

*The Thrilling Adventures of  
The 18th Century Club*

*Written by  
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## Chapter Six

### A Curious Shifting of the Shadows.

And so it was, later that very evening, I found myself once more breathing the brackish air as the three of us made our way to the harbour.

Bartington had prevailed in accompanying us, despite Lord A's insistence that he remain within easy reach of his medication and, moreover, that we expected at any time the arrival of the Monk, who, though evidently delayed, had intimated to Lord A his intention to join us by nightfall at Bartington's laboratory.

I had naturally suggested we therefore loiter in the vicinity of the surgeon's amply stocked drinks cabinet until such a time as the clergy put in an appearance; but the saw-bones wouldn't hear of it.

"All I ask is a tall ship, and a star to steer her by!" the medic had Masefielded breezily, in response to our joint entreaties back in the vault. "And failing that, a sturdy tug, what? Besides, his Eminence will no doubt divine our plan of action. Still, just to be on the safe side, I'll leave him a note."

"What, pinned to the door?" says I. "Hardly seems the wisest course of action under the circumstances." I was already blowing the dust from a bottle of Quinta De La Rosa in order to ascertain the vintage.

"My dear Shuteye, I assure you there's nothing to worry about." says Bartington, deftly removing the bottle from my grasp whilst discreetly draping a surgical towel over the port tongs. "Whoever penned the vile epistle that instigated this chain of circumstance did so, I'm quite convinced, in the certain knowledge that we'd unravel sufficient of its secrets to embark upon this next step."

"Ah," says I, "so what you're saying is, we're walking headlong into a diabolical ambushade?"

My worthy companions rolled their eyes.

"We won't be walking, old boy." says the Brigadier, "not if I know Bartington."

Thus, as darkness duskily descended we emerged from a series of leafy lanes and onto the open expanse of the foreshore. A few desultory bulbs decorated the deserted buildings to our left, whilst to the right, the lone and level sands faded and merged into the expanse of water, though in truth the scene was a touch more Copperfield than Ozymandias, as an occasional breaker foamed with a languid hiss under the lowering curtain of night.

"I'm all for a bob on the briny," says I, taking a nip from Lord A's tastefully gilded hip-flask of spiced rum, "but if I ain't mistaken, couldn't we just as easily have chartered a hackney, and been there in half the time, using the road?"

"Use the road? Are you mad?" Lord A retrieved his flask and gave it an appraising shake.

"God damn it Shuteye, you've necked the bally lot!"

"Sorry old boy. It's the proximity of the sea, d'you see? Always gives me a most wretched thirst. We could always repair to a tavern?" I postulated hopefully, "Place like this, bound to be swimming in the stuff. Smugglers, Salty Tars and the like - always handy for a drop of the old cane juice. Am I right, Bartington?"

"Zombie fuel, I calls it." scowled Bart. "Never touch the stuff. Almost lost me leg in Haiti."

I eyed him quizzically. "Haiti, you say? I never knew you'd..."

"Quiet!" hissed Lord A, thrusting his arms to either side, and bringing both myself and the Surgeon General to an abrupt halt.

"What is it, old boy?" Bartington queried, as the Brigadier's peepers scrutinized the waterfront with the icy precision of twin spotlights scanning a barbed-wire perimeter.

"Quiet, damn you! I thought I heard something, in the mouth of that alley up ahead."

I too squinted through the gloom along the dilapidated frontages of the shabby pleasure houses that skirted the bay. Temples of gaiety 'pon a summer's afternoon they may well have been, yet espied whilst embarked upon a desperate enterprise in the chill of an off-season twilight, their aspects did indeed incline towards the unnerving.

Still, other than the aforementioned aquatic oozing, silence unequivocally reigned.

We, meantime, remained motionless, ears pricked to the slightest sonic fluctuation, until at length Lord A lowered his arms and gave the universally acknowledged signal to advance with caution.

But we had proceeded only a few paces in the direction of the quay when he again signalled the halt.

"There!" he half-whispered, "there chaps, do you hear it? Up ahead. It's as if someone were just beyond this line of buildings, pre-empting our approach."

"Following us in advance?" I eyed my companions dubiously.

Yet I could not help but recall Bartington's declaration that our every move thus far carried the distinct whiff of the predictable.

"Deploy in open order and move towards the beach. Now." Lord A slipped obliquely to the right as he spoke. My initial instinct to skulk in the shadow, or, frankly, to turn around and retrace our course to the surgeon's den at full pelt, dissolved instantaneously as I recognised the tactical advantages of the Brigadier's imperative. With Bartington in the lead, and myself and Lord A covering the flanks, we picked up pace. Over to my left, as we trotted at double time, I seemed to detect a curious shifting of the shadows, as though some dark mass about the size of a stooped yet bulky fellow, or perhaps two thin pygmies moving in tandem, mirrored our progress. It lasted only a moment, then the shape or shapes blurred once more into the morass of darkness.

All at once, it seemed, we were at the pier.

"Did you see it milord?" I took hold of Lord A's sleeve as we regrouped beside the gutting sheds, catching our breath. The stench was surprisingly appetising. I realised I hadn't eaten since breakfast.

"See what? I saw nothing. Nothing, I tell you. It was just that sound..."

I looked to Bartington. "And you sir, did you see it?"

"Whatever you may have seen, or think you may have seen, is of no immediate import." Bartington curtailed my questioning and leaned close, whispering, "Dammit, man, look at the Arse. He's as rattled as a tin of nuts."

Indeed, even in that miserable light I could discern at once that the Brigadier's florid complexion had paled to that of the underbelly of a braised cod.

"I say, Brigadier, are you alright?"

"What? Oh, yes. It's nothing. Bartington - where's this damned sloop of yours. I ain't intending to mooch about on the prom all night like a lovelorn doxy. Let's have at it sir!"

"This way chaps."

Bartington gave me a reassuring left-jab to the shoulder and scuttled crab-like to starboard.

I slowly became aware of the proximity of the water, and the silent shapes that rocked upon its obscured surface. The sound of our hurried footfalls echoed back from the walls of the sheds, first they fell on stone, then wood, then, as we crossed a short gang-plank beneath which oily waters glinted briefly, metal.

And, blast me, it may have been my imagination, yet I swore I could discern the faintest counter-rhythm to our tread, for all the world like the padding thud of a filthy simian tread, or the distant slap of leathery paws, striking bongos...

Yet I had no time to dwell on such unwelcome fancies, nor even to take stock as yet of the dimensions or particulars of the vessel upon which we now found ourselves, for no sooner were we aboard than we descended at once through some species of hatchway and down two or three clanking metal steps, to be confronted by yet another doorway which, still in semi-darkness, Bartington motioned us to enter.

"On you go chaps, and make yourselves comfortable. I'm to the bridge to get this beauty sea borne. Don't worry - we're fully crewed and will be out in the offing before you can say 'keel haul the land lubbers'. Ooh arrgh Jim lad, what?"

With which he vaulted back the way we had come and disappeared into the gloom.

I laid a hand on the Brigadier's shoulder.

"Well, here we are old boy, wherever this is. He seems to be holding up rather well, considering."

"Who, Bartington? Fellow's as addled as last month's eggs. Still, got us this far, all credit to him. Shall we?"

"Lay on" says I, and the Brigadier opened the door.