

*The Thrilling Adventures of
The 18th Century Club*

*Written by
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Chapter Fifteen

The Gates of Hades.

Few things stir an Englishman from a port-induced state of unconsciousness like the waft of sizzling bacon, stealing upon the nasal follicles like misty zephyrs bestowed from a porcine heaven.

The singular tang of dry-cured Wiltshire in a pan of butter, and the pop and splutter of a brace of eggs nestling alongside, produce an aroma alike unto no other, and, with four of my senses coming immediately to attention, I needed only to satisfy that of taste, to feel entirely revived.

It was but a simple case of following my snout out of the great hall, and a few doors down the passageway, before I located the stairwell to the kitchen.

To my surprise though, upon entering said chamber it was a sprightly and apparently fully compos mentis Brigadier, and not the Baron Ironface, whom I encountered labouring at the range.

In full dress regimentals, to boot.

He turned at once upon my arrival, and greeted me most cordially, thus:

"Morning, my Lord. I trust the armchair did not present too inhospitable a billet? You certainly snored fit to un-mast a frigate."

"Snored?" says I, gathering me own wits, "Damned if I did. You were probably dreaming of the siege of Sebastopol or some such. Mind you, I recall old Ironface has a fair nocturnal bellow about him. Perhaps you heard him?"

"Sebastopol?" chortles Lord A, "Balaclava perhaps - snores to the left of me, grunts to the right, what? Here - get your port-stained lips round this lot."

And so saying, he dished the contents of a vast skillet onto a platter atop the table - eggs, bacon, sausage, black pudding, white pudding, Portobello mushrooms, fried tomatoes, and a pair of chops, kidneys attached, all tumbled forth in steaming profusion. I fell to with gusto, and washed it all down with a pot of coffee and a large apricot schnapps, for vitamins.

"I say," says I, reaching for the toast rack, "I'm sure Ironface said there was nought but porridge in the offing. Where'd you lay your hands on all this? And where is the dear Baron, anyway?"

"Ah well, it would seem that Ironface had only managed to locate the servant's pantry. By all accounts our absent Laird likes to keep his underlings on the lean side..."

"Old Function wouldn't stand for it! Can you imagine?"

"I'm glad to say I can't, old chap. Perish the thought." He poured himself a pint mug of tea, topped it off with a slug of Plymouth gin, and continued: "Still, such is. I've sent Ironface on to the station, to reserve us a carriage."

"A carriage, you say?!"

"Indeed sir. Our exploits are not yet over, or had you forgotten why we're here? Now, take a look at this, and tell me what you make of it. Hand-delivered by some liveried Jock retainer of the former Viscount, this very morning."

"Former Viscount? What on earth..."

"Read, sir, read."

He handed me a letter; and I read.

"My Dear Sirs,

Word must by now have reached you via the scurrilous medium of the London scandal pages as to my recent decision. I assure you most earnestly that it was not a decision taken lightly. Having studied at some considerable length the long and lamentable treatment of my adopted homeland by the pernicious and profligate peerage, (present company excepted), I have renounced my title, and hereby forfeit all claims and privileges incumbent thereupon, until such time as I deem it appropriate to confer such dubious honours upon a nominated heir.."

"I say, Brigadier, can he do that?"

"Remember the Club motto, old boy; he can do what he bally well likes. Pray, read on."

So I read:

"... I will, however, with your Grace's permissions, retain my membership of The Society, and hope that you will accept this declaration in the spirit it was intended and conceived.. ("a single malt, probably." asides I) ...Further, I trust I shall see you all in the none too distant.

Bartington is with me, and seems in fine fettle. He did, admittedly, take an unsportingly vicious swing at me with a sabre from the trophy room after we imbibed liberally of the

hock on his first night, then donned Bavarian Light Dragoon picklehaubes and engaged in a friendly duel on top of the billiard table. Fear not - his coup droit was weak, and his passata sotto, inelegant.

In short: Reader, I parried him.

He further assures me that his head wound is entirely superficial.

Meanwhilst, I am now fully appraised of the situation with regards to Apes, and look forward to our rendezvous at the Manor with unerring keenness,

Your servant and friend

The Gentleman Commoner."

"Well?" Inquires Lord A, sparking up a mild Princesa De Cuba Toro, and proffering another in my direction; which I accepted with an appreciative nod.

"Well." says I, "It's a rum do, and no mistake. Still, he seems perky enough. All that demmed hill walking, no doubt. Clomping the Munros, or whatever it is he does. Strange - I recall when I first met the chap. Why, in those days it took nigh on all his strength for him to stagger from the boudoir of his latest inamorata and into the drawing room. I can still see him, emerging from the drapery clutching a claret-stained copy of Harris's List, and slurring on about Coleridge.

But sink me, that was twenty years ago. People change."

"Do you think he's serious then, about the renunciation?"

"I do. And no harm in it, I'm sure. Why, some of our finest members retain a touch of the hairy heel. Up from the ranks and so forth. The Baron himself is practically half savage. I had feared much worse. What concerns me, I confess, is this: The Viscount - sorry, the Gentleman Commoner, alludes to a rendezvous; and you yourself lately informed me that you'd despatched Ironface to the railway terminal. Am I to surmise, then, that further action is afoot? Are we indeed about to muster, and proceed henceforth to the abode of The Marquis himself?"

"We are."

"Splendid. I'm all for loitering, as you know, but this whole episode has fatigued me immeasurably. I'll be glad to get to the bottom of it. What's our next move?"

"Ah, Shuteye, you are living testimony to the restorative powers of the slap-up full English, sir! Why, all that remains for us to do here, is to pack our trunks and sally forth down the track you travelled last night, arrive at the station where Ironface awaits, and

board the next express South, to Yorkshire.”

“A most excellent prospect, sir.” Rejoins I, “Do let’s have at it!”

And so it was that we made our way back in the opposite direction to that I had lately traversed, and under considerably more pleasing circumstances. The morning light lent a picturesque aspect to the blasted heath, and the wind-blown terrors of the night seemed but silly fancies as we strolled briskly and purposefully along. Admittedly, I was somewhat perplexed by the apparent change that had overtaken the Brigadier, in so far as he betrayed no outward signs of the previous evening’s lunacy and befuddlement, and seemed in every aspect back to his old self. However, I made no remark upon the matter. Perhaps the fever was past its worst?

As is so often the case, the journey back by daylight seemed decidedly shorter than the journey outbound by night had done, and it was in no time at all that we found ourselves mounting the steps to the platform and locating the admittedly humble, but by no means distasteful, waiting rooms.

Upon entering, my spirits were raised still further when I espied the mighty figure of Ironface, reclining upon an upholstered bench, surrounded by baggage, and with his glowering visage buried in a book.

“What ho, Ironface!,” calls I “A most hearty good morning to you, sir!”

“Ah? Urrgghh. Morning my Lords. There’s a blighter about somewhere who can furnish you with a haggis roll, or some such heathen barbarity. Or have you already broken fast?”

“Indeed we have,” responded the Brigadier, as we occupied the adjacent bench. “Though a beer wouldn’t go amiss. And what of your mission? Are we properly situated?”

“We are secured aboard the 10.15. Private carriage, no riff-raff, full bar and buffet. Very tidy.”

“Good, good.” says Lord A., then gestures towards the volume in the Baron’s dependable grasp.

“I say, Ironface, what’s that you’re reading?”

“This? Ugh, nothing of merit.” says he, flinging the volume to one side. “A preposterous romp of limited appeal, in which nothing much happens. From what I can gather, the whole self-indulgent enterprise is populated by half-baked caricatures of the author’s ridiculous chums.”

“Sounds absolutely splendid!” says I.

"If you like that sort of thing. I prefer something a trifle more ennobling myself, but I'm dashed if I didn't leave my heavily illustrated copy of "Owain Glyndwr's Secret Amazons" back at the Laird's lodge."

He stared wistfully into space for a moment, before continuing. "By the way, what time do you have?"

Lord A produced his half-hunter. "Ten to nine. Sink me, we've over an hour. Where's that chap you alluded to? Damned thirsty work, this waiting lark."

A foaming jug of the local "heavy", summarily produced by the impenetrably accented attendant proved just the ticket for washing down the fry-up, and passing the time until the locomotive drew in. As the porters - who apparently work the day shift only, damn them - bundled our valises and trunks aboard, myself and my worthy companions settled into the Club carriage - a surprisingly sumptuous lounge, as it transpired - and arranged ourselves for the ride.

The compartment was furnished admirably in the Caledonian style; all regimental tartan and claymores, with the ubiquitous hunting scenes in oils, featuring plump grouse and stags at bay 'pon the bonny purple heather, and so forth. But it was a very stirring depiction of the advance of the 42nd at the Alma above the drinks cabinet that drew my attention. I recalled seeing something similar several months ago in the quarters of a subaltern or captain the Cardinal had introduced me to, and who's petition for Associate Membership was currently under review. I was pouring Ardbegs all round and enjoying this sojourn into the memories of a less fretful time, when my reverie was shattered by nothing less than a terrific explosion in the adjacent carriage.

For a moment, I assure you, I thought we were undone, and pictured briefly in my mind's eye scenes of locomotive carnage, with twisted metal and gouts of steam bursting through fractured boiler plates as we all careened down some precipitous embankment to our doom. In reality, all that happened was that I sloshed a good three fingers of peaty goodness onto the shag-pile.

Both Ironface and the Brigadier, meanwhile, had leaped to their feet and were staring goggle-eyed in the direction of the boom.

"Ambush!" cries the Brigadier, and without further prevarication hurls himself head-long down the centre of the carriage towards the door. I followed at once, as did Ironface, who had the wherewithal to snatch a up a stool en route - one assumes for the purposes of bludgeoning an assailant, rather than for somewhere to sit down after an exhausting six-yard sprint.

We hit the door en masse, then stumbled back in some disarray when Lord A remembered it opened inwards.

A mumbled explanation later, he turned the brass handle and flung open the portal.

A sobering blast of wind hit us as we faced the gap between the compartments. The space was only a couple of feet across, but the threatening blur of iron tracks beneath, and the rush of air on either side nonetheless invoked considerable trepidation in your humble narrator, as we paused briefly in that rattling doorway.

The 'Arse was again the first to move.

He sprang nimbly across the gap with the agility of a leaping gazelle, only to spring just as nimbly back again and land on my feet as the door before him burst open - outwards, Goddamn it.

I, buffeted by Lord A's burly shoulders, and catching an epaulette to the jaw, and a spur in each shin, fell back onto Ironface, who in turn collapsed onto the convenient stool, which he had, after all, set down behind his rump.

Momentarily discombobulated, and stacked like tumbled dominoes, all three of us could only look on as plumes of acrid black smoke erupted from the doorway to our front, to be whipped away like rags by the chill air blasting from our flanks.

As the vile cloud dispersed, a hideous yelping sound issued from the smoking carriage beyond.

"Christ and the Penitents!" exclaims Ironface to my rear, "Like the very gates of Hades, look you!"

And indeed, his pantheistic exposition seemed precisely on the button, for, as we all three struggled to regain our composure, a hunched and demonic figure took shape within the dissipating shrouds of noxious, sulphuric smog.