

Chapter Three

A Most Convivial Welcome.

As we had anticipated, Function's communiqué had forewarned the noble clergyman of our approximate time of arrival, and, despite the ever pressing demands of ecumenical enterprise, the good reverend had done all in his power to afford us a most convivial welcome, not to mention shelter from the seemingly relentless torrents issuing from the firmament.

Snugly situated in an unassuming side street of the parochial capital, The Manse, whilst far from modest in its facade, nonetheless bespoke of a utilitarian practicality remarkable in a structure ostensibly dedicated to the pursuit of matters spiritual. Indeed, this theme continued throughout the various ante-chambers, waiting rooms and offices through which myself and Lord A. found ourselves conducted by a remarkably pretty novice nun who was, as part of her induction, and in common with the other more promising members of various orders, afforded the opportunity of a tenure of vocational training within the Manse itself, under the direct tutelage of our esteemed ecclesiastical host.

"I say," said Lord A, giving me a companionable dig in the ribs as we followed her sensually sashaying form towards the door of the inner sanctum, "a sight easier on the eye than old Function, what?"

"I should coco, old boy" I responded sotto voce, and could not help but recall that, as long as I had known the good Friar, he'd always displayed an unerring enthusiasm in his appreciation of the fairer sex.

"He always told me," I ventured, "that if the Celestial Father hadn't meant us to delight in the female form, he simply wouldn't have made it so damnably attractive."

Further speculation on this most pleasing of topics, was, however, curtailed by our arrival at a gleaming oak door, polished to a stately lustre, and situated behind a curtain of exquisite velvet brocade.

Our guide immediately drew said drapery aside and pushed the door open. It swung noiselessly inwards whilst she, with a coy glance backward over her shoulder, continued down the corridor along which we had hitherto been progressing.

"After you, old boy" I said to Lord A, and we duly entered the chamber.

The contrast to the unassuming austerity of the outer rooms could barely have been credited by one unfamiliar with the mores of our congenial Cardinal.

It was a room appointed for ease and luxury, with all the trappings and fittings accumulated by a man who had clearly travelled extensively throughout the most savage, as well as the more refined environs, of the known world.

The walls and shelves were festooned with souvenirs and peculiar artefacts worthy of a professor of anthropology, from exquisite works in oils, to shrunken heads and barbarous weaponry. A cheery fire blazed in the vast marble hearth, and the sumptuous upholstery and profusion of easy chairs, settees and chaise longues exerted an almost irresistible magnetism upon a weary traveller such as myself.

And there, beside the crackling fire, reclining in a vast leather daybed and clothed in a mauve smoking jacket of paisley silk, lounged The Monk.

"Ah! Do come in gentlemen! Pull up a pew, you look utterly fagged! I'll send for Cognac."

With which he pulled twice on a velvet chord that dangled just above his elegantly bejewelled yet manly hand. Somewhere a bell tinkled faintly.

"Just been toying with this little beauty" he said, exhibiting a curiously wrought flute-like object which I at first took to be some species of smoking device, "Picked it up on me last sojourn to the South Seas" says he. Then, placing the pipe to his lips he blew down the thing, for all the world like a New Orleans trombonist with his mind set on Jericho.

Sink me, if a yellow feathered dart didn't jet-tison from the end like a bolt of divine fire, and embed itself dab between the eyes of a stuffed caribou head, mounted above the hearth.

"I say Monk!" I cried "capital shot!"

"Good show!" says Lord A, in tandem with my own vociferation.

"Would've been," says The Monk, "but I was aiming for the fruit bowl. Now then, gentlemen, the drinks'll be along shortly. Cigars?"

"Don't mind if we do."



Cardinal Sin, The Monk.

"Good, good. Can't discuss serious matters without a serious smoke, I always say. Obtained these in Paraguay of all places," he remarked casually, whilst passing across to us a teak cigar box which boasted a rather fine relief of the Sistine Chapel, inlaid in mother of pearl.

"Paraguay?" I ventured, "when you were circumnavigating with the Lord Advocate I take it?"

"The very same. Poor chap was laid up with the undulating fever for a fortnight. I was bored stiff and nearly smoked myself into a kipper. Still, happy days..."

"Here's to 'em!" says Lord A., for at that very moment the door opened and gave egress to a silver tray laden with bottles, supported in the delicate looking, yet presumably capable hands of a second novice nun; an olive skinned vixen who demurely set the items upon an occasional table and exited in silence.

"A Sister of The Perpetual Reticence," offered The Monk, by way of explanation. "Never hear a peep out of her."

Whereupon he rose with a cat-like economy of motion and offered to pour.

"I'll be Mother Superior. What's your poison?"

"Hennessy for me." says Lord A, sparking up his rolled leaf.

"I'll have the Hine. Me father-in-law swears by it."

"Ah," says the Monk "a touch of old Blighty in the provenance of both, what? I think I'll stick with L'Esprit de Courvoisier. I often picture the much maligned Ogre of Corsica during his latter years, sipping meditatively away whilst musing on past glories in that confounded hell hole of Saint Helena. I rather fancy that despite his martial proclivities, he was in many ways a man not unlike me self."

Indeed, despite his fair complexion, one couldn't help but notice, in The Monk's diminutive but powerfully robust physique, a certain resemblance to the one time scourge of Europa.

He handed me my glass and I settled back into an armchair of Cordovan leather, liberally garrisoned with embroidered cushions, and swirled the drink languidly in its balloon of fine lead crystal.

"Now then," says The Monk, returning to his couch and adopting a manner both relaxed yet businesslike. "This Monkey Ape malarkey. What's the score?"

Lord A released a veritable cumulous nimbus of tobacco fumes from beneath his whiskers and leaned forward.

“Well, it’s like this,” he said.