

*The Thrilling Adventures of
The 18th Century Club*

*Written by
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Chapter Two

An Unaccountable Funk.

The rain had not abated.

Indeed, the insistent watery salvos that cascaded against the windows seemed if anything to be multiplied by the rollicking velocity of the locomotive as we headed north in the private compartment. It had been the work of but moments to decide upon our immediate course of action back at the Club, though admittedly it had taken rather longer to impress upon Function the imperative nature of our endeavour. However, having at length grasped that we were indeed in earnest, the splendid chap assayed to make the necessary arrangements for our transportation with the coolly efficient pragmatism of a regimental sergeant major.

Meanwhile, myself and Lord A paced the reading room. Several times I attempted to coax my companion into further disclosures as to the nature of his alarming communication, but he insisted on silence.

"No, my dear Shuteye. I shall say no more until we are aboard the express and I can be sure that we are not overheard."

"Overheard?" says I, "What, here at the Club? Why, that's simply.."

He shot me a glance from eyes as cold and grey as a butcher's cleaver. I poured us both a hefty brandy and let the matter rest.

That was four hours ago. Now, as the rain-drenched twilight obscured the sodden fields that blurred into an indistinct panorama of Prussian blue beyond the glass, and with the swarming metropolis scores of miles to our rear, I once again felt compelled to speak.

"I say, old boy, we'll be at The Manse in an hour or so. Function will have telegraphed ahead and The Monk will be expecting us. I don't suppose you could fill me in a trifle? I'd hate to arrive half-cocked, if you catch my drift."

Lord A, seated opposite me across the remnants of the meagre repast I'd had the foresight to have Function prepare for us before our departure, continued to stare balefully into the descending darkness. I noticed he'd hardly touched his terrine of smoked salmon, and had consumed little more than a brace of quail, a game pie, a plate of devilled kidneys, a dozen heads of buttered asparagus and a bottle of Moet. Blight me, he'd hardly even touched the damn goose.

I lighted a cigar and resigned myself to continuing the rest of the journey in silence. I was, in point of fact, surrendering myself half-contentedly into the welcoming arms of Morpheus when, without warning, he spoke:

“That damned yellow-eyed swine. Twenty years! Twenty years, I tell you! And now, this!”

He vigorously patted the pocket of his tunic that held the letter, and turned at last away from the window to face me. His eyes, however, remained strangely distant, as if focused upon some invisible object hovering above my shoulder.

“I have told you, Shuteye, of my time in the East?”

“Well, I know a little of your foray amongst the Tartar, though I confess I always gleaned the impression that you’d had something of a jamboree. What was her name, Natasha?”

“No, not that. Before. When you first arrived at the academy?”

“Ah. There you have me. If you recall, you were absent when I first enrolled. It was several weeks before you put in an appearance and, as peculiar as it sounds now, I was slightly in awe of your reputation with the sabre...”

“Yes, yes, but did I ever mention where I’d actually been during those several weeks?”

“Come to think of it, no. In fact, I rather fancy it became something of a taboo subject in the mess.”



At the Academy

Lord A nodded, and it seemed as if this passing reference to our salad days had tempered his agitation somewhat. He reached over the table and plucked a particularly savoury looking morsel of braised mackerel from my trencher, snaffled it, then poured himself a fresh champagne from the half consumed magnum in the ice bucket.

“In that case,” he went on, “allow me to elucidate”.

“It was some twenty odd years ago, as I’ve said. I’d taken a sabbatical from my studies in order to ascertain their practical usage in, shall we say, a somewhat less theoretical arena. To cut a long story to the marrow, I soon found myself languishing in indolence in the harem of a certain potentate who shall remain nameless,”

"In the harem?" I interjected

"It's complicated." retorted Lord A. "Suffice to say, I was young, willowy, and in full hijab for the duration. The point is, I saw things there which few men have ever seen."

"I rather bet you did, old boy!"

"Shuteye!"

"Sorry old chap, do go on."

He toyed pensively with a goujon of halibut before continuing.

"One particular night I awoke from my opiated stupor in an unaccountable funk. Barely conscious, and still partially enrobed in the torpor of the infernal poppy, I peered about the seraglio, only to discern a series of peculiar shadows, flitting across the marble walls. Flickering like insubstantial phantoms they were, between the profusion of hanging silks. A strange beating sound filled my ears, like the pounding of drums. At first I questioned my own senses, for it seemed to me as if these sounds were emanating from within my own mind."

"I know the feeling."

One sharp glance and I elected to hold my piece until the conclusion of his account.

"From within my own mind, I say, yet with a compulsive, almost savage insistence, and growing ever louder, as the weird silhouettes continued their erratic progress across the walls in the shimmering half-light of the oil lamps, until they disappeared in the direction of the sultan's private chambers. As the shadows dissipated, so too did the accompanying cacophony. Naturally, I determined to investigate, and, checking my poniard was still concealed within my robes, I crept forth in pursuit. No one else stirred. Wives, eunuchs and catamites alike all appeared to me to be in the very depths of a most profound slumber. Not so much as a twitch or a snore, and, furthermore, the usual sultry heat seemed tinged with an unnatural chill."

I could not but recall a similar sensation back at the Club, when I held the letter for the first time, but for once I said nothing.

"Upon reaching the entrance to the royal bedchamber" he continued "I knew for certain that all was not well. The guards, a brace of the most ferocious, strapping fellows you can imagine, lay before the door utterly insensible, and dribbling like kittens. I bent down and procured a scimitar from the limp fingers of the one nearest to me, and, recognising that the time for caution was gone, and the time for decisive action had arrived,

I paused merely to re-focus my faculties, then shouldered the door with main force and burst headlong into the room."

"Good show sir!" I could not help but exclaim, as I pictured his Lordship, moustaches bristling beneath his veil and the gleaming blade in his fist, crashing into the fray with all the ludicrous bravado of Blucher at Auerstedt.

"Indeed," says he "and yet, for all that, I was utterly unprepared for what happened next".

Suddenly, as if to underscore the denouement of the tale, a piercing shriek ripped through the carriage.

I confess, I almost spilled me pinot noir.

"Suffering Jesus!" I spluttered, "what in God's name was that?"

To my consternation, Lord 'A instantly threw back his head and emitted a most garrulous chortle.

"Shuteye, you buffoon, it's the damnable train whistle! We've arrived, dear chap."

"Arrived? Arrived? But what of the sultan and the flickering spectral shadows? What of the fiendish drums, sir? You must tell all!"

"And you sir, " he said, leaning across the table, "must be patient. 'Tis but a few rod's march to The Manse, and I must tell the whole thing again in the presence of his Eminence, our very dear friend the Monk. He is, I'm sure you'll concur, the most widely travelled of any of us, both on this Earth and in the arcane realms of pagan theism in its myriad forms. It's his counsel we need, that's why we're here, or did you forget?"

"Dash it all, Brigadier" I rejoined. But I knew he was right.

And thus we disembarked, and made our way through the deserted streets, in the still teeming rain, beneath the gibbous moon, to The Manse.