

The Fabulous Silk Road

"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 Earl takes an inexperienced 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."

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?"

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".

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

"Well may you ask, dear and rather fetching Baron, how I, a ludicrously prosperous merchant in my own right and ninth Earl of Rangoon and Lower Salford, would be seeking low employment with a gravestone caravan. Do I not have people I employ to take care of this sort of thing? Do I not command a veritable multitude of traders, guardsmen, caravaneers and elephants, such that to involve myself in the day to day running of my vast trading empire would be a tedious chore better suited to a menial? Have I not become one of the richest and most powerful men in the Empire entirely by profiting from the hard work of others? Indeed, 'tis so, but it was not always thus. Why, once I was nothing more than a down-and-out minor - yes, I say minor, hard as it may be to believe - scion of nobility. The domains of Lower Salford, once a mighty seat of power, the very pride of the House of Lancaster, had dwindled, alas, to nothing more than a two-bedroom house in the suburbs of Manchester and half the commons across the road, which we shared with the Duke of Roughly an Eighth of Manchester, another family that had fallen on hard times.

"My father's tales of our ancient ancestral might inspired me, as a young lad, to regain our former greatness, to valiantly reclaim my noble and illustrious birthright, starting with our long-forgotten lands in Rangoon. Against my dear mother's protests, then, I signed up with a promising-looking Merchant, offering my quick sword and quick wit in their defense in return for passage, and we set off along the famed Silk Road. Our destination: India!"

The Earl coughs, and adds, in parentheses, "(Technically, it was only my destination that was India, as

the caravan would continue on the Peking in order to trade their precious cargo of quaint northern English tomb-markers for bale upon bale of silk. However, I would pray, my fellows, that you allow me this little piece of poetic license, and in return I swear that the remainder of my tale will be the unvarnished truth, with far fewer flamboyant flourishes. Further technically, I was not at this stage in the caravan's employ, but was merely travelling in the same direction.)"

"I'll wager," interrupted the Contessa, "that your mother's protests were based partly on her having fallen prey to the misplaced (yet somehow widely held at the time) view that your father's tales of ancestral might and family landholdings in Rangoon were nothing more than the tall tales of a drunken liar."

The Contessa smiles languidly up at a boy who has brought the next round of opium.

Noble sons fallen upon hard times

"I won't say that the view was widely held, Contessa, but it was certainly Mother's. However, it must also be said that Father entertained a certain scepticism in his later years towards Mother's claim to be a member of the Austrian Imperial Family and heir to certain strategic trees within the Prater.

"Certainly, none of my fellow guards shared Mother's concerns, which was probably because they were in similar straights themselves. On learning of my plight of birth, they made known their own backgrounds. King William, for example, though looking rather like an ill-fed and poorly groomed terrier, was the ruler of deepest Tibet, and expected to be able to pay off all of his sister's gambling debts by reclaiming the back taxes from during his years in absence, the reason he had joined the caravan. Arthur had in his youth been the Prince of one of the larger rooms in the Chinese Imperial Palace, and longed for his silken bedchamber. Clive, though to all appearances a merchant's son, confidently stated that he was rightful emperor of all India. I promptly swore him my loyalty, as my rightful liege, much as he told me he had done recently, to the Queen. They were jolly fellows, and fond of a laugh - often at nothing I could easily determine.

"Indeed, it seemed that each of these fine noblemen had constituents throughout the lands. It would seem that all King William would have to do was follow a gentleman who he recognised as a Tibetan into an alley (for reasons of discretion according to ancient Tibetan rites) where the person would gladly surrender his portion of William's back taxes, before swooning, quite overcome with the magnificence of his liege, in that same alley. William assured me that a close accounting was kept of each Tibetan's contribution to the Kingdom.

"It was largely on behalf of William's largesse, then, that my fellows and I were able to stay during the caravan's time in Samarkand, stocking up on socks and stockings, at the most luxurious of traveller's inns in all of the known and unknown Russias - the Spotted Owl!"

The Duke of Gloucester gestures with a hand, giving pause to the tales recounting.

"If I may interrupt, sir"

"There was an abortive attempt by Prussia at this time, to invade Mongolia via Tibet. I had a spot of tea with a Hussar just the other day who informed me of it. He and his men were in a large expeditionary force destined to scout and set up a camp within the borders of that country." "As you all know, Prussian Hussars are reknowned for their honourable nature and inability to deceive, so I

naturally took his word on this matter." "The force of two hundred men and horses were passing through Samarkand at the time of your own stay. As the captain of the Hussars spotted King William in his tax collecting capacity and mistook him for a well dressed mugger."

"Perhaps, your grace, you could explain how you managed to stop the men from killing King William and the subsequent besiegement of the Spotted Owl?"

A Tibetan Revolt

"Prussian officers are, as a rule, honourable and unable to decieve, which is how we knew this one for a Tibetan, for he denied that he was quite strenuously. I hope you counted your small change when you left the man's company, your grace, for he was clearly an inveterate liar and no doubt a thief to boot.

"King William, of course, could not have predicted that one of his countrymen, even one so traitorous as to serve in the Prussian Army in the capacity of captain, would react to a his legitimate collection of the dues owed to him by right and law in such a violent way! Why, rather than being overcome with William's magnificence as had so many Tibetans before, the churl had the *gall* to actually lay hands on his monarch - and fists, and elbows, and feet, and knees, and forehead!

"Fortunately for our friend, Arthur and I were in the vicinity. After a short debate regarding the relative merits of intervening in what was, after all, an internal Tibetan matter, and whether Rangoon or the Imperial Silken Suite, as foreign powers, had the moral and legal right to interfere in a, as it were, Tibetan civil war in miniature, it was noted for the record that William had not yet settled the bill at the Spotted Owl. We decided that rule of law and the divine right of kings must be upheld whatever the cost, and thus waded into the fray.

"The three of us together made short work of the ruffian, though he shook his fist at us and swore that he would return with his regiment, an event which occured sooner than we expected, for the 14th Mounted Prussian Saber-Tossers had apparently been waiting at the mouth of the alley.

"Two, or rather, three could play at that game, though. Arthur harangued the anarchist, saying that if he was the kind of misbegotten son of a French yak that would bring an army to a fistfight, then he would do the same. He told them to meet us in three days at the Spotted Owl, where the 8th Silken Suite Armoured Division would teach them a lesson in manners, warfare, the sanctity of the state and embroidery, in roughly that order. I myself got into the spirit of things, threatening to bring down the wrath of the Ready Rangoon Regulars upon them. This may have been getting ahead of myself, for I had not yet claimed my title in Rangoon, and I did not know if that unit was still in existence. Still, I knew from my father's tales that they were a fearsome regiment, and not to be taken lightly by anyone, Prussian or otherwise.

"Besides, we were due to leave Samarkand in two days time."

"You were due to leave in two days, but honour dictated that you be back, with your armies by the third day?" asked the Contessa. "'Surely uou can't have made the trip so quickly. I'll wager that you took your leave from the caravan and went on ahead at once, by the fastest means possible."

"Hoots woman!" Exclaims the Bruce. "How can ye think that? How could they have been involved in the Standoff of Samarkand if they'd made their way towards Rangoon straight away? Anyway, I'd wager that any resourceful man with some stout friends, a good sword, ten wagons full of bootleg

gravestones and, of course, the famous deep feather mattresses of the Spotted Owl inn could defeat a whole division of Prussian Hussars, let alone a piddling batallion.

"I mean surely, lady," he raises a shaggy eyebrow at the Contessa, "you can see how it was done?"

The Standoff at Samarkand

"Our hirsute Hibernian friend is correct, your eminence, though your statement reflects my initial inclination.

"Indeed, it might have been, in theory, possible for me to ride from Samarkand to Rangoon in a night, reclaim my birthright, mobilise the Regulars and return, Arthur did not have that luxury. The back rooms of the Chinese Imperial Palace are vast beyond number, and we did not have time to even reach the secondary reception foyers. We had to hit on another plan.

"We were fortunate, for our commitment to the duel and our honour and our commitment to our employers was not in conflict. A rampaging army, of unknown provenance, had made commercial traffic entirely too risky. The Caravan Master had decided to stay in Samarkand for another 24 hours in Samarkand, in the hope that the army activity would clear up.

"Fortunately, also, Clive had somehow procured for us several bales of finest silk, and a large quantity of paint. Within the carts of quality English gravestones were a surprising number of pre-made effigies bearing a stern countenance, and an equally surprising number of allegorical stone women, angels and poets. By wrapping these figures in silk and painting their faces with warlike design, we were able to disguise them as a reasonable facsimile of the Chinese Imperial Back-Room Army.

"For my part, Clive had also acquired a homing pigeon - a beast of such amazing training that it would find the nearest unit of the Rangoon Regulars, and lead them back to us. I had to trust in the Almighty that it would not be shot and curried, but I reasoned that such a highly skilled unit would check for messages before eating a pigeon.

"The stage was set, then - we had our invincible army, for who can kill a stone man? We set up our command headquarters in the Spotted Owl, in a fortress comprising several of the impossibly soft mattresses. You may scoff, but I'd rather have one of those luxurious accountrements between myself and a cannonball than three feet of steel, as the steel will not send a projectile back towards the firer.

"The Prussian - or should I say, Tibetan - captain was completely taken in. His men charged ours, but were forced to retreat as, despite their spirited charge, they were unable to break our ranks - indeed, our men (and women) seemed completely fearless. However, they were also unable to fight back, so there was nothing to stop the Prussians regrouping, and we were unable to take advantage of their disarray.

"And so it was - the Chinese Stone Army, being completely immovable, could withstand anything the Prussians could throw at them, but their offensive strength was so poor that that they could hope to win the battle alone.

"And there you have it, ladies and gentlemen, the infamous Standoff at Samarkand - a tense situation, to be sure, and nerve-wracking for all concerned, except of course the statues.

"And it became obvious to me that there could not be a unit of the Rangoon Regulars in pigeon range, for they had not come to our aid - if I was not to be thought a fool and a swaggering braggart, it would fall to me to break the standoff in the most decisive terms.

"And so I did - with feathers!"

"Why, was the whole thing called off on account of snow?" enquires the Contessa.

A gust of luck, and a new story asked

"Yes, called off on account of snow. Perhaps milady would like to tell the story?"

The Earl pauses in reflection.

"I must admit, it was a stroke of incredible good fortune. I spent two days in my fort made of the Spotted Owl's mattresses, in deep tactical cogitation, or as my mother would have it, sulking. However, this was where my family's relationship with Lady Fortune, hitherto less than remarkable, changed incomparably for the better. While my invincible stone legions held out against the Hussar regiment, I consoled myself in the lounge bar of the Owl, looking for a way to break the standoff. It was there that I met an old man who claimed to know my Great Grandfather.

"'It is true,' he said, 'that once I knew the old Earl of Rangoon and Manchester, and it is for this reason that I sit in this lounge bar drinking sticky Saracen liquors and sighing. For, though he was my best friend, and an incomparable gentleman, it was my fault that he lost his seat in Rangoon. I, the King of the North Winds, had promised to help defend Rangoon against a native uprising. However, at the crucial moment, when the Earl called upon my aid and I was meant to blow the entire native legion from the causeway leading to Castle Rangoon, I, having partaken perhaps a little too much of his hospitality, could only burp.

"'It was a sad day for Rangoon - the Earl watched in horror as the natives put his town to the torch. He made sure that his wife and young son were safely aboard a caravan headed for Manchester, and resolved to hold the castle with his dying breath, which he swore, even should he have no strength at all, would be better than my pitiful effort.

"'I have dwelled here in misery and drunkenness ever since.'

"'Never fear,' I said, 'for I am the great-grandson of that personage, and you can resolve your debt to my family by helping me recapture Rangoon, and, to be honest, I wouldn't mind a little assistance with this standoff situation, either.'

"The King of the North Winds was extremely grateful that I bore him no ill will, and gifted me with a bag. 'This bag,' said he, 'contains pretty much all of the North Winds. Be careful how you open it, but when you reach Rangoon, you will be able to use it to blow the forces of the Usurper clean to New Zealand. As for your standoff situation, I can offer you know more than good fortune.'

"I took the bag back to my fort. It occurred to me, even through the draughts of liquor that I'd partaken of, that a gift from an old man claiming to be a semi-mythological character that appeared to consist entirely of an empty leather bag might need to be treated with a certain skepticism. I opened the bag just a fraction.

"I believe the wind that was released was the Arctic Zephyr, and it reduced the temperature of my

fort to a level that caused my fingers to turn blue and my words to freeze in mid-air. Now, I've no doubt that Miss Thimblebelly is well aware that, when taken to a temperature below the freezing point of water, the extremely soft and fine feathers of the Spotted Owl mattresses take on a character that, to the untrained eye (which is to say, everyone who is not an eighty year old eskimo), is entirely like that of snow. I hatched a plan.

"I took my saber to the mattresses, causing them to burst in a flurry of feather drifts. I instructed the Zephyr, who was still hanging around hoping for a tip, to take the drifts and bury the Hussar camp.

"It was under the cover of this apparent snowstorm, then, that I and my friends took to a mighty charge. Our shouts rang out, and, in the darkness of the storm, the Hussars thought that our heretofore immobile army had come to life, and half of them routed!

"In the darkness, my friends and I found the Hussar captain, and gave him a good thrashing. We then forged a ceasefire, citing snow, and our need to catch up with our caravan, and the fact that the captain couldn't see very well through the swellings about his eyes.

"And that, my friends, is how I resolved the Standoff at Samarkand with the feathers of the Spotted Owl. The tale of how I returned to Rangoon to reclaim my birthright, while undeniably amazing and exciting, must wait for another day. Upon my honour and the honour of Rangoon, I swear, every word is true."

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?"

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