

*The Thrilling Adventures of  
The 18th Century Club*

*Written by  
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## Chapter Five

### A Cup of Rosy Plosh.

"Shuteye! Brigadier! Well, here we are, 'we happy few' indeed!"

"Bartington, my dear chap! How the very Devil are you?"

I shook his proffered mitt with vigour and delight as Lord A. clapped the fellow soundly on the back.

"I'm absolutely capital. Don't believe everything you read, chaps. How're the ladies? Are you staying at the Manse? Lays on a damn fine spread, don't he, the Cardinal? Anchovy, as I recall! Huzzah! Place still rammed with skittering virgins is it? The old goat, eh? What did you have for breakfast?"

"Well, yes. They're in Cumbria, the ladies..."

"Cumbria? Ah, those high peaks that bound the vale where now we are, Faint and diminished to the gazing eye..."

Swinging an arm over each of our shoulders he pivoted to the north west and gazed earnestly into the mid distance. I swear a tear half formed and then receded on the cusp of one eye, like a stop-motion dew drop.

He spun us south again, gripping us with a tenacity that immediately dispelled any doubts as to his physical stability, and marched us in the direction of the clock tower. To our left, below the cliffs, the sea sparkled gaily under infinity's azure canopy.

"I say, Bartington," I panted, for we'd set off at something of a trot, "The Brigadier's still keeping me in the damned dark. What's going on, exactly?"

"I ain't keeping you in the dark, Shuteye," barked Lord A., "it's just as I say - things are moving rather more quickly than I'd anticipated."

Indeed they are, thought I, as we continued to quicken our pace along the concourse. I felt something lurch menacingly in me vitals, and tasted once more the steaming plate of Oeuf Bénédic I'd perhaps rather unwisely consumed on top of the kedgere, coffee and two pints



Bart Bartington the Surgeon General

of Bishop's Finger at breakfast.

"Never fret," rejoins Bartington, casting a trained and appraising eye over my no doubt pallid visage, "A cup of rosy plosch and a rummage in that satchel The Arse is carrying, and you'll be tickety boo!"

I spared a glance at the leather hold-all of Lord A's. So I was right: a physician's valise, just as I'd surmised - not that this in any way dispelled my mounting confusion. First that letter at the Club, then the hurriedly convened train ride; some vague yet urgent conversation at the Manse, and now this headlong scamper with Bartington. To my mind, none of it added up to a tuppenny cup of grog.

At last we reached the imposing monolith of the clock tower. It was three fifteen precisely. The tower itself had no bell, but the wind carried to us the chimes of a distant church. I pictured the Monk out on his rounds, pausing to take a nip of sherry and comforting the demure and vulnerable young widow of some deceased rustic. Why, the fellow was a saint amongst men. "Spit spot, Shuteye" Bartington called me back to my senses, "down you go!"

And I found myself ushered through an hitherto unnoticed portal in the base of the edifice, Lord A leading the way down a dimly lit spiral staircase that put one in mind of an inverted lighthouse. Bartington, above me and to my rear, closed the door through which we had entered, thus shutting out all natural light, so that we must proceed with some delicacy in a bluish lambency, the source of which I had no thought to observe, focused as I was upon the precipitous metal steps, slick with moisture beneath my gleaming brogues.

"I say, chaps, where the devil are we, and furthermore, where on earth are we going?" "Why, to get to the bottom of it!" chortled Bartington. "And I don't mean the damned stairs. Press on, Shuteye, no time to dilly dally, as dear old nanny used to say!"

I secured some purchase on the brass handrail that weakly reflected the sickly light, and continued to descend, comforting myself that at least Lord A was ahead of me, in case of the increasingly likely eventuality that should I take a bit of a tumble.

At length the staircase ended, and we found ourselves in a mean circular chamber barely large enough to contain all three of us. The floor was an uneven jumble of greasy flags, the walls of rough hewn black rock disappearing into the ghostly luminescence through which we had just descended. A pair of stout doors, flush with the rock and smeared with a patina of age and mildew offered a brace of equally unappetising options.

"Dexter or sinister?" quizzed Lord A, turning back to engage Bartington, who remained, like an adoptive Northerner, at the foot of the stairs.

"I think you should be the judge of that, dear chap."

The Brigadier chose left. I can't say I was thrilled.

Yet whatever I'd expected, I can assure you it wasn't this.

"Sink me," I exhaled, "who'd have thought it?"

For it seemed we had entered a vast laboratory, of the type one might most readily associate with a student from the University of Ingolstadt (first name Victor, if you catch my drift).

Unfeasibly complex arabesques of tubing and vermicular coils of wire draped and cascaded across a series of test-tube infested tables, and antique machinery of every stripe fizzed and crackled against the dangerously damp looking walls. The words "mad" and "scientist" were barely contained behind my incredulous lips. I looked questioningly at Bartington.



"Isn't it magnificent?" he said.

"Er, quite."

"A passage leads direct to the Rotunda, another to the wine cellars of the Grand Hotel." He gestured vaguely towards a series of archways at the far end of the lab. "Others have somewhat less salubrious destinations." He offered me a knowing wink. I turned to the Brigadier for clarification. He merely shrugged, and, placing the hold-all upon what can only be described as a "slab", unbuckled the straps of said satchel.

"Ah," says Bartington rubbing his hands together, "Pandora's box."

The Brigadier proceeded forthwith to extract a series of curious objects from within the diminutive trunk. First, a small package of shredded leaf, which he handed directly to Bartington, who frolicked at once towards a bubbling samovar to our right, muttering incoherently.

Next, Lord A produced a series of glass vials containing tinctures and compounds of sundry hues, a battered, worm-eaten volume bound in green leather, and lastly, with evident distaste, the very manuscript which had precipitated this entire affair.

"The letter!"

"Indeed."

At last, I thought, now we're getting somewhere.

As The Arse arranged the newly disclosed contents of the bag upon the unsavoury work surface, Bartington returned baring a disarmingly innocuous silver tea tray and three glasses of steaming liquid. It was evident that we were to partake of some potion. I recalled his re-

cent history and surmised that perhaps a somewhat altered state of awareness might be a necessary precondition to whatever curious proceedings were about to be enacted. I gingerly accepted the proffered receptacle, and ventured a sip.

“Good Lord, Orange Pekoe?”

“Indeed.” says Bartington, “Fine Tippy Golden Flowery, from the Monk’s personal stock. I asked The Brigadier to pick me up a pouch. Wouldn’t dream of embarking on a sustained analysis without it. Now then, hand me that filthy parchment, and give me some room, you brace of bunglers.”

Affixing what appeared to be a stunted telescopic device attached to a leather thong about his closely shorn pate, Bartington, ignoring the other sundries on the slab, fell at once to peering intently at the manuscript.

“Abu Abu” he murmured. “don’t often see it. Hand me the book.”

Lord A. picked up the aforementioned leather covered monograph and placed it in Bartington’s twitching left hand. The Surgeon General glanced at it briefly, and began leafing through, peering at it with his one naked eye, whilst seeming loathe to relinquish his other ocular receptor’s enhanced focus on the epistle.

“Vermillion. Nightmare. Finely woven. Simian. Enigma. Paradiddle. Interesting.”

At length, heaving a sigh which seemed to embody a unique confluence of satisfaction and dismay, he stood back, and removed the lens attachment.

“Well?” enquired Lord A.

“No, I’m afraid not. Not well at all.” disclosed Bartington.

“Do go on old boy” I prompted, fishing in my weskit for a hand-rolled Cuban, which I duly ignited on the blue flame of an unattended Bunsen.

Bartington imbibed a thoughtful mouthful of tea, swirled it round his immaculate molars, grimaced, and proceeded.

“It is indeed penned in the ancient argot of the drumming monkey cult...”

“I knew it!” cried Lord A. “The bestial beat seems to echo within these very walls when I so much as think of the thing”

“Then don’t.” says Bartington. “and pay attention!”

Lord A, slightly abashed, nodded towards my cheroot, and I at once lighted him a smoke

as Bartington paced about the slab, his face working its way through a series of portentous contortions. At length he continued:

“As you no doubt noted, the language itself may indeed be ancient, yet the parchment is indubitably of modern contrivance, and the hand which made these vile marks that of an educated individual. Either it is a forgery - most unlikely, gentlemen, since few outsiders would have the knowledge to produce such a script - or, and I fear we must assume that this is indeed the case - some survivor of this nefarious sect is not only abroad, but full set on the most perfidious mischief!”

“Good Lord!” says I.

“Blast you eyes man, expound!” says the Brigadier. “I knew as much when I first saw the damned thing. Can’t you at least tell me what it says, in plain English?”

“Alas no. My familiarity with such texts is limited. Once the Monk arrives he may be able to shed more light...”

“But I showed it to the Cardinal only last night” exasperated Lord A. “It was he who suggested you, sir. Dash it to blazes, was there nothing in his etymological treatise to aid in the decipherment?”

The Surgeon General gestured listlessly towards the green book.

“A fascinating study, and yet ...”

“So, in short,” I ventured, hoping, (at the risk of appearing the dunce), to lighten the palpable tension, “What we have here is still a bit of, if you will, a, er... monkey puzzle, what?”

I cast my eyes hopefully between the two of them in the half light of the subterranean vault.

Seconds past. Lord A glared at me over the blazing tip of his cigar. Bartington opened his mouth, closed it, then opened it again. This time he spoke.

“Sink me, Shuteye, I think you’ve got it!”

“I have?”

“You have sir! Why of course! Araucaria arucana! Of course! My eyes, my eyes! I have been blind! Blind!”

“Feeling a trifle bat-like myself old boy...”

"Bat-like indeed, how very droll my Lord. But this is no time for jests. Surely you see - *Araucaria arucana*- in common parlance: the monkey puzzle tree!"

"?"

Ignoring our obvious bemusement, Bartington, in hushed tones, went on:

"Why, it's as clear as a baboon's behind! It can mean only one thing. We must proceed at once, northwards, along the Jurassic coastal lines to the impacted deposits thereof, and there, I feel sure, we shall glean a more thorough comprehension as to the import of this chimpish conundrum."

"But where sir? Where must we go?" for I readily admit, I was utterly bamboozled.

"Why, to the very crucible of forgotten skills appertaining to the fashioning of witch's jade, the stone which is not a stone, that mystical ore spawned from the rot of unfathomable pre-historic forestry in the black heart of the Gothical repository of all things vampiric. In short, we must seek out the purveyors of Jet."

I looked at Lord A. He looked at me. Together, as the stunted shrub of understanding bore fruit simultaneously within our fevered minds, we chorused as one that most fearful appellation:

"Whitby."