

Chapter Four

A Pair of Beaux Flaneurs.

Dappled sunlight poured in through the casement and melted like hot butter on the counterpane. Morning at last, and the rain had mercifully ceased. Thoroughly refreshed from my slumbers I stretched extravagantly beneath the brilliant white linen. As my senses coalesced I soon recognised the furnishings of my surroundings as belonging to the Medici suite, in the east wing of the Manse. I slipped at once from the sheets and padded to the pristine latrine to avail myself fully of the facilities, whilst I cast my mind back to the close of the previous evening. Alas, I recalled precious little after that first cognac, about which time The Monk was interjecting into Lord Arse's testimony with an amusing anecdote alluding to an indiscretion of the Lord Advocate's in Dubai. Something about a houseboy and a mix-up over bathing etiquette...

Still, as I shaved before the gilt edged mirror - a spanking new badger hair shaving brush, and various creams and salves from Trumplers of Mayfair having been thoughtfully laid out for my benefit - I surmised that I'd no doubt be appraised of the situation soon enough. I noticed my travelling kit had also been stowed away in my suite, so, without further etc, I dressed and headed forthwith to the stairs, my mind fixating eagerly on the promise of a spot of breakfast.

It had long been the Monk's custom to eschew formality, and to take his initial repast in the kitchens. He always said that mixing with the cooks and serving girls first thing of a morning, all hot from the steaming kettles and dishevelled by their domestic labours, helped stiffen the Christian spirit, and reminded him that even the Almighty's bounty benefited from a bit of cultivation.

"A ripe fruit may fall from the tree," he would say, "but a plum duff needs a good hot baking." Frankly, I was never entirely sure what he was getting at, but still - "such is", as Lord A. was wont to say.

And indeed, he was saying it now as I broached the kitchen through the servant's entrance, which by-passed the main body of the Manse and afforded discreet and unobtrusive access to all of the rooms via a convoluted labyrinth of hidden passages and stairways.



The Monk interjects with Lord A

"Ah, such is, my dear Monk" he was saying, cramming his jaws with apricot preserve, thickly spread over a slab of bacon on toast, "Shuteye! A very good morning to you. I was just saying to the Monk here - pass the Earl Grey, would you old boy?- I was just saying, it's a damn shame the ladies couldn't be with us on such a fine morning. All off on a boating trip this past fortnight, ain't they?"

"Indeed they are. Sketching, pressing flowers and the like in Cumbria I believe. They do enjoy communing with the sublime, bless 'em." I rejoined, nodding to the Monk who was also seated at the enormous oak table, and making sterling headway into a platter of eggs and gammon.

All around the table there was a tremendous bustle and clattering, as a gaggle of novices, the sleeves of their habits rolled up and beads of perspiration gleaming on their beatific brows, attended to the innumerable culinary chores appertaining to breakfast -grilling, frying, boiling, poaching, and so forth.

The door to the rear courtyard was open, and I espied one of the Monk's cats making a dash for it, with its chops clamped around a pilchard. In short, it was a scene so redolent with pleasant domesticity and normality that I almost forgot why we were here. My companions too both seemed in the best of spirits, notwithstanding the discussions of last night, so I determined not to break the mood, and duly intimated to one of the lovely yet devout attendants, that a dish of kedgeree and a steaming java would be just the ticket.

An hour later, fortified and replete, I was back in my room changing into my day wear when a gentle tapping drew my attention, not to the main door, but to the servant's aperture I'd employed that morning.

"Come in?"

It was Lord Arse himself.

He'd changed into mufti and was carrying a stout, silver-topped cane and an attaché case not dissimilar to that which a medical man might brandish.

"Shuteye, are you ship shape? It's time we were off. Couldn't say anything at breakfast-didn't want to alarm the nuns. We're meeting Bartington at three on the esplanade. Leave by the back door, but otherwise everything has to look as regular as buggery at Eton. The Monk's made all the arrangements and he'll join us later- has to dispense extreme unction or some such in one of the villages hereabouts. Damn superstitious lot, these bumpkins. Chop chop old boy, I'll see you downstairs in five."

And with that, his head disappeared behind the woodwork and I was left staring boggle-eyed and slack jawed at nothing, wondering what the blazes was afoot, and what on earth Bartington was doing so far North. Last I'd heard he'd been made an honorary professor of something or other and had gone into semi-retirement, cultivating rare orchids and distilling their petals into an hallucinogenic tincture, which, when ingested with absinthe after a heavy night at the Viscount's summer ball last August, had nearly tipped him over the brink. He hadn't been seen at the Club for months. And now he was apparently here of all places. On the esplanade, at three? What about lunch?

Still, there was nothing for it. It was clear now that I'd missed a great deal last night whilst in my cups, and furthermore, that the chaps had already been hard at work whilst I was all tucked up like little boy blue.

It was only then that it impinged upon my cognisance that my travelling kit, so neatly squared away when I awoke that morning, was no longer in the room- doubtless spirited off during breakfast in preparation for this seemingly hurried but evidently well rehearsed departure.

I dressed as rapidly as possible, and made my way once more down stairs.

A small retinue had presumably conveyed the baggage to wherever it was going, and I found myself alone again with Lord A, as we strolled through the delightful avenues of the town towards our rendezvous. The pavements were wet and glinting in the sunlight, and a gentle breeze carried with it the harsh yet familiar caterwauling of gulls. To all intents, we appeared as fine a pair of beaux flaneurs as you could hope for, sauntering nonchalantly about the place without a care between us.

It was still early in the year, and the holiday crowds had yet to overrun every concourse and boulevard with their unspeakable fashion sense and screaming progeny, so that the lone figure leaning on the railings two hundred yards ahead was clearly visible as soon as we set foot on the main thoroughfare. Lord Arse halted and laid a cautionary hand on my arm.

"It's Bartington alright. I just hope the chap's up to it."

"I say, Brigadier, I've been meaning to ask - up to what, exactly?"

"Never mind," he said, then raising the walking cane above his head he waved it hither and thither, and called out full throttle, scattering gulls like a blast from a Purdey:

"Bartington! I say, Bartington! Over here!"

The figure turned towards us, waved, bowed, pirouetted on the spot, flung back his head, howled like a banshee, and advanced.