

Arctic Zephyr

The scotsman, who was mentioned briefly, but then faded out of everyone's minds again, sits down at the table heavily. Everything about him is heavy, from his beard, to his accent, to the gigantic sword which he has propped beside him. He wears the tartan of clan Bruce.

"Aye," he says, "Chinese opium is all very well, but it's highland mist compared to the *Scottish* opium we used to grow. One puff, and everyone around ye feels the effects! They sag around, wear silly clothes, follow nancy-boy kings, and talk in damn silly accents. Sometimes they cannae even see ye. Ye may have noticed."

Out of deference to the newcomer's position, the Bruce nods to the Duke in a manner bordering on the churlish. He does not jump up, cleave the man off at the knees, and headbutt the remainder to death, which would appear to be his natural inclination.

The Earl takes the moment to order a selection of Saracen liquors, which he downs with alacrity.

"But I understand, Sir Bruce, that you are no stranger to the Arctic Zephyr. Perhaps you could tell me how you came to know this strange being, and why you took one of Scotland's highest mountains to the Antipodes in secret, only to return it a week later?"

"Oh, aye, I'd near forgotten that," says the Bruce, "it was so long ago. But it set me up for life. Before that I was just wee Angus Drummond, the assistant groundskeeper at Clackmannan.

"I'd met the Arctic Zephyr when I was but a bairn. Farley, the chief groundskeeper - daft, dyslexic old dunder-pate he was - had been send by the old Lord to capture the Arch-Zebra, and he decided to take me along. He said it was for company, but I think he knew what I'd been up to with his daughter." He chuckles a little and takes a long swig of his drink. He seems lost in memories of the groundskeeper's daughter.

"If I hadae been a little older I would have spoken up when we set out north, but I must admit I was a little wary of the man. He was near on seven foot tall and as hairy as one of those Irish dogs. He said he had some wildman in him, and there were few willing to gainsay him. Besides, I had been seeing to his daughter.

"When we got back from our trip with a bag full of Arctic Zephyr, rather than the Arch-Zebra in a cage, the old Lord was furious and told us to sort it out before we dared show our faces at Clackmannan again. He was wooing the Duchess of Wolverhampton and had promised her a ride on the King of the Zebras." Once again the Bruce downs a large portion of his drink, and then gaffaws, spraying you all with beer. "I'll tell you what happened when she tried it some other time.

"So Farley set of south, this time with a picture of what a zebra looks like, and it was left to me to take the Zephyr back where he came from. When I let it go, it was so grateful it told me I could call on it three times and it would help me out at need. I've used two calls, one when I was pretending to be the chief eunuch at the palace of Brunei and couldnae find a cold shower for the life of me, and one in the tale I'm about to tell.

"Now you may think that a trip to the north pole is hard thing for a boy of only twelve summers, but you must remember that we breed them tough in Scotland, and besides, I've got a little wildman in me myself." He points to his beer-soaked beard, then leers at the Contessa. "Have you got any wildman in you, lady?"

"Indeed not," replies the Contessa firmly. "Nor would I wish to. My family is of impeccable noble stock."

"Oh, I see - I had understood the Bruce's question to be culinary in nature. I have not partaken, myself, but I'm told that spit-roasted wildman is at least as palatable as orangoutan, and very sustaining.

"As an aside, you may be interested to know that the Arch-Zebra was killed by the King of Beasts, who, of course, took his title by right of conquest. This title was later bestowed, in return for unspoken services rendered, to a close personal friend of the Lions, to wit, the Empress of Russia, who added 'Arch-Zebra' to her very long list of impressive titles.

"I'm also told that she was not averse to giving the Duchess of Wolverhampton a ride, as a favour to the Old Lord, though it apparently did nothing to further the courtship.

"Pray, continue, sir Bruce."

Ben Bovril

"Aye, well, be that as it may," says the Bruce, "I knew that having the Arctic Zephyr on my side could well be the making of me, but it wasnae until near on seven years later, after Farley had been lost in a freak garden trowel accident, that I realised how it could be done.

"I'd been on a trip to the highlands as part of my passage to manhood. As part wildman, I wouldnae be considered a man until I'd spent a month in the snow wi nae clothes and only a rock of my choosing to hunt with. To fulfil my dream of being a laird in my own right, I'd have to bring back some snow from the top of a mountain too.

"Naturally, I chose the terrifying Ben Bovril, which had never been scaled before, even by the famous goat men of the Pyrenees. You may not have heard of it, but it's notorious amongst the highland clans. Not quite as high as Ben Nevis, but far more treacherous."

You notice as the massive Scotsman waves to the barmaid for another drink, that he is building a scale model of the mountain out of complementary nuts.

"I scaled the south-western face," he says, indicating one particularly difficult part of his model, "which as you can see is an overhanging glacier. It's easy enough when you know how. All you have to do is lick your hands, and press them flat against the ice," he presses his hands flat on the table and grins manically, "you stick like glue."

"Anyway, once at the top of the mountain, I took a moment to look around at the view, since no one had ever seen it before and, in all likelihood, would never see it again.

"As I stood there, I noticed a strange smell. I hadnae eaten for more than a week, since with both hands busy climbing the glacier, I hadnae been able to hold on to my rock, and whatever the smell was, it was making me hungry. So I looked around, and eventually found that it was coming from my feet.

"I didnae seem natural, wanting to eat your own feet, even if you had just climbed a cliff with no food and you were standing naked in the snow on top of the most dangerous mountain in the world, but

when I looked closer, it turned out my feet had melted little puddles in the snow, and it was these puddles that were making the smell." He smacks his lips at the memory and downs his pint in one gulp.

"The stuff in the puddles was some kind of brown liquid, and it smelled like liquid cow. Now that may not sound appetising to some of you more civilised types, but liquid cow is a rare delicacy amongst the wildmen and the Scots alike. So I tasted the stuff..." He smacks his lips again.

"And suddenly I knew how I was going to make my fortune. I could be more than just the Laird of a clan, I could be... well you know what I am! All I had to do was steal the mountain and haul it off somewhere warm where the snow would melt. The only question was how."

"I'd imagine that it would take more than a stout cart and a brace of oxen," says the Earl.

"Well I thought of that, naturally," says the Bruce, "and some kind of arrangement with sails, too, but like most mountains I found Ben Bovril to be fairly well stuck to the ground. And then there was the issue of how to cover up what I'd done for long enough to harvest the snow."

"Well," comments the Contessa, "the method that comes first to mind is to hollow out the mountain from the inside, leaving only a thin shell of permafrost in place. Of course, to do that properly, you'd need a jar of pickled fox eggs and a very long straw. Fox eggs aren't easy to obtain. Still, I'll wager that's the approach you took."

Of Foxes and Flamenco

"Aye, lady," the massive Scotsman says, "I thought long and hard, but the ancient hollowing-out-a-mountain-with-fox-eggs-and-a-long-straw trick was the only way I could think of. In fact, I realised that if I did it not once, but twice, I could solve all my problems at once. "The first time, it would leave a hollow shell that would disguise what I had done, and the second would leave a hollow mountain that'd be light enough for the Arctic Zephyr could lift. All the rock and stuff from inside I could just dump in Pentland Firth. People've been sticking in new islands up there for years, and no one's ever noticed.

"Getting hold of a long straw was no problem," he says with a wicked grin, "I'd been spending time with a Spanish lass who'd been trying to beat the world record for the length of straw a person could suck an olive through. The fox eggs were another matter. The monotreme fox isnae native to Scotland. Not to Europe at all. In fact the only place I knew for sure I could find one was in Madagascar."

He cracks his knuckles and disassembles his nutty model of Ben Bovril, then reconstructs it into a map of Madagascar, complete with settlements marked with olive pits and mountains with walnuts.

"I didnae have the money to get there myself, but now I was the head groundskeeper at Clackmannan, and I was in charge of keeping the Laird's menagerie up to date with the latest European fashions.

"I had my pneumatic Spanish friend forge a letter from her mistress, saying that she was "ever so attracted to men who owned three-toed sloths" (I dinnae ken if you ever got a letter inviting you to see it, Contessa), and within a week I was well on my way to Madagascar in search of the monotreme fox."

He sits back and downs another half pint, obviously waiting for congratulations on his cleverness, or at least questions about what else his flamenco floozy could do. These not being forthcoming, he continues with his story.

“Now Madagascar's a strange place. I wished I'd been with Farley on his second hunt for the Arch-Zebra, since he'd actually made it to Africa that time. But as it was I had to make do with sailors' stories and any maps I could lay my hands on. I discounted most of what the sailors told me, but I did learn that the place was ruled by dozens of tribes, each with various kinds of royalty, and some of them were none too keen on white men, let alone gigantic red and pink men.

“The ship put me down on the north cost of the island, saying they'd be back in a month to pick me up, and if I wasnae there, it was my own problem. So I set off south, whistling the distinctive call of the monotreme fox.

“It wasnae long till it had an effect. I'd only been in the country for a day an a half before some of the locals mistook me for the very fox I was looking for and shot me with a poisoned arrow. Now these days I'm immune to every poison known to man, but this all happened long before I ever met Viracocha, so the deadly poison knocked me unconscious in less than a week.

“I awoke in the village of Antsohiny, hog-tied to a stake over a slow fire, and surrounded by natives. I glanced around quickly and saw a basket of the very eggs I needed sitting next to what had to be a kitchen hut. This journey was going to be easier than I thought, and everything I needed to escape was right where I needed it.”

“I'll wager that one of those items needed for your escape was a sample of Nowell's Limestone Moss, which normally lives only on very old stone walls in the Yorkshire Dales, which flowers only every 130 years or so.”

The earl looks around the table. “I'm at a loss as to what the other articles were, but I've no doubt the others here would have some idea.”

The Contessa considers this for a moment. “I'm not sure, but I imagine he might have made good use of the very ropes that bound him.” “Aye, you're right there,” says the Scotsman, “and the Contessa too - the ropes and the moss were all I needed to not only escape from the natives, but to establish myself as their God.

“Now I reckon you've all been someone's Gods at some point. It's not like it's hard to achieve, but the folks of Madagascar were my first, so I remember them fondly.

“Native Madagascans are of Indonesian stock,” he explains, “so they're not a big people. They're not used to dealing with Europeans, and definitely not used to dealing with wild men. I could have torn the ropes apart any time I wanted, but I'd've been nae further along my path. They would've just shot me again and strung me up.

“Instead, I just hung there, waiting for the Yorkshire moss I habitually keep in my sporan to heat up. You may not know it, but any clever Scotsman keeps the moss about his person to warm the bits that need warming. Even a little bit of heat makes it give off ten times as much in return. As well as that, when it's warm it smells like flowers.

“The Yorkshire moss only flowers once every 130 years, but it makes up for it in smell. A plant that flowers every year may smell nice, but one that flowers every 130 years smells 130 times as much. In Europe, that's not a problem, the animals and insects are used to it, but in Africa, it's a different story.

The heating of the Yorkshire moss attracted bees from all over the island of Madagascar, and within minutes, they were swarming all over the village.

“African bees are normally pretty docile, but they were driven wild by the smell of the warm moss. They were stinging the villagers and swarming all over the place. I took the opportunity to break free of my bonds and take shelter from the insects in the kitchen hut.

“Now I could have left the villagers to it at that point, but it seemed heartless to leave them being stung by bees when all they'd done was to shoot their future God and hang him up over a fire. So I took pity on them. I wove my ropes into a kind of a net and strode out into the village square.

“There weren't any natives around, but I could feel their eyes on me. I threw the net into the air with a mighty cry, and while everyone was watching that, surrepticiously threw the moss into the fire where it wouldn't cause any more trouble. Now naturally, the net wasn't much use against the bees, but the natives didn't know that, and with the moss gone, the bees buzzed off.

“Naturally, the natives made me their God: they had tried to cook me, and the bees had descended, and only I had been able to dispell them afterwards. Even today you can hear them chanting what I shouted when I threw the net in the air: 'Does your mother own a sewing machine?' the priest call out. 'Well tell her to stitch this then, Jimmy,' the natives reply.

“As their God, I delivered a few choice commandments: don't kill anyone who doesn't deserve it, don't steal anything you can't hide, and give me some monotreme fox eggs. They did all of these things, and I rested in the village for a fortnight. When it was time to leave, they begged me to stay, but I told them I had to attend to Godly business and would be back whenever they needed me. I've been back a few times since, and have found the people in dire need of my presence, with an excess of virgins in the village, needing to be 'sacrificed'.”

He sits back and is quiet for a moment, thinking of something pleasant. It's obviously good to be a god.

“I left them with most of the fox eggs,” he says eventually, “I only needed a dozen or so, and set off to the north to meet my ship. On the way, I scruffed a three-toed sloth to please the laird, and boarded the ship bound back for Europe. It was a pleasant voyage, with calm seas and plenty of African produce to eat. So I was relaxed, and totally unprepared for the harsh reception that met me when I got back to Scotland...”

“I would wager, me dear Bruce', says the Duke,”that the inhospitability of your homeland to your arrival was entirely the fault of your sometime nemesis, Farley.”

“He had in fact, not only failed to locate the Arch Zebra for you Laird, but had actually claimed that you had met in your travels with him and stolen it. Some nonsense or other about archrivalry and a daughter no doubt.”

“I suspect the Laird had the entire army of Royal Mad Scots awaiting your arrival for the sole purpose of arresting you and discovering the whereabouts of the Arch-Zebra through any means necessary. Including use of the Bagpipe with Intent.”

The Earl gasps in shock.

The Trouble with Sloths

“Well,” says the Bruce, “if you remember, your Lordship, Farley had already retired by this time, having successfully found the Arch-Zebra and given his lady friend a good long ride,” he grins again at the memory, “but you're right when you say that Farley's grudge over his daughter was to blame. In the past he'd accused me of not only deflowering his daughter but, so to speak, pruning her severely, practicing a bit of topiary, and finally cutting her down and making her into an item of bedroom furniture.

“He hadnae been able to make these charges stick with the old Laird, so had resorted to having them brought up in the English courts. He'd also accused me of sailing to Madagascar to gather fox eggs, which are a well know aphrodisiac. If I had've known that at the time, I would've got some more.

“Now you know how the English are for prosecuting and persecuting the Scots, so ye'll ken I had little chance of getting away with my fox eggs, or even my life, so I had tae get off the ship and back to the Laird's mannor without the English catching me. Normally, this wouldnae have been a problem, but the docks were lined with English soldiers, and the three-toed sloth, never a particularly stealthy beastie, had been violently ill for days and had got into the habit of farting loudly and disgustingly whenever anyone approached. I think the load of dried prunes we picked up in North Africa may have had something to do with it.” Having said this, he downs his seventeenth pint and waves at the barmaid for another two or three.

“Fortunately, I was by now on good terms with everyone aboard ship, and they agreed to help me. They were willing to lend me a boat, and even row it, but with all the noise the sloth was making, there was no way we'd be able to sneak past the soldiers, and ye cannae outpaddle men on horseback. The mate - who had been worrying all of us for a while - suggested putting a cork up the sloth and tarring it to prevent leakage, but I'm no a cruel man, and even if it had have enjoyed the cork, I cannae see how getting tar out of it's nether-hairs could have been fun at all.

“So in the end, I came up with an idea based on something the captain had seen on a voyage to China. I decided I couldnae risk the lives of my friends - except perhaps the mate, who'd made comments about my kilt - so I set off alone by dead of night. The two smallest ratings, a pair of brothers named John and Alan Neilsen, sat atop each other's shoulders to fool the soldiers on the shore into thinking I was still aboard, and me and my sloth were lowered gently into the water in one of the boats.

“Now if you've ever been to China and seen one of their festivals, I'm sure you'll know what happened next. I strapped the sloth down firmly, so he couldnae fall - or fly - overboard, and set up a candle behind him. After that it was just a case of pointing the boat northwards, and within minutes we were rocketing our way to freedom faster than a man can ride.

“When we finally reached land, we were no more than ten miles from Clackmannan. I delivered the sloth, who was quite worn out by then, and after a bite to eat and a quick visit to Farley's daughter, I set out on the last and, as it was to turn out most difficult, part of my quest, the theft of Ben Bovril.”

“Was it the sudden change in the weather that made it so difficult?” asked the Contessa.

Farley gets his

After what seems an inordinately long pause to polish off his beer, the Bruce leans forward to finish his story.

"I'll tell ye a secret, lady," he says in what probably counts, for him, as a whisper, "I've always told people it was the change in the weather, but with the Arctic Zephyr on my side, I could have coped with that. It was really Farley that made it difficult. He damn near ruined all my plans.

"I dinnae know how he did it, but somehow he'd caught wind of what I was up to, and he'd decided to do it himself. By the time I got to the top of Ben Bovril again, all the snow was gone, and Farley was sitting there waiting for me! He must have hollowed out the mountain and towed it away himself. Ahd he must have ridden like the wind to beat me there from the coast, but he was sitting there calm as can be, and a dozen English soldiers with him besides.

"I quickly hid behind a rock and wondered what I was going to do. All the marvellous brown liquid was gone, probably stored somewhere in the Antipodes for him to come back to once he'd done away with me. I knew there was no chance of getting him to tell me where it was, he was always a tight lipped fellow, and I wasnae his favorite person. I must admit, I searched for the stuff for years, but I never found it. I'm sure it's out there somewhere just waiting for someone to come along and make their fortune from it. It doesnae worry me any more. I made my fortune that day anyway.

"With my plans ruined, my thoughts turned to revenge. I still had the fox eggs with me, and a long length of straw which was now useless. And I had the Arctic Zephyr with me. It didnae take long to come up with a plan. I trimmed the straw down to a two foot length and stuffed one of the eggs inside. I aimed to use it like a pea shooter, but with the size of a fox egg and the size of a straw, I didnae have the puff to blow it out the end. I'm no sure even my Spanish lady could've done it.

"But the Arctic Zephyr could, and come evening, we set ourselves up behind a rock and waited for Farley to get tired. Sure enough, it wasnae long before he started yawning. While his mouth was wide open, the Zephyr blew down the straw and the egg flew out the end like an arrow from a bow, straight down his throat." He laughs uproariously at this.

"You should've seen the look on his face when it hit him in the back of the throat! I bet he suddenly found out how his daughter felt when I was about. But that was nothing compared to the look on his face when the aphrodisiac effect of the egg hit him a few seconds later.

"Now I don't know if you've ever tried it, but fox eggs are powerful and irresistible. They give you urges that have to be attended to straight away. You want to be very careful that you're in the right company before you start messing around with fox eggs. Swallowing one when your only companions are twelve English soldiers for instance, is not a good plan, unless you're that kind of girl.

"The last I saw of those soldiers, they were racing down the mountain with Farley in hot pursuit, his kilt hitched up around his waist, and his manhood standing up like a caber. They must've made it back to England in the end, but I don't know if they were the same men they'd been when they set out."

The Bruce sits back with a smug look on his face, then notices you all staring at him waiting for more.

"Oh, the fortune," he says, and slaps his forehead, "I made that turning Farley in for the reward a fortnight later.

“But enough about me, now. I'm parched. How about you tell me what you think of me? What about you, Your Lordship,” he asks the Duke, “I know you followed me about for several months when I was trying to beat you to the lost temple of Keekong Dong. I could never ken how ye beat me there, and why you had four geese and a monkey with a small accordian with you instead of your sherpas when you did.”

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