

*The Thrilling Adventures of
The 18th Century Club*

*Written by
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Chapter Ten

Sink me! Bede's *Ecclesiastica*!

Drenched to the skin in briny foam and spinning like a bobbin?

Not what I signed up for at all, sir!

Still, here I was, lurching about in a decidedly un-jollyboat, as the wind lashed the spray across me cheeks; just as it lashed the clouds above across the blank and equally pasty countenance of the midnight orb.

Shiver me timbers indeed. A parade of skewed and wretched images played out with ghastly plausibility across the water-logged stage of my imagination. The Medusa; The Matutina; sink me, the infernal Demeter herself, in these very waters! I grasped the gunwale and vowed that, should I survive, I'd never eat crab again.

At last, after what seemed an eternity of careening saturating mayhem, the crunch of wood into shingle and the sudden apparent steadying of the howling night signalled our beaching. Firm hands bunched the sodden shoulders of my pea coat and I felt myself manhandled a-shore through two feet of churning water, insurmountably grateful for the feel of something other than heaving planks underfoot.

Noggin bent, and sou'wester pulled down against a drilling downpour that replicated the intensity of the surf, I stumbled up the slope of the beach towards the mass of the headland. My companions likewise, tight lipped and hunched against the wayward fury of the elements, shouldered on.

Sanctuary of sorts was finally afforded as we crammed into a shallow alcove of rock at the base of the cliffs. I took advantage of the respite to spare a glance at my companions. The Monk, similarly incongruous in nautical apparel, was removing his head gear; into which he duly sneezed heroically.

"Bless me! I'm about as dry as Jonah's jacksie. I say Shuteye, let's me and you stick to terra firma for a bit from now on, what say you old boy?"

"I don't intend to bathe for a year. Have you a flask about you, perchance?"

The Monk, wiping the dribblets of water from his chapped cheeks with an elegant percale weave monogrammed kerchief, winced to indicate the negative.

"Perhaps one of these fellows?"

I turned enquiringly to our three associates who had so manfully navigated Neptune's tantrums before escorting us thus far. Bold crewmen, as I'm sure you've surmised, from the ursine Viceroy's own version of Fulton's Nautilus. The nearest fellow obligingly handed me a small leathern pouch, evidently water tight, and plugged with a brass-topped cork.

"Damn decent of you, sir."

I swallowed a stiff measure of grog and passed it over to the Monk.

Meanwhile, our taciturn jack tar chum indicated that we might keep hold of the drink and then, tugging his forelock with surprising dignity and aplomb, turned and disappeared back into the storm. His subordinates immediately followed suit, and all sight of them was in an instant erased by the plunging curtain of night and rain.

"Well," says I, turning back to the Monk and retrieving the flask for another lengthy pull, "that's that, and here we are. What now?"

"Follow me" says the cleric, and damn my eyes if he doesn't slip like a puffin to its burrow, between a fissure in the rocks at the back of the cave wall. Corking the juice, I duly pursued.

Scrabbling up a steep incline in a narrow rock-walled passageway in absolute Stygian darkness whilst dressed as a trawler-man ain't my usual definition of comfort and joy, but after the rigours of the sea, 'twas a positive balm to my buffeted constitution.

My restoration continued apace as the passage, veering abruptly to the left, suddenly opened up into a well-lighted corridor of stone flags. Here the Monk paused, allowing me time to catch my breath and to refresh us both with a further warming draught of the seaman's tippie.

"So, dear Monk," says I, "What is all this then? Some smugglers' secret snicket, I'll be bound."

"Not far from the truth, Shuteye old boy. At least, suffice to say that in times passed it did indeed serve as a portal for certain select comings and goings, best left unobserved by, shall we say, none sympathetic parties. Regard."

And with that, the cryptic fellow drew my attention to the walls themselves. By the flickering illumination of the bracket-mounted torches that lined the corridor, I was now able to discern a myriad peculiar markings etched into the rock. What at first seemed merely a random jumble of lines and unconnected blotches of muted colour revealed themselves to be a vast and intricate panorama of rupestral text and ideograms. I could decipher nothing specific, of course, and yet for all the primitive associations of the medium, I sensed a distinctly ecclesiastical sophistication in the arrangement. I ventured a conjecture; Your chaps have anything to do with all this, Cardinal?

"Well before my time, Shuteye, but you're definitely on the right track. Come along, I think you might find this interesting."

We progressed at a more stately pace a little further, until at length the cunning clergyman came to a halt before a remarkably accomplished rendering of a wyvern rampant, which nestled upon the wall amid the engraved panoply. Without further prevarication he placed one hand upon the depicted claw of the beast, matching his finger's span to that of the dragon's scaly digits, and pressed.

Gentle reader, pray ponder a moment 'pon my astonishment, as what appeared to be a slab of solid rock slid seamlessly to one side to reveal a rosewood panelled vestibule carpeted with a sumptuous shag pile of midnight blue.

"Don't stand there dithering like a half-cut verger, Shuteye," sighs the Monk. "Wipe your damn feet and press on, sir!"

This I duly did, and moments later we had passed through a second, conventional, doorway, and found ourselves, to my continued bewilderment but not inconsiderable delight, in the most elegantly appointed library I have hitherto beheld.

"Blimey."

"Not quite what you were expecting?"

The Monk, with evident satisfaction, was already un-stopping a decanter which rested on a superb Pugin side piece lit by a solid silver Flambeau de Vermeil table lamp. The unmistakable peaty aroma of Laphroaig drifted delightfully under my twitching nostrils. Accepting the proffered tumbler I took a most welcome sip, and gazed about.

As well as the shelves that lined the walls, numerous tables and glass fronted cabinets stood in all quarters of the great domed chamber.

"Bit of a tip, I'm afraid." said the Monk, "Nothing's in any sort of order. Just can't seem to get the staff these days. Still, do have a gander, commander."

Discarding my outer garments and dripping bonnet, I gave some attention to the nearest stack of works piled haphazardly upon a mahogany bureau.

Leather sheathed Elzevirs dated 1712; a calf skin incunabulum or two; a series of scrolled encyclicals; several exquisitely bound works of hagiography; and, sink me, Bede's Ecclesiastica!

"Good Lord."

"Indeed."

I polished off the malt with unseemly haste.

"Is all this yours?"

"Bless me, no. I'm but a humble curator. What you see about you is the property of the Church, dear boy. Or, more specifically, a certain Order thereof, of which I am, if I may say so, a reasonably well respected member."

I wandered over to the wall and cast my peepers across a row of gilded and embossed spines of evident antiquity.

"Bonfini's *Rerum Ungaricarum Decades...*; Beheim's *Die Gedichte; Chalkokondyle's Atheniensis Historium....*"

A kernel of thought began to take shape.

"I say, Monk, don't these books here all touch upon the history of ..."

"Shhh!" says the Monk, finger to his lips in the time honoured librarian style. "Don't forget where you are old chap."

"Where I am? I'm in a library, ain't I?"

"Not just any library." He motioned upwards towards the spectacular arch of the roof, and continued:

"Hundreds of feet above us lie the ruins of Whitby Abbey. Synod of six sixty four and all that. Now, it's a little known fact that following the Wold Newton meteor strike of 1795..."

"The what, sir?!"

"Oh Shuteye, please pay attention. It's all perfectly well documented. Have another drink. But don't smoke, mind. Place could go off like Joan of Arc's picnic. Now, as I was saying. Following the aforementioned meteor strike, a series of geological shifts took place that caused something of a chain reaction. Very little visible topside, of course, but down here, all manner of disruptions. Long story short, members of my esteemed Order took advantage and put together what you see about you. Gathering together some of the rarest and most sort after monographs, manuscripts and codices from dozens of private collections to create one definitive repository, study in all things other worldly for the use of."

I ran my finger down the title page obverse of a Kramer and Sprenger *Malleus Maleficarum*, (surely a facsimile edition?), that lay open on a lectern, and suppressed a

shudder.

“So, the plan is...?”

“Oh come, come, Shuteye. Were you paying any attention whilst we were holed up in that dreadful cigar tube of the Viceroy’s?”

“I was drunk, sir. As were you, if memory serves.”

“Slightly tipsy, I think you’ll find. And in full command of me faculties. Let me reiterate.

“Lord A divulged his stratagem, did he not? It goes something like this: He and Bartington were to head North to ascertain the whereabouts of the Viscount and the Laird. Having done so, they then move South by land and pick up Lord Blackheart, assuming he’s capable of ambulation. The Viceroy, meanwhile, was to voyage South again and anchor off the coast, rendezvous with Foulmouth, then together locate the Lord Advocate amid the legal dives and flesh pots of Covent Garden. Meanwhile, we two are to remain here and scour this bibliographic bazaar for any nuggets of intelligence that might profit our crusade. Finally, at the duly appointed time, we all converge on Pocklington Manor, the impregnable stronghold of the Marquis de Qu’est-ce que C’est, in Lord A’s inimitable phrase ‘like the fingers of a mighty hand forming a fist.’”

“Correct,” says I, “Exactly as I remember it. Your powers of exposition remain without parallel, Cardinal.”

“And your powers of buffoonery know no bounds, sir.”

I paused for a moment’s reflection.

“I say, Monk, from what you impart, we might be here for some time. Much as I can’t wait to begin delving into the fray, so to speak, the fact is, me glass is empty and furthermore I’m soaked to the bally skin. And not from the inside, if you catch me drift.”

“Fear not, Shuteye. You don’t think I volunteered for this end of the action just because I’m the only one who knew the way in, have an unequalled grasp of metaphysics, and, it just so happens, hold exclusive access rights to the Special Papal Erotica collection, do you?”

“I rather hoped not, old boy.”

“Then rest easy, old chap. And walk this way.”

And with that the noble fellow ascended a spiral staircase that snaked upwards from behind a towering casement of illustrated bestiaries and I, stealing a second uneasy

side-long at the Hammer of Witches, eagerly followed.