

The Course of my Career
from and Including

THE PURVESS INCIDENT

or,

HOW I BECAME AN AMBASSADOR OF THE REALM, *Due to Certain Happenstances of Said INCIDENT; wherein is discussed diplomacy within and outside of the boudoir, the evil of onerous odours, the partial success of inventors, and the performance to and of certain ends.*

An account from the memoirs of

SIR EDMUND CLEVERE, BART.

prefaced and annotated by

James Lincoln Warren

This is the surviving fragment of a larger work by the Age of Reason English diplomat and explorer, Sir Edmund Clevere, baronet (1687-1758). Clevere was known to many principal figures of his era, including such worthies as G. F. Handel, Jonathon Swift, Alexander Pope, Dr. Samuel Johnson, and the brilliant artist William Hogarth. More interesting than his acquaintance with the literary and or artistic giants of the epoch, however, is his much deeper sympathy and friendship for many little known scientists and crackpots of peculiar brilliance, and in this light I have deemed it proper to seek the fragment's publication, primarily out of historical scientific interest, but also in recognition of a personality that may well rank with two other great chroniclers of their respective eras, Samuel Pepys and Brig. Gen. Harry Flashman.

—James Lincoln Warren, New York, 1974

My first reaction to the knowledge that it is my destiny to procure this tale for posterity is one of humility, yes, and even hope of the reconciliation of my own reputation and the Reader's sensibilities. For I know not who may discover my account, but to whomever Fate decrees to peruse this document, I beg of you not to hold the indelicacies of my narrative against me, for I would not wish to appear as a champion of unpalatable ribaldry or immodest Outrage: such is not my purpose, and what details I include I must to preserve the Truth, the pursuit of which is my heart's dearest endeavor. Having thus made my apologia, I am now prepared to undertake the recitative of my curious story, a tale which

merest echo of the Horror it induced in me.

My name is Sir Edmund Clevere, Bart., and at the time of this writing, as I have done since the summation of my many studies at Oxford, I dwell in London, and it is in that great City that my participation in the related incident began, in the crisp autumn of the year 1711. At that time my business was not so much Diplomacy as Intelligence in conjunction with Her Majesty's Army¹ and I had just returned from a profitable, tho' hazardous foray into Russia. I was delighted to come home at last to a civilised Empire, and you can imagine my dismay at discovering upon my arrival seal'd orders from a General, a Peer whose name I shall not disclose, in respect for his prestige and his family. I received the letter from my man Montague, and with my heart sliding to my knees I broke the seal and slowly read the letter's contents.

October 11, 1711

To the distinguished Sir Edmund,

In respect to your many talents, and in especial your ability to extract information from the most stubborn sources, i.e. rocks and trees &c., I am entrusting to your care an American whom we suspect of some connection with French Spies in the Crown colonies established there. In God's name and in the name of our Sovereign Queen, I charge you to discover whatever dangerous knowledge he may have imparted to our lustful enemies.

I have the honour, &c., to remain

A—

My heart gladly returned to my chest, because it appeared that I could enjoy this assignment within the comforts of my own home, and I recall that I may have clicked my heels once or twice in my intense jubilation. Of course, I did not suspect that this joyful notion was to be far removed from the repugnant reality. Far from any suspicion of the impending horrors, I felt only glee at the prospect of having an easy time with my cushy assignment.

When the scowling soldiers brought the American (and I would have scowled the more fiercely had I been one o' them), I nearly gagged. He was crudely garbed in a well-worn but ill-fitting suit of smelly deerskin, and upon his low, idiotic forehead was perched some amazing excuse for a hat, apparently made from the hide of some furry indigenous American creature². His appearance was unsettling to a gentleman's composure, certainly, but how can I describe the olfactory agony I was forced to endure? He could not have bathed in at least a year, and his body's stench was over whelming. Thus was I introduced to the fumes and the gargoyle countenance of Methuselah Purvess.

"By the Feet of Christ!" I exclaimed. "You bring unbidden into my parlour the strong aura of a stable, or a Barn."

"Well," he said, his yellow eyes glaring into mine, "at least I'm clean." And with this audacity accomplished, he began, in an unspeakable awful manner, to pick his nose with his gnarled forefinger, his face contorted with a singular concentration, as if the effort required to perform this distasteful deed was Herculean in the extreme.

"In my house there will be no exploratory diversions into one's nasal passages," I said with a becoming dignity, "and before we can discuss our affairs, you simply must bathe your self." Did I see a fleeting expression of fear on Purvess's ugly face? If so, it was enveloped by scarlet irritation.

"There ain't nowhere ta bathe," he exploded, looking slightly angered, and the air turned momentarily dark with his foetid breath.

“You can try the bathtub,” I intoned, and instructed my gentleman’s gentleman to show our guest (for lack of a more suitable term) to the bath. No sooner had the vile Purvess left when I became aware of a horrendous commotion above. But in my bitter ness for the man and his barbaric habits, I am forgetting my major purpose: I do not intend to bore my Reader with an account of my maid’s pinched peachy arse. Therefore, I shall move the scene forward, as in the theatre, for the gross result of days of intense interrogation was that I had discovered no more about the man save his unquenchable crudity—nothing, that it, until he bolted.

How, you most certainly will ask, did such a barbarian elude the protective agency of a capable gentleman in Her Majesty’s service? By means most bizarre, I may comfortably assure you.

After we had swept away the eroding influence of his fantastic filth, Methuselah Purvess had begun to withdraw to the comforts of the bottle, or what was worse, more specifically to my bottles, and not a decanter in my house was secure from his vandalism. How can I emphasize my displeasure when I discovered I had lost my finest Irish Brandy and Scotch whiskey? And the demon did not observe the virtues of moderation.

Picture if you will us both, myself in a state of exhausted exhilaration and the American in a state of infatuated inundation. I constantly made subtle references to his suspected dealings with the French, and yet he spoke of naught but an ancient native medicine man whom he had befriended, and that is the entirety of all I shall ever know about his past. I did not then realise, of course, that his short term future was to unfold with the abruptness of a pistol crack. At one point he was speaking calmly of his savage companion, and then quite suddenly he leapt from his chair and began screaming and whooping like an Arab. I was shocked absolutely senseless. As we were (or rather had been) reposing in the salon on the first stage³ he had easy access to the balcony, and running out there he vociferously exclaimed, “follow me if you can, you womanish bastard,” and was then gone, having ostensibly launched himself into the tree which grew in front of my little manor.

“Montague!” I cried to my butler, “outside! Stop the bloody scoundrel!” My servant faithfully rushed downstairs, and I hurried to the french windows from which Methuselah Purvess had disappeared, to make good his final challenge. May he fry in Hell longer than Lucifer himself! I dove with the grace of a swan, but still my best wig was hopelessly ruined, and my fine satin breeches were grasped by the unkind branches of the oak, which sundered the seams apart with a mighty rip, leaving me suspended in the hated foliage with my arse bared as on the day of my birth.

My maid meanwhile had come to the window, doubtless to investigate the unruly activity, and screamed, with all the attractive pitch of a goose, in sight of the pale white apparition facing her from the support of the tree. What ignominy! Yet worse than my profound embarrassment was the grueling knowledge that the wretch had escaped.

Immediately the machinations of my mind were set in motion . . . where does one seek an inferred ally of the French? The answer sprung fully armed from my forehead, and immediately formed on my lips. Despite my reputation as a man of the world I decided to pay a visit to a friend who was unquestionably an authority in the matter which so assertively suggested itself.

After having redressed my disgraced rump, I hurried post-haste to the study of a scientist and physician, one of my dearest friends, a man entitled Dr. Caspar Finch, F.L.B.S.⁴

“By the Breath of Jesus!” I cried as I burst into his laboratory, “Finch, I am in dire need of aid. Can you tell me where a fugitive, a crude American can, may find . . . accommodations?”

“In a bordello, you mean,” he said with a small smile. “I may know of such a place.”

“Excellent! You must tell me its location immediately. It is a matter of—” I paused, as I’ve seen actors do for effect, “—a matter of the Realm.”

Dr. Finch merely laughed. “I think I can be more help to you t merely supplying the address of a bawdy house,” he said. “Come and behold my latest invention: The man seeking detective device.” He arched his index finger in summons and bade me follow. At the rear of his fabulous workshop was poised a most perplexing device which had the appearance of a divining rod of a most advanced nature. From a large wooden fork hung a variety of glass jars, each containing a differently coloured chymical or extract; I seem to remember at least five small vials of this peculiar nature suspended from the instrument. The tops of these bottles were corked, but from the cork Finch had rigged some sort of ingenious tubing so that the contents of all five jars were by means of the tube enjoined.

“Isn’t it lovely?” he said, with a grin of parental pride upon his distinguished features, his eyes agleam behind his spectacles.

“O yes,” I replied hastily. “What does it do?”

“Ah. How does it work, eh?” He emitted one of his learned chuckles (to this day, I have not quite figured out bow Finch can make a chuckle sound educated. But he does). “It’s all very simple. You are, of course, acquainted with the method whereby the divining rod operates?”

Of course I am no fool. I know Newton’s Laws as well the next educated man⁵. But when Finch began talking about relative mass attraction, &c., he completely lost me. Apparently, he has constructed a strange theory that the divining rod works according to a shift of Gravity due to the different weight or some such qualification in the presence of subterranean liquid. You see, it’s all very nonsensical, but apparently it’s correct. I know for an unfortunate fact that Finch’s divining rod worked.

“The principles involved with my man-seeking detective device are rudimentally the same,” he said. “Each of these vials can be adjusted to fit the specific qualities of an individual—making it a certainty that the device will locate that individual.”

“Ah!” I said, not comprehending in the least. “But how can we be sure that it is adjusted correctly to the scoundrel I am seeking?”

“Simply accomplished,” he said with a knowledgeable smile, “by the acquirement of a sample of said scoundrel’s bodily chymistry.”

“And what form should such a sample take?” I asked, a little put out. I knew very well that I could not draw Methuselah Purvess’s blood, despite the joy I would extract from such a procedure, the simple cause being that he had to be found first, in which case we would have to turn him loose again in order for Finch’s invention to be of any use.

“Yes, well,” he said, coughing. “Ah, indeed, ah, the customary form would be, ah, a generous sample of feces.”

“What? Ordure?”

“Well, yes. If this man is an escaped prisoner of yours, as your ea gerness indicates, then surely you must have access to such a sample.”

And so we were thrust into the discouraging task of preparing Finch’s divining rod with a hefty chip of American turd. Having thus armed ourselves, we set our feet in stride swiftly toward the accomplishment, of our quest, tho’ it would take us across the threshold

of a great den of iniquity; which is to say we went immediately to a most disreputable brothel, one with many offerings which (Finch assured me) were undeniably bizarre.

The Madame met Finch with open arms and an open heart. “’Ow yew maikin’ out, Doctor Finch?” she squawked. “Yew know yer a big faiv’rite ’round ’ere. Ooh! And ’o’s this yew come draggin’ along wiv yew? I’ll fetch Betty an’ Alice meself, for nuffink’s too fine fer Doctor Finch an’ ’is pal.”

Finch turned magenta red and became most apologetic, and had begun to explain chivalrously that he wasn’t here for pleasure, but rather on business, when the divining rod began to shake violently.

“God’s teeth!” I roared. “The villain is still here!” Without further ado Finch and I rushed headlong through a throng of delicate creatures, following the wild stick’s vibrations, knocking a few of the more unfortunate madonnas of the night upon their cushioned professional buttocks. And believe me, for I am quite a gentle man, I have never felt a greater urge than the one which compelled me to reach out and squeeze one of those score of alabaster breasts. Luckily, virtue and duty followed the same path, as Finch and I ran precipitately into a bedchamber, whose female occupant shrieked at our mercurian entrance. I don’t imagine I shall forever forget the look of abject consternation on the pudgy face of the rotund Gen. Lord A— as Finch and I leapt upon his rented bed and ran across to the door at the room’s antipodal wall, the entire action as swiftly executed as the dive of a falcon.

“Excuse me, m’lord,” I cried as we flew above him and his shrieking whore and out of his room.

Suddenly we burst into the adjacent room, and who should, be present but the wicked Purvess himself, just dropping his trousers in the presence of a deliciously attractive harlot.

“Aw, damn!” he yelled as he wheeled to “face our charge. “Ya just cain’t leave a feller alone, can ya? I told ya ’bout that Injun medicine man I was compeer to. Well damn if the ol’ red savage didn’t teach me to take care of myself, too!” With this speech he lifted his hands and began to chant something in a very strange tongue. And a strange sight it was, too.

By this time I was quite wrathful, and scarcely in the mood to listen to the ravings of a lunatic, so I grabbed him just as he reached the climax of his chant, and what happened then was extraordinary. There was a colossally loud report, like cannon fire, followed by the presence of a stench that made the American’s foul odour of no account. I could see Finch swaying in a daze, and it was obvious that the bottles of his apparatus had exploded, the same having sent out their contents in a fine, malodourous spray throughout the entire room. Methuselah Purvess cursed and crapulously belched, muttering in a sepulchral tone something akin to “Someday that Injun’s spell is gonna work right.” It caused me to suddenly shudder, that statement, as the thought of what Purvess may have intended with his magic struck me.

Finch has told me since that Purvess’s utterances could have had nothing to do with the destruction of his device, and that it was in fact caused by the combustible nature of the sum of the chemicals he had utilised in realising the invention, a fault which forced him to abandon the project altogether. The worst of it all is that Purvess proved that he was not in league with the French at all and was returned to America, where I hope he rots, although doubtless Finch would say that the saddest part of the disgusting adventure is that they will no longer tolerate him at one of his favourite houses of pleasure.

The greatest (and truly only) benefit of the entire affair came in the guise of a summons from Lord A—, who looked me in the face and said, “You’re aware, of course, that we need a new man in

Here Sir Edmund’s manuscript ends. As of the present, the remainder of this memoir has not been found.

NOTES

¹ Sitting on the British throne at this time was Queen Anne, daughter of the exiled James II and the third monarch of England’s first constitutional monarchy, having succeeded the joint reign of William III and Mary II. From Clevere’s education at Oxford, as well as his literary tone, we can assume that he was a Royalist, a member of the group coming to be known in this era as the Tories.

² Probably raccoon.

³ Clevere betrays his continental influence by this statement. The French “premier étage” translates to “first stage” and means what the English call the first floor, i.e., the flight above the ground floor.

⁴ It has been suggested that this means “Fellow, London Brotherhood of the Sciences.” As I have been unable to confirm the existence of a scientific fraternity in 18th Century London with this title, I am inclined to agree with Prof. Shick that it means, in fact, “Fanatical Lover of Boudoir Society.”

⁵ Clevere shows that he is indeed well educated, since physics was rarely included in the education of a gentleman in his day. Sir Isaac Newton lived from 1642 to 1727, and although it seems that he and Caspar Finch were acquainted with each other, there is no evidence that the great physicist and Sir Edmund ever met.