

*The Thrilling Adventures of
The 18th Century Club*

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Chapter Nine

The fug of Cigar and Pipe Smoke!

Espied from the eye of a swooping kittiwake cresting the thermals, perhaps the glint of afternoon sunlight on burnished metal might have betrayed the presence of the periscope.

Other than this, I'll wager no outward sign existed that could indicate our situation, as beneath the choppy grey waters of the bay, within the sleek and sturdy confines of Kebababad's remarkable craft, we remained those long hours; not so much becalmed, as be-tensed.

The Monk's startling revelation, and our host's tidings both from the east and from the peninsula hung as heavy in the air as the fug of cigar and pipe smoke which overarched the proceedings of our sub-aquatic symposium, like a suspended ceiling of impending doom. We were all now more or less upright at the table. Myself, Lord A, Kebababad himself, and The Monk; plus Bartington, who had relinquished the bridge to one of the Viceroy's worthy crew - none of whom we had as yet encountered. Indeed, not one of us had left the cabin other than when impelled by nature's call to slip discreetly to the adjacent jakes.

A prodigious quantity of alcohol and vittles had been consumed. The brain requires fuel, and this was heavy work. Periodically, with a well-oiled swish, an oak panel in one wall slid open to present a trencher of sweetmeats, savouries, and beverages, conveyed by dumb-waiter from the galley below. Bartington was just now taking possession of one such delivery - a platter of charred lamb, proscuttio and figs, together with a carafe of chilled mosel - a singular combination beloved of the Viceroy.

"Ah!" says Kebababad, as Bartington wove unsteadily towards the assembly, "I call this my Battle of the Pyramids! Picture those luckless European mercenaries in the Corsican's Egyptian escapade, relishing the flavours of home, spiced with the tang of the Orient, what?"

"Gave the bounders a thrashing at the Nile though!" Lord A perked up at once, forking a choice cut of ham, spinning it in a flamboyant twirl about the tines and chomping down on it forthwith.

"Indeed, indeed!" enthused the Viceroy, as Bartington tabled the food with a crash of up-ended silverware. "Here's to the one-armed hero who knew no fear!"

It must have been the seventeenth toast of the afternoon. Still, we stood as one, huzzah-ed effusively, drained our bumpers and crumpled back into our seats with what dignity we could salvage.

"Now," slurs Lord A. "Back to business."

On the table before us, amid all the clutter and flotsam, and held in place by a variety of nautical instruments, plates, glasses and, in one instance, a wicked looking kukri that The Monk had flung haphazardly at a spatch-cocked grouse he swore was still moving, lay the letters.

There were three of them. The "original", if you will, that Lord A had received at the Club; the second- though in all probability, the first to be delivered- which the Viceroy had carried and which he had retrieved from a strong box concealed within his sea chest in a curtained ante-chamber of the cabin; and finally the most recent, discovered lately and perhaps most disturbingly, at The Manse.

We had stared at them long and hard, and continued now to do so. Notwithstanding the vagaries of penmanship, they appeared to be all of the same hand, and in content of an accord. Alas, what this content comprised of eluded us one and all.

With all due modesty I confess myself not an unlearned man of letters, and both Bartington and the Cardinal, by dint of both profession and inclination, are fellows of some note in the realm of the cipher and of the idiosyncrasies of obscure syntax. Moreover, the Cardinal's treatise on, and translation of, The Rule of St. Benedict, had been singled out for Papal approbation and his subsequent allocation of nuns was decreed by edict as a direct acknowledgement of his linguistic cunning. As to Lord A and the Viceroy, their respective travels and propensity towards the study of militaria, plus the imperative to order the correct wines and to converse wittily with the fairer sex in the far-flung consulates of the Empire had tightened their respective grasp of patois and colloquialism well beyond the average. Yet for all this, we remained at a loss.

For the umpteenth time, I ventured to summarise: "The Club, the Manse and the Embassy. One a place of relaxation, one of business, one a hybrid. You say, Viceroy, that Foulmouth had received nothing?"

"Not when I saw the fellow, no."

"And nothing, so far as we know, has been sent to either myself or Bartington. What of the other members of our esteemed order?"

"We've been over this, Shuteye." The Monk yawned and dejectedly cast his eyes about the room.

"The Laird has been incommunicado for months. Ironface, last I heard, burns everything before he opens it. The Viscount is away reconnoitring his estates in that godforsaken Pictish wilderness, and as for the Marquis...?" The Monk rolled his eyes and gazed heavenward.

"And The Lord Advocate?"

"The Lord Advocate is beset by creditors and simultaneously embroiled in one of the most

convoluted cases ever to be set before the Crown. I doubt he'd even notice if a troop of dancing orang-utans were cavorting in his thunder box."

"You've had word from him then?"

The Monk sighed and fished for a cigar.

"Yes. When I checked the box and found that," he gestured dismissively to the letter pinned under the Ghurkha blade, "I also consulted my day's correspondence before absconding to the jetty. There was a brief despatch from the firm of Mathew, Hopkins and Sterne, The Lord Advocate's nom de business, as he refers to it. As I've said, he's tangled up in some legal shenanigans with some colonial type and said he'd be in touch."

"Did he give the chap's name?"

"Does it matter?"

"It might."

"Hang on."

Pausing to flame the tip of his smoke from the candelabra, The Monk rummaged about his vestments for a moment and produced at length a crumpled paper. "Here we go. Indian chap by the sound of it. A Mr Bandar Log, for what bally good it does us."

The Viceroy exploded a mouthful of Rhineish and fig half the length of the table.

"Good Christ sir! Did you say Bandar Log?"

"I did sir. What of it?"

"Good Christ." The Viceroy lunged at once for the mosel and imbibed a goodly guzzle direct from the carafe. Wiping his mouth on an exquisitely embroidered sleeve, he proceeded to gaze about the company as if confronted by imbeciles.

We, the evidently uninitiated, exchanged glances in bemused silence, Bartington poised mid-slurp, a tumbler of gin dribbling its contents between rim and lip.

"Well?" enquired Lord A "Do tell, dear Viceroy. What know you of this so-called mister Band of Logs?"

"Confound you, Brigadier!" retorts Kebababad, "do you not recall your jungle lore? And you, Cardinal, have you not allegedly humped your gospel through the sickly tropics, traversing forest and swamp to bring light to the benighted corners of this savage earth?"

"I most certainly have, damn you, and they were dashed grateful for it I don't mind telling

you! Why..."

But the Viceroy's upraised palm silenced all further debate.

"And in your extensive travels, did you never hear this?" And, drawing himself up to his full height, the Viceroy, in a weird and chirruping falsetto, suddenly began to sing:

"Here we go in a flung festoon,

Half-way up to the jealous moon!

Don't you envy our pranceful bands?

Don't you wish you had extra hands?"

"Fellows lost his marbles!" says Lord A. "Cabin fever."

"Cabin fever my roughened rump!" retorts Kebababad. "There's more:

Brother, thy tail hangs down behind!.....This is the way of the Monkey-kind."

"Good Lord!"

"Indeed."

"So," says I, "this Bandar Log, he's..."

"They," corrected The Viceroy, "are The Monkey People. Fabled dwellers of the ruined city of the Cold Lairs."

Silence descended but momentarily, and The Brigadier was the first to shake off his discombobulation.

"We must split our forces."

Bartington, suddenly animated, harrumphed.

"Split our forces? Tactical suicide. As a military man I thought you'd know better, sir. A General never..."

"As a rule, you are indeed correct, dear doctor. But we are engaged in no conventional campaign, and conventional strategy simply will not do".

The Brigadier paused only for as long as it took to tamp his Savinelli.

“Now, gentlemen. Here’s what I propose...”

