

First Toke

The Englishman, er, woman, doffs her hat and leans her cane in the corner before seating herself next to the Spaniard. Fiddling with some unseen laces, or unseen *somethings*, certain parts of her body appear to become more... curved, if anyone were looking. She takes a deep breath. "Ah, *Chinese* Opium", she says. "That does take me back".

"I say," says another Englishman, "can anyone join in? It looks like an exclusive party, what, but I've been *dying* to tell *someone* about my adventures!"

The Englishman is tall, slender and slightly effete, dressed in an elaborate ruffled shirt that is quite the fashion in London at the moment. It's not the fashion in this establishment, though that doesn't seem to bother him.

His manner suggests "idle aristocracy" and the fact that his sword gets caught on a cushion as he sits down does nothing to allay that impression. It's a wonder he hasn't been beaten up seven times today for his golden watch.

"[Earl S](#)____," he says with a grin and a proffered handshake, "Servant of Her Majesty and employee of the East India Company, in a troubleshooting capacity."

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."

The Earl winces. "Perhaps, Mr. Bruce, you should reduce your volume to a civilised level. I understand that in your ancestral halls you need to shout to be heard over the cattle, but I can assure you that it is not necessary here."

The Earl takes an inexpert puff at the hookah, and splutters mightily. "Aaah, (*coff* *coff*) so this is (*coff* *coff*) Chinese Opium. I confess I cannot see what the (*coff* *coff*) fuss is about - I think I shall stick to Western vices."

Enter the Duke

Entering the haze enshrouded room is an expensively dressed young man. Of regal bearing and somewhat rogueish manner. The somewhat unkempt nature of beard and sideburns adding little in the way of austerity.

Dusting lightly at his silk waistcoat and velvet frockcoat. He is obviously trying hard not to notice the looks of recognition from the lower elements reclining in their sins and smoking their lives away.

If he had a hat to doff, he would do so as way of introduction. Fortunately, he brought a servant and lickspittle along for occasions such as these.

"Patsy?"

"Yes, yes M'lord..."

The unhunched dirtily kempt and above all dubiously lurking servant introduces his master:

"[The Duke of Gloucester](#), gentles, he being known as Peter by 'is friends and suchlike."

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 looks around the room.

"Are we all here, then? Perhaps the lady Contessa would like to request a tale? And by the by, is that peculiar smell the opium or the Scotsman?"

[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?"

"Ach, a hoon noot ye eefor, ye sassenach"

"If you say so, sir, though I confess to being confused about the cow.", says the Earl

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.

- [Miss Thimblebelly's Tale](#)

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”.

The Fabulous Silk Road

“Ah, yes. The Silk Road. The Spotted Owl. The Stand-Off of Samarkand. I remember it all well.

- [The Earl's Tale](#)

A gust of luck, and a new story asked

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?”

The Contessa nods her approval at the Earl's accomplishments in the use of feather beds, and turns her attention with interest to Bruce.

“Bravo, your Grace, well told.”, says the Duke.

“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](#).”

- [The Bruce's Tale](#)

“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 accordion with you instead of your sherpas when you did.”

“Therein lies a tale to be told”, says the Duke. “Allow me but a moments contemplation to avail myself of the salient points - memory being what it is. And I pray it comes close to the inestimable story with which you have regaled us. Most entertaining indeed.” The Duke of Gloucester raises his glass in the direction of the Bruce in appreciation.

The Lesser Great Wall of China

“It was during one of my famed week long garden parties, if I recall [correctly](#)”, says the Duke.

- [The Duke's Tale](#)

With an air of mystery the Duke eyes the crowd gathered to listen, before breaking the mood with a burp.

“Your pardon.”

"Contessa," the Duke says, turning to face her, "perhaps you would care to regale us with the story of how you accidentally caused the demise of The Five Headed Hydra of Constantinople, and how you escaped the King's subsequent wrath. "

"One wonders it were killed," muses the Earl, "or did it just look dead?"

The Tiddlywinks of Constantinopolus

"Ah yes," murmurs the Contessa, "I had almost forgotten that little incident, coming as it did just before the much more memorable Toothpick Adventure. Still, it's not a tale I've told before and it isn't without it's own small interest.

- [The Contessa's Tale](#)

"Most insteresting, Contessa! I do commend you on your success at this mission.", says the Duke.

Go back to [the exlusive back room of an opium den](#)

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