

Escape from Kensington: Sir Charles scores a (toilet) duck

My dear Pen Pushers – I have been laid up with a peculiarly bad case of gout these past few months, and feared I should have no choice tale to regale my loyal readers with. But somehow a Maxwell-House's life can never be dull.

Feeling well enough to walk abroad again but a few days ago, I hobbled off to the Literary Probers dinner; a monthly occasion at which myself and five other great bookish explorers meet to discuss our latest discoveries. This particular supper was held at the Kensington residence of my dear friend Sir Pasty Bipps. As per, PB laid on a splendid feast quite ample to satisfy the not-inconsiderable appetites of six portly gentlemen of advancing middle age.

After dinner, it is the tradition for each to recount their latest literary coups. Grubby Blenheim had just finished his long and vigorous account of wrestling a stout lady at an auction in Suffolk for a priceless (yet marked at a mere fifty pence) first edition of the *Life and Letters of Charles Dickens*, and we all cheered most heartily as the victor triumphantly produced the disputed volume from his capacious cloak. Quite suddenly, as the mirth died away, all eyes turned on me, and I confess, I started to feel a little bilious under the company's keen collected gaze.

'But what have you been up to, Charlie?' asked Grubbers. 'You've been unusually quiet this evening. You're not still ashamed of your unwise amorous tangle are you?' There were some titters at this point, which I ignored. (Dear readers, rest assured, that passionate madness has quite evaporated and I find the lady in question to be the long-winded old bore I am quite sure you all recognised her to be.) [Thank God – Ed]

'Well, my dear sirs, I'm afraid I have little to report. Let me see. I have had a most powerful attack of the gout, you see. Yes, in my largest toe, as is common.'

There was a little laughter at this. 'However, I have, from my bedside, been carrying out some research into whether pigeons communicate through their droppings: research has led me to believe these splatterings could be transcribed. It's rather ambitious, I know, but observation has been easy as a clan of them sit outside my window and seem to be engaged in nothing but the aforementioned activity ...' I paused for breath and was suddenly aware of a powerful silence in the room. All faces seemed strangely taut and somewhat ruddy. I frowned. Only Jaggers, the master phonetician, could break the silence:

'Pray, Sir C, do go on! I entreat you! I must know ...'

But it was too much, and he broke down into a fit of the giggles, which the others promptly aped.

'But you've been doing nothing! Nothing at all my dear chap!' Grubby roared.

'Yes, my dear sir,' exclaimed Pasty through the tears, 'much better to say you had done nothing at all!'

'You know you shouldn't come to these dinners if you've done so little. It's not quite the spirit of the thing,' said Mr Piers Essling, a humourless and squat professor of linguistics who, I might add, always lays on the scantiest repasts.

Much offended, and having felt the call of nature some time ago, I haughtily excused myself, hoping that their laughter would subside with the onset of remorse. Instead, gales of laughter followed me to the water closet. Really! It was too much. My deeds were perhaps not as notable as theirs this past three-month, but yet was there not value in my small exertions? It could not all be drama and excitement. (Besides, I began to rather wonder if some of these tales were not made-up anyway. Wrestling a woman to the ground, and a stout one at that. Really, I don't think Grubby could have managed it at all, he being so preternaturally short. And I am now almost quite sure that Sir John Fruitcake could not have spent a month in a notoriously dangerous area of The

Bronx working on gang dialects, though he was wearing a new NYC t-shirt, which was a gross violation of the club dress code).

I sat down and began to relieve myself (having a tendency to be a little costive in the morning), picking up as I did some spurious reading matter kept by the side of the lavatory – a low-brow adventure novel entitled *Escape from Loki*, a story concerned with obliterating mankind from the face of the earth. What rot! Tossing aside the hyperbolic paperback, I mused that life rarely worked out so dramatically. Who is it that can write about the small incidences; moments that neither lead to disaster nor lifelong happiness. Certainly, I concluded irritably, not my fellow Probers. I felt I had been unjustly teased and determined to prepare a little speech with which to reprimand the upstarts once I got out of the toilet.

No doubt it was the particular position I found myself in, but as I unburdened myself, soothed by the pungent scent of pot pourri, I was reminded of a similar scene in that rather lewd but still masterful work by Mr Joyce. Dear Leopold Bloom's trip to the 'jakes' is recounted in irresistible prose, and as for *The Diary of a Nobody*; well, no one could call that classic a 'thriller'. And, of course, the unforgettable but arguably insignificant exploits of my own hero, dear Mr Pickwick ...

With a start, I recollected myself. The port had sent me into a most woolly and wistful mode, not at all in keeping with my razor-sharp investigative mind, and the powerful rhetoric I was planning to use against the others now seemed rather fuddled in my head. I realised I was cold, still seated on the 'jakes', my trousers forgotten by my ankles. Dear, dear.

Suddenly there was a quiet knocking at the door. It was Jagers.

'Dear Sir Charles. We do apologise ...'

There was, I instantly noted, a quaver in his voice.

'You must not hide away in the toilet. Really it is most undignified and we're all ... very ... sorry ... that we laughed ... about ... the pigeons!' He burst out in hysterics again, sounding, to my subtle ear, as if he'd consumed more port.

I was in a quandary, to be sure. They thought I was sulking in here, did they? I could hardly convince them my mind had run to far higher literary concerns. Readers, it was simple: I could not face them. Much better to let them think I had left, in a dignified manner, hours ago. But how? I remained very still. Probably out of good manners, Jagers had not yet tried the door. I heard him go down the stairs saying,

'He won't come out!' More outrageous laughter followed. I had to act, and with great speed!

With scant regard for my ailment, I flung open the bathroom window and peered out. Downstairs, I saw the kitchen door still open on this balmy night. Perhaps ... ? It must be attempted! I unlocked the door to avoid suspicion, and then struggled out on to the flat roof below, carefully closing the window behind me. Above, the stars were bright amid a deep indigo sky. Hearing no noise from the kitchen, I shimmied down the drainpipe – it was an undignified struggle. Ah! Terrible agonies! My toe throbbed in rebuke as I looked up at the horribly distorted pipe. But haste! I crept round to the open door from which emanated a sweet yellow light and saw Mrs Grubbs slumped most indelicately beside an empty bottle of wine, snoring heavily.

It was certainly most unfortunate but as I tip-toed delicately past the slumped matron my tail coat ends caught on a nail on the dresser, and as I slipped onwards, my not inconsiderable bulk brought the whole construct and the dozens of precious plates and glasses within it crashing to the floor. Readers, forgive me! I did not hesitate. Rather I scuttled into the hall and wrenched open the door. Behind me I heard the cacophony of Mrs G's drunken screams and the voices of the Probers suddenly raised and coming towards me. Slamming the door behind me I dashed out into the night!

But worse was to come. As I ran blindly into the road, an oncoming car swerved to avoid me and – I cower in shame – squashed an innocent pigeon, idly pecking by the roadside, beneath its wheels. (The terrible crunch of bones and flesh haunts me still.) Appalled, I dived into the darkened gardens in the middle of the square, the sound of the car's horn ringing in my ears, and cowered under a bush. Through the heavy iron bars I saw Jagers, Grubbers et al rush out into the street, shouting angrily and looking around. But they soon went inside.

Most sorrowfully did I skulk away and hail a cab. Mrs B was appalled when I arrived, in agony and covered in dead leaves and soil. She hastened me to bed where I fell into a deep and far from guiltless sleep.

I woke from a fitful night bathed in sweat and screaming like a madman. Ceasing, I immediately heard the gentle coos of the pigeons: the soft sounds of my guilt. Memories from the night before came thick and fast and I blushed anew at the chaos I had caused. But the most piercing and disturbing memory of all? Perhaps the most terrible fact from my disastrous evening: sweet readers, I had not flushed the chain.

[Sir Charles has been barred from the Probers Club by a unanimous vote until further notice – Ed]