

*The Thrilling Adventures of
The 18th Century Club*

*Written by
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Chapter Fourteen

Damn my eyes, I knew it.

No sooner had that most unexpected vociferation set my ears on edge than I bounded to my feet like a jumpy recruit to a bugled reveille.

A lesser chap would've drenched his twill with port at the very least; and yet for all the shock of the moment, I perceived within that gruff enunciation some warm timbre that allayed my apprehensions in the very instant of their coalescence. Thus I did not turn, but rather, keeping my back to the interloper, drained my receptacle with exaggerated insouciance.

"Ah, Gibbons," says I, still without deigning to face the fellow. "Your timing is impeccable; me glass appears to be empty."

"Mine too." grouches Lord A from the settee, "And me cigar's gone out. Jump to it, man."

"Why certainly..... my Lords."

A heavy measured tread - did one detect the slightest of limps? - creaked across the floor boards towards the drinks table. I had the impression of an object of considerable bulk and power moving behind me, like an old stag treading the tussocks of some primordial heath.

"Oh, and Gibbons," says I, "Do have one yourself."

"Urrrr? Urrggghhh."

The chink of crystal; the ever-pleasing gurgle of port being liberally dispensed; the chunky click of a stopper being replaced by a large, firm hand. The sound of Gibbons moving forward, handing Lord A his glass, then sparking a match. Lord A's lips smacking about the butt of his smoke and breathing in, out. The aroma of fine Havana tobacco.

Still, I kept my eye-beams directly affixed on the guttering flames in the hearth.

Silence.

Until, at length:

"Ahem. Your Lordship?"

And at last, I turned.

"Damn my eyes, I knew it."

"Indeed."

And so it was that I found myself face to face with none other than Baron Ironface, Lord Blackheart himself. Here, of all places!

For all the unexpectedness of this turn of events, it was not without precedent.

Ironface, a gargantuan man of solitary habits and vast appetites, was noted, as much as anything, for his tendency to appear when least expected, and in the unlikeliest of situations. Though having said that, this masquerade as some mysterious monkey-monikered retainer of the elusive Laird was a decidedly singular pantomime.

Still, introductions over, we adjourned a discreet distance to a cluttered corner of the room where we could further our discourse without unduly agitating the Brigadier, who, for the moment, seemed once more content to doze upon the divan in the agreeable company of cigar and tumbler.

"Ironface, my dear fellow" says I, once we had seated ourselves within a pair of battered but sturdy button-backed mahogany tub chairs in the snug bay of a window, mercifully shuttered against the elements. "My dear fellow - I hardly know where to begin. To find you here at such an hour - why, I had no idea what to expect, but I must say, it certainly wasn't you, old boy!"

The Baron shrugged, and loosed one of his peculiar deep throated gurgles before proceeding, "Urrgghhh? Ahhhh. Indeed, my lord, indeed. Purely by chance, isn't it? I've been looking to make a purchase in the area - something remote, look you, and augmented with turrets. I've been devising a new flag and need somewhere to fly it, see. So I thought - a turret, that's the ticket. Perhaps on a rocky outcrop overlooking a wooded area with a lake, herbaceous sward, and plenty of wild garlic. I could fish for trout and sauté the devils in a dash of olive oil..."

"Ironface?"

"Urgh? Ah, yes...so, I thought I'd call in on the Laird and see if he knew of anything in the vicinity. But the blighter wasn't here. Have you perchance seen him of late?"

"Not for some months. But tell me - I assume you spoke with Bartington and the Brigadier? And what's with this ridiculous Gibbons masquerade?"

"Damn clever eh? Bartington's idea - to confound our enemies, isn't it? Subterfuge, look you. You know that rascal Bartington. We'll use a false name, says he, in case our

correspondence is intercepted. Speaking of, do you think he's all there? Bartington I mean. Seemed a little on the flighty side."

"No more than usual, I'll wager. But stay - let me get this straight. By pure coincidence you happen to drop in on the Laird, only to find Bartington and Lord Arse here in his stead. Lord A is not quite himself, so Bartington deems it fit to appraise myself and the Monk of said intelligence via a devious coded epistle, the concoction of which you entirely colluded in; he then takes himself off to the Viscount's chateau, leaving Lord A here, in the somewhat doubtful care of your very good self?"

"Er... yes, that's about the size of it old boy. Or a part of it, at least. "Nother drink?" says he, heaving himself from the chair, and belching like an ox.

"Indeed. And Lord A, how's he been?"

"Thinks I'm Gibbons." says Blackheart over his shoulder, nodding in passing to the prostrate form of the Brigadier, who was by now snoring as gently as a whelp, glass in hand. "Whoever the hell Gibbons is. Bartington suggested that we maintain the charade rather than confuse the old coot. Apparently he's suffering from some type of the boiling brain fevers."

"Yes, the Surgeon General did mention it. But tell me then, if you knew that, what the chuffery were you doing, letting him out on a night like this, on a damned horse?"

"Steady on, Shuteye. The chap needs his constitutional, and you can't expect him to walk. He ain't well, look you."

"Quite. Well, where's that damned drink, Ironface?"

"Coming right up, my Lord."

He ambled back across the room bearing a full glass in each paw, with a bottle of port wedged up under his armpit.

"Tuck in, sir."

"Served as ever with all the panache of a high class salon, I see. You know, in another life you'd have made someone a half-decent butler, Ironface old boy."

"Your very good health" says he, nudging our glasses, "and I surmise you'd favour a more comprehensive account of recent events?"

"Indeed I would, sir. For instance ..."

And so it went, deep into the night, as the storm lashed the windows fit to pock-mark the

very lead.

The Baron's narrative, or the rather the gist of it, when shorn of sundry deviations and asides largely concerned with his dismay at the surprising lack of imposing tower houses in the region, ran roughly along the lines already described. Moreover, prior to his serendipitous meeting with Bartington, the Baron had been entirely ignorant of our predicament, and of the ill-defined yet undeniably disquieting sense of danger and unease that pressed about the members of the Society, like so many half-solid shadows.

It was Bartington who had filled him in on events thus far; describing the trip in Kebababad's vessel, and of our brilliantly formed, if subsequently ill-enacted stratagems. Prior to this, he assured me, he had "heard precisely nothing on the subject of apes since learning that B is for Baboon, at dear old nanny's knee."

"Then it seems," says I, "that for tonight at least we are at an impasse. But upon the morrow we must decide amongst the following options: one, we remain where we are, tend to the Brigadier and wait for Bartington to return to us; two, since the Brigadier is clearly in no condition to travel, we split up - one to remain, and the other either to pursue Bartington, or return to the Monk, and seek his advice."

I raised a hand to stay his interjection.

"No, my dear fellow, don't decide now. Let's sleep on it, and we'll look at the bally thing with fresh eyes in the morning. I take it this place is sufficiently provisioned to provide a modest breakfast?"

"Hah! If you like porridge and salt, it is."

"Porridge and...? Damn that parsimonious Laird!"

"Laird? Laird!? Blackball the dog!"

"Ah," says I, "'Twould appear that the Brigadier has rejoined the land of the living..."

"Call this living?" bellows the voice from the couch, "I'll show you living. Fifteen days in the saddle and ten nights in the harem. Turkish delight? Say that to a Greek and he'll slit your gizzard. Damn these swamps. Gordon, take that ridiculous bonnet off, you look a fool, sir!"

"Brigadier! So glad you could join us. May I offer you a glass of port?"

"Swivel."

"I'll take that as a no, shall I?"

"Port! Bring me port, I say, not porter. Black bottle? Black ball! Damned infidels. Devil dogs. Where's Gibbons? And who the hell are you?"

I scurried over and poured the poor fellow a stiff one.

"Drink this old boy, and have a nap. Do you the world of good."

"Nap? I've slept for longer than you muttonheads have lived. Hundred-yards dash merchants, the lot of you. I make it last, sir! Living? Humbug. Pure hum-buggery."

"Yes. Very good old chap."

At least the drink seemed to quieten him, bar the odd "harrumph". I made my way back to Blackheart, and flung myself once more into my chair.

"Good lord, Ironface, I had no idea. Is he like this often?"

"Not often enough. Half the time he sits there with eyes glazed like a fish. Not a lovely trout, mind, but a haddock."

That second bottle of port had clearly been a mistake.

I decided to cut my losses, and feigned an extravagant yawn.

"Ah well. Time for bed, Ironface. As they say at Rugby, I'm utterly fagged."

The Baron's only reply was to rise unsteadily, bow elaborately, and emit the most noisome and stentorian eructation I've ever had the privilege or misfortune to witness. Upon delivery thereof, he about-faced with surprising dignity, and exited the chamber without another word.

I wafted the air to my front for a moment or two, then breathed a port-infused sigh into the now almost silent room.

I say almost, for the dying embers of the fire still gave off the occasional wheeze and crackle, as did Lord A upon the divan. The rain, at least, had abated.

Though thoroughly foxed and fatigued, it is nonetheless one of my particular delights at such moments to enjoy one last tipples, and, should circumstances supply, perhaps a specially spiced Mysooru beedi to round off the evening.

I stumbled about the room a bit, dislodging sundry items of stationery and artist's materials from the proliferation of desks, easels and so forth, and opened the odd drawer in any promising looking bureau, but to no avail.

Thus stymied, I contented myself with one last tumbler of Da Silva, pulled a rug over my exhausted form, and settled down in the armchair for a well deserved slumber.