

*The Thrilling Adventures of  
The 18th Century Club*

*Written by  
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## Chapter Thirteen

### Damned Crapauds!

I shall spare you, dear reader, the details of my 'Northward' passage. Suffice to say that a constitution less robust than that of your humble narrator, and one unfortified by the contents of a generously provisioned travel hamper and a goose-down bum bolster, must have been sorely vexed by the relentless juddering purgatory I endured. The exigency of my mission and the imperative of discretion ruled out the use of the Cardinal's private locomotive, which was at any rate still undergoing a refit, following some unfortunate incident last Saint Cuthbert's Eve; I pressed the Monk for particulars, but he rather coyly invoked ecclesiastical privilege.

By necessity rather than by design, therefore, I was compelled to make my way via the common railroad in tiresome proximity to that most wretched of assemblages, the General Public. You will forgive me then, if I draw a soiled veil over this sorry episode and recommence our tale at the point of my decantation upon a deserted provincial platform in the middle of the night, somewhere North of the border.

I was, as the astute amongst you may already have surmised, alone.

The 'Monk, being not entirely convinced of the wisdom of my foray, had elected to remain behind in accordance with our original intentions, and apply himself earnestly to the task of tying together the multitudinous strands of evidence we had thus far amassed: baobab pulp, witch's jade, the 'Bandar Log, and so on and so forth. If any blighter could explicate some semblance of meaning from all this monkey mish mash, then he was most assuredly the fellow.

And so, without so much as a valet, and no sign whatsoever of anything resembling a porter, I duly found myself forced to shoulder my own pack and advance quick-time solo into the Hibernian night.

It was what I believe the natives refer to as distinctly "soft", weather-wise, which is to say intolerably filthy and wet; though how the elements conspired to simultaneously provide mist, darkness, ceaseless drizzle, and a wind as chill and foul as the breath of a banshee, must remain forever a mystery to any unfamiliar with the singular meteorological extremities peculiar to the habitat of the Celt.

Furthermore, being devoid of maps, I was reliant solely upon my trusty 'Nairne and Blunt, peered at with straining and bemoistened eyes whenever a faint slant of moonlight pierced the dripping gloom.

Thus then I trudged, upon what I hoped was a road, and in what I hoped was an

approximation of the right direction. It seemed like hours, and may well have been for all I know, as I tramped that deserted track; when all at once a distinct yet irregular clomping adverted me to the approach of some other midnight wayfarer.

Remarkable as it might seem, my thoughts had hitherto been so focussed upon maintaining contact with the causeway, that the potential of some other harm befalling me had never entered my noggin.

However, the sound of heavy hooves stumbling on in the dark summarily banished all other concerns. I instinctively veered to the left, and in so doing found myself sprawled inelegantly in a boggy ditch, just as the vast grey shape of some phantom-like cart horse emerged from the clinging misty moonlight.

To my horror, rather than pass on in the direction of the station, the beast drew up immediately above me, and gave forth fiercely with both snort and stamp. Cold as I already was, a further degree of chill crept stealthily up my spine.

Indeed, as I peered up at that monstous apparition, my only thought was to shrink into the oozing peat and pray that those puckering nostrils and rolling eyes should not detect my trembling form.

Then I noticed the rider.

Swathed in a voluminous cloak and crowned with a broad-brimmed hat, no features as such were visible, and for a moment I thought the unthinkable; yet the merest flick of a moonbeam, it seemed to me, chanced to alight upon the waxed and glistening tip of a finely twizzled whisker.

Where there's whiskers and hats, I mused, then there is at least a head, and a human one to boot.

Blast it, thinks I then, am I not Lord Shuteye? Favoured scion of that most esteemed of families? What would dear Father, the Arch Duke himself think, to see me scrabbling in the soil like a straw-sucking bumpkin at a goose fayre?

Did the Shuteyes quake at Quebec? Did they bolt at Blenheim? Why, no sir, double damn you, they did not!

Thus, steeled with this notion, and hefting in my right hand my reassuringly solid, brass-embossed hip-flask, to hurl or proffer as the situation demanded, I lurched with all the dignity and address I could summon, to me feet, yelling for all I was worth: "Ahoy there!"

The rider at once swivelled alarmingly, and the beast reared to a terryfing height, whinnying like the very devil, hooves cleaving the mist like twin cudgels in the paws of a

mad troll. A cry of pure dismay bellowed from under the hat, and the horseman plummeted from the saddle, hurtling headlong into the muddy surface of the track. The mount immediately scarpered, to be instantaneously swallowed by the murk, the sound of hoof beats masked in a moment by the soaking eiderdown of night.

A muted groan escaped the erstwhile chevalier.

Of all the possible scenarios played out in my mind's eye in the moments before I made my move, this one, I confess, had failed to present itself.

For an instant I remained motionless, utterly at a loss - yet only, I assure you, for a moment. When faced with such a situation a gentleman really has only one course of action available to him. I immediately unscrewed the stopper and took a step towards the crumpled form.

"I say old chap, are you alright? Fancy a snifter?"

"Unhorsed sir! Up-ended like milkmaid in a hay loft! Damn me, and damn that equine brute. By the Tsar's left.. I say, do I know you, sir?"

Ah! How can I express the co-mingled delight and relief of that moment, as I recognised those barking tones and peered at that mud-splattered yet noble visage. I laughed most heartily as I helped the fellow to his feet,

"Know me sir? Indeed you do sir! 'Tis I, Lord Shuteye! My dear fellow, I must say you gave me quite a turn..."

"Shuteye? Shuteye? I am Lord Arse sir!"

"Er, You are indeed sir. And I am Lord Shuteye. You've taken a tumble old boy. Here, have a drink. Collect yourself."

"Collect myself? What am I, a hat? No sir, I am Lord Arse, and what is what? The Brigadier, that is what! Give me that booze, you impudent pup. Now who, by God's holy trousers, are you, sir?"

"I'm Lord Shut - oh, never mind. Drink up, sir, drink up. Have you come far? Your horse..."

"Slouching heiffer. It's the glue pot for that wretched dobbin, mark my words. Well, what are we waiting for? Give me your arm, sir. Back to barracks. Stormed at with shot and shell, what? Where's that demmned flask of yours? What is this? Burmese jungle juice?"

"Good Lord no sir! Otard, a very fine champagne cognac sir, only the very best, I..."

"Frenchified! I knew it. Damned crapauds. All sing! Here's forty shillings on the drum - sing up, lad - to those who'll volunteer to come..."

And so, I sang.

Ah, and what emotions now swirled within me as we roared and meandered down that desolate path? To have found Lord A was surely a blessing, but like this? Was it merely the fall that had temporarily blunted his rapier-like mind, or were these the symptoms to which Bartington had alluded? I comforted myself with the notion that the Brigadier had taken it upon himself to meet me at the station, and would soon be quite tickety-boo; but deep down I knew this to be as forlorn a hope as ever scaled the breach at Ciudad Rodrigo.

We pressed on, the rain thickening into an unseasonal sleet that dispelled the mist but did nothing to improve visibility. The Brigadier clung to my arm with a grip that threatened to arrest all circulation, pausing occasionally to sniff the air like a wolf, and mutter choice blasphemies about the retreat to Corunna.

It was in the midst of one such diatribe that he suddenly fell silent, and the hand on my sleeve perceptibly slackened its force.

"We're here."

"Where, sir?"

"Here, damn you. D'you smell the weasels?"

"Can't say I do, old boy." I strained my peepers against the torrent, but beheld nothing but flying ice and night. "Weasels, you say?"

"Easels, sir, easels! Are you quite mad? The reek of paint! Damned scribbler! Infernal dauber! Come on."

The Brigadier grasped my poor bicep once more and dragged me forward with renewed vigour. It was only then that I noticed a brace of granite gate-posts looming out of the dark on each side of us, and perceived the crunch of gravel beneath my feet. Evidently we were now traversing the entrance-way to some estate. I prayed for a roaring fire and hot toddy, though such fancies seemed dashed as, after advancing a couple of hundred yards, the black bulk of the manor formed before us. No a light appeared to offer hope of either warmth or sustenance. Indeed, the place seemed quite deserted, and, for all the grandeur of the portico, I held out little hope of comforts within as the Brigadier rustled about in his cloak for the huge brass key to unlock the iron-studded door of scarred and knotted oak.

Once within, however, my spirits were immediately lifted. Despite the chill that pervaded the hallway, wherein a dull sheen reflected from antique suits of armour that lined the

panelled corridor like cobwebbed sentinels of some medaeval keep, a cheery orange glow escaped from beneath one of the doorways that abbutted the passage, and to this we headed.

The Brigadier, chuntering under his breath, lead the way into what I must assume was the great hall - a most comodious chamber, richly furnished, with a welcome fire ablaze in a vast hearth. The walls were bedecked with tapestries, a fine selection of fearsome looking swords, and no small number of horned and antlered beast heads, mounted in fine style. Also, I was perplexed and yet relieved to note, in light of the Brigadier's ramblings, at least a half dozen artist's easels erected about the place, and a proliferation of framed canvases leaning against every wall and item of furniture. Pots of paint, oils, water colours, palettes smeared with pigmnet and reams of paper were similarly scatered about, so that for all the baronial trappings of the room one was placed in half a mind of some squalid bohemian garret.

The Brigadier, having shed his outer wear, stode at once to a laquered cabinet in a far corner and began fussing with a selection of bottles.

"Calls himself a Scotchman and not a decent whisky in the house! Blast his eyes, sir!"

"Anything's fine for me, old boy." I ventured.

"Who's that?"

The Brigadier, a crystal decanter in one hand and a brimming tumbler in the other, spun back to face me.

"Who the hell are you sir? How did you get in?"

"My Lord, it's me, Shuteye. We met on the road. I've come to rescue you old boy."

"Rescue? Rescue you say? And pray, sir, from whom will you be doing this damned rescuing?"

"Well, to tell the truth I ain't entirely sure. Do you mind?" I held out a hand and the Brigadier thrust the tumbler into it, splashing half of the precious contents up my sleeve as he did so. I took a gulp.

Port. A Da Silva, judging by the hint of liquorice in the bouquet. Not at all bad.

"I mean to say sir, that I received your communique at the Monk's. Yours and Bartington's. You do remember Bartington?"

"Bartington? Queer fellow, mad as a loon. Went off. "

"Yes, that's the chap. Perhaps we should sit down?"

I ushered us toward the sofa nearest the fire, taking care to collect the decanter. The Brigadier slumped into the upholstery and pulled a tartan blanket across his knees.

"Cigar?"

I reached inside my topcoat, fished us out a couple and lighted them. Lord A sat back, puffing away with an expression of such abject contentment that for a moment I could almost believe we were back at the Club, before this whole peculiar business had started.

I allowed myself the indulgence of savouring the scene for a moment, before continuing.

"Lord Arse...?"

"Ah, the ladies. Where are they now I wonder? Reclining in glowing dishevelment upon some quilted divan..."

"Lord Arse, I beg you, pay attention for a moment. Do you know where we are?"

"What? I say, don't I know you? Shuteye, ain't it?"

"That's right sir! My dear fellow, well done! Now, think for a moment. Where are we?"

"The Laird's hunting lodge of course. Damn his eyes. Should be black-balled! Black-ball him, I say!"

"Steady on old chap. The Laird. Now then, think - where is the Laird? Did you see him? Speak to him?"

"Gone. Laird gone. Bartington gone. All gone. Me, alone, every night, eight o'clock, dressed for dinner..."

"Yes. But where sir, where is the Laird?"

"Damned if I know. Ought to black ball the swine. You'd better ask Gibbons."

Good Lord, Gibbons! I'd completely forgotten.

"My Lord ... who is Gibbons?"

From somewhere behind me a voice like thunder bellowed out across the room,

"Me, damn you! I am Gibbons!"