

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF FIRKIN BUSTARD

Like their cattle, the peasantry of the slow rolling acres of North Yorkshire hardly batted its eyelids at the dawn of the new century.

By contrast the South of England greeted the year 1800 with mounting hysteria. For starters, Farmer George was filling his chamber-pot with blue ink again and losing more and more of his marbles by the day. Prime Minister Pitt, having experienced the old king's madness before, promptly removed the sceptre from his erratic grasp. This only encouraged fat Prinny, the worthless heir, to stop humping the maidens of Mayfair with his mate Brummell and hotfoot it round to Whitehall to snuffle in the Government trough for handouts. This in turn caused commotion in Parliament between supporters of the spendthrift Prince and those who abhorred his profligacy. Then there was the Hero of the Nile. Having lately returned triumphantly to the metropolis, the sex-mad little sailorman, sick of Norfolk Fanny, had brazenly set up a *menage a trois* with his new doxy Hamilton and her compliant husband. The streets which had greeted him with acclamation were now divided between those who still praised and those who condemned him. The antics of Boney on the continent did nothing to calm an increasingly volatile city. Despite the thrashing Nelson had given him in Egypt, *le petit caporal* had raised another army, said, 'Goodnight Josephine,' again and set about smashing the armies of crazy King George's allies on the continent. Encouraged by his bravado, a multitude of war-crazy Frenchmen had massed on their northern coast brandishing swords, billhooks, hayforks and even their choppers at 'perfidious Albion' across the Channel. From Dover to Penzance maidens lay awake at night trembling, some with dread, some with delight, at the thought of the imminent arrival of *Jean Francois* to ravish them in their beds. And while an unknown Arthur Wellesley was honing his military skills in far-off India, the horrors and ultimate triumphs of Trafalgar and Waterloo lay hidden in the mists of an unimaginable tomorrow.

As far as the yokels enjoying that halcyon summer on the aforementioned northern acres were concerned, the excitement in the south might just as well have been happening on the dark side of the moon. Although Firkin Bustard was undoubtedly one of those Yorkshire bumpkins, he was not typical. He had a quicksilver wit and an eye for the main chance which accounted for his current post as valet to Sir John Chuff-Chaser of Fairfolly Hall in the bishopric of Ripon. Born on the land, bred on it, and although, like all thoughtless youth, giving his mortality scant thought, he would have said, if pressed, that he would most certainly be buried under it. Fate, however, had decreed that this summer day at the turn of the century would be the last one he would spend at liberty. The events unfolding in the wider world of which the young peasant was unaware would lead ironically to him sharing a niche in British military history with the swashbuckling Cornwellian Richard Sharpe. On Firkin Bustard would fall the distinction of standing not only on the bloody deck of the Victory but also amidst the carnage on the field of Waterloo.

On this sunny day, however, fortune seemed to be smiling on Sir John's gofer. The rich baronet had always baulked at the burden of responsibility his inheritance had placed on him. He longed to be the butterfly and not the ant. So, he built himself a beautiful little gem of a country house in a few acres of landscaped grounds in which to play the leisured gentleman. As soon as it was built he handed over the bulk of the estate - more than two thousand acres of forest and farmland - plus the old family Tudor farmhouse to his more conscientious younger brother. At last Sir John could emulate those southern fops and rakes and live the idle licentious life after which he had always hankered.

From the lowliest of starts as a scullion in the kitchen, Firkin's speed of thought and deed had brought him to the notice of Sir John and he had soon carved

out for himself what later generations would call a 'cushy little number'. His remuneration of £50 per annum was a generous one and his duties were not arduous. What a pity, then, that before the June day was over his comfortable billet would be snatched away.

It began like almost every other day for Firkin. He rose at six and ran naked, apart from the towel round his waist, down to the pump in the stable-yard which was deserted at that time of the morning. Flinging the towel aside, he steeled himself to the icy douches of water and then rubbed himself vigorously till his body glowed like a fire-stick - a performance much appreciated by the bevy of tittering female servants waiting round the corner for the daily striptease. Unaware of his fan club, Firkin dashed back upstairs to his little pad, grabbed the bottle of *Le Brute*, recently extolled by the French pugilist, Henri Coupair, and splashed it on all over, giving an extra squirt of the pungent concoction to his sporting equipment. Although it always stung, the cock of the midden persevered with its daily application, as by evening it had usually paid dividends with one or other of the available maids. Then he flunkeyed himself up in his short green velvet jacket, the cream knee-breeches which showed his muscular thighs to such advantage and the finely knit hose which did the same for his curvaceous calves. Shining black shoes with silver buckles and a small wig of tightly curled grey sausage rolls completed his attire. Bouncing down to the kitchen he snatched a pork pie and a tankard of ale, kissed the slender kitchen maid Jane and goosed the bulky bottom of Kate the middle-aged cook. He dodged her flailing ham of an arm and skipped off to begin his morning schedule as they smiled and shook their indulgent heads at him.

'Oh aye,' said Kate, 'that gradely lad 'as an eye fort' ladies alright.'

'No' just an eye,' replied Jane, who had already experienced the young buck's attention, 'but a lip, a tongue, a finger an' other body-parts int' bargain.'

His mother, who was the eloquent one in the family, always maintained, 'When oor Firkin's testicles descended when 'e were nobbut a lad, 'is brains took up residence wi' them an' a".'

'Aye,' agreed her more verbally-direct husband, "'F lad's allus 'ad 'is brains in 'is balls.'

At seven this bollock-brained servant roused his master, filled the hipbath with hot water and helped him with his toilette. Scented and powdered, the master was then helped into his dress for the day. The shoes, hose and breeches, although of finer quality, were not dissimilar to his lackey's. His brocaded waistcoat and full-skirted embroidered coat, cravat and wig with flowing pigtail, however, screamed the gulf between master and man.

Eight o' clock saw Firkin waiting on Sir John at the breakfast table. Although his master ate alone in a small refectory, the side-table groaned with as great a variety of food as did the tables in the larger dining room. After porridge and cream which was accompanied with the tired daily jest that he was a man for his oats, he went on to the herring, sardine and trout, followed by veal pie, tongue, sausage, bacon and grilled kidney with bread rolls and butter. Having washed them all down with a couple of cups of coffee, he pushed his chair away from the table with a grunt of satisfaction and called for his pipe and tobacco. As Firkin returned with them he prepared himself to force a laugh at the next time-worn quip.

'Odds bodkins, Bustard, what have you brought me this morning?'

'Twist, milord,' the flunkey sighed.

'Zounds, you should know better than that by now, Bustard. You know I always fancy a little shag after breakfast.'

'Very good, milord. Ha ha. Shall aa be 'avin' it changed milord?'

'No, no, Firkin. Gramercy, it's just my little joke. And anyhow, I prefer the twist.'

'Yes, milord.'

Followed by his valet, Sir John walked out onto the gravelled terrace that overlooked the little lake where swans swam and peacocks preened. Master and man proceeded to pace up and down in the sunshine and tobacco smoke. It was now nine o' clock and though conversation for the past couple of hours had been limited, the liberal-minded baronet proceeded to parley with his servant on such familiar terms as would have scandalised the London aristocracy. This morning's main topic was the ball that had been held at Fairfolly the previous evening. Ball - as in Lady Richmond's in Brussels on the eve of Waterloo - it was not. Although attended by most of the local worthies, it was more of a barn dance with bouncy Sir Roger de Coverleys, cotillions, Scottish reels and not a gavotte or minuet in sight.

Sir John, who had been estranged from his wife Lady Margaret since she had caught him *in flagrante delicto* with the recently departed (as in 'left' not 'dead') housekeeper, had discreetly disappeared early from the dance-floor to perform a more intimate coupling with his latest floozie and now needed to catch up on the events of the evening.

'What did you make of the newcomers then? The Poxworthys, Bustard?'

'Very impressive t' colonel were in 'is regimentals an' all them flashin' medals, aa must say, milord.'

'Yes, I suppose you had it from the old grapevine that Poxy has finally left the regiment. Gadzooks, the man's hen-pecked by that harpy of a wife of his. She's persuaded him he's had enough of army life and wants to sample country ways. I suppose you've heard he's taken a six-month lease on Blossom Hall?'

At these words the young man fell into a trance. With vacant eye and expressionless face he began to chant tunelessly: *Blossom Hall! Blossom Hall! The long and the short and the tall. Bloss all the sergeants and WO Ones. Bloss all the corp 'rals and their blinking sons, 'Cos we 're saying goodbye to them all, As back to their billets they crawl. You 'll get no promotion this side of the ocean. So cheer up my lads, Blossom Hall.*

He stopped and slowly returned to mother earth to say, "Ave aa 'ad another one o' ma turns, milord?'

'S'truth, you have. You silly old bustard, Bustard. A lot of rubbish, as usual. Stap me, man, what was all that about?'

It must be explained at this point that Firkin Bustard was the seventh son of a seventh daughter and had received the gift of second sight from his mother, a witch who had narrowly escaped death by fire and water several times until she had seen sense, got rid of the cat, the toad and the broomstick and settled down to making blackberry jam and elderberry wine instead of hexing the locals she did not like. As for poor Firkin, the ancestral gift for prophecy occasionally disturbed his mundane existence. Some word or gesture would trigger him off to prophesy and only half-remember what he had said. At first the revelatory moments had been few and far between but recently they had been occurring more frequently. Only the previous week he had gone 'otherworldly' when visiting his parents' hovel just outside Ripon. His youngest brother, Audie (named after his Irish uncle, Murphy), was being a bit rebellious at bedtime so his mother insisted, 'Off tha goes upstairs afore aa teks t' belt to tha backside me lad - an' - tha's forgot summat, son. Come back here an' kiss me, Audie!'

Immediately Firkin had been away with the fairies. He was standing among the noise and stench of blood and gut on the hell of a great wooden battleship as he heard those words again, coming from below deck: 'Kiss me Hardy.' As he edged his way along the deck which was awash with blood and brine, one of the crew shouted, 'Watch it, mate. That's where Nelson fell.' 'Aa'm not chuffin' surprised,' Firkin had retorted. 'Somebody should get it cleaned up smartish. It's bloody slippery.'

But now he was remembering a little more of his latest revelation: 'Aa were stood on't quayside in a 'ot country, milord. T' sign on t' dock said *Bombay*. A great war 'ad just finished and t' soldiers were gettin' on this big iron ship. That were a bit daft

warn't it? Even Dick, oor village idiot, knows iron don't float! Anyways, these soldiers weren't dressed like oor lovely redcoat lads. They'd grungy brown uniforms on but they was happy as pigs in't shed 'cos they was 'omeward bound. An' what a funny lingo they spouted. That's all aa remember, milord - 'cept it must a' been 'undreds o' years in't future.'

'That's a mercy, then egad. Let's have no more of your magic moments - and tell me more about the Colonel and his Lady.'

Now Firkin was well aware of all the gossip surrounding the Poxworthys. No sooner had they taken up their new abode than the jungle drums had begun to beat. It was true that the colonel had served under Cornwallis against the American rebels and had been taken prisoner at the infamous surrender at Yorktown but the slander-mongers were soon over-egging the pudding. From the ghastly apparition that was Margery Poxworthy, they deduced that while his regiment had been engaging the enemy, Poxworthy must have been bedding every bit of dubious American skirt he came across during the campaigns. Had he heeded the warning implicit in his name, they said, the colonel might have escaped the infection he contracted. Ironically the disease, they said, had no effect on him. He was merely a carrier, they said. Unfortunately for his wife, she was smitten by a galloping form of syphilis, they said, which was responsible for her ravaged appearance - they said.

'Tha's niwer seen t' newcomers afore, then milord?' asked Firkin.

'No Bustard, I was - ahem - called away before they arrived and when I got back to the ballroom the band had gone and all was in darkness.'

'Aye, well, 'e were a picture, milord, in 'is fancy uniform an' moustaches, there's nay mistake. An' she were a picture an' all - nay more o' a sight, aa thinks. 'Er dress an' jewels was a bit o' alright, though but. It were 'er face that took t' biscuit. Under this great tumblin' silver wig she 'ad one o' them shrunken 'eads what Captain Cook discovered on Cannibal Island. 'T were white like a ghost, 'cept where she'd plastered on great splodges o' rouge. An' she'd three black beauty spots - ugly spots morelike - big as farthin's they was on what was left o' 'er face. Then there was 'er eye-patch - black wi' little sparkling diamonds all roond t'edge. Aye, she were a picture alreet.'

'God's blood Bustard! She must look like that portrait of Dora Grey, Lord Grey keeps up in his attic. I must call on the Poxworthys soon. But I can't make it today. I'm off to Preachprattle Parsonage this morning to call on the Reverend Mr. Canting and his wife. But never mind that. How did the evening go Bustard?'

'It didn't go,' thought Firkin. 'It more-like exploded and dropped to bits.'

But he would still enjoy recounting the events of the evening to Sir John: 'Well, tha knows milord, tha put me in charge o' t' Punch Bowl on account o' its potency. Aa was stood there wi' me ladle in me 'and mekkin' sure that naybody got ower much to drink. Why, that weren't necessary, milord, cos most folks knows aall about tha punch an', beggin' tha pardon, milord, most o'fem steered pretty well clear o' 't, preferrin' the ale and the Nettle an' Dandelion wine we brew in t' cellar 'ere.'

'Stap me grunions Bustard, you mean, man, that my lovely punch was not a great success? I noticed there was none left in the bowl this morning.'

'To a degree, it were, milord. Most guests 'ad a glass an' that were enough for 'em - an' t' servants finished it off at end o' t' neet. But most of it, milord were downed by Mrs Poxworthy. She took one glass an' said she'd tasted nowt like it sin' she were downin' Cowpat an' Thistle brew as a lass at 'ome on t' Lincolnshire Wolds. She kept comin' back for more like bombardiers to t' brothel. She must a' supped a dozen ladlesful, milord.'

'Gad, Bustard! She must have been drunk.'

'As a lord, milord - beggin' your pardon milord.'

'S'truth, she must have been a sight to behold. How did she manage to walk

man?'

'With great difficulty, milord. That were t' trouble. She could 'ardly stand niwer mind walk. An' she insisted on bein' on t' floor for ivry dance. Well, she got 'er comeuppance in a reel, milord. She lowped that 'igh, she copt 'er wig on t' chandelier. Why, it come off didn't it?'

'Don't tell me, Bustard. Well do tell me. She was bald, wasn't she?'

'As a coot, milord. But that didn't put 'er off. She rammed it back on back to front and carried on jiggin'. Only - she got into one o' them spinnin' bits. Roond an' roond she went an' couldna stop. T' result was she screwed 'er wooden leg off an' fell flat on 'er backside. That were enough for t' colonel. 'E were dancin' wi' Mrs. Plushin'ton but when 'is wife started shriekin' 'e stopped fondlin' 'er in the do-si-dos an' bundled 'er - aa mean 'is wife, not Mrs Plushin'ton - outside an' away in't gig.'

'Stap me in the ginnel, Bustard. I must call in at Blossom Hall - now don't start that prophesying again - as soon as possible and apologise for the punch. I suppose that put paid to any more dancing then?'

'Not quite milord. All t' fancy folks took their cue though and pushed off in their curricles an' carriages. 'T were early though but, an' after we plied t' fiddlers wi' t' punch we got 'em to play a few more dances for us servants, finishin' off wi' tha old favourite, milord - T' Quaker.'

'Aye by Gad, that's a rare old jig, Bustard. One of my favourites - twice round the floor and outside for your oats. Gadzooks, I wish I'd been there.'

'Aa can well believe it milord. But tha'd notice we didna shirk oor duties. After we'd finished t' jiggin' an' oatsin' we came back in to tidy up an' sweep t' floor an' dowse t' candles an' leave everythin' shipshape an' Bristol-fashion.'

'Fine, Bustard, fine. You did a good job.'

It was obvious that Sir John was preoccupied. It was now ten o' clock and he was itching to be off. He had already put the visit to the Poxworthys on the back-burner, especially as from Firkin's description Dame Margery was an old prune, hardly a fit candidate for a spot of the old rumpington-pumpington. Mrs Canting, however, was a different bag of plums. Since her marriage to the stolid Reverend Caleb she had stagnated in the back of beyond for three weary months. John had visited the Parsonage the previous week and the signs were promising. The lady was ready for a fling and he was eager to assist with the flinging. The right side of thirty, Dorcas was a buxom lass whose severe black dress had given up the impossible task of concealing her voluptuous curves. She was a nice girl, a proper girl, but she had a dark and roving eye and her hair did indeed hang down in ring-a-lets. 'Yes,' Sir John thought, 'She's a lofty clipper-ship alright.' And he couldn't wait to board her. During his visit Dorcas had demurely emphasised several times that on this particular day her beloved would be at the Bishop's Palace in Ripon discussing the worthy cause of building some new almshouses for the deserving poor. Having been given such an obvious green light, John was looking forward to several hours of dalliance that would not bring him back home until the middle of the afternoon.

This meant that for the next five hours or so Firkin would be his own master. As soon as Sir John on Dapple-Grey had galloped down the drive, he bounded boldly up the front stairs in search of the new chambermaid, Sukie, who had deliberately set her cap at him from the moment she had arrived at the Hall the previous week.

'What is it,' the cocky young narcissist thought, 'that meks me so irresistible to t' fairer sex? Is it t' snazzy costume aa wear, or even t' French perfume? No,' he modestly decided, - 'it's just m' dazzling good looks and magnetic personality.'

As he expected, he found her in one of the guest bedchambers. She was stretching up on tiptoe to dust the architrave at the top of one of the windows. Balanced on one leg with the other in the air, she was revealing much more than the permissible glimpse of ankle. He could not resist the provocative pose. Grabbing her

round the waist, he was soon bouncing the compliant maid on the bed and struggling with the mysteries of eighteenth century female underwear. Mission accomplished, they were soon at it hammer and tongues in some preliminary heavy petting until she needlessly whispered, 'What are you - Firkin! - doing?' The unusual word order could have been construed as the fruit of a term she had spent improving her English at evening school the previous winter. The construction would have been wrong. It was simply her startled reaction to Firkin tweaking one of her nipples a little too boisterously.

They took advantage of the pause to recover their breaths but were soon enmeshed again in the arms of Eros. Some two hours later, having proved to an exhausted but enraptured Sukie his supreme stamina and artistry, Firkin was roused by an increasingly insistent sound coming through the open window. Could that be coconut shells galloping up the drive? The guinea dropped. It was the hooves of a horse. Dapple-Grey's! Firkin shot from the bed like a button off a fat man's waistcoat and feverishly began to get into his clothes.

'Get tha keks on an' gerron wi' tha' dustin,' he yelled at Sukie as he struggled into his flunkey kit.

In a couple of minutes the wench was attending once more to the architrave and Firkin, adjusting his wig, was bounding down the stairs four at a time. He need not, however, have been in such a tearing hurry. For Sir John, despite his rampant libido, was a humane man and always ensured that his horses after exercise were properly attended to. By the time he had handed Dapple-Grey over to Job the ostler and given him precise instructions, Firkin was calmly arranging the cutlery in the private dining room.

"Bustard! Blast your innards, man, where are you?" shouted an irritable Sir John as he stamped into the entrance hall.

'By gum, milord, tha's back a bit sooner than expected. Was t' reverend out an' bein a gentleman tha coudna stay an' compromise t'young lady?'

Sir John completely missed Firkin's daring sarcasm because of the frustration he was feeling. He had found the rector at home because the bishop had cancelled the meeting due to the onset of mumps. Unable to leave Preachprattle immediately without breaching protocol, John had engaged the couple in the usual generalities before becoming entangled in a discussion on the relative merits of the 'once and for all' efficacy of Anglican baptism and the Wesleyan insistence on being born again! For more than an hour, enmeshed in the toils of Caleb's serpentine exposition of established doctrine, he kept glancing at the Clippership who had completely furled her signals and was reduced to shrugging her shoulders and casting her black eyes to high heaven. At last the not so gay Lothario managed to extricate himself and, having expected to take a leisurely romantic sandwich with his inamorata, now found himself at home at one o' clock in need of sustenance.

'Zounds, I'm hungry Bustard,' he complained, 'and it's only one o' clock. I can't wait till three for dinner. I'll just have a couple of pieces of pigeon pie and a dish of tea before then. And when you've finished getting it ready, go and find out what the hullabaloo's about in the poultry yard.'

So, while Sir John was at table, Firkin went to investigate. Apparently, just after Sir John had galloped off that morning, Lady Margaret had descended for her daily visit to the chicken run to lavish her rejected love on the hens. She had once been a real looker but now at the age of forty her charms had faded. She had never really recovered from the discovery a couple of years before that Sir John was a serial-shagger. She had always been a one-guy-girl and had loved him deeply - still did. But all the spirit had left her, her light had gone out and she now spent most of her time in the boudoir attended only by her maid. She had transferred some of her love for John to the gothic novels that were sweeping the country. Having read *The Castle*

of *Otranto*, she was hooked and lived her days on the printed page with villains, maniacs and ravaged maidens, with sex-crazy madmen, vampires, werewolves and with the Devil Himself. The only time she put down her book and left the house was to commune with the poultry. It was such a sad sight, the more sympathetic servants agreed, to see a lovely lady with so much love to give dispensing kisses and caresses on clucking clumps of feathers.

It did not take Firkin long to discover that Toby was the unwitting cause of the furore. Now Toby was a West Indian slave, only recently arrived in the north from Bristol. He was a seven-day-wonder but was soon accepted by most of the staff, mainly because of the master's example. Although Sir John was a slave to his carnal impulses, he was, as has already been mentioned, an enlightened man and his liberal views had rubbed off on most of his staff- though a conservative minority sighed that the road of good intentions usually led to the guillotine. Inspired by Rousseau's *Social Contract*, Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* and the current efforts of the Quakers to stir up Parliament to challenge the iniquitous slave-trade, he had bought Toby and, as an example to his peers, had virtually freed him. The Jamaican, a magnificent muscular specimen standing six and a half feet high, had been unshackled on arrival and given the same freedom as the rest of the staff. He did not take advantage. A gentle giant, he was also a pussy-cat and was soon liked by all - especially Molly the milkmaid. Bowled over by the black Adonis, she was soon making cow-eyes at him and it was not long before she had seduced him in the hayloft. It was this heartless girl whose treacherous tittle-tattle was responsible for his nickname. He was soon 'Ten-inch Toby' to the whole household, including the squire and it was even said that the news had reached Lady Margaret's ear and given her melancholy lip a transient humorous tic.

And it was from the lips of Toby, the innocent abroad, that Firkin heard the story of the morning disturbance. The mistress had entered the enclosure and begun to make a fuss of the chickens, calling them by their pet names and giving the two white roosters particular attention and some titbits from the kitchen. Toby had had to break the news to her that the aging cockerels could no longer justify the expense on the corn they devoured and were bound for the pot. Their replacements were at that moment in a cage in the henhouse. It was most unfortunate that milady was at that moment reading her latest gothic tale, *Satan on the Loose* - a lurid tale of the Prince of Darkness terrorising village maidens with his double-pronged pecker that could penetrate both abdominal orifices simultaneously. So, when Toby informed her that he had two cocks, one red and one black and if she would come into the henhouse he would let her stroke them, she flipped her lid and ran screaming back into the house.

'Much ado about sod all,' thought Firkin as he walked back to report to Sir John. It was even less of a to-do than he imagined, for by the time she got back to her boudoir, Lady Margaret realised what the score was and her shrieks turned from hysteria to merriment. She could hardly speak for laughing as she told Mona what had happened. For once their gloom lifted and, for a brief moment at least, tears of a different sort streamed down their faces.

Firkin was telling a different tale to the master who, in different circumstances, would also have found the situation funny. But he was concerned about his wife. Sadly, he was impotent to do anything to give her the comfort he thought she needed, for there had been no contact between the pair of them for years. Firkin, who was used to *being factotum extraordinaire* to Sir John, was immediately appointed ambassador to the boudoir.

'Get upstairs immediately, Bustard,' said Sir John, 'and see what you can do. Take that whisky decanter with you and give her a stiff one.'

'I will milord, I will. But what'll I do wi' t' whisky?'

'Shove it down her throat, man!'

'I will, milord, I surely will. But what about t' whisky?'

'Blast your eyes, Bustard. After that shock in the farmyard, she'll be gagging for it. You'll have no difficulty getting it into her. Go and do what you're told.'

'I will milord. I will - and then happen I'll drink t'whisky missen.'

Disappointed that Sir John had not responded to his risqué humour, Firkin arrived at the boudoir door and knocked timidly. He was expecting a crisis and was not sure how he would resolve it. But when Mona opened the door he was surprised and relieved to find that she was giggling and that sounds of mirth from within indicated that milady was far from distraught. Soon he was administering alcohol to both ladies in celebration of their happiest moment for months. Throwing protocol to the winds, Lady Margaret invited Firkin to be seated in the Queen Anne chair near the window and to split the whisky bottle with them.

Several glasses later, Firkin took leave of the ladies and descended to report to Sir John whom he found chafing at the bit. On hearing that all was well upstairs, the master complimented his valet on a diplomatic mission happily accomplished but thought it necessary to issue him with a warning.

'By the Well of Walsingham, Bustard, do not deceive yourself that your *double entendres* about the whisky went unnoticed. Have a care, young man. You are beginning to get above yourself. Do not overplay your hand and take advantage of my liberal tendencies or you could easily find yourself deposited with your family among the swine again.'

Firkin's grovelling reply was undone by his whisky-induced exuberance: 'Milord, aa'm ashamed o' missen. What come ower me to be so familiaritical aa'm at a loss to explanify. Happen it were 'cos aa were filled wi' t' sense o' honourability tha' was bestowin' on me to perform a visitation to 'Er Ladyship in 'er own chamber an' me wits got a bit fuddled like.'

'Shut up, Bustard! I like you better without all that brown-nosing. Now get off and make arrangements for dinner. At three as usual. On my way home I met the Wyde-Lobbers and Mr Atterley out riding and invited them to dine so there will be four of us at table. And afterwards we'll be having a few hands of whist. See that the card room is prepared.'

Firkin liked the three expected guests and looked forward to meeting them again. Although Julian and Andrew Wyde-Lobber could not play tennis for toffee, they were no humbugs at the musical game. Julian played a mean fiddle and was a wizard on the new guitar he had brought back from his sojourn in Spain. Andrew wrote musical entertainments and his latest piece, *Dogs* was going down such a bomb at the Royal in Richmond that he was being hailed as Yorkshire's answer to George Frederick Handel himself. Phil Atterley, a pleasant young bachelor, boasted no such accomplishments but would, decades later, attain a brief distinction as the first stamp collector when his cousin, Rowland Hill introduced the Penny Post.

'Gramercy, why do you linger Bustard? Be off with you,' cried Sir John.

Firkin had indeed loitered too long. But his thoughts had moved on to the playing cards. It must have been the dutch courage coursing through his veins that made him invite more wrath from his master as the foolhardy valet continued to tarry loquaciously.

'Cards, milord? Tha' surprises me. Tha' niwer touches 'em until t' summer be over - if tha' don't mind me mentionin' it, milord.'

'Egad! I don't know why I'm humouring you, Bustard. But stap me in the giblets, man, you are skating on thin ice. I know I only pick up cards in autumn but I am making an exception today. I trust you have no objections? Now - about your business before I put you back in the scullery.'

But Firkin was not listening. For the second time that day he had passed on into the Land of Tomorrow. It was the words 'up cards in autumn' that had sent his wits into freefall. And now he was hovering spirit-like over a reeking battlefield.

Below him on a magnificent chestnut stallion was an impressive figure with a nose like Almscliffe Crag. He roared, 'Up Guards and at 'em,' and immediately a body of redcoats advanced through the noise and smoke to attack the enemy lines. Patting his horse's neck, he whispered, 'Come on Copenhagen, we'll show 'em.' Then the nasally-challenged one slapped his Wellington boot and exclaimed to his nearest officer, 'Look at them, Uxbridge, they're the scum of the earth. But aren't they magnificent. I don't know what effect they'll have on the enemy, but, by God they frighten me! And by the way, Uxbridge, you seem to have lost a leg.'

The vision quickly faded and Firkin returned from the field of Waterloo to planet Yorkshire to feel the wrath of his master: 'By the cringe, Bustard, I am getting tired of your flights of fancy when there is work to be done. Once in a while is fair enough, but this is the second time today you've been off cavorting with the piskies. Where have you been this time?'

'Milord, I beg your pardon but aa can nobbut 'elp missen. It's gettin' right serious. Aa'm sure t' things aa'm seein' is true an' is goin' to 'appen in t' future. I were at a big battle, milord. Cannons, rifles, bayonets. Lots o' noise an' smoke. An' this big cheese wi' an 'ooter the size o' 'Arrogate yellin' orders at 'is army. An' one poor beggar wi' blood pumpin' from where 'is leg used to be. Oh, aa'm afeared it's all goin' to 'appen milord an' worse still, aa'll be there in t' middle o' the whole shambles.'

'Come come, Bustard. Don't stand there swaying like a pair of curtains. Pull yourself together. Begone with you and see to the dinner and the card room.'

Firkin retired and by the time he had carried out Sir John's orders it was pushing three o'clock and the guests were arriving. Young Mr. Atterley informed Firkin that there was a bedraggled individual at the front of the house enquiring for Sir John but that, in his opinion, he should not be allowed anywhere near the master without being closely vetted.

'Aa'll attend to t' matter, sir. Just take a seat in t' drawin' room an' aa'll tell Sir John tha's arrived.'

Firkin eventually arrived at the front door to greet the woebegone figure on the step and laid into him for having the effrontery to roll up to the main entrance.

The bag of rags and filth grovelled: 'Aa'm sorry sir. Iknaa. Iknaa. I should hev went round the back. But what with the pain in me hand, aa'm not thinking stright the day. Please, please can aa see the sorgeon, sir?'

'Surgeon? What surgeon? There's nay surgeon 'eretha stinkin' Billy. Where did tha get that idea from?'

'They telt iz in the village, sir. Aa axed them where the sorgeon lived an' they said the sorgeon lived up at the big hoose.'

'No, no, tha's got it all wrong, lad. And don't keep callin' me 'sir'. As tha can see by ma fancy pants, aa'm nobbut an 'umble flunkey. Anyhow when tha said 'surgeon' the thick pillocks in t' village thowt tha' was sayin' 'Sir John'. This is t' residence o' Sir John Chuff-Chaser. There's no blood an' bandage butcher 'ere. But what's tha want a surgeon for lad? An' afore we goes any further what's tha name?'

'Aa'm caalled Tuart, sir, Thomas Tuart - sorry Mr. Flunkey but what di they call ye?'

'I'm Firkin - and let's have no corny cracks either. So, Mr Tuart what does tha want a surgeon for?'

Thomas lifted up his tattered coat sleeve and showed Firkin a filthy swollen hand covered in blood and pus. He explained to the sympathetic lackey how he had left home in Durham a fortnight before to make his way to the golden streets of London and do a Dick Whittington. He had spent a few days looking after some pigs at a farm near Richmond for bed and board but one of the ungrateful creatures had mistaken his hand for a crust and given it a right old gnashing. It truly was in a terrible state and needed urgent attention to save him from losing it.

'Sit tha down on that mountin' block, Tommy lad, an' aa'll see what can be done for tha.'

Firkin hurried indoors and informed the master of the situation.

'Tuart you say,' said Sir John. 'Tuart eh? Is he a Bigg-Tuart or a Little-Tuart?'

'He looked medium-sized to me, milord. About five foot six in 'is stockin' feet.'

It was obvious that master and man were trying to communicate on different wave-lengths. This was difficult because the radio had not yet been invented. However, what Firkin did not appreciate was that Sir John knew more about the Tuart family than he did. As a minor member of the aristocracy, Sir John was aware of the struggles the Tuarts had had a few generations back to keep their heads above water. Sir Walter Tuart had lived in a castle in Durham County but he was stony broke and the castle was about to tumble round his ankles for want of the readies for its upkeep. Walter had hit on the idea that there must have been several rich families who had made a packet in industry or trade and were just dying to top off their success with entry to the titled classes. Somewhere, surely there were fellows rolling in the hard stuff who would marry off their daughters and exchange some of their dosh for double-barrelled names. Walter had two eligible sons, and the hunt was soon on throughout North East England for brides who would bring whopping dowries for William and Wilfred. To cut a long story short, two brides were found: a Miss Louise Little from Northumberland whose fortune was in tanning and a Miss Beatrice Bigg from Yorkshire whose family was big in wool. In next to no time they were married and two new dynasties had been established - the Bigg-Tuarts of Heckmondwyke and the Little-Tuarts of Ponteland.

'Stap my left kidney, Bustard!' exclaimed Sir John. 'Go and see what kind of Tuart this fellow is and see if something can be done for his hand. Don't come back till you've done all you can for the poor wretch. You're not the only servant in this establishment, lad, so I'm sure we can manage to get through our dinner safely without your ministrations.'

After establishing that poor little Tommy was a single-barrelled Tuart from the original Durham family, it only took Firkin a few minutes to have him lying on a bed of straw in the stable being attended to by man-eating Molly. While she was bathing the septic mess with hot water, Firkin was fetching old Jack the cowman who was a dab hand at fixing the minor knocks and scratches picked up by the cattle. Molly had cleaned the wound by the time Jack arrived. The old countryman took one look at the angry jagged gash and shook his head knowingly.

'Get t' whisky bottle from t' kitchen, Firkin,' he said, 'an' give 'im a good slug. Aa'm sure tha would like a few tots, Tommy, wouldn't tha?'

By now Tommy was sweating and had developed a rosy glow. Jack lowered his voice but it was an unnecessary precaution for Tommy was slipping into delirium and could neither speak sensibly nor understand what was being said to him.

'Aa don't like t' look o' this. It must a' been festerin' for nigh on a week. If me knives an' irons can do nowt the neet then poor old buffer's like to lose 'is arm or even snuff it. Aa'm off to get ma tools and a brazier an' while aa'm about that, get as much grog down 'is neck as tha can manage.'

An hour later Tommy was in a deep drunken sleep. The whisky had helped to dull the pain as Jack had probed the wound, cut away some putrid flesh and cauterised it with a red-hot iron rod. Instructed by Jack, Molly had gone outside and collected some mud, moss and manure and brought them back to him. He had mixed the smelly ingredients together into a poultice, slapped it over the gaping wound, crossed his fingers and hoped the ancient remedy worked as well on a man as on a beast. Molly bandaged the hand with some clean linen from the kitchen and the three angels of mercy stood back and looked at their handiwork.

By the time Firkin got back to Sir John the meal was over and the diners were lingering over the port. He reported what had been done for little Tommy, that he was unconscious in the hayloft and that Jack reckoned his chances of recovery were only evens at best. The humane Sir John was so concerned that he jumped to his feet.

'By the rood, Bustard, it seems excellent work has been done here. Well done all of you. I'll be over to look at the lad as soon as I can. In the meantime I think we should have him looked at by a pro. So get yourself out of your livery and put some outdoor clothes on. Get Happy the hack saddled up and get yourself into Ripon straightaway for Mr Potts the surgeon. He lives in the big house on Minster Road right opposite the cathedral. You can't miss it. What time is it now?'

'Just after five, milord,' replied Firkin who sensed a chance to enjoy some unexpected jollity in the fleshpot that was Ripon.

'And you needn't bother coming back the fifteen miles here tonight. You can just nip down the bank and over the river and stap my gonads, you'll be home in ten minutes. I'm sure your mother will be pleased to see you. You can get yourself back here in the morning. Make sure you give Happy a good rub down and feed. Well don't stand there like something sent for that couldn't come, lad! Be off with you - and Bustard, give my regards to your mater and pater.'

'Me ma an' pa' I'll be tickled pink to be matered an' patered,' thought Firkin as he ran upstairs to change. He chuckled at the mouthful he'd get back from them but his face temporarily clouded as he realised he'd be unable to run Sukie to ground that evening to finish off what they'd started in the afternoon. Nevermind. He knew that trollops were ten a penny in the Unicorn on the Market Place. Roll on Ripon.

If only he had known! If only he had known, as he light-heartedly mounted Happy and trotted down the drive, that he was leaving his easy billet for the last time and would never see Sukie again, nor Sir John, nor his family wallowing happily among the pigs. Had his clairvoyance helped him at that moment he might have gone straight home instead of succumbing to the bright lights of the beckoning taverns in the Market Place. But Fate was bearing down on him apace and now that it was breathing down his neck he had no inkling of the disaster ahead; no premonition as he delivered his message to Mr. Potts; no sense of foreboding as he entered the beckoning maw of the Unicorn; not even a shiver as he saw the recruiting sergeant, resplendent in red, sitting on the settle beside the fire with his arms around a brace of easy wenches.

On the contrary, having stabled Happy at the inn for the night at Sir John's expense and with no thought of visiting his family till the early morning, he looked forward to an uncomplicated evening of joyous excess. The Unicorn was a coaching inn and its passing stream of travellers, its wealthy farmers supping port and its peasants hugging single tankards of ale for as long as mine host would allow, filled the large smoky room with lively noise.

Firkin ordered a pint of Maskam's famed Olde Peculiarity ale and as he took his first appreciative sip he leaned back against the bar to scan the heaving room for available crumpet. He caught the eye of one of the girls in the fat and florid Sergeant Hogg's embrace and winked at her. She lowered her eyes and shuffled uncomfortably.

'Hello, hello,' thought Firkin. 'Aa knows that pretty face.' And as his eye penetrated its powder and paint he realised it was Poll from the hovel next door to his own humble birthplace, the lass he'd made daisy chains for in the meadow and whom he'd later kissed during those innocent early teens before he'd left home. Her guilty demeanour told all. Not so sweet seventeen now and kissed too many times! He wagered her parents just down the bank by the river were grieving the loss of their daughter to the vicious world of sex at a price. She had obviously left home to scrape a sordid living in some bawdy house in the city. Perhaps she was not yet so lost in

depravity as to prevent a feeling of shame from sweeping over her when caught in the gaze of her one-time playmate.

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doesn't mind.'

'Keep the gob shut when thou'st talkin' to me, peasant. Us 'as all witnessed the takin' t' King's Shillin'. Thou'st one o' us now - or thou will be by t' morning.'

'Nay, nay, soldier boys, aa'm just doin' a favour for the sergeant there. Aa'm getting' 'im a pint o' Peculiarity. Aa've not joined the chuffin' army.'

From the fireside the sergeant roared, 'No such thing, me lads. He's a lyin' swine. He's signed up and he's having second thoughts. Too late my little yokel, you're a King's man now and these lads'll testify to it.'

The outcome was inevitable. While Firkin struggled in vain and the good citizens in the bar turned their backs as if to say, 'Nothing to do with us,' the soldiers manhandled him out of the back entrance and along to the jail in St. Mary's Gate. There he spent the night sobering up and slowly realising the desperate situation he was in as he listened to the wails of the unfortunates who had also been pressed into His Majesty's service.

Early next morning, hopeless and hung-over, those who were about to make Boney tremble were mustered and marched off for training and kitting-out before the forced trek towards real military action in the South. Firkin felt it in his bones that he was leaving his beloved little neck of the woods never to return. Vowing he would never forget Fairfolly Hall, he heaved a sigh at the memory of three lusty years in Sir John's service and then shrugged his opportunist shoulders as he anticipated more amatory adventures among the ladies as a lobsterback.

By sad contrast, he would only be remembered by the folk at the Big House for a short time before he faded from their memories. One moment his footprints were all over life's beach but one high tide was enough to wipe the sand clear of them forever. Life at Fairfolly moved on. Sir John, who had never really stopped loving his wife, repented of his wantonness and was happily reconciled with the long-suffering Lady Margaret. The stricken Mrs Poxworthy died and the colonel found solace in the arms of the Clippership. Molly paid for her mad moment in the hay with Toby by being delivered of a baby boy of such distinctive hue that the paternity could not be denied. Sir John, light-years before his time, insisted on a church wedding and all the trimmings for the happy couple. Tommy Tuart made a good recovery, disabused himself of the delusion that London's streets were paved with gold, and stepped ironically into Firkin's shoes and flunky-suit to become the darling of all the Kates and Sukies, Mollys and Monas.

Over the next fortnight Firkin got to know four of his fellow-disconsolates a little better. Tommy Flood and Billy Boyle were starving farm-hands who would probably be better off in the army than on the land - if they survived the coming wars. Ironically, Bob Sears had been a humble pot boy at the Royal Oak and was just visiting the Unicorn on his evening off when he was nabbed. Anthony Twett who was the younger son of Sir Archibald of Pratfall Hall, had been overindulging in the wrong place at the wrong time but would eventually benefit from some string-pulling and the purchase of a commission for him by his dear papa.

Initial training over, the five of them found themselves marching with all the other enthusiastic Ripon volunteers down the Great North Road listening to the interminable bullying patter of Sergeant Hogg. As they approached Wetherby, the abuse fell, not on Firkin for a change, but on his four hapless new-found friends.

'Flood, Boyle, Sears and Twett!' roared the Sergeant.

But Firkin did not hear the specific profanities that fell upon his companions' ears, for he was once again caught up in the unfathomable pathways of space and time. The little man who was to play a small part in the defeat of one oppressor was floating face to face with a giant who would later save his nation from another. Out of the mist the squat figure of a bulldog-faced old man wearing a homburg had materialised. 'I have nothing to offer you,' he intoned, as he clasped

with one fist a glowing cigar and raised the other in a defiant two-fingered salute, 'but Blood, Toil, Tears and Sweat.'

So, like Moses swathed in Sinai's clouds, listening to the commands of the Great-I-Am, Firkin Bustard, also high and lifted up, received the Churchillian Word - the finest challenge he had ever received in his hitherto empty worthless life; a challenge he would embrace for the next fifteen years before laying down that life on the field of Waterloo.

Bryan Harbottle