

*The Thrilling Adventures of
The 18th Century Club*

*Written by
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Chapter Twelve

O Caledonia!

Dinner being usually served in the refectory in the company of a coterie of the fair Sisters, I was initially disappointed to find we would be dining alone in one of the Cardinal's private withdrawing rooms. The Monk, however, assured me that under the circumstances, exclusivity was a prerequisite.

Dismissing the alluringly be-cowled attendants, we had no sooner drawn up our chairs to the table when his Reverence, pausing only to cram his jaws with a hefty portion of the pigeon a la duchesse, began at once to unbuckle the sabretache that lay incongruously amid the steaming comestibles.

I looked on eagerly, if slightly distracted by the piquant temptations of the beef in wow wow sauce.

The Monk unfurled a parchment, then rose and fetched a candelabrum from a side table.

"Can't see a demmned thing without me readers." Uncasing an ivory box he duly produced a scrap of velvet and began polishing his pince-nez. With growing impatience I gulped a mouthful of port and gherkin.

"Do hurry old boy. What news from his lordship?"

"Calm yourself, Shuteye. As Saint Augustine reminds us, patience is the companion of wisdom. Now, are we sitting comfortably?"

"Oh indeed. I say, do go on, I'll get the galloping indigestions at this rate."

"Very well. I'll skip the usual salutations. Here we are. It's dated the 15th instant, foothills of the Grampians, Wilderness.

My Lords -

Voyage wet but uneventful. No sign of the French...I say Shuteye, what does he mean, no sign of the French?"

"Oh, he does that sometimes. Wanders off. Do press on old chap."

"If you say so...ahem.... Disembarked in good order. Kebababad en route as per. Myself and Bartington secured transportation inland. No word from the Laird. Mansion

deserted and in considerable disarray. Gamekeeper says this is normal. Servants all dismissed six months ago except for ground staff. These operate on a very modest retainer, but are allowed free use of hovels. Cellar well stocked. No trace of apes. Such is.

Your humble et cetera, The Brigadier."

"That's it?"

"It seems so." The Monk uncorked a jug of porter and filled our tankards, "Not much to go on, is it?"

I mused a moment until a thought struck me.

"Wait a minute - you say it's addressed 'foothills of the Grampians'? That's nowhere near the Laird's estate. They must have moved on towards the Viscount's. Have another look in the pouch."

The Monk drained then replenished his Triple Stout before complying.

"Thirsty work, oratory. Now, let's see. Ah yes, there is something else in here."

A thin paper, folded minutely to no more than a square inch, appeared between the Cardinal's béchamel soaked fingers.

"I'll need tweezers. And a magnifying glass. Over there, on me bureau."

I rapidly procured said implements and watched fascinated as the Monk painstakingly unfolded the miniscule scrap. Both sides of the wafer-thin sheet were crammed with the tiniest script, the markings like unto a regiment of insects arrayed in column, as if parading for review by some disciplinarian, entomological field marshal.

"Bartington?"

"The very same. It's encrypted of course. A cypher of some kind. I'll need me books. Meanwhile, you might as well tuck in, I may be some time."

And with that, he shuffled over to his desk and began pulling various lexicons and the like, from the surrounding shelves. I amused myself with the beef.

Soon, save for the clink of cutlery and the rustle of papers, only the dependable tick of the porcelain-cased Vulliamy on the mantle disturbed the quietude. I munched on, slurping liberally of the porter, until the twin pronged assault of silence and satiety worked its somniferous charm.

When next I glanced at the clock face, some two hours had passed.

The Monk was no longer at his books, but pacing back and forth across the rugs and parquetry, inhaling vigorously from a long-stemmed silver pipe, the bowl worked to resemble some fearsome Oriental dragon, with the smoke dribbling fiendishly from its furled nostrils. The effect was most striking, if a trifle Mathew Lewis.

"Ah, Shuteye, you're awake."

"Indeed." I yawned. "Forty winks- just the ticket after a hearty repast. Nice pipe, by the way. Any progress with Bartington's despatch?"

"With the Good Lord's help, I have prevailed. Are you up to it?"

"I'm all ears sir."

Returning to his desk and scruntizing the jumble thereon, his Reverence, first wetting his whistle with a schooner of tawny sack, duly began.

"O Caledonia! Land of brown heath and shaggy wood, land of mountain and of flood, and so on and so forth. My dear fellows, Bartington at your service, chins to heaven and nobly onward. The very Jack of all frosts last night. Are we doomed merely to gradations of Persephone's munching of pomegranates amongst this heathen heather?"

"May I interrupt old boy?"

"Shuteye, I know what you're thinking. Believe me, it was the absolute devil to make any sense of it at all. Scovell himself would have been hard pressed to get this far."

"I do appreciate your efforts old chap- it's just, well - what on earth is he wittering on about?"

"Thus far, I think he's just complaining about the weather. But listen to this -

and the poor Brigadier being struck down with febrific encephalitis, I was forced to administer sal volatile and red lavender."

"Febrific encephalitis you say? Ain't that some kind of pyretic brain fever?"

"Precisely. My guess is that Lord A has worked himself into some species of conniptionous mind frenzy. You must have noticed his recent outbursts of fury, well, ever since this whole escapade commenced?"

"Alas Cardinal, that's nothing new. Why, back at the Academy I once saw him hurl a full decanter of claret the length of the sergeants' mess, just because some dunce of an n.c.o. produced a black bottle at table on Ladies Night."

"HmMMM...I know what you mean, but let's face it - Bartington isn't the most well-tethered of canons, and if even he perceives something awry with his Lordship..."

"I take your point sir. Perhaps, on reflection, it wasn't the wisest course to send the two of them off alone, without some calming influence. And you're right, Lord A has been particularly touchy of late. I had hoped that The Laird might have cooled the situation somewhat, but his apparent absconsion can only have added to the Brigadier's troubles. Damn it all sir, I simply don't know what to make of it. Does Bartington elaborate?"

"He does little else. Though I have managed to isolate a thread of cohesive narrative. In three words, it seems that they holed up at the Laird's for an evening, during which time Lord A penned his brief despatch, before unaccountably lapsing into a state of feverish malaise. Bartington deemed him unfit to travel and left him in the care of the game-keeper; fellow by the name of Gibbons."

"Gibbons!"

"Why yes. Have you heard of him?"

"Of course not. But Gibbons, sir! Gibbons! Don't you see? Gibbons is apes!"

"Mother of Mercy! But surely..."

"Cardinal, this could be news of the most fearful import. Quickly, does Bartington say anything further?"

"Only that, having seen to the immediate comforts of the Brigadier, he departs post haste en route for the Viscount's villa, and we shall hear from him next when, I quote- I arrive begrimed with the crust of honest travel at the portals of that most noble keep."

"Sink me to the very Devil, this is no good. No good at all sir. We must decamp at once and head for the Laird's."

"Shuteye, Shuteye, it could all be perfectly innocent. A coincidence. Gibbons is, after all, not the most outlandish of surnames, and once Bartington reaches the Viscount..."

"Oh me! Bartington arriving at the Viscount's, unchaperoned? You do realise what mayhem might ensue? Remember last time? Why, the Viscount is a damn decent fellow, but he's also the most dissipated, gin-soaked rake and libertine I've ever encountered. A

commendable pedigree as I'm sure you'll concur, but need I remind you he's also noted in Who's Who as housing the most extensive collection of laudanum and absinthe varieties in the civilised world. He's consumed more Kendal Black Drop than you've consumed communion wafers. Why, if Bartington inveigles the Viscount into opening his store rooms..."

"Then the precarious balance of his delicate mind may well be irrevocably tipped!"

