

An examination of the effect on character of greatly altered circumstances, as epitomized
by the divergent conditions into which two young unfortunates are thrust by the wretched
cynicism of their betters.

Or

The Wager

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Introduction

It is the one of the great pleasures of the age to discuss the crass immoralities of others. For those of the moneyed classes, such gossips often turn to gambling and on the turn of wagers lives are lost or changed irrevocably. Lady Piffing Squib, in her educative autobiography 'An Entitled Girl's Experience of Matrimony', recounts the tale of such a bet. Viscount Runtburry had so the story goes, fared the worse at draughts against his brother the Earl of Dotheringham. Fearing this ill luck should continue 'till he might lose his ruffled shirt, the Viscount proposed a wild gamble.

"If I," he declared, addressing his foe "manage to swim unaided the length of the Amazon, you Sir shall publicly state your inferiority at all gentlemanly games of card and board, and furthermore concede to offer your hand in marriage to my dear pet guinea pig Maple."

"And if you lose?" responded his competitor, clearly amused at the prospect of such a messalliance.

"Why then it is I who shall marry the beast, and walk about Leicester square each morning for the remainder of my life, bearing a placard marking me out as a dolt. 'The Dolt', it shall read."

At that those two paragons of the table made fast their gamble, and the Earl watched with interest as his brother set out to obtain his victory. In a move so cunning that it won him the position of Villain Laureate, the Viscount (whose Christian appendage was, it should be noted 'Emanuel', from the Aramaic 'Emanthuzella', meaning either 'the crafty swindler' or 'one who imbibes Turkish delights purely for the purposes of provoking flatulence') had a swimming pool installed in his Summer home in Islington, and there swam, over the period of fourteen years 'the length of the Amazon river', never leaving the comfort of his own castle.

Defeat was conceded, the proposal offered and one supposes hastily accepted. History does not record how the Earl fared in his marriage, though a cynical observer might regard his bubble cheeked, soft tempered, long whiskered decedents as proof of its success.

What lessons does Lady Squib's anecdote have for us today, in this age of mechanical sense and electrical sensibly? Are we too well educated to have use for fables? Or may we yet fall prey to the seduction of that Hellenic harpy, hubris?

The work you are about to entertain is my own humble attempt to assault such intractable conundrums. When Dorothy Perkins, my wife of forty years, proposed the project to me, I was only too keen to direct her resources as a draftsman towards its completion. On returning from a year amongst the Grecians, enjoying Aristophanes, I found to my pleasure the project completed, and to my precise specifications. The story I had written was everything I might have hoped. It is my fervent wish that the reader shall find in it such consolations as I have encountered, and learn as I have, that the prattling sex have a use for their organs of vituperation after all.

Yours, etc, the authorial voice.

The Ruttlington Club, 1920.

Chapter 1 - Lockstock in London

Euston station was aflame. Cinders clambered skyward in the early evening breeze, and a fell hand of smoke fisted the London sky. From his window on the seven fifteen Manchester to London coal guzzler, Florien Lockstock watched in blind panic. Fortunately, it was that brand of blind panic that actually improves one's vision. His train rapidly approached a station smashed to rubble. Was there was ample time to slow and safely stop? Perhaps. Did the only real danger lie in hasty action? Yes, there was that. What of it! Could a man ever trust his life to some common navvy, tasked with steering a machine he could not comprehend, still less control? Never! Florien Lockstock knew in his stout steam heart that if a gentleman did not see fit to intervene, all aboard might as well have placed their necks between the canines of hungry hound, so certain was their imminent collision.

Making a throat cutting gesture to his batman, Lockstock reached for a leather strap and held on tight. The young Jamaican nodded, pulling hard on the brass leaver Lockstock had had installed in his cabin. A leaver that, heedless of all sensible precautions, threw the engines into reverse. Instantly the train began to slow, and Florien watched, helpless a woman, as his manservant Lothario was dashed violently against the compartment door.

With a wail like a whaled whale wailing, train recoiled from track. Through the panoramic windows of his state car, Lockstock watched as the world tumbled about him. Safe in his luxurious compartment, he was thrashed against his chaise longue, a soft cheese on a velvet

cushion teased by a gentle breeze.

With a final shudder, Lockstock's carriage tore away from the body of the train and tumbled to the bottom of a gravel embankment, rolling end over end like an egg dashed from its teaspoon in the final moments of an egg and spoon race. Rising up at a hundred miles an hour was the stone floor of the embankment, a demanding father at the finish line, waiting to cuff his dyspraxic son, drag him off the field and force him to watch as father consumed an expensive choc-ice. Florian Lockstock shut his eyes, held tight and prayed his egg was hardboiled.

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Lifting his uncomfortably middle-aged body through a shattered window that looked out on stars, and smoke, and a sky that pitied London, Lockstock made his escape from the ruined carriage. Half a mile yet outside Euston, he had cast the train off her tracks. Although his compartments expensive safety mechanisms had saved his life, others had not been so lucky. Above him, exploded carriages lay like a litter of stillborn puppies. Scattered passengers twitched like shredded viscera. The steaming engine, upright atop the moonlit embankment, like a piteous bitch howling in grief.

Doubtless, the fearless peelers were busy forming a cordon around the burning station and every strong back would be needed to assist the injured. Florian Lockstock determined to be one hero who would never pay for a pint after this day. He would cast aside the privileges of rank and pull from danger nobleman and dollymop alike. He would strike up unlikely friendships with bawdy peelers, and catch the eye of crumpled ladies. He would prove he was a man yet, with a man's strength, and yes, a man's needs too.

As he stumbled up the gravel pile, anticipating the glories to come, already politely refusing drinks in the wine bar of the imagination, Lockstock's legs gave out. Too late he realised

he had not escaped the accident unharmed. He felt a pinch like iron tongs compress his chest, and reaching five fat Bratwurst fingers along his body encountered the wet stem of a rib, jutting from its cage.

Those grain-fed pan-fried veal phalanges crept on, tensing, almost recoiling at the knife of broken bone that pierced his jacket. Shaking, he rolled on his back next to the cooling corpse of the steam dragon. Reaching into his waistcoat, Lockstock retrieved a small hard thing secreted there. Heaving a sigh of relief, he let himself drift into swamp of sleep, the tiny box safe in his fist, his last thoughts bright despite the tragedy. His great invention had survived. Men might die like dogs this day, but progress had been saved!

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Lockstock awoke between familiar sheets. 'By Zeus', he thought, 'naught but a dream!' Alas, bandages bound tight about his chest and the cries of a city alive to danger told him the nightmare had been no foolishly late and generous serving of Edam. 'I camembert it', he thought, 'this hell is real!'

"Lothario", Lockstock called out meekly. But it was not the swarthy features of his faithful islander that greeted him out of the salmon tinged dark, rather the age clawed visage of old Gormthwhate. "I'm afraid Mr. Lothario is not available to attend you, master Lockstock," whispered the servant, in that lifeless drawl that had terrified Florien as a child.

"Surely he 'as not perished? Lothario!"

"Worry not sir, I have arranged for a temporary valet. You shall be unattended only until the morning."

Lockstock's expression shifted, satisfaction replacing grief as bride price replaces a beloved daughter. "Fine, fine. You know my needs. Now leave me!" he croaked, the broken rib

worrying his chest like anxiety.

"Very good sir," said Gormthwhate, as insolent as ever. The phantom drew back, eyes fixed on his master's prone form, till their owner vanished like lust in the presence of a papist.

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The city was preternaturally quiet that morning, as London's eighth richest visitor took to its streets against every order of his family's physicians; a stout birch cane his only concession to infirmity. Mayfair, in ordinary times decorated with a myriad of rainbow umbrellas, the chirp of playful Scottie Toms, the dizzy extravagance of dandy gents and their merry servants, was as dull as Deutschland. This condition was greatly to Florian Lockstock's liking. He had always hated London, with its smirking neoclassical museums and its chattering aristocrats. London was a city obsessed with the past, a crypt for a mercifully vanishing era. Lockstock had his new man, a mute young Fenian he had rechristened Telemachus, hail a handsome; and with the able fellow's help hauled himself into its waiting mouth, like a tongue-eating louse clambering into the gills of a snapper.

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Lockstock's phrenologist was an Oriental whose practice was located on the Charing Cross road. That morning the street was blocked by a flotilla of carts and carriages eagerly departing the terrified metropolis. Lockstock was forced to dismount and have a path barged through the fleeing Londoners by the broad farm hands of Telemachus.

"Me cranium, me blasted cranium," he exclaimed, bustling his way into the foyer of Master Wu's practice. "I demand to see a Chinaman!"

"No wait is necessary for my most treasured patient," said the mysterious oriental, as he glided down the banister of an ornate winding staircase to greet his visitor. "Come this way, most

honoured Florian Lockstock," he added, not looking back but moving with many rapid little steps, so that it seemed he almost sailed into his richly carpeted examining room.

An oak table dominated the vast parlour, upon which lay every variety of beaker, pipette, tube, rack and instrument of laboratory experimentation that might be imagined. The high shadowed walls of the former library held books enough, but they were books of alchemy, craniometry and physiognomy rather than the Latin histories and Greek poetics that should more properly adorn a gentleman's study.

As he rested his aching corpus in the low barber's chair that served as a couch for both diagnosis and treatment, Florian Lockstock allowed himself a moment's peace. Here, surrounded by the ointments and unguents of medicinal science- modern and ancient, by the wise pronouncements of long dead sages, by the obscure wisdom of the old old orient, he could shut out the constant worry that plagued his daily life as plague plagues the plague-plagued sewers of Calcutta.

Without a word, Master Wu rested the svelte dexterous fingers of one bony claw upon his patient's dome and the equally elongated, sinister digits of its compliment upon a fine porcelain phrenological head. This was no ordinary smooth map of the continents of the mind, but an innovation of the practice: A replication of the every contour of his client's skull, performed by a team of skilled artisans utilising a multi vectorial craniometer, so that the shaving of the head might be avoided. Thus, Wu could feel at once the state of his visitor's skull upon his initial visit, and at the same time measure the changes written on the dynamic surface of the cranium as the furies of life or worse, disease took their toll. As his fingers swirled through the greasy mop of Lockstock's mane, Wu called out a series of figures to his tiny lady assistant, who noted them down in a scientific logbook. He finished his inspection with a gentle squeeze of the patient's

neck, and a second assistant presented a silver bowl filled with perfumed l'eau de toilet for the Master's fingers. As more assistants dried his hands, the oriental vizier of physic took a seat opposite his fretful patient and read over the measured deviations.

"Out with it Wu, tell me the worst."

The phrenologist swirled his long fingers in the air in an ambiguous gesture. "It is not good, honourable Lockstock. Alas it seems despite the continuing success of your endeavors, the faculty of covetousness has grown still larger."

Florien Lockstock placed his suddenly heavy head between two work-scarred palms.

"Might I recommend a charitable contribution to the practice?"

"Of course, of course," mumbled Lockstock. Wu nodded to an assistant who approached with an illuminated invoice.

"How much would..." began Lockstock.

"I'm sure the honoured gentleman will be more than generous whatever gratuity he chooses," the phrenologist replied silkily. "And now..." he paused, rising from his chair to select a tool from his collection of mysterious scientific instruments, "The treatment."

Lockstock groaned. "Is it really necessary? Must I must endure the dreadful 'ammering again?"

"Oh yes," replied Master Wu, "Sad to say, absolutely necessity. Lift your head please."

Lockstock watched in evident fear as the towering Chinaman placed a familiar sterling silver device over the dome of his skull, brushing his forefingers once more against his patient's cheek. His miniature lady assistants moved in to tighten the stereotactic rig, silent as always. One tapped Lockstock's jaw with an impolite finger, and he opened it obediently to receive the leather bridle.

"I'm afraid this will pain you very greatly Mr. Lockstock," said Master Wu, the soft pads of his slender fingers once again cupping Lockstock's cheeks. Cheeks now sunk in wretched anticipation, like a baby forced to drink from a vinegar nipple.

"And so," said Master Wu, smiling and reaching for the long obsidian stem of his reshaping hammer, "we begin".