

DEAR QUEEN VICTORIA

If Sir Ponsonby has forthwith cancelled all Royal engagements and is at this very moment kneeling before Her Majesty and preparing to orate, and I pray *Gott* that it may be so, then there is still a chance that Queen, Country and Empire can be saved. If, on the other hand, Ma'am's Private Secretary is about to secrete my humble missive in a filing cabinet labelled 'cranks' then the worthy factotum should know this: what will follow will be an act so terrifically unpleasant one hesitates to give it a name.

Still think it sounds a bit cranky? Fair enough. Let me add then that I speak not for worthless self on this matter. I am merely reflecting the views of another. I speak of my friend and confidant Mr Melmoth. Rest assured he is no crank. On the contrary, he happens to be the cleverest man ever to wear mink trousers. And this very morning he sends me a package containing a *Remington Automatic Typewriter*® with the following note attached.

My Unhappy Prince.

*What a piece of work man is,
that's what I always say. But
mark my words Maddy dear*

friend, and mark them well. Use this contraption to tell the Queen your sorry epistolary and soon enough we shall both know again of the wind in the trees. Leave nothing out {even my shy bladder}. Let honesty be your leitmotif. Let wisdom and understanding be the strangers they always have been. As for 'Scenes from Plato's Phaedrus No. 7 - Phaedrus dresses up as a Shepherdess', I suggest you enjoy a jolly good manoeuvre sur les derrières. It deserves no better. Dépechez-vous! dear Maddy, and have faith: even things that are true can be proved.

*Your partner in irons
Sebastian Melmoth*

PS May I suggest you begin your narrative by warning old Ponce features that should he choose to secrete your humble missive in a file labelled 'cranks' then Queen Victoria will have to stop calling Herself the Empress of India consequent of there no longer being an 'empire' - and that will be the least of Her

worries, it will be that unpleasant.

Leaving aside for the moment the matter of Phaedrus and the Shepherdess and the jolly good *manoeuvre sur les derrières*, I anticipate Her Majesty's first remark to be *was ist das!*

From its size and weight Ma'am will readily deduce that what Sir Ponsonby holds within his grasp is more than some wretched plea for mercy, more than a morbid lament for a serious miscarriage of justice {though both of these it may be too}, and though it may be a confession, and a most candid one at that, it is not a confession of guilt {though I do confess I may be guilty}, but rather a confession, nay admission, that I, 2nd Lt Madagan Rùn {rtr}, former orphan of the Kirk of Ballater, may just be the only man alive {note intimation} who can shed light upon those episodes in our great nation's recent history so profoundly bleak, so unequivocally *dunkel*, that were Dickens not dead he would declare it *the very worst of times* and have nothing more to add.

I talk, of course, of Her Majesty's *anus horribilis* - a subject that has been filling the front pages of the redtops ever since '95 met with such an ignominious end. How terribly painful for Ma'am, having to suffer Her

Royal Prerogative being associated with such rough offerings. My *Gott* how our newsmen do revel in the gaudy and the sensational eh Ma'am! Victoria's *Anus Horribilis* this, Victoria's *Anus Horribilis* that. Makes one wish the Tower would furnish its inmates with bona fide lavvy-wipe. As my friend and close confidant Mr Melmoth is want to say: "To be in prison is merely a bore Rùn, but to have to use newspaper to complete ones toilet is a tragedy."

Then again, had the Tower provided bone fide lavvy-wipe, I would not be able to gum this particularly temperate example of the genre to my humble missive as an aide memoire, just in case Ma'am never reads the redtops, and who could blame Her.

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YARD PROBES POSSIBLE

TWIST IN

QUEEN'S *ANIMUS HORRIBILIS*

Officers from Scotland Yard last night attended upon a disturbance at the Marquis of Queensbury's Hellfire Club after a man disguising himself as Oscar Wilde attempted to cash an eponymously signed cheque for thirty

thousand Krugers. The Yard describes the man as being in his late twenties, runtish in stature, of irregular habits, wearing an ill-fitting ankle length mink fur cloak with a short fichu style snow fox capelet and matching mink fur trousers. The Yard confirms that the physiognomy of the man now in their custody is analogous to that of the missing British diplomat last espied departing the scene of the Jameson Raid peddling a pneumatic tyred bicycle with a member of the agitator class of negroid balancing upon the crossbar. Lord Salisbury as yet makes no statement in regard to any likely association between the apprehended gentleman and Her Majesty's *animus horribilis*, though *The Weekend Liberal* understands Queen Victoria takes a close interest in the affair.

As one might expect, given the gravity of the matter, every man and his pup mastiff seems to have a theory *viz-à-vis* the origins of Britannica's slide into moral turpitude and global ignominy. *Too much popery!* say the Protestants. *Too much beastliness!* say the Catholics. Both think it might all be the fault

of the Darwinists. Though the Darwinists, in return, refuse to blame God. The Marxists blame capitalism. The capitalists blame the advent of the eighty four-hour week. Meantime the redtops can't make up their minds whether it's the fault of the suffragists, the unionists, the abolitionists or simply too many Jonnie Foreigners.

What I am yet to encounter, as I attend to my toilet, and I find this most peculiar given the circumstances in which I am attending to my toilet - ergo sat in the Tower awaiting execution for Treason - is that absolutely no one, whether Gladstonian Liberals or English Garibaldians, Anarchist Syndicalists or Mrs Ormiston Chant at the National Vigilance Society, has yet to trace the origins of Ma'am's *anus horribilis* to:

THE DAY MADAGAN RÛN BECAME AN HONORARY ATTACHÈ

Seems a lifetime ago now, such have been my adventures since, when in truth it was October '95, just these nine months past. I had only recently returned from India and now there I was stepping gingerly across Westminster Bridge. I say gingerly, for one of London's notorious pea-soupers was blanketing the metropolis and, if I'm to be honest, I was finding it rather creepy. I knew the approach of an omnibus or Hansom cab only by the ghostly clatter of its wheels and

the rhythmical rhyming expletives of its driver. Dark shadowy figures would materialise out of the dank mist with no way of telling the pickpocket from the magistrate, the mug-hunter from the clergyman. Once already that morning I had raised the view-halloa only to find myself grappling with an indignant chambermaid.

As I felt my way into what I hoped was Downing Street what happened was I fell over this flower-seller. Even in that pea-souper I don't know how I missed the aged hawker; sat there draped in a great wilderness of blankets and shawls, her charms rather more elephantine than sculptural. Picking myself up, I thought to purchase, in the manner of apology, some of the old hazard's wares. And to be frank, my attire at this juncture was in need of a floral leg-up, consequent of my recent falling out with the Queen's Own 1/8th Elephant Corps. Not only had I been stripped of my rank and thus pension, but the spiteful bounders had took my smart crimson uniform off me too.

Just for the record Ma'am, I had suffered the misfortune of being cashiered for selling four Durrani spies to a Russian merchant in Lahore, my orders having been to *flog them*, and for losing another lot of elephants, and was duly sent home on the first steamer embarking Bombay.

All I had on me as I disembarked Southampton {regimentally speaking} was a

pair of steel toed army boots and the faux tash and sidies I generally wore on parade to avoid being taken for a drummer boy. Hardly proper dress for a chap with an important engagement in the metropolis. Being broke I'd foregone *Chas Bakers* and had tried my luck at this pawn shop in Chandos Street. The Hebrew proprietor there picked for me a suit he claimed had once belonged to a small cabinet minister. Judging by its drabness I thought it more likely to have once belonged to an apprentice pallbearer. He threw in a bowler hat two sizes too large to seal the deal. I left the shop looking like a cheap ventriloquist's dummy.

This was the sartorial vision assailing the flower-seller as Madagan perused the old dear's basket with a mind to make a purchase. Amongst the weeds and dangerous looking herbs my eye was taken by a cheery looking green carnation.

"I'll take that one my good woman" I said, thinking she'd be glad of the sale.

"I keeps them for me special gentlemun, them who likes to dress up all fancy like" she said stonily. The aged hawker then gave me a beady-eyed onceover. Then she grinned. Momentarily I imagined her basket to be a cauldron. "Oh I gets it, you is one of them boys who does tricks for gentlemun is it?" Evidently the old crone thought I looked a bit like a third rate music hall act too. There being no time to palter with the woman I

nodded my agreement and the cheery green carnation got pinned to the lapel of my dreary suit.

But little did I know that this Singularly Gay Little Flower was about to help me secure gainful employment.

Had I known this as I was being ushered through the corridors of Whitehall I may not have felt quite so much like Oliver Twist on his way for seconds. I will not deny it, the morale of 2nd Lt Rùn {rtr} was on its uppers. My goose had been so filthy of late and my services dispensed with so many times that I did not care to imagine to what and to where I might be dispatched next. A state of affairs not aided none by a thought that had struck me somewhere between 'Western European Affairs' and 'Consular and Treaties'. Why, I asked myself, am I being sent for an interview with a personage as august as Sir Garret Fydel? Did he not have some minor functionary to do such things for him? Judging from his demeanour when first we met, I'd hazard he was thinking much the same thing.

"This really is most irregular." Those were the exact words with which he greeted me. Trust me on this matter Ma'am. My headmaster Old Meldrum used to say I had an *Edison's Metalaphonic*® memory for speech. Hence I was always very good at morning recitations. What any of it actually meant may have been a different matter. But

I always could recall the order in which words are spoken and Sir Garret Fydel definitely said "This really is most irregular." Then he offered me the kind of handshake lepers must become accustomed to and waved me toward a vacant chair.

"I suppose I must welcome you Mr..." There was a pause. "Run is it?"

"That is correct Sir" I replied. I'd given up explaining to people about ten years past that it was Rùn with a squiggle over the U and was thus pronounced Rhune. Somehow it never seemed to help.

"I suppose I must welcome you Mad..." There was another pause. "Do you pronounce it Mad-Again?"

"No Sir, I pronounce it Mad-A-Gan."

"Oh I see. Quite the unusual name. From where did your parents hail?"

"No idea Sir."

This news did not seem to do a great deal for his enthusiasms.

"Are you a member of the Beard Movement Mr Run?"

He was referring to my ersatz mutton-chop whiskers and matching butcher's sideburns: chestnut in coloration, made-to-measure of real hair imported from an Italian barber in Milan, brought at a bargain price from a horse-capper in Clapham, and prerequisite of any campaign if one happens to be only six inches shy of being a circus

dwarf and cursed with a fizzog as smooth as a *kinder's arsch*.

"I must warn you that we do not favour the bohemian here at the Foreign Office."

"I am not greatly attached to the beard" I said, which was factually correct, for I'd not had sufficient funds to purchase a new pot of glue.

"Good. Glad to hear it. Very well. Welcome Mr Madagan Run to what I suppose we shall call your Board of Selection. For the record your panel consists of me, Sir Garret Fydel, the Permanent Under-Secretary to the Foreign Office, and, of course, to my right is Her Majesty's Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary."

I took a moment to reconnoitre my surroundings {old soldier's habit I suppose}. The room was both sizable and grandly furnished: lots of oak panelling; draped velvet curtains; fireplace large enough to house a boatload of Huguenots; portraits of Ma'am and Ma'am's ancestors festooned all around the walls; that type of arrangement. Immediately in front of me, almost at eye level now that I was seated, was placed a large and very expensive looking table. Behind it sat the man who had introduced himself as the Permanent Under-Secretary to the Foreign Office. Perchance Ma'am will have previously met Sir Garret? Perchance at one of those posh balls thrown to wine and dine visiting dignitaries? Or perchance She

forgets? It's quite possible. He has the look of a Methodist about him. A bit nondescript in his nonconformity if Ma'am knows the type: frock coat, stiff collar, clean shaven with hair centrally parted, about the middle-age, say late thirties, softly spoken with just a hint of lilac in his toilette. Clearly a man of regular habits. Just the fellah to pass unnoticed in a crowd.

Not that this could be described as a crowd. In fact, insofar as I could tell, Sir Garret and I were the only two people in the room. All that lay to his right was one of those terribly annoying three-wheeled bath-chairs that one increasingly finds blocking up the pavement nowadays with more of us living into our sixties. This one had a leather hood and a steering handle, so was evidently a deluxe model. But apart from a shabby collection of tartan rugs and a faint aroma of mildew, it was showing no signs of occupancy.

"Prime Minister *and* Foreign Secretary?" I asked, for even after looking under the table I could still see neither of the aforementioned gentlemen.

"Yes, His Lordship combines both offices" offered Sir Garret, clearing up part of the mystery. "I suppose one might call this his *duplex facio*."

Having been schooled at Tor Britches, Dartmoor, where the Latin Master, Mr Rantipole, was no such thing and all the boys

knew it, I guessed *duplex facio* to be Latin for bath-chair.

"Will he be joining us?" I asked politely, gesturing towards the *duplex facio*.

Sir Garret, adopting the countenance of a man who would like the world to halt so that he may get off, adjusted his cuffs, took a number of deepish breaths, and proceeded with the interview without bothering to answer my question.

"Thanks to the actions of a number of high-spirited individuals we have acquired, if acquired is not too strong a word, an Empire. This Empire appears to be quite popular with some of our fellow countrymen, and even one or two members of the Cabinet have declared themselves to be cautious enthusiasts..."

Fascinating stuff, I am sure Ma'am will agree. And I was trying my hardest to keep up. Really I was. Only from somewhere in the room there came the noise a Dartmoor Pony makes when it's been fed too much school cabbage. A sort of *phwrrrrp* if Ma'am knows the item. A smell to match followed shortly thereafter. To his credit Sir Garret Fydel barely missed a beat.

"...Representatives of the mercantile classes say we should develop our imperial estates as though Africa were some green and leafy shire ripe for the plough..."

Phwrrrrp. There it was again! And unless my ears and nose deceived me, the culprit

was not the Permanent Under-Secretary, as I had first suspected, but the fancy bath-chair.

"...They would have His Lordship pursue a forward policy over Empire..."

There was another *phwrrrrrp*, this time of sufficient rip to cause the *duplex facio* to rock.

"...What these gentlemen are forgetting is that the British Empire is a source of much jealousy and rivalry amongst our European neighbours. The French covet Egypt. The Russians have their eye on India. The German Kaiser..."

Phwrrrrrrrrrrrrrp.

"...openly declares he wants his place in the sun. All that is needed is one infelicitous episode of imperial filibustering and we'll have on our hands a European War..."

A monster *phwrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrp* was interrupted mid-flow by a nasty burst of splutterous hacking. All the action still coming from the bath-chair, which by now was starting to behave as though it were possessed. Sir Garret, his gentle burr forced up a couple of decibels, dabbing his reddening eyes with his neckerchief, carried on heroically.

"This is why His Lordship pursues a policy of splendid isolation, seeking neither friendship nor enmity with our neighbours on the Continent. 'Masterly inactivity' the hawkish redtops call it..."

Phwrrrrrp-hack-hack-phwrrrrrp.

"Portside, Lord Salisbury is now ready for his morning constitution."

"Very good Sir" said the clerk, dutifully wheeling the now becalmed bath-chair from the room, leaving Sir Garret and I alone in the room {insofar as one could ever be certain about such things}.

Even tenor returned, air that of a Methodist Minister admonishing his flock for cussing on the Sabbath, Sir Garret Fydel put Rùn straight on one or two matters of state. Apparently His Excellency Chancellor Bismarck had once described His Lordship as *a lath painted to look like an iron* {?}. But never before had anyone mistaken him for a corpse. I was to know that His Lordship was incapable of pose, incapable of cant, and, yes, unfortunately, nowadays, he was also incapable of going to the lavvy without assistance. But then His Lordship had been severe with the Portuguese; staunch with the French; conciliatory with the Russians; remarkably polite, in the circumstances, to the Germans, and despite a certain amount of infirmity, he had managed to combine the offices of Foreign Secretary *and* Prime Minister.

"And make no mistake about it Madagan, this is a *duplex facio* beyond the energies of most statesmen."

The penny dropped.

I would say without fear of contradiction that from this point on in the interview, Sir

Garret Fydel was trying to rid Whitehall of one Madagan Rùn Esq. Take, for example, the way he was now:

FINGERING MY EXAMINATION PAPER

The Competitive Examination had only been three days thither my interview and the memory was still painfully fresh. The hall had been alive with trill chatter: *Have you crammed? Went to Scoones! Ghastly hovel! Have you read your Callières?* Then the whole place erupted into song: *Swing, swing together with your bodies between your knees.* I spent some time wondering how you achieved such a feat. I then attempted the first question on the paper: *Explain in detail 'The Punctuation of Olmutz' (1850).* Then I fainted.

"I can assure you Madagan that *The Punctuation of Olmutz* has nothing to do with a mid-century dispute over grammatical irregularities in the Austrian Provinces."

"No?"

"No! And is this all you wrote?" He held the single sheet of paper up to the light as though he hoped to find some sort of hidden cipher.

"Afraid so Sir."

"Well it is not always essential that the successful candidate passes the Entrance Examination" he said doubtfully. "We have been known to take on the odd *proxime*

accessit." Unless this was Latin for 'charity case' I did not fancy my chances much. He reached across the desk for my curriculum vitae and began reading it with the scepticism of a man finding his own obituary in *The Times*.

"We also value character and educ...Tor Britches?"

I was forced to admit that this had indeed been my private school. He was forced to admit that he had never heard of it. I was forced to admit that no one ever had.

"Ah, *adolescere!*" he said whimsically. "Have you read Thomas Gray's *Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College?*" No I had not. Largely on account of my prospects of attending Eton always seeming rather distant. I decided to play a straight bat.

"No Sir."

"Still, you *must* have been a fine scholar, I mean to say, why else would you be sat here before me?"

"Oh rather" I said, trying a little sweep to leg. Sir Garret reached for a scrap of paper headed 'References'. I immediately realised that I had failed to pick his Chinaman.

"Strange that your headmaster should remember you as, and I quote, *an accident prone ne'er-do-well with a freakish gift for remembering every last word ever said to him, usually to his own advantage.* Moreover, reading between the lines, it

would seem that you were implicated in the burning down of the school."

"You'll find his view is somewhat warped Sir."

"Oh, and why is that?"

"He was in it at the time."

Sir Garret continued to peruse my references, now with the quiet satisfaction of a man about to discharge a rather unpleasant duty.

"And I see the Colonel of your old regiment calls you 'a bummer'. I presume his view is warped also Mr...oh how appropriate...Run?"

"Yes Sir. I do Sir. I did not desert my post as the Colonel suggests."

"No?"

"No Sir. I was found guilty of aiding and abetting the enemy Sir. That and mislaying a company of elephants."

"Yes. I imagine in calling you a 'bummer' he was trying to be kind to you."

The game was up. Sir Garret rang the brass bell thing one finds on shop counters again and began gathering up my curriculum vitae and references and dropping them into the waste-paper basket.

"The man who represents England abroad" he sermonised, checking the time on his fob-watch, "must be a true-born gentleman, a gentleman by birth, habit and feeling."

A wave of melancholia washed over me. Now that the chance had gone I was finding the notion of joining the Diplomatic Corps an agreeable one. Paris, Vienna, St. Petersburg. Had to be better than being the Duke of Sutherland's under-ambler. Or the Duchess of Argyle's chief-kedger. Better surely than being second-in-command to a company of unpatriotic elephants.

"I fear you are not a gentleman by birth Run."

True enough. I was an orphan of the Kirk of Ballater. A misbegotten waif. Socially impossible.

"Actually its Rùn" I said, but the Permanent Under-Secretary to the Foreign Office had moved onto other business and was not listening. Time for Madagan to make his dignified exit. I positioned my over-sized bowler hat on the tips of my ears, gave my host a prudent bow, checked the faux tash and sidies were still in-situ, adjusted my green carnation and motioned to leave. Portside, the clerk, shirtsleeves rolled above the elbow and smelling of *Pears Soap*® and *Vaseline*®, received instructions to "escort Run from the building".

To where? I knew not. Back to kedgering? Sent for a turn at bellow-farming? Told to join the down-going men queuing for a chance at the dog-walloping? Finally take up the 'offer' to be the Earl of Seaforth's under-ghillies' second-whipper-in? And if I

refused? What then? Finally succumb to the inevitable. Accept my fait. Become a Pig Wa...

"Wait a jolly minute!" I exclaimed. What a prize *rübe* I had been Ma'am! What a chump of the first order! What with the peas-souper and the aged hawker and the august company and the oak panelling and all the fancy portraiture and the *phwrrrrping* bath-chair I had only gone and forgotten to show Sir Garret the thing I was supposed to show him.

No time to waste, I got it out there-and-then in the corridor, unfolded it, and showed it to Portside instead. He grimaced and led me back to the offices of the Permanent Under-Secretary. After a few *most irregulars* Sir Garret finally consented to take a look for himself.

"I do wish you had thought to show me this before Madagan" he said, as he read through:

MY LETTER-OF-INTRODUCTION