

The First Game

In which Dr. Van B. receives his guests, in order to ask of their Adventures in foreign parts. Phineas is introduced to the company. A brief Altercation.

The room in which we are gathered is a large one, with an oaken table dominating its centre. Standing at its head is one Doctor Van B., formerly of Amsterdam. The good Doctor is a large man, clean shaven, and is wearing slightly worn academic robes, a large ruff and a habitually worried expression. He welcomes each member of the party with a small, nervous bow.

When all are gathered, he taps a glass to gain the attention of the company and says, "I, ahem, I would like to welcome each and every one of you to the Bear and Garter, and I thank you all very much for responding to my invitation. It is indeed a pleasure for such a humble scholar as myself to be in the company of such distinguished adventurers and raconteurs. After we have eaten, and I must say that the food here is excellent, far in excess of anything I have ever been accustomed to, we will get down, as they say, to the business of tales. I would like to introduce you to our landlord, Phineas," at which he gestures to that fine fellow, "who will, as is customary, indulge us by providing us each with two silver pieces at the beginning of each... excuse me?" Phineas leans to whisper something in Dr. Van B.'s ear. The doctor turns so that his mouth is obscured, and whispers back. Phineas' reply is more guttural, and the Doctor starts whispering with much more animation. "Excuse me, ladies and gentlemen, mine host and I will just need to step outside," says the doctor, as he is dragged by the arm from the room.

Returning, Van B. starts again from where he left off. "As I was saying, Phineas will indulge us by providing two silver pieces from my own purse which will be added to my account at the beginning of each tale, and will exchange two of these silver pieces for gold any time you request it of him." Phineas glowers. "He will also be more than happy to provide you with any drink that you request from his magnificent and well-stocked cellar."

Phineas leaves to prepare the meal (an excellent repast of roast meats and exotic vegetables), leaving the company to seat themselves. Shortly, Sally comes up to blush prettily and take drink orders.

The Duke's table

In which the Duke is introduced, and his proclivities in provisions are discovered.

Seated to the right of the good doctor is a tall, 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. Looking up from his repast of roast beef and diverse vegetables, he glances around the gentlemen and ladies present as he holds the last piece of turnip on a fork. As yet there has been nary a drop or mark fallen by mischance onto his silk waistcoat, nor his velvet frockcoat. He is obviously trying hard not to look impudently at the Frenchman present, but old habits die hard - even when diced thinly and thrown overboard.

Somewhat surprised to find the rare delicacy of a potato on his plate, he view's the Doctor with new respect for having chosen the place. For a commoner, he has good taste.

"Young lady!", he calls out - somewhat boisterously. Sally turns her attention to him. "I would like

some ale, m'dear". The serving girl is quick to serve him his drink. There is something about his natural commanding tones that demands it. Either that or her willingness to do her occupation justice.

The Lady Kathryn Is Satisfied

The Lady Kathryn sat resplendent in dark green velvet. A woman of some stature, she had thoroughly enjoyed her meal. The potatoes in particular had been a revelation.

'I understand they are grown underground', she murmured to her neighbour, the Countess Barbara.

Now replete, she calmly surveyed those around her whilst picking her teeth with the nail of her little finger, a habit she had - some say unfortunately - picked up in Romania.

She smiled graciously at Sally as she approached and requested a snifter of brandy.

'And a saucer of warm milk for Gerald, if you please', she added, motioning to a small white rat that played about her ladyship's person.

Sally, a credit to her profession, did not blink as Gerald settled comfortably upon her ladyship's rather ample bosom.

In which the Doctor taps his timepiece meaningfully

"I had hoped the others would have arrived by now. They will miss the potatoes. Perhaps someone should send a servant to the Marquis and Lady Alyssa..."

In which the Countess arrives fashionably late

A footservant scurries into the room, looks up at the August assemblage, and clears his throat. Bowing with a flourish, he speaks: "The Countess of Tango". On cue, the door opens, and an elegant woman dressed all in black enters the room. "Thankyou, Harold" she murmurs, then stops, looking expectantly at the seated (?) gentlemen.

In which Lady Alyssa finally locates the establishment

The door barely closes before it opens again and Lady Gray sweeps into the room. She removes her heavy shawl and hands it to the young girl behind her. She briefly pauses and then adds, "A small port if you wouldn't mind."

Turning to survey the room, she moves towards the empty seat beside the Countess. "No, no, Gentlemen please don't get up. I do apologise for my tardiness. The place was a little difficult to find."

Taking her seat, she gratefully accepts the glass handed to her by the young girl.

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In which the Doctor gets proceedings underway, and asks a tale of the Duke. .

"Well, then, your Grace," says the Doctor, turning to Duke Peter, "After that excellent repast, I am quite sure that I am very much in the mood to hear a tale of your adventures. Perhaps, then, you could tell us of the time you discovered the potato, now so popular upon our tables, and how you used its little known and hitherto unsuspected properties to cause so much mayhem among the primitive tribesfolk of the American Indies."

In which the marquis stumbles up the stairs from the taproom.

The Marquis stumbles slightly across the threshold, and as he catches himself, liquid splashes from his unusually large Toby jug, undoubtedly full of ale. Fortunately, his blue brocade coat is dark enough to disguise any sign of spillage. Unfortunately, his ivory cravat shows evidence of some minor previous messiness. Having been lurking in the taproom downstairs, His Excellency actually arrived well before the other guests, and now appears unaware of his lateness.

Moving to the last place at the large table, he turns to his left and bows over the Lady Alyssa's hand, "Bonjour Madame". Turning to his right, he thanks the Doctor for his kind invitation, and with an inclination of his head and an expansive gesture, threatening further spillage from his mug, greets the other guests.

Ignoring the sidelong looks from the Duke over dinner, the Marquis quickly clears his plate, lingering only slightly over the potatoes which remind him of home. Sitting back, and after getting Sally to refill his oversized receptacle, he looks toward the Doctor as he begins to speak...

In which the Duke travels to America

Cocking his head towards the doctor, the Duke raises an eyebrow. "'tis rather serendipitous of you to ask, good sir.", he smiles wryly, "as I was just recalling the facts of my strange adventures concerning the [potato](#)".

- [Duke Peter's Tale](#)

The Hon. Clare Thimblebelly actually appears

The door suddenly opens, and Miss Clare Thimblebelly sweeps in accompanied by a great sound of

tinkling. A rather large woman, she is dressed in a voluminous silk dress of an unfortunate shade of orange, from which one's attention is only diverted by her elaborate pile of hair which is a surely artificial and positively, er, **breathtaking** red.

She pauses a mere moment to catch her breath, then proclaims "oh, my darlings!" at unknown persons or perhaps the room in general. Bustling around the table, cooing such things as "Your Grace!" and "dearie!" she arrives between Marquis Terry and Doctor van B. A chair arrives and she wedges herself into it, muttering loudly behind her hand, "I **do** so hope I'm not interrupting anything, Doctor!"

Leaning over the table, she exclaims "America! Oh, do please continue, sir!"

She nudges the Marquis' oversized receptacle away from her and produces a silver flask, from which she sips while she listens.

The Duke finishes his tale

"Why, Duke Peter," says the Doctor, "Allow me to express my delight at such a wonderful, educational and indeed inspirational tale. I shall never fail to think of it every time I consume a [potato](#)."

The Doctor looks with some surprise into his empty glass, and summons Phineas, saying "More wine for myself and my guests, my good man! And indeed, more ale, too! As a point of fact, if you would be so good as to fry some potatoes, we should be forever in your debt!" At the last comment, Phineas mumbles something darkly under his breath, causing the doctor to pale visibly. "Of course, sir, I had not forgotten the matter. Let us talk of it anon."

Lady Kathryn echoes the Doctor's praise.

"Indeed sir, whilst familiar with the triumph of the Bangerznmasch people over the Bubl'nsqvek, I was not aware of your own pivotal role in the matter. Oh Gerald! What **are** you doing there?"

Finally noticing Gerald's wanderings, Lady Kathryn proceeds to entice him back with cheese and other delicacies.

"Ah," exclaims the Countess, "so twice you were so entranced by the beauty of the young maidens - no doubt insisting on taking the time to sketch their portraits in your hut - that you were caught, but you ultimately triumphed! What a fine tale, Duke. Perhaps you can show us the portraits later."

The Duke asks a story of the Lady Kathryn

"I must first have them framed properly, dear Countess. With pieces of art - often it is the setting that makes it memorable, I find. There is a fellow on Chadwick street, blind, deaf and dumb - but in possession of the most remarkable seeing-eye duck who would do a marvellous job of mounting my sketches of the dusky maidens of the tribe, Bubl'nsqvek. I must attend to it later this week."

Duke Peter, wiping his beard after his quaff of ale turns to the lovely Lady Kathryn seated to his right. "Lady Kathryn, it would be an honour if you could enlighten us as to the circumstances of your having

a rat name Gerald. And how it was that with nothing but his help you lifted the Great Siege of Antioch?"

In which Lady Kathryn sets the scene

"[The Great Siege of Antioch](#)? Why, that occurred during my Ottoman Adventures whilst gathering material for my", she laughs as if embarrassed, "some say seminal volume, 'The Breeding of Rats. Part XVIII. The Ottoman Empire'."

- [Lady Kathryn's Tale](#)

"But that, my friends, is another story."

Exhausted, Lady Kathryn slumps back in need of sustenance.

"A most remarkable story, dear lady, indeed!", the Duke toasts his mug in her direction.

"Formee-duh-bluh! Bravo Madame!" The Marquis' pupils are swirling quite vigorously with his enthusiasm, "I am mosst impressed wiz your rezzzourcefulness and brevery!"

"A neat solution," acknowledges the Countess, giving Gerald an unsettled glance. "Thankyou for sharing your adventure."

The Doctor applauds heartily.

"Most admirable, dear lady, most admirable. I shall not hesitate to make copious loud noises should my path ever again cross von Mouchtenstein's."

"Marvellous!", says Miss T. "You know, my dear, I did meet a Scottish relation of yours whom I believe to be the very same Cousin Fergus. He seemed altogether unaffected by his brief foray into the rodent world... except for the twitching of course. And the peculiar high-pitched shrieking which seemed to be his sole method of communication, and needn't have been a side-effect of his rattish transmogrification, though certainly must have occurred after the adventure in Antioch, since I fear it permanently put an end to the fellow's ability to imitate the mating call of the Slightly Better Known Ghost Rat of Asia Minor."

She takes a breath, and offers a pouch of fragrant green powder to the Doctor, sitting next to her.

In which Lady Kathryn asks a story of the Countess

Lady Kathryn starts with surprise at Miss Thimblebelly's information. "My good lady, you have described my cousin exactly! I was not aware that you had met him." She sighs. "The twitching **was** a rather unfortunate side affect of our Ottoman Adventures, but he began shrieking at a very early age and has not yet given it up. It is most trying."

Turning to her neighbour, she continues. "Countess Barbara, I know you have travelled to all 5 corners of the globe and I have always been most interested to learn more of your adventures in the Far East. In particular, I have heard rumors that you were instrumental in recovering the Grey Pearls of Pung Qing for his Excellency Qian Long, Emperor of China. Is it true that you found them in a

forgotten room of the Imperial Palace?"

Contessa Barbara smiled at the memories that Lady Kathryn's question brought to mind. "Ah, yes," she mused, "The famed [Grey Pearls of Pung Qing](#)."

- [Contessa Barbara's Tale](#)

Draining her glass, the Contessa turned to Sally. "My dear, is there any chance of some pudding?"

Addressing Contessa Barbara, Duke Peter enthuses his pleasure, "Why, how extraordinary!"

"Contessa," says the Doctor, "that was indeed a most astounding adventure!"

The Marquis, who has been sitting quietly with a very slight, somewhat dreamy smile on his face as he listened to the part of the chronicle involving Catherine the Great, noticeably returns to the present. He shakes himself slightly and focuses intently on the Contessa as her extraordinary tale comes to its climax.

"Bravo madame! Your experiencez in overcoming ze wildz of ze orient are muhst inspiring!"

The Countess asks the Lady of Essex to Tell Her Tale

The Countess' pudding arrives - a large bowl of steamed fruit pudding swimming in custard, and she says no more for a few minutes as she tucks in. Breaking her silence, she addresses Lady Alyssa:

"I have long been impressed by the extent of your travels, Lady Alyssa. This is a good night for tales, so perhaps you could share with us the tale of your journey to the Earth's core in a barrel of ice, and what you found there to precipitate the downfall of the government of New Zealand."

Lady Alyssa Prepares to Tell Her Story

Lady Alyssa laughs for several minutes before responding. "I must thank you, my dear Countess. I hadn't thought of that adventure in a very long time. However, before I begin, I must beg all present company," she pauses to look each person in the eye, including the butler and Sally, before continuing, "for the utmost discretion in what you are about to hear, for the protection of both myself and the others who were involved in this extraordinary chain of events. The Earl prefers me not to talk of such things these days. I trust, since I am amongst friends, that you will all respect my request."

She stops talking to motion to Sally for a jug of the house wine. "Oh, and do you, by any chance, have any Belgian chocolates?" she adds.

The Countess looks intrigued. "You have my word of honour that I will not carry your tale past these walls."

"Of course, my lady, you have my word as a scholar and a gentleman.", says the Doctor.

"But of course, Madame!" the Marquis replies.

Lady Alyssa and the Barrel of Ice

- [Lady Alyssa's Tale](#)

The doctor is agog. He pushes forward a silver coin to join the gold one already in front of Lady Alyssa.

"My... word..." he murmurs. "What an extraordinary tale!"

"Bon Dieu! It all seems so unreal!", says the Marquis.

Contessa Barbara bursts into spontaneous applause at the completion of the tale (or is it at the arrival of Sally with a tray of flaming cocktails?)

"A most astounding tale, M'lady Alyssa!", says the Duke.

Lady Alyssa asks the Marquis for a tale

As she discreetly slips her hard-earned coins into a small red purse, Lady Alyssa turns to the Marquis beside her and says, "Do tell us the exhilarating tale of the time you went on safari in the North of Africa and what you did there to ensure the survival of the last known species of dinosaurs."

In which the Marquis takes much too long to set the scene, *or* In which the Marquis is expelled from a volcano into the deepest, darkest equatorial jungle and encounters a small people who make him their god.

"My esteemed peers, I must apologize for my quietness - your vivid descriptions 'ave so distracted me! The very colours of this room 'ave become so entrancing - the very surfaces seem to be breathing and pulsing with the life of your stories - the colours! the burning towers! the colours!..." The Marquis shakes himself and blinks, and the swirling of his pupils seems to subside somewhat. He calls for some throat lubricant and takes a quick swig.

- [The Marquis' Tale](#)

"Bravo, Monsieur," says the Doctor. "A masterful tale. Shame about poor de Silinami, of course. I have no idea what I shall tell his widow, now left all alone amongst the vast treasures he had recovered from parts unknown, but tell her, I clearly must."

Lady Kathryn claps her hands delightedly and inadvertently secures the attention of Sally. "Oh! Yes. Well, I'm sure Gerald would like a little more cheese. He does particularly enjoy a bit of fresh wensleydale at this time of night (as I documented in 'The Complete Book of Cheese'). And I think I'm ready for a spot of coffee, if you have it."

She returns her attention to the Marquis. "What a wonderfully uplifting tale! I can almost hear the faint strains of this jungle music as I sit here."

She stops to listen for a moment.

"Although perhaps it *is* just the sound of beets being broken downstairs. (I believe they do a very nice beetroot goulash here.) Admittedly, the Jabberwock's plumage sounds a far superior decoration than that of the (rather curiously named) Rainbow Robin that the Ging Gang Gooly were using during my stay. Still, I do believe their dull brown and grey feathers are still very valuable on the European market." Turning to Countess Barbara, Lady Kathryn then enquires

"What *were* the origin of these laundered feathers you speak of?"

"A fascinating, and no doubt, altogethor factual and true, account Marquis", proclaims the Duke.

"A most excellent tale, Marquis," says the Countessa, "Thankyou for sharing it with us. I am sure, doctor," she continues turning to him, "that you will be able to comfort the widow.

- [The Contessa digresses on feathers](#)

"I returned home to my father and he never spoke again of my eductation. So that was that."

"An enlightening tale, Contessa," says the doctor, as he surreptitiously ensures the strength of the table separating himself from the lady. "I must admit, I should very much like to meet your po.. your dear father."

The Marquis

"Oui Madame - it has been most fascinating to hear of the continuing value of feathers to our modern civilized society."

The Marquis pauses to drain the dregs from his jug, then glances to his right.

"However, I am also somewhat interested in the high value of substances of a more herbal or indeed pharmaceutical nature - Miss Thimblebelly, if you would be so kind, could you tell us of your Spanish adventure leading to the discovery of your famous Preparation Number 3?"

In which Miss T travels incognito in Spain

"Certainly, sir", says Miss Thimblebelly, settling back in her chair. "You should know that although I have often hinted at the extraordinary events surrounding my discovery of the formula, never before have I told the full story.

- [Miss Thimblebelly's Tale](#)

"A marvellous tale," confirmed the Countess. "Whatever will we hear of next?"

"I confess to being curious myself, Contessa. Miss Thimblebelly - what tale would you hear of me?"

In which petit-fours are eaten

Having devoured a number of petit-fours that promptly arrived courtesy of Sally, Miss Thimblebelly looks over at Doctor von B., seated next to her. "My dear Doctor, I would be eternally grateful if you would share with us the story of how you discovered the Mask of Zorro in a remote part of the Andes. I admit I have a personal interest in learning more about your experiences, to which you alluded earlier, with Peruvian pharmaceuticals"

Lady Kathryn turns an attractive shade of pink. "Aphrodisiac?!??", she splutters. "But Papa! And Betty. And Nancy. And Mary. And Roger!!"

She sits still whilst contemplating several new and unsettling trains of thought.

"I never thought the floors were *particularly* shiny" she mutters finally.

Whilst the Doctor gathers his thoughts, Miss Thimblebelly reaches over the table to the attractively blushing and rather unsettled Lady Kathryn, and pats her hand in a comforting manner, then takes the opportunity to scoop Gerald up and conduct a brief, hushed, and possibly rather one-sided conversation with him about explosives.

In which the young doctor secures a position aboard a ship and embarks on a voyage

"Ah, yes, the Andes. It was my first voyage as Ship's Natural Philosophy Officer, you know. I remember it like it was yesterday.

- [The Doctor's Tale](#)

The Contessa breaks into spontaneous applause. "Bravo, sir!"

"Indeed, Doctor. Your story is most impressive." Lady Alyssa smiles appreciatively at him, raising one eyebrow ever so slightly.

Duke Peter votes

The Duke of Gloucester slumps backward in his chair as he ponders the last story. "It is a shame that I cannot split my coins amongst all the stories. I would that I did not have to choose one only." He sighs before continuing. "Lady Alyssa's journey to the Earth's core was most intriguing, entirely a barrel of fun. Contessa Barbara's story on the Grey Pearls of Pung Qing, whilst perhaps besmirching the good character of Catherine the Great, did make a good run of it. Lady Kathryn's narrative on the origins of her rat were very definitive, and I have learnt much about the dwellers of the city of Antioch. Miss Thimblebelly's alluring story of her chemical adventures were certainly very captivating. The Marquis' reptile adventure was head and shoulders above hunting tales. And needless to say, Doctor B's Andes trip was wonderfully brazen."

"I enjoyed them all, even though there was little in the way of duels, bloodshed, derision for the French and commoners, present company excluded, of course.." He sniffs somewhat arrogantly.

"But based purely on the story told, I did enjoy the doctor's the most. Therefore I place my gold in his care." Duke Peter slides his three gold coins left, in front of Dr. Van B.

Contessa Barbara votes

"For sheer audacity, my money is with the Doctor's tale too," says the Contessa. "Although I must say, I thoroughly enjoyed all the stories we have heard tonight. Miss Thimblebelly's digression on Boy Troupes deserves a particular mention."

Lady Kathryn Decides

"It is a tough choice indeed", laments Lady Kathryn. "I loathe to have to choose but one story yet feel that I must forward my paltry sum to Miss Thimblebelly. I found her description of the halls of Castillo Flamenco riveting - as only one who has also trod their gloomy paths possibly could. Her description of how Preparation No. 3 (floor polish *and* aphrodisiac!) was developed was truly enlightening. I will certainly be discussing it with Papa when I reach home."

The Doctor casts his vote

"A difficult decision, indeed. However, as I can only vote for one story, it must be that of the Contessa de Tango." The doctor pushes his coins to the Contessa.

"The Empress of Russia is a most astounding woman, and most taken with the earthworks and engineering projects of my native land, or so I am told. Your tale has not tarnished my opinion of her in the least, and your vivid description of Chinese court life was most enlightening."

Lady Alyssa Decides

"I too must choose Lady Thimblebelly's tale. I'm still smiling from her description of the laundry shoot misadventure." Lady Alyssa slides her coins discreetly across the table.

"I agree - all of ze stories have been intriguing, ze choice is m'st difficult! I 'ope I am not choosing style over substance, but I found ze Lady Kathryn's adventures in Antioch to be m'st amusing."

The Marquis slides a small pouch of coins toward the Lady of Basingstoke.

Miss Thimblebelly is slumped over the table after perhaps overindulging in the garlic icecream. She mumbles "Um, the, um, potatoes, I think"

"Why, I'm honoured," says the doctor.

At the sign of the Bear and Garter

"Well," says the doctor, expansively, "it must be said that I haven't had a finer night's entertainment since my student days in Amsterdam. But it is getting late, and there comes a time when even the finest night must become morning, and I think I would rather be in bed before that happens."

Sally stifles a yawn as she clears the table. Finishing their drinks, sweets and potatoes, the company makes its way slowly down to the common room, which is now all but deserted.

"It has been my pleasure to serve you all," says Phineas. "Have a pleasant and safe journey home, my ladies and gentlemen, and I thank you most warmly for your patronage."

The doctor farewells each member of the company as they head out into the darkness of the night. "Ah, your grace, do keep well, won't you? Milady Kathryn, I do so look forward to reading your next work. Contessa, commend me to Ali next time you see him, won't you? I do miss the lad." The doctor kisses Lady Alyssa's hand in a courtly if slightly wobbly manner, and proffers his most winning smile. "Marquis, sir, I do hope you find your way home, soon. It is just over the channel, after all, persistence is the key. And Mistress Thimblebelly, I hope to be able to make my way to Lower Cannonboroughbury in order to discuss herbs and unguents with you at some length. Goodnight, all, and I hope to see you all again in the near future. Safe travels, all (and especially you, Marquis!)"

As the members of the company gradually make their way to their carriages, chattering and laughing, the Doctor discreetly passes his purse of winnings to Phineas. "You're a fine man, Phineas," he says, "but too mercenary by half. Why, there are people all over the world that would consider the tales told tonight to be more than adequate payment for that fine if rather workmanlike repast... no, Phineas, I was not trying to recover my purse, merely preventing the gold coins from escaping... oh, look, see how I caught that one, here, have it back... why, Phineas, I'm shocked at the very suggestion! Come, come now, there's no need to be like that, what's a gold coin or two between friends... well, of course we are friends, my dear man, you are easily the equal of any of my friends and companions of yore... Yes, Phineas, as you say. Good night, and pleasant dreams. Oh, and thank Sally for the port."

And a short time later, the lights of the House at the sign of the Bear and Garter are extinguished, and the night is silent and dark once more.

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