

The wrath of the Beggar's Guild

Contessa Barbara turns to the Englishwoman at her right. "Miss Thimblebelly," she enquired, "I see that you have not yet abandoned your disguise. Perhaps you could entertain us with the tale of how it is that you came to incur the wrath of the Beggar's Guild over involving cheese and why it is that you are restrained by a solemn oath from simply dispatching potential attackers from that quarter with the efficiency for which you are known?"

Miss T. sets out on a positively *lovely* day

Miss Thimblebelly, having been engrossed in rearranging the contents of her pockets, namely several shrivelled and grotesquely formed items which *may* be responsible for adding to the pungency of the room and do not bear closer examination, glances at the Contessa and mumbles, "Yes yes, the confounded disguise. It has become rather a bother. The gentlemen's conveniences, for example, do not even bear thinking about".

She looks up to glare at the Scotsman and the Duke, then gives a start. "Your Grace, I didn't see you come in", she says, turns slightly and blinks at Earl S_ as if noticing *him* for the first time, and waits until the silence of the room is punctuated only by some heavy yet melodious snoring from the far side of the door.

"Ahem. If I may be permitted to continue. Entertain, you say, Contessa? Well I shall endeavour to fulfill your request, though the degree of *entertainment* you all may derive from this particular tale is as much dependent on your dispositions, I suspect, as it is on my delivery. Well. It all began", she says, leaning back against the cushions and waving an arm expansively, "one fine morning this past spring, in a small village in Dorchester, the name of which I shall refrain from mentioning.

"Ah, the birds were chirping, the daffodils swaying in the fresh breeze, and the triple-horned cattle (peculiar to the region) were blissfully content in their fields of verdant grass. Little did I suspect anything untoward was afoot, let alone horror on a vast scale in which shortly I myself would be enmeshed. Of all the vile, underhanded... But I fear I am getting ahead of myself.

"It was this scene of pastoral serenity into which I set forth from my lodgings at the village's sole inn (the Pusillanimous Pheasant) on an errand of seemingly slight import, yet in truth of some significance to me. It took, as it happened, several hours for me to reach my ultimate destination, having stopped along the way to assist several small children devise a better version of Scotch-hop, to coax an elderly lady's cat from a tree (with the aid of my slingshot), and finally to dismantle and reassemble the postmaster's carriage, making a few improvements during the process with an ingenious (if I do say so myself) use of a skipping rope, a box of snuff, and a disused wine-barrel of which I just happened to be in possession.

"So the sun was high, and though I am not unaccustomed to exertion, having finished credibly placed in a competitive field in last winter's Glencoe Gourmet Glen Gallivant - perhaps you know it sir?" she says with a sideways glance at the Scotsman, before continuing in the same breath, "I was rather fatigued when I reached a certain secluded meadow, and perhaps my powers of observation were not at their best. For, indeed, that is the only explanation I can muster for my failure to notice what should have been immediately apparent".

She pauses, and casts a beady eye around the assembled company.

“You must have been weary indeed,” murmurs the Contessa, not without sympathy. “For what you failed to notice was - I imagine - that, within the secluded meadow, it was the middle of a clear winter night, with snow lying on the ground and stars sparkling overhead, although it was still broad daylight beyond - and a warm summer day at that!”

The day takes rather a turn for the worse

“Why, yes, Countess Barbara”, Miss Thimblebelly says in a tone of surprise. “I see that you are already aware of *several* of the particulars of this tale”. A hand emerges (seemingly of its own will) from a voluminous sleeve, and snatches up the coin.

“Blinking in the sudden darkness, I merely assumed that my patented solar-deflecting spectacles had malfunctioned and were blocking out too much of the sunlight. From time to time the chill bothered me, ('Why', I thought to myself, 'the day's taken rather a turn for the worse'), but I wrapped myself more warmly in my griffon-skin travelling cloak and set about to picking wild snarfleberries (the collection of which was my purpose there).

“Humming to myself as I worked (my latest composition for bugle and lute) I was startled when a heavy hand landed on my shoulder. The hand was attached to an arm, and thence to a body in the usual fashion. On the body was a head of such particular baseness, such degeneracy, such malformed and be-warted visual offensiveness that even my special eyewear could not safeguard my orbs from shock at the sight.

“He swung a cudgel at me. I dodged. 'Hold there, my good fellow', I said, or words to that effect, only to narrowly escape a braining with the lump of wood (as gnarled as its owner). Clearly he meant business.

“He attempted once more to inflict grievous harm upon my person. After leaping nimbly over the cudgel, I sensed that any attempt to reason with the fellow was doomed to failure. Drawing my small-sword (the only invention, I believe, that the French have inflicted on the world with less than disastrous consequences) I took up a fighting stance”. Miss Thimblebelly moves surprisingly quickly to the corner, snatches up her cane, and wheels around to stand en-garde facing the large hookah, which is sitting unconcernedly on the table.

“I quickly had him on the retreat”, she shouts, parrying a non-existent thrust and riposting into the gap left by said attack. “I didn't want to hurt him, of course, until I could ascertain just what the blazes was going on. After all, it might all be some beastly misunderstanding!” She waves her cane vigorously in the air before disarming the offending vessel.

“Well!” she says, turning suddenly and stalking back to the couch. “Unfortunately my moment of victory was shortlived. With the point of my small-sword at the ruffian's throat, I demanded, 'Now, tell me why you...'

“Then a sack came over my head and a heavy blow knocked me unconscious”.

“I say, Earl S_!” injects the Baroness, with some confusion, “Whatever were you doing there?”

“Ah, I see you recognised from the description the visage of my faithful servant, Rashid. Alas, I have

no idea as to why he would be accosting Miss Thimblebelly, as, although he was my inseparable companion in the Crimea, such that his presence there would indeed have implied my own, we have since parted company.

“Rashid's hideous, hideous appearance belies a heart of the purest gold. I can not believe that he would stoop so low as to accost young and innocent ladies resting in benighted meadows without good cause. I would wager, then, that his good cause involved a matter of such utmost urgency that he, against his gentle nature, must needs resort to more direct methods of obtaining our friend's aid, and that she found herself pressed into the service of, I would hazard, an unlikely alliance of simple rustics, reformed criminals, civil servants, and former companions of gentleman adventurers, who sought aid in combatting an evil that was above their station.”

Earl S_ idly strokes his flawless features and twirls his elegant moustache.

The plot thickens to a pea-soup consistency

Miss Thimblebelly, having coughed at the 'young' and blushed at the 'innocent', looks at the Earl appraisingly. “So *you* are the 'Stu' of whom Rashid spoke so highly. Why, I heard so much, (during the long hours we spent together) about your adventures in the Crimea. I was particularly impressed by the deft manner in which you handled the plague of ducklings, earning the gratitude of a village that was thenceforth quite prepared to overlook your role in causing it in the first place.

“But I fear I am getting ahead of myself. Earl S_ has the long and short of it correct. Fearing for my life, valuables or reputation when I awoke, I sat up from where I had been placed on a straw mattress in a dingy hovel, ready to give whomever was in earshot a right tonguelashing, if not worse. Those within earshot (but hovering just outside of arms-length) turned out to be a motley collection of neer-do-wells indeed. A scrawny red-haired fellow with but one arm piped up before I could speak, 'Ma'am, are you all right?'

“Not at all the reception I had expected. His name, I gleaned, was Rupert, but not before he apologised profusely for the assault upon my person. With much hovering and wringing of hands (by those who still had both), the assortment of rascallions explained somewhat incoherently that it had been necessary to remove me from the meadow post-haste, lest 'they' learn of my presence and assorted (vaguely alluded to) disaster ensue.

“Rupert, a former pickpocket, eventually made so bold as to ask me what my business had been in the meadow. Ignoring his cryptic, 'For you sure don't look like one of *them*, my lady', I explained my mission to collect the variety of snarfleberry found only in a few local localities, glossing over the exact eventual use to which they would be put (for reasons of copyright).

“'Why, ye're a witch!' spoke forth boldly a young man (Rufus) of indeterminate accent and the bearing and manner of a postmaster's assistant. Well, try as I might, I could not convince these good but simple folk that I no more than dabbled in the Dark Arts, or rather the Medium Greyish at Worst Arts, and they immediately decided I should be recruited to help their cause, of which only the vaguest hints had up until now been dropped.

“Well, democracy is an *interesting* concept, but one which leads to naught but confusion when a rabble of common folk attempt to exercise it. There was no consensus on who should deliver me what information, and in which order. Order, sadly, was something that was quite lacking from the ensuing proceedings.

"I learned something about a plot (indeed the word 'plot' was frequently mentioned, in tones of great despair), some more about conspiracy and fragments (whispered and accompanied by much head-nodding) about the End of Civilisation. Rodriguo, a former farm-hand, babbled about shipments, timetables and recipies. There were hints of extortion, rumours of bewitchment, and the assertively stated conviction that the Beggar's Guild was behind it all.

"Piecing the information together, I came to a startling conclusion. 'Why!' I exclaimed, 'They intend to...'

"I was interrupted by a ferocious pounding on the door".

"Seems to me I reckonise the man who jumped ye," the Bruce rumbles, "I knew a man who used a cudgel so, and the face is a dead giveaway. It's a family trait, and it's why I grew me beard." He leers at the assembly, and it's suddenly apparent that under the red beard he is a man of most striking ugliness.

"It sounds to me like you were attacked by my cousin, Halitosis Hamish, the hairy highland hunter. He always works with an accomplice, Wee Kenny McMurdo a one armed bandit, and a midget to boot. A naughtier pair you'll never meet. Was it them, lady? I'd be mightly glad to hear of their whereabouts, so I can stay away."

"Why, yes, Countess Barbara", Miss Thimblebelly says in a tone of surprise. I see that you are already aware of *several* of the particulars of this tale"

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"Then a sack came over my head and a heavy blow knocked me unconscious".

"Ach, the Scottish opium has made me more invisible than usual...", says the Bruce.

Emerging again from the obscuring cloud of Scottish opium smoke, the Bruce seems to have a thoughtful look on his face. "I'll wager," he says, "the two you've named were Rupert the right-handed, red-head rascal and Rufus the registered road-freight receiver, then the others would have been Reginald Rankin, the royal riverboat wrangler, and Raging Richard, rebel ranger and raconteur. If their fellow, Randy Raymond, the Richmond ram rogerer was there, I'm sure you would have said. You couldnae have missed him. "Last I saw them, they were still robbing roadside restaurants, but Rufus the registered road-freight reciever had some right funny ideas. He talked about Revelations and Ragnarok, and some right religious ramblings. I heard a few months ago that Rupert the right-handed, red-head rascal was calling himself Reverend, and they'd formed the Revealed Rectory of Reformed, Revered Rosicrutans." "Rum rascals all, or they were once," says the Earl. "But at least Red-Haired Rebecca the rough but radiant racketeer and her wretched rival, Ruthless Ruth the repulsive renegade, weren't involved." The Earl shudders. "You'd need a redoubtable royal regiment to deal with the likes of those."

An alliterative aside

Mis Thimblebelly inhales and intently intones, "Responding to the racket, right-handed Rupert (previously a pickpocket and currently in the clergy), darted to the door, dismally decrying 'Defeated! Demons do destroy our deception, dealing doom and death!'

"Rufus (who had indeed been until recently a registered road-freight receiver) ran to red-haired Rupert, rattling off reassurance, 'Why, with the witch we will win!' I recoiled at the responsibility.

"Fortunately it was no fearsome foe who had found us, but our friend, the frighteningly-faced rascal Rashid who had returned from his ranging. He ducked under the doorway and declared that a dreadful darkness was creeping clammily across the countryside. There was therefore no time to talk about theories. I kept my calculations close to my chest, and crawled after the crowd of my courageous countrymen through a concealed cover into a claustrophobic corridor, and carried on into a cold and creepy culvert.

"Reginald Rankin (retired royal riverboat wrangler) described to me our desired destination. We would wend our way toward the water close to the community's centre, covertly concealed from the chaos-spawn that had committed such cunning craft upon this charming countryside. Then we would a set in place a scheme to spoil the supernatural sport that had harrowed the hamlet (and endangered the entirety of England). This contrivance was yet to be concocted.

“The Dastardly Demons of Darkleblith were the doers of the dreadful deeds that had plagued this peaceful paradise. Rashid exposted that they had emerged from an eerie Elsewhere, and entrapped the preponderance of the populace with evil enchantment. The current company was spared since the spawn could not pronounce their proper names (for them the letter “R” was laborious), and thus the incantations were ineffective.

“My own name, naturally, did not privilege me from the peril. Rashid reached into a bulging bag and handed me some hunks of hessian so the enchantment would not endanger me. 'In case they infer your identity', the massive man muttered.

“Raging Richard, rebel ranger and raconteur, cheerily chatted to me, meanwhile. 'Milady, a happy happenstance indeed it is that you have not consumed any of the culprit cheese'. I blinked. Breakfast had been baguettes, butter, brie... oh *bother*

Miss Thimblebelly breathes belabouredly, and blinks briskly.

The Earl energetically and exuberantly exclaims, “Why, what a wonderful way with words! Your amazing alliteration astounds us all!”

“I surmise,” said the Contessa, clearly enjoying the tale, “that the cheese you had consumed left you vulnerable to demonic possession, since it is commonly known that a dairy-based comestible - prepared in a certain way at a certain time of day - provides a ready focus for the summoning of demons. I wonder how the focus cheese left the control of the villains and entered general circulation.”

A dark and stormy night ensues

'The cheese', said Rodriguo into the silence that had fallen after my confession. 'Did it taste of peat and mulled wine?' Oh dear. I indicated the affirmative by means of raising and lowering my head. There were gasps (not, I should be clear, emanating from *me* - I was a little set back by this turn of events, but not in the least bit worried. Why, I had been landed in far worse pickles, just in the previous *week*). Miss Thimblebelly surveys her audience, nodding as if to say 'But of *course*'

“The crowd gathered anxiously around me in the dank underground tunnel, inspecting my pupils and peering at my ears (which would, I surmised, show telltale signs had I been possessed by this particular strain of demon). I withstood the collective scrutiny, searching my own mind for any ectoplasmic tentacle-prints. I resolutely did *not* stand on my head, quack like a duck, or dance a Lancastrian jig, whilst Rupert the religious expert impatiently explained to the undereducated rabble the difference between susceptibility to demonic possession and susceptibility to suggestion.

“Rufus and Rashid conversed anxiously a little way away from us, casting worried glances in our - specifically my - direction. Feeling peckish, I absently scarfed down a handful of snarfleberries from my pouch - after all it appeared as though I would not have the opportunity to preserve them in time for use in my special Preparation (number 4B). I looked around as silence fell once again. 'What?' Rufus rushed up to me. 'Milady! The snarfleberries!'

“It turned out that I should undoubtedly have been showing signs of possession so many hours after enjoying my breakfast - exhibiting incandescent red pupils, convulsion of the ears, and the sudden urgent desire to participate in plots to spread darkness, demons and cheese across England (and the continent). As well I knew, snarfleberries (the local strain in particular) possessed many remarkable

properties, and it now seemed as though fending off otherworldly attack by Darkleblith Demons was one.

“As I urgently conferred with Rodriguo (the former farm-hand) on the best way to inoculate the milk supplies with essence of snarfleberry, we were interrupted by one-armed Rupert. He seemed convinced that the timetable was 'all wrong'. That demons would invade England (and the continent) was prophesied in certain religious texts in his possession, he told us at great length, (to which ramblings I frankly paid little attention, and will not inflict such as I do remember upon my current audience) and was centered around next Tuesday afternoon. This had been bothering him, he said. The encroaching darkness, an unmistakable sign that ever more demons had emerged and taken over hosts in this plane, was appearing well ahead of schedule. And now to learn that the Special cheese was already being served in the inn, and who knew where else? This was not, he said, the plan. I left him muttering about 'how in the blazes can we foil their plot if they won't stick to the damned program?' (actually he used his own dialect, which was far cruder and which I shall not reproduce), and called Rashid over.

“We left Rodriguo in charge of preparing the cheese counteroffensive, Rufus assisting him, Richard responsible for morale (Reginald had vanished, to do I knew not what), and Rashid, Rupert and I took a side-tunnel to the surface to investigate what might be responsible for the unexpected spread of the cheese. We emerged into an alley behind the inn. Whilst we had been underground, the unnatural diabolic nighttime had expanded dramatically, and now blanketed the entire so far as we could tell. And it was no longer a serene winters night like the one into which I had stumbled in the meadow but few hours ago - wind howled menacingly through the streets, lightning crackled hellishly in the sky, and torrents of puce clouds raced tumultuously from horizon to horizon.

“Rashid clutched at my arm. I turned my head. From our vantage point just inside the alleyway we could make out a skulking figure. Two things about him impressed themselves on my mind. Firstly, he was rolling a large barrel of cheese down the street in a decidedly suspicious manner. Secondly, though clearly human, he was misshapen and hunched. I recognised him as a deformed beggar who had accosted me quite persistently upon my arrival in the village”.

Another hookah having arrived to replace the mysteriously broken one, Miss Thimblebelly pauses for a brief diversion.

“I'll wager, Miss Thimblebelly, that Rashid's vile aspect formed a vital part of your plan to save all England and much of the continent, as it did so many of my own such plans regarding the various Indies. It can be handy, especially in cheese-related emergencies, to have on hand a comrade who can curdle milk with a glance.”

Ach, man,” cries the Bruce, “do you know nothing about cheese? Ye cannae even let snarfleberries in the same room with curdled cheese, let alone put them in the mix! The air and fire of the berries clashes with earth and water of the cheese. The results can be explosive. “Unless...” understanding suddenly dawns on his face, “aye, that'd be it. I wager you planned to use the explosive force to defeat the legions of hell somehow!”

“Pish tosh and primitive superstitious nonsense, old bean. It's got nothing to do with earth and water and such mumbo-jumbo. It's a simple scientific process, as the aether emitted by the ripening snarfleberries and the intrinsic protestant faith represented by the cheese combine in a *perfectly natural* blast of flaming energies. Honestly, what passes for a scientific education in Scotland these days...”

“Ahh, a noot ceel on ye eether.”

The Plan is enacted

Miss Thimblebelly taps her foot impatiently at the exchange of scientific theories. "You'll note, my dear Scottish fellow, that I said we would inoculate the *milk supply* with snarfleberries. That is exactly what we planned to do, for twofold reason. Firstly, the butter produced from said milk would act, when consumed, against otherworldly possession. Secondly, should anyone try to produce demonic cheese, the obvious consequences would ensure the cheese never reached general circulation. We relied on Rufus' knowledge of freight delivery systems and Rodrigo's farm experience to inoculate the village's milk supplies and export counteractive butter to all surrounding villages that might thus far have received contaminated cheese. That part of the plan was executed without a hitch.

"While Rodrigo and Rufus were hard at work implementing these measures, Rashid, Rupert and I had stumbled upon proof, or at least circumstantial evidence, of the involvement of the Beggar's Guild. I stepped forward to accost the beggar. "What in blazes do you mean by making off with that cheese?" I asked.

"Well, we was 'ungry", the fellow said. As I blinked at him in disbelief, he added, "and it won't be long now before that lot get Lord Dringvolt through the gate, and *then* we'll see who's in charge. Won't forget his friends, our Lord Dringvolt".

"Well, halting the spread of cheese and consequent demonic possession was all very well and good, but we needed to deal with the demons that were currently in possession of townsfolk, draining their life energy and casting the appalling pall of darkness across the land, leaving it open to invasion by their darkness-dwelling relations. From what the beggar had told us, there was no time to waste. I had never heard of this Lord Dringvolt, but given Rupert's pallor I rather didn't fancy meeting him.

"Stopping only to pilfer some milk from the deserted dairy, we ran to the meadow - the original source of the darkness. It took little hunting to locate, behind a thicket, a carved black altar of ominous aspect. Surrounding it was a veritable horde of villagers, all with glowing red eyes and agitated auditory apparatus. They appeared (from my rudimentary knowledge of demonology and occult rituals) to be summoning forth more of their nocturnal brethren, one Lord Dringvolt very likely among them.

"I dropped a handful of snarfleberries into a flask of milk and pitched the lot at the altar. As it smashed, Rashid stepped forward and scowled at it. The milk curdled instantly, reacted with the snarfleberries, and the resulting explosion destroyed the altar and flung us all flat on our faces. A fine mist of snarfleberry wafted through the air. As the townsfolk inhaled, their pupils returned to black and their ears ceased to twitch. We had been victorious. What with the butter stratagem and the anti-cheese-making measures, we were satisfied that all Darkleblith infestation would be expunged from this sphere by Monday at the latest.

"Now that we had defeated the demons, we had only to deal with the Beggar's Guild".

Dregs are mopped; another story is requested

"We had, in our haste to thwart the demons, neglected to apprehend the misshapen beggar whom we had observed pilfering the cheese. When we made our way back to the centre of the village there was

no-one in sight. As the light of late afternoon crept over us, Rupert pointed toward the river, down which a riverboat made its stately way. At its bow was visible the malformed beggar, along with were a number of others by whose artfully tattered clothing I took to be high officials in the Beggar's Guild. And steering the boat was a familiar figure - Richard the riverboat wrangler. We had been betrayed.

“No sooner had this horrifying realisation come to me than I became aware that we were surrounded by a pack of grimy thugs possessed of assorted sharp weaponry. Rupert, Rashid and I prudently backed into an alley. Much exposition was thrown about in the time-honoured tradition of half-witted villains standing over their presumed helpless victims. It appeared that they believed they had been involved in the theft and distribution of local cheese to alleviate hunger among poorly-paid beggars. Why local cheese specifically? It seemed that it was rumoured to have 'special properties', being made as it was from the milk of the triple-horned cattle of the region (at this my companions and I elbowed each other in the ribs and rolled our eyes knowingly; 'special properties' indeed). They had been ordered by the Guild Bosses to dispose of us in revenge for having thwarted their utopian scheme for an England full of well-fed beggars. Having learned all we could, the three of us promptly disarmed and restrained the hoodlums.

“Rupert, having fallen out of pickpocketing after the loss of his arm, had been dependent on the Beggar's Guild for a number of years before being 'called' to the 'clergy'. He implored me to refrain from harming the ignorant louts, who after all believed only that we had been responsible for foiling their Grand Plan to distribute cheese to all the beggars in England, and were ignorant of the dastardly demon-plot. Between him and Rashid (whose own ill-made appearance left him sympathetic to the various deformities of many in the Beggar's Guild), I capitulated. Now, as I'm certain you, my dear listeners, are aware, the process of disabling an attacker without doing him injury is a delicate one, and liable to all sorts of mishap. At the prospect of more attacks (knowing the persistent nature of beggars) I therefore suggested to my co-counter-conspirators that we each adopt a disguise until the whole hoo-ha blew over.

“I therefore became Baron Thistledown, as you saw me when first I entered this establishment. I last saw Rupert in the spiffy uniform of a mortician's assistant, and Rashid is currently employed as a dancing bear (a deception which for him requires very little camouflage). I calculate the current leadership of the guild is about due to be deposed in a purge any day now, and when that happens I shall be free to go about in public without hindrance. Well, no more than usual anyway. Though I must confess I do find a number of advantages to this disguise... well, that's a story for another time”.

The current Baron Thistledown orders a glass of sherry, and peers across the table at Earl S_. “I heard many tales of your exploits from Rashid, and hints about many others. The one I am most curious about, however, is the highly improbable saga of how you came to be employed by a caravan travelling on the Silk Road and how the special properties of Spotted Owl feathers assisted you in defusing the Stand-off of Samarkand”.

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