


Shortlisted for the Amazon
Breakthrough Novel Award

Irish Writers' Centre Novel
Fair Award Winner

The Reluctant Cannibals

A hand in a white glove holding a silver tray with the title text on it.

'A truly compelling
read with a
shocking climax'
Publishers Weekly

Ian Flitcroft

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Ian Flitcroft studied medicine at Oxford University, and then went on to complete a D.Phil in Neurophysiology. During these six years, he started developing a fascination with all things culinary and on finishing his doctorate, gained dining rights at Pembroke College as a John Lockett Memorial Scholar.

Ian has travelled around the world twice (once in each direction) and sampled many of the world's strangest foods en route from snakes and scorpions, to a soup in Thailand that required all his anatomical knowledge to deduce its contents. Ian is a long-term member of the Slow Food Movement in Ireland, a collector of old culinary-related books, an avid cook and wine collector. Ian now works as a consultant eye surgeon in Dublin, where he has lived for over ten years.

The Reluctant Cannibals was one of the winning entries for the 2012 Irish Writer's Centre Novel Fair competition, and was also shortlisted for the 2013 Amazon Breakthrough Novel Award.

The Reluctant Cannibals is Ian's first novel.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the team at Legend Press, especially my editor Lauren, for giving this curious story a life in print.

I like to think that its publication will put a smile on the lips of Arthur Plantagenet, wherever he may be - in Hades or, by some strange fluke of fortune, Heaven.

I would also like to thank Carrie and everyone at the Irish Writers' Centre for their Novel Fair competition which spurred me on to complete this final version of *Reluctant Cannibals* and, of course, for selecting this book as one of the winners in 2012. A small group of those winners continues to meet in the Library Bar in Dublin and I feel honoured to be among them.

This book has been helped on its way by many people who have commented upon (and I might add rejected) earlier versions. I would like to thank them for their comments, which in hindsight were extremely insightful. But beyond all others my wife and fellow-author Jean has been my greatest guide, critic and support. This book would certainly not exist without her. The dedication 'to my beloved Jean' is to her not Brillat-Savarin!

To my beloved Jean

Constitution of the Shadow Faculty of Gastronomic Science

Herein lie the immutable rules of the Shadow Faculty of Gastronomic Science:

Rule One

All members must be fellows of St Jerome's College, Oxford.

Rule Two

All members must ascribe to the gastronomic principles pronounced by Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin¹.

Rule Three

The Faculty must hold a dinner of gastronomic significance in the eighth week of each term.

Rule Four

Each member must invite one guest per dinner and ensure that their guest presents a new dish to the Faculty.

Rule Five

The Faculty must ensure that no dish is served more than once with the exception of a truffled turkey, which is to be served each year at the Michaelmas dinner.

Rule Six

A member of the Faculty is elected for life unless they breach rules one, two or four.

Rule Seven

The Shadow Faculty will remain in existence until the

¹ Author of *La Physiologie du Goût* (The Physiology of Taste), which was first published Christmas 1825 in Paris. This book set out Brillat-Savarin's vision for gastronomy as a true science.

University of Oxford inaugurates an official Faculty of Gastronomic Science.

Membership:

Augustus Bloom	Lecturer in Physiology and Tutor in Medicine
Arthur Plantagenet	Professor of Ancient History
George Le Strang	Professor of Modern History
Hamish McIntyre	Lecturer in Zoology
Charles Pinker	College Chaplain and Lecturer in Divinity
Theodore Flanagan	Tutor and Reader in Criminal Law

Former Members:²

Conrad Petersen	Resigned following a breach of rule four
Gordon Maxwell	Deceased
Stanley Lovell	Deceased

2 A brief history of the founding and early years of the Shadow Faculty of Gastronomic Science is provided in the appendix at the back of this volume.

Chapter I

Trinity Term 1969

It took two men to lift the dismembered carcass. The departure of its copper coffin was met with a brief but respectful silence. Respect that derived from the fact that it contained the mortal remains of what was undoubtedly the largest turbot ever to grace a dining table in Oxford. Once the moment had passed, the room began to fill again with the sound of conversation. Augustus Bloom discreetly turned his head towards the ear of his distinguished guest, Takeshi Tokoro.

‘You’re up next. Do you want me to introduce you?’ Dr Bloom whispered.

Mr Tokoro declined the offer with an almost imperceptible shake of his head. He then rose to his feet and stood motionless, waiting for silence. The others around the table appeared not to notice him as he remained quietly erect, with a posture no European could ever match. He had an austere dignity, but his slim five-foot-four-inch frame lacked the physical presence of his fellow diners. Apart from Dr Bloom, the other guests continued their animated conversations, not through disrespect but culinary enthusiasm; egged on it must be said by a particularly fine wine, a 1959 Condrieu. The shadow faculty of gastronomic science and their guests were barely halfway through the dinner but it was already clear that this was a night

to be remembered. The sea urchin and fennel en papillote with its sublime, caramelised vermouth sauce had proved a magnificent success as a first course, but even this great dish had been eclipsed by the turbot – a recipe taken straight from the pages of the great man himself, Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin. A turbot of implausible proportion had been cooked whole in a copper fish kettle of even greater scale; poached with vegetables in a white wine and cream stock. By the time the fish was cooked, the sauce had transformed itself into a perfect chowder. Fillets of the turbot were served on a bed of spinach with the chowder presented to each person in a small silver salver to universal acclaim.

Augustus glared across the table, trying to catch the eye of the chaplain, Charles Pinker, who was being uncharacteristically talkative. With each passing second, Augustus felt an increasing sense of frustration. Mr Tokoro, accustomed to immediate deference due to his status within the diplomatic service, showed no hint of any such emotion. Augustus nervously fiddled with his cutlery. Tapping a glass with a spoon, the traditional method of calling the table to order, would certainly have worked, but Augustus held back for fear that Mr Tokoro might not appreciate the gesture. After a few more agonising seconds, he caught the eye of Charles Pinker across the table who correctly interpreted the impassioned, almost gymnastic movements of Dr Bloom's eyebrows. A discreet cough and tap of the elbow to his neighbour sent a signal that slowly spread around the table until the last man still talking, Professor Arthur Plantagenet, finally realised he was holding forth amidst the silence.

Mr Tokoro gave a slow and solemn bow. In an instant he turned the tables on his audience who tried to cover the embarrassment of their discourtesy by variously nodding and leaning forward in stilted half-bows.

'Distinguished Gentlemen,' said Mr Tokoro. 'I have the honour of bringing to you a national treasure of Japanese cuisine: Fugu-chiri.' Then, with perfectly timed theatricality,

he clapped his hands. This was a cue to Gerald, the senior common room steward, to open the doors for Mr Tokoro's Japanese chef who, in contrast to Mr Tokoro, had the dimensions of a sumo wrestler. He walked in carrying a large wooden chopping board on which twelve small fish had been laid out. A table was carried in behind him and placed in the recess of the large bay window. This was followed by a large copper pot and a spirit burner, which were placed at one end of the table.

The chef placed his chopping board down on the table and from his apron produced an impressive set of wood handled knives, whose metal blades bore the swirling pattern of a medieval Damascene sword. He then set to work removing the skin and filleting the fish with extraordinary speed and deftness. Mr Tokoro was the first to rise from his seat and walk over to inspect the process at closer quarters. The precedent having been set, the others quickly followed him. When it came to the last fish, Mr Tokoro said a few words in Japanese to the chef who, with a deferential bow, stood back from the table and handed the knife to him. Mr Tokoro was clearly skilled with the knife but not to the same level as his chef. He removed the fins and skin with great speed but was more hesitant on the internal organs. He neatly excised the liver and intestines in a manner that appeared to meet the chef's approval, but in removing the ovaries he sliced through the edge of one of them and left it attached to the flesh. The only person who noticed his mistake could not remark on this dangerous oversight. The social rules that have defined Japan's society for centuries prevented the chef from passing comment, or taking any action that might have shown up a failure on the part of Mr Tokoro. The chef stepped forward, keenly aware Mr Tokoro was still closely observing him, and knowing there was no escape from his master's mistake. Without any flicker of emotion on his face, he placed all the fish fillets into the copper pan along with the light vegetable stock that had been brought back to the boil.

There was great excitement in the anticipation and discussion of these little fish when they were finally served. Sadly the actual consumption created less impact. The light broth was subtle and delighted Mr Tokoro, but seemed lost on Western palates used to richer food. The flesh of the fish itself was almost too delicate and the flavour an ephemeral mist that barely registered on the taste buds compared to what had come before. It was Mr Tokoro who raised the last piece to his mouth, with the mixture of triumph and sadness that greets the end of a fine dish. It was the very last fillet he had prepared. He washed it down with the fine white Burgundy that had been picked to accompany this course. He normally preferred sake but had to acknowledge the superior subtlety of the Nuits St Georges.

It was not until the seaweed ice cream that Mr Tokoro felt the first erratic beat in his chest. The perspiration that appeared on his brow was initially merely an imperceptible moistening. His lips felt peculiar but he put that down to the coldness of the ice cream. After a reassuring sequence of regular beats, Mr Tokoro's heart fell into a syncopated rhythm that made him draw a deep breath, or at least try to. He raised his chin to take in air but his diaphragm sat motionless on top of his distended stomach. There were no outward signs of any problem until his fork fell onto the table, his fingers losing their power of grip.

Mr Tokoro went to rise from his chair. He started the movement easily enough but after he had elevated barely an inch, his body rebelled and refused to move further. He held this position for a second until gravity conquered his failing muscles. He slid to the floor, his weight dragging the tablecloth as he fell, bringing with him an array of cutlery and wine glasses. Indeed, if it hadn't been for Arthur Plantagenet's fast reactions, an almost half-full glass of Nuits St Georges would have been lost too. Mr Tokoro, his mouth opening and closing in a silent and ironic parody of the creature he had just eaten, looked up at the equally stricken face of his host,

Augustus Bloom. It is true that Dr Augustus Bloom was in possession of a medical degree, but it was obtained with little in the way of practical experience and his years in academia had dulled whatever limited resuscitation skills he had ever possessed. Augustus Bloom, his own heart racing from panic, fell to his knees and, for want of anything better to do, cradled Mr Tokoro's head in his hands.

'For Christ's sake will someone call an ambulance,' Augustus shouted.

Gerald, the senior common room steward, who might have been expected to be the first to respond, stood rooted to the spot with a look of complete terror on his face. Mr Tokoro's mouth continued to open and close silently for another few seconds and then stopped.

'Gerald, you heard the man. Go and get Potts to call an ambulance,' said Dr McIntyre.

Arthur Plantagenet was the only person in the room to remain quite calm. He emptied his wine glass and murmured to no-one in particular,

'What a bloody marvellous way to die.'

Chapter 2

Michaelmas Term 1969

The new academic year of 1969 started in October with the reassuring inevitability of the rising sun. On that first morning its weak rays were valiantly trying to warm the chilled, golden stone walls of St Jerome's. The last geranium blooms of the year graced the window boxes of the quadrangle, though their tired foliage showed that the exuberance of summer was long gone. It would be hard to imagine a scene of greater calm or serenity. Certainly there were no hints of the drama that had occurred at the end of the previous term; in fact it had barely been mentioned outside the confines of the college walls. Death was no stranger to the shadow faculty of gastronomic science. Two of their members had died in previous years, though under less dramatic circumstances and certainly not during one of their dinners. These two deaths had given rise to the shadow faculty's alternative title: the declining dining society. At least on this occasion it was a guest who had died so their numbers had not suffered a further depletion. Of course it had devastated Mr Tokoro's family and caused a degree of consternation within diplomatic circles, but, beyond that, the death of Mr Tokoro had created barely a ripple within the college or the world outside.

The day was Monday of noughth week, so named because

it came a week before the official start of term, which is, reasonably enough, called first week. For Mr Potts, the head porter, these were the last precious moments of peace before the college was re-invaded by the noisy legion of students. During the quiet summer months, Mr Percival Potts had been practising his peculiar art of sleeping upright, a skill part innate and part honed during his years on guard duty in the army. In this finely poised state he could ignore all ordinary sounds and background voices, but if a question were put to him he could in an instant wake up and, without otherwise moving a muscle, feign an excusable touch of deafness with the words ‘Sorry, sir, didn’t quite catch that.’ This remarkable ability was concealed by his black bowler hat, which was perpetually tilted down at an angle that was finely judged to hide his eyes from anyone presenting themselves to the porter’s lodge. It is true that a dwarf or small child might have been able to rumble Potts’ secret, but dwarves and children were rarely, if ever, seen in the lodge of St Jerome’s College.

On this particular day an unexpected and unwelcome noise entered the head porter’s ears, insinuating itself into his dreams. The sound was certainly not human, so there was no imperative to wake, but neither was it an everyday noise. The scuttling noise grew louder and, in the increasingly distressed imagination of Potts’ dream, more rat-like. Salvation burst through the door of the porter’s lodge in the substantial form of Dr Hamish McIntyre.

‘Morning Potts. Now where are these squills?’

Potts, still troubled by dissolving images of rats, found that his normally poised response on waking was shortened to something rather less coherent.

‘Er, wha, sir?’

‘Squills, Potts. The *canocchie del mare* you so skilfully procured.’

Guided by the increasingly frenetic scratching noise, McIntyre’s eyes alighted on his precious delivery. He grasped the package and within seconds was gazing admiringly at the

curious crustaceans.

‘Oh, them.’ It was with some relief that Potts identified the source of the strange sounds from his dreams.

‘Glorious little creatures, aren’t they?’ said McIntyre proudly.

Even allowing for the typical English sentimentality when it came to animals, Potts felt that Dr McIntyre’s description of these creatures was generous in the extreme. If Potts had been a more educated man he might have described these creatures as ugly trilobites. In the absence of all but the most basic education, he offered a description that was as simple as it was accurate.

‘Look like ugly great earwigs to me, sir.’

‘Well, we’re all God’s creatures, Potts, and while they’re not the prettiest, I dare say they’re tastier than you or I.’

Hamish McIntyre slipped out of the porter’s lodge with remarkable grace for a man of his girth and disappeared around the corner into Old Quad, chattering to his reluctantly captive audience of crustaceans.

Just as McIntyre and his squills stepped into Old Quad, Augustus Bloom disappeared from it; a small door off a narrow passageway clicked shut to mark his departure from the crisp morning light. He descended into a gloom alleviated only by a rather sad and dim bulb overhead. This was nevertheless a great improvement over the hand-held paraffin lamp that Bloom had experienced on his first trip into this subterranean universe many years ago. It was not that Bloom was exceptionally ancient (he had barely turned forty), but rather that St Jerome’s was proud of the fact that it was the last college in Oxford to electrify its wine cellars. On reaching the bottom of the stairs, in keeping with college tradition, he nodded in thankful acknowledgement to a small bronze bust of the first bursar of the college for his foresight in planning a college that had cellars twice the size of the buildings above.

In addition to the size of the wine cellars at St Jerome’s,

the college also boasted the oldest wine cellar ghost. In years gone by every college seemed to have ghosts in their cellars. Many a ghost has been born from the lack of light and a nervous but imaginative disposition. With sufficient illumination even the most creative mind is less prone to such flights of fancy. The arrival of the electric bulb had accordingly banished most of Oxford's cellar ghosts. St Jerome's ghost, the Reverend Hieronymus Bloch, proved to be much more tenacious. Reverend Bloch was the college's first chaplain who had, according to college lore, gone to the cellars during a dinner in search of a particularly fine port sometime towards the end of 1752 and had never been seen again in the flesh. Shortly after this he started appearing at regular intervals within the confines of the cellars, apparently still searching for the elusive bottle.

Over the years Bloch became bolder, with more frequent apparitions. He was considered as no more than an entertaining diversion, until one particularly disreputable cellar steward in the 1930's had incurred Bloch's wrath by stealing some of the finest bottles of wine and selling them on through a well-established, if equally disreputable, wine merchant in London. Justice came not from the Oxford constabulary but mysteriously one night when the unfortunate man's skull was broken with a bottle of Château d'Yquem 1921. No-one in St Jerome's doubted Bloch's involvement in this crime. Nor were they surprised that with Bloch's assistance, this bottle of precious nectar had miraculously proved to be stronger than the steward's skull. The bottle was found alongside the corpse, the label heavily bloodstained but the wine otherwise intact.

There are those who condemn wine decanters as an affectation but this event admirably proved their worth, allowing the same bottle to be the splendid finale of a Master's Dinner in 1955. The '21 vintage d'Yquem had turned out to be a jewel of the century. All the more rare because of a late spring frost that year. It was served without a murmur of disquiet from a fine crystal decanter. A beautiful golden

colour with an orange blossom nose and a symphonic blend of flavours to follow – walnut, banana, grapefruit – unified by a thread of lavender running through it all. Meanwhile the bloodstained murder weapon lay safely out of sight in the college kitchen.

Despite such stories the cellars were Augustus Bloom's favourite place. Hieronymus Bloch's murderous reputation ensured that Bloom was unlikely to be disturbed during his visits and he felt sure that his devotion to oenology would protect him from the Reverend's wrath. Augustus came here to think, be inspired and to escape. Add to that the beneficial physiological effects of a fine Claret and one can easily see the appeal of the cellars for Augustus. They were also an important part of his research. Dr Augustus Bloom, in his role as medical tutor, was a leading figure in the investigation of the French Paradox. This is the curious injustice that allows the French to eat, drink and smoke more than the rest of Europe and yet have healthier hearts and longer lives.

Augustus Bloom potted along the dusty racks, occasionally stopping to examine a bottle in more detail before finally selecting one. At this time of day a good Beaujolais would go down well and the temperature straight from the racks would be just about perfect; Augustus often railed against the tendency in recent times to serve red wine half-cooked. After an enjoyable hour searching, he had finally chosen a bottle of Morgon, the 1964 Château Bellevue, and was approaching his preferred resting spot. At the end of a particularly long tunnel lay a chamber. This was directly underneath the chapel and Augustus felt doubly blessed when his thoughts and wine appreciation were joined by the low rumble of the organ pipes above. The experience was made particularly resonant by the fact that only the deepest, most visceral notes could permeate the stones and earth to reach the cellars below.

When Augustus entered the gloomy chamber in a state of almost meditative peace, he was brought up short by the sight ahead. In the old wooden chair that had been in the cellars for

as long as anyone could remember sat a dark, slumped figure. It took a second to gather himself and to be able to observe the figure rationally. His thoughts raced ahead to the vastly improbable possibility that this might be his first encounter with the ghostly Reverend Bloch. He inched forward, excited rather than fearful, but these fanciful notions were cut short by an explosive awakening of the slumbering figure.

‘Whoaaaaa. Wazgo, who, er.’

‘Arthur? Is that you?’

‘Who? Oh, Bloom, thank God. I thought I’d died, having an awful dream. Gates of hell, earthquakes.’

‘Just Charles Pinker upstairs doing a bit of early morning practice on the organ; either that or we’re both dead, but it’s too cold to be hell and too dark to be heaven,’ said Augustus Bloom smiling at his old friend and colleague. In reply Professor Arthur Plantagenet shook his head in the manner of a wet dog before surfacing back into full consciousness, still wearing the gown and clothes he had worn last night at dinner.

‘Have you been here all night Arthur?’ asked Augustus.

‘I couldn’t sleep, kept wandering and suddenly I’m down here being woken by a shrieking maniac.’

Augustus desperately wanted to say that Arthur had cried out first, but he graciously allowed the Professor of Ancient History the privilege of rewriting history on this occasion.

‘Don’t suppose you fancy a glass of Château Bellevue?’ asked Augustus.

‘What year?’

‘The ’64.’

‘Hmm, not a bad year. Anyway it won’t last much longer, so pour away.’

Augustus pulled his prized scrimshaw-handled corkscrew from his jacket, deftly plucked the cork from the bottle with a sound that raced off into the darkest reaches of the cellars only to return in a shower of faint echoes. He gave the cork to the professor for the requisite sniff. After finding approval, he offered the bottle.

‘A little liquid history, Arthur?’

‘Good God man, do you expect me to swig from the bottle like an inebriated townie?’

‘Heavens forbid no, just hold onto the bottle for a moment. I’ll get something to drink from.’

Augustus rummaged in a small alcove just to the left and emerged with two silver goblets carrying the college crest.

‘Will these do?’

‘Perfectly.’

After polishing them with his tie, one of few practical uses for such a garment, Bloom filled both goblets and raised his for a toast.

‘To the new academic year, Arthur.’

‘Indeed. Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we may die.’ The mention of death caught Augustus Bloom off guard and, while Arthur Plantagenet drained his glass, Augustus was thrown back to the moment three months ago where Mr Tokoro’s head lay cradled in his hands.

An hour later, Augustus Bloom surfaced thoroughly recharged by a fascinating discussion on the battle capabilities of ancient Greek fighting ships, diets of gladiators and the wicked sins committed by ancient physicians on their trusting patients. Arthur Plantagenet had finally nodded off again while Augustus was holding forth on the medicinal value of wine, and Augustus had left him as he had found him, deeply asleep. Heading into the porter’s lodge he was faced with a wall of trunks. The invasion of the undergraduates had begun. Augustus dived for the door to check his mail, dodging the trunks and avoiding all eyes as he went in case he met a pair that he might be forced to talk to.

Potts was absent from his chair, corralling the gathering masses somewhere outside, so Augustus flicked through the envelopes in his pigeonhole looking for letters more interesting than the usual start of term memoranda.

What he was hoping to find was an envelope with an American postmark written in a familiar flowing hand. His

search stopped temporarily at a fine ivory envelope with the university crest and the ominous printed message indicating its source: from the office of the vice-chancellor. This letter was not totally unexpected, but was definitely unwelcome. He stuck the letter between his teeth and kept searching for better news from across the Atlantic, but like the day before and most likely the day after, no such letter had arrived. He put the rest of the letters back unopened. Taking the letter from his mouth and placing it in his jacket pocket, he turned to leave and locked eyes with the returning Potts.

‘Good day, Dr Bloom.’

‘No, not really Potts.’

Chapter 3

Augustus Bloom started the day with a fine breakfast at the King Edward Hotel. Perfectly poached eggs with smoked salmon, capers, Earl Grey tea and toast lavishly adorned with salty butter. As in college, the scrambled eggs at the King Edward Hotel were an affront to a delicate palate, yellow rubber robbed of flavour by the misguided use of milk and excessive heat. Poached eggs were a safer bet when eating out, not that poaching eggs isn't an art in itself. For all the mystique and bizarrely complicated methods, it is hard to ruin a poached egg except by overcooking. Bloom had experimented methodically with all the described methods for poaching. He found the use of vinegar unnecessary and ruinous in terms of flavour. As for the challenging task of rapidly whisking water into a whirlpool while dropping an egg into the centre, he had dismissed this long ago as no more than French culinary theatre. The result of his endeavours was this: simply lower a truly fresh egg into a shallow pan of water heated just enough to coat the bottom with fine bubbles. Turn down the heat and in five minutes the resulting egg would invariably meet his exacting standards, though if the egg weren't fresh or the water were actively boiling the result could, all too easily, become a chaotic mass of white strands and an inedible yellow ball. At a temperature well below boiling, Augustus had discovered that the egg white would cook perfectly while leaving the yolk, as

it should be, gloriously runny.

The treat of breakfast at the King Edward cast the day into a much better light than it had started; the first thing Augustus remembered on opening his eyes at dawn was his meeting with the vice-chancellor. The letter had merely stated:

'In light of recent events, the vice-chancellor requests that you attend his offices at 10 a.m. Monday next.'

The letter may have been gently worded, but Augustus was under no illusion that this was to be a friendly encounter. His only hope was that the vice-chancellor was feeling in a mellow mood this morning although, under the circumstances, that seemed unlikely.

*

Professor Arthur Plantagenet had started the day with a less enlightening culinary experience at the hands of St Jerome's kitchen staff. The college chef Monsieur Roger never supervised breakfast. As a result, this meal fell far short of what St Jerome's kitchens could offer. In a triumph of hope over experience, Arthur Plantagenet had opted for kippers. Shocked by their inedibility, he consoled himself with copious quantities of the one reliable breakfast offering: tea. He too was venturing into town summoned by a letter. On this occasion it was from his physician who had rooms on St John's Street. Doctor Reginald Pierce was an eminent man who, for all his eminence, had spectacularly failed in his attempts to curtail Plantagenet's gargantuan appetite.

Shortly before 10 o'clock in the morning, Professor Plantagenet walked into the waiting room of Dr Pierce. *Vanity Fair* prints of famous doctors adorned the walls that themselves wore elegant striped wallpaper. He had barely settled into the burgundy leather Chesterfield sofa before he was ushered in.

'Good day, Arthur.'

'Reginald.' Arthur nodded.

Arthur Plantagenet settled down and Reginald Pierce pulled up a chair and sat beside him rather than at his usual

position on the other side of his large partner's desk. He took Plantagenet's wrist without saying another word and felt his pulse while looking intently down in deep concentration. Dr Pierce finally looked up and gave his verdict.

'Arthur, those tests I did last week on your heart. I've gone over the results and I'm afraid it doesn't look good.'

'Good God man, I'm as fit as a fiddle; never felt better. I must say you're looking a little peaky yourself these days. You could do with a little more flesh on your bones.'

'Quality not quantity is what counts in health, Arthur. With your unfortunate family history you must know that your current eating habits are putting you in significant danger.'

'Danger of what?'

'The grave, if I must be so stark.'

'We're all dying, so we might as well enjoy ourselves during the process. I'd rather die now than starve myself for the sake of a long but miserable and hungry life.'

'A rather bizarre philosophy, don't you think, Arthur?'

'Not at all Reginald, an ancient and entirely logical stance. I take my cue from Apicius.'

The lack of reply and slightly baffled look on Dr Pierce's face told Arthur he was on winning ground and he took great delight in pushing forward his advantage.

'Marcus Gavius Apicius. Greatest food writer of the Roman Empire. Nobly decided to poison himself in the prime of life rather than face the prospect of poverty and starvation in old age.'

'Noble indeed, Arthur, but I think your risk of starvation would be slight and imagine how many meals you'd miss by an early death.'

Uncharacteristically Arthur didn't have an immediate retort, so Dr Pierce cut straight to the point he had been circling around for the last few minutes.

'I'm afraid that your situation is rather serious, Arthur. Your heart has become very enlarged and developed a dangerous rhythm.'

‘Surely there’s nothing wrong with a big heart, Reginald?’

‘It’s a sick heart, Arthur. Dilated cardiomyopathy. I’m not sure there is much I can do at this stage to reverse the process.’

‘Excellent. So I can keep on just as I am.’

‘An unusually optimistic interpretation. In terms of eating, my only advice is that if there is anything you haven’t yet tasted I’d suggest you try it soon. I don’t know how much longer this heart of yours will keep ticking.’

‘Oh now, Reginald. It can’t be that bad.’

‘I’m afraid it is.’

‘Oh...’

‘Indeed.’

‘Not much time then?’

‘If the gods are smiling you may have a few months. If not it might be a matter of days. Shall I waste my breath by telling you that losing weight could take a lot of the strain off your heart? That might help it to keep beating a little longer.’

‘With the greatest respect, I wouldn’t bother. I preferred your earlier advice about eating everything I haven’t tried yet.’

*

Another member of the shadow faculty of gastronomic science was in town that morning too, on a mission of great gastronomic importance. Professor George Le Strang wasn’t a man for breakfast, so a brief cup of tea in the covered market on his way to the Bodleian Library amply serviced his morning requirements. Today the covered market was itself his principal destination. Furlong and Furrow were Oxford’s best game butchers. They were also reasonably game when it came to meeting Le Strang’s sometimes curious requests for meats. These requests inevitably involved some beast or fowl that rarely graced English dining tables. They were usually tricky to locate but the founder’s great grandson, Philip Furrow, took pride in meeting any challenge. All the more so as George Le Strang was generous in his thanks, which was often expressed in the form of extraordinarily good Claret from the college cellars.

Le Strang worked his way through the intricate maze of the covered market and stopped short of Furlong and Furrow's threshold to take in the glorious sight that greeted his eyes. Pheasants, rabbits, ducks and venison all arranged with the casual, compositional beauty of a Caravaggio painting. He stepped inside and was a little put out to find the shop populated with customers. After waving a greeting from the back of the queue to Mr Furlong, Le Strang duly waited in turn. On reaching the counter he was troubled by the shoppers that stood politely behind him waiting their turn, ears alert, all apparently waiting for him to speak.

'Professor, always a delight. What can we do for you today? We've some excellent rabbit just in.'

'Marvellous Philip, but this is more of a special order for later in term,' Le Strang half-whispered.

'We'd be delighted to help. So what's on the menu this time?'

Looking over his shoulder before looking back to Furrow, he muttered quietly, 'Something a little out of the ordinary.'

'You know us, Professor, the extraordinary takes a while, but it's always worth waiting for.'

'Any chance we could pop out back to chat about it?'

'Of course, of course.' Furlong called a young man who was boning geese at the side table to take over at the counter. He then retired to the back of the shop with the professor who was greatly relieved not to have to discuss his specific requirements in a shop full of English animal lovers. Le Strang always felt the English had a curiously inconsistent and sentimental approach to eating animals, but he was sensible enough to know when discretion was worthwhile.

Even though it was only the first week of term, Le Strang was already thinking ahead to the shadow faculty of gastronomic science's Michaelmas dinner. This was by far his favourite dinner of the year and not only because of the unmatched pleasure of sharing a truffled turkey. With great Gallic pride he was planning a Napoleonic dish that would be

impressive even by the high standards of the shadow faculty. It would require a particularly unusual cut of meat that might take a while to locate. With the time also needed for ageing the meat, it meant he had no time to lose.

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Augustus sat in the room outside the vice-chancellor's office. It was a drab utilitarian attempt at modernity. The garish lamp that hung from the ceiling had made Bloom physically shudder when he entered the room. The vice-chancellor had declared himself to be a reformer who would bring the university into the twentieth century, 'straight from the 1860's to the 1960's' as he often said. Since it was already 1969 with little evidence of change, his chances of succeeding in this task looked bleak. The door opened and the vice-chancellor stood in the doorway. Dr Ridgeway was a rather short man and like many short men, made up for his lack of stature and indeed charisma with dogged determination.

'Dr Bloom, so good of you to come.'

'How could I resist such an eloquent invitation?'

Dr Ridgeway smiled, but a flash of irritation sped across his face.

'Indeed. Now I'm sure you appreciate why I asked you here today?'

'Your letter was a trifle brief, so perhaps you could enlighten me.'

The vice-chancellor pricked again at Bloom's politely disrespectful tone.

'Your little accident last term at dinner, Dr Bloom. You do remember that?'

'With Takeshi Tokoro? Yes, indeed. An unfortunate and indeed tragic accident.'

'Unfortunate? It was a major diplomatic incident. Good God, man, you can't go around killing the cultural attaché of a major international power without people noticing, Bloom.'

'It was an accident, vice-chancellor. I might also remind you that Mr Tokoro was proud of introducing a dish that is

of great cultural importance in Japan. I believe it was the first time that Fugu had been served at Oxford.'

'And the bloody last.' Ridgeway rose to his feet hoping to give these words greater impact. Bloom merely looked at him impassively. Ridgeway sank back into his chair.

'Bloom, it may be culturally important to the Japanese, but it is poisonous as you have amply proven. Do you know who in Japan is forbidden from eating this ugly little fish?'

'Yes, I believe the Japanese Emperor is forbidden from eating it, presumably to avoid this sort of... event.'

Ridgeway sat back in his chair and glared at his adversary. Seeing no signs of Bloom faltering, the vice-chancellor changed tack.

'What disturbs me most, Bloom, is that I've heard that this was part of some ludicrous secret dining society.'

He enjoyed the look of surprise in Bloom's eyes.

'He was indeed invited by our shadow faculty of gastronomic science, but as we have in the past petitioned the chancellor himself regarding the merits of gastronomic science it can hardly be described as secret.'

'Be that as it may, I have decided that this ridiculous boys' club has put the university in a bad light and therefore must be disbanded. Now, what do you have to say about that?'

A pall of silence fell on the room, each second passing slower than the last.

'With the greatest respect,' replied Augustus finally, 'I don't believe you have any jurisdiction over the private activities of the fellows of St Jerome's.'

'Don't try my patience, Bloom. If I hear of any more antics like this I shall take action and, trust me, the question of jurisdiction won't save you. If the coroner hadn't been so obliging – at my request I might add – you would be in gaol right now as an accessory to murder.'

Walking back down St John's Street, Augustus reflected on this conversation. It had gone much as he had expected apart

from the bit about being an accessory to murder. Guilty as he felt over the whole incident, he did feel that was a bit much. Augustus had put on a good front with the vice-chancellor but, truth be told, he found himself a little shaken by the memories of Mr Tokoro's death. He was forced to stop abruptly to avoid colliding with a man who emerged unexpectedly from one of the doorways.

'Good God, Arthur, you look as if you've seen a ghost,' said Augustus, shocked at the appearance of Professor Plantagenet, whose normally ruddy complexion was showing distinct signs of pallor.

'No, just pondering the prospect of becoming one.'

'What in God's name does that mean?'

'According to my physician, I'm going to die rather soon.'