*

*Written by  
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## Chapter Eleven

### Heretical Chamber of Curiosities!

For the next several days we remained cloistered within our subterranean domain, and, unlikely as it might first appear, this was not without its charms. In the first instance, as you might expect, my host's penchant for what he referred to as "the transubstantiation of grape and grain into more spiritually rewarding materials" allowed for an almost limitless abundance of liquid refreshment. Indeed, the extensive catacombs and labyrinthine chambers of this underground citadel contained a most excellent and extensive wine cellar, distillery and brew house, so that the racks and barrels of fine vintages were continually replenished by a ready supply of "home made" ales, brandies and liqueurs of every stripe. Deacon's Delight, a piquant blend of creme de kirsch and mead, I recall, being a particular favourite amongst the nuns.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Allow me, if you will, to contextualise:

The Cardinal's earlier reference to geological shifts allowing for a little building work beneath the ruined abbey proved to be the very quintessence of understatement. Rather than a few spartan cells adjoining the library, my guided tour of the cavernous estate revealed a virtual palace, nay, almost an entire village of inter-linked rooms, from the most functional to the most luxurious, all perfectly appointed, and all, quite marvellously, utterly unsuspected by the casual strollers who ambled and idled amongst the ruins above. In short, it was as if the Manse itself, magnified and enhanced, had been transposed entire to sit, encased in solid rock, between the moorland and the cliffs. Admittedly, the total lack of natural light was initially disconcerting, and yet the very novelty, to me, of our situation, more than compensated for any twinge of incipient claustrophobia. After a while, and a goblet or two, one hardly noticed.

Thus, though notions of day and night were somewhat academic, a routine of sorts was readily established.

Awoken by the gentle tapping of a nun on my chamber door, I would breakfast languidly on Amontillado and kedgeree, and smoke a cigar, which was only permitted in private chambers for reasons previously espoused. After dressing, I would then descend via a series of staircases and walkways to the library itself, there to find the Cardinal already hard at it, generally overseeing the studies of the several novices detailed to bibliographic pursuits. These Servile Sisters of the Scriptorium, diligent and demure, were variously tasked with the restoration, replication and categorisation of the library's contents; though by what system this was accomplished I was unable to fathom. Nevertheless, when, in the pursuit of my research, a certain footnote or cross-reference alluded to a particularly pertinent scroll, or to a specific edition of some obscure esoteric chrestomathy, I had only to advert the Cardinal to my requirements, and with a silky whisper into the nearest wimple he'd

have one of them scurry off upon the instant, and in no time at all said dusty tome or crinkled parchment would appear at me elbow.

And thus the hours passed: The Monk, pacing between the shelving, rummaging in his cassock and enunciating on the finer points of Papal dogma to his enthralled devotees; me, poring over the wafer thin leaves of rare monographs, scribbling copious notes; triangulating all things enraged, percussive, and simian.

It was in the midst of one such session that a glimmer of a breakthrough emerged at last.

"Sink me! Cardinal, a word, if you'd be so kind."

Casting aside a slim précis of Saint Ignatius's *Exercitia Spiritualia Sancti*, and mumbling something about "damnable Jesuits", The Monk glided forthwith to my *escritoire*.

"What is it Shuteye? Found something?"

"Perhaps, old chap. Take a look at this." I gestured to an antiquated herbarium before me, each item exquisitely rendered in watercolours on vellum. "*Adansonia digitata*." I read aloud, "The gourd-like fruit of the baobab tree. Common name, Monkey Bread."

"Suffering Saviour!"

"There's more. The vulgar sobriquet derives from the circumstance of this particular pod being gorged upon by the filthy indigenous ape. But listen, 'the hemp-like fibres of the bark may be used to produce rope, or even...'"

"Paper!"

"Precisely. Blast me, I'll wager..."

"The letters. Of course." cries the Monk, "Why, add this to Bartington's deductions appertaining to the Monkey Puzzle tree and..."

"Yes?"

"I haven't the foggiest."

"Me neither. Still, I wish we had Bartington's laboratory to hand. We could at least confirm something or other. By way of tests and so forth, on the letters, do you see?"

"Hmmm....I say, Shuteye, we may not have the Surgeon General's equipment and expertise, but we do have the Heretical Chamber of Curiosities."

"We do?"

"Follow me."

Thus it transpired that my perceived grasp of the dimensions of this sunken edifice proved rather less than complete, as the good Monk led me through a bewildering series of corridors and stairwells, to levels even lower than I'd imagined existed. After a few minutes' perambulation in this manner, the lighting became noticeably dimmer, the ways narrower, the cobwebbery more prolific.

"Dash it, Monk, where the blazes are we going? The third circle of Hell?"

"Shuteye, at least try and show a modicum of respect. We are on hallowed ground afterall."

"Sorry, old chap"

"Ah, here we are. You may smoke, by the way. Place reeks like Beelzebub's armpit at the best of times."

And with that, he opened a disarmingly modest looking wooden door in the rock face, by employment of a hefty brass key - one of several he seemed always to have about him. I had to stoop to enter, and the smell that assailed my recoiling snout was indeed astounding.

Fumbling for a half corona and match, I peered about the room as the Monk forged ahead, igniting a series of ingeniously wrought lamps.

"Tallow and ambergris. " he imparted, by way of explanation. "That, and various embalming fluids and other taxidermical concoctions, preservatives and such like. Well, what do you think?"

As each sickly flame spluttered into life, another singular specimen revealed itself in the twitching dance of shadows.

It seemed at first glance that every hideous beast that had ever haunted the imagination of man had found itself here, entombed who knows how far beneath the light of day, and each made all the more hideous by the lurid danse macabre of the lamplight

Bell jars replete with all manner of petrified arachnid; vivaria enclosing sundry desiccated reptiles; wall-mounted octopi of unlikely proportions; a glass case containing the sagging remains of what appeared to be an enormous mermaid.

"Good Lord, Cardinal." I withdrew my gaze from this particular abomination and focussed on something slightly less alarming to the senses.

"I say, is that brutish fellow an actual wolf?"

"Is it? That is indeed the question. You or I might say so," says he, patting the head of the stuffed lupine, perpetually preserved in an aspect of malignant ferocity. "Others might say Loup Garrou. Are you familiar with the term?"

"Lychanthropy? Stuff and nonsense sir! Stuff and damnable nonsense."

I had to admit, however, that the whole set up gave me the galloping jib jabs.

"You saw the books upstairs," continued the Cardinal, "Well, here is where we store the, how can I phrase this? The supporting evidence."

I took a few calming sucks on my cigar.

"You mean, all of this purports to be the genuine article?"

"Indeed." The Monk strolled about the place pointing out one or two choice items.

"A jar of killer bees from the Andes. Vampire bats. A crab with the legs of a duck."

"Hogwash. They're glued on!"

"I assure you, everything has undergone considerable investigation to ascertain its veracity."

"Pah! And what's this little fellow then, a man-eating deer?"

"Oh, that? That's just Vlad. The impala."

"Damn your eyes."

"Well, I admit there might be the odd cockatrice and confection. Ruling out the fakes, you see, is just as important as establishing the provenance of the genuine. Take this, for example."

The Cardinal drew my attention to the somewhat nauseating spectacle of a shrivelled human hand mounted on a small plinth of dark wood, and grasping a candle.

"Behold, The Hand of Glory. Heard of it?"

I suppressed a shudder.

"Of course. Chopped off a hanged murderer, ain't it?" says I, endeavouring to project a

degree of sang froid I was far from feeling.

“So they say,” chuckles his holiness, “but the fact is, it’s nothing of the sort, old chap. No such thing. This is on loan from the local Literary and Philosophical Society. Thoroughly decent bunch of chaps. You see, it all stems from a confusion of etymology. The French for...”

“Sorry to interrupt, old boy, but, fascinating though this is, what’s it got to do with our current predicament?”

“Maybe nothing. But listen - this type of mumbo jumbo, true or false, can thoroughly put the wind up a fellow. And I’ve been thinking...”

But the Cardinal’s discourse was suddenly curtailed by the peeling clang of a series of bells somewhere above us. I nearly choked on my smouldering stub. The Monk meerly raised an eyebrow.

“Ah, at last.” says he.

“I say, what’s afoot, your eminence?”

“It’s the signal. Dinner is served, but more importantly you may have discerned that under normal circumstances, the key of *D* is employed to signify the evening meal. Those bells resonated with a distinct *A* sharp.”

“Which means?”

“Why Shuteye old chap, as every schoolboy knows, *A* is for *Arse*! And sharp is for jolly well jump to it, what? In short, word has arrived from the *Brigadier*!”

“Capital!”

And with that, dousing the lamps, we quit that most shudder-some of emporiums, and for me not a moment too soon, I can assure you.

