



Triumff

HER MAJESTY'S HERO



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an excerpt from
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Dan Abnett

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THE FIRST CHAPTER.

Which is set upon St Dunstan's Day.

It had rained, furiously, for all of the six days leading up to St Dunstan's Day.

Water rattled off slopes of broken slates, streamed like horse-piss from split gutters, cascaded from the points of eaves, boiled like oxtail soup in leaf-choked drains, coursed in foamy breakers across flagged walks, and thumped down drainpipes in biblical quantities. For the same measure of time that it had taken the Good Lord God to manufacture Everything In Creation, the entire city was comprehensively rinsed. There was water, as the Poet had it (the Poet, admittedly, was wont to have it mixed with brandy), everywhere, and every drop of it was obeying Newton's First Law of Apples.

In the rents of Beehive Lane, near Boddy's Bridge, un-potted chimneys guzzled in the rain and doused more than a score of ailing grates. The steep cobbled rise of Garlick Hill became a new tributary to the Thames, and the run-off that washed down it from the foundations of the spice importers' hill-top barns had loose cloves floating in it and tasted

like consomme. At Leadenhalle, the rapping of the rain upon the metal roof drove several market traders temporarily psychotic, and deprived many more of their usual cheery dispositions, and so the cheap was suspended until the inclement weather subsided ("if sodden London don't subside first" remarked more than one tired and emotional stall-holder). Many worried that, if the fantastically grim weather persisted, the Great Masque that coming Saturday might itself have to be abandoned. And that didn't bear thinking about.

The Fleet, the Tyburn and the Westbourne all spilled beyond their courses, and enjoyed wild excursions through the streets of the ditch-quarters and the wharfs. More refuse was then moved by force of flood than is in a month by the municipal collectors, though, to be fair, the Noble Guild of Refuse and Shite Handlers had been on a go-slow since 1734, following a dispute over the scale of Yuletide gratuities.

The city's watergates were all choked to drowning point, each gagging like an over-eager sot on an upturned bottle of musket. Conduits thundered with the passing pressure, their stonework trembling, and voided themselves with huge tumult into the Thames, casting up mists of rainbow spray from their cataracts. Men from the Guild of Cisterns and Ducts visited each city conduit daily in turn and stood, dour and drenched by the spray, shaking their heads and tutting.

The Cockpit on Birdcage Walk became so full that the stewards had to open all the public doors to vent the water before gladiation could begin that night. Small boys had been found sailing rival armadas of paper man-o-wars from the pit rails. Even after the stewards' action, some said the only birds worth betting on that night were ducks. When it did eventually occur, the cockfight proved to be a notable and famous bout, featuring a title fight for the Bantam Weight Champion of All London. The contenders were Cocky Joe, a six-pound, experienced fighter trained by John Lyon of Poplar, and Bigge Ben, a twelve-pound newcomer presented by one Thomas Arnes of Peckham. The eventual victor, Bigge Ben, was later disqualified when it was discovered he was a cunningly disguised buzzard, and Cocky Joe reinstated, though by this time he was full of onion and three-quarters roasted.

The rain fell on all. It made no distinctions for rank, and offered no exceptions for situation. It hammered on the unprotected heads of the impoverished and loose of bowel in the jakes of Shite-berne. It drizzled off the leaded glass of the Palace Mews. It fell with a continuance and persistence that was nothing short of impertinent.

From Cornhill to Ludgate, not one thing in the whole Vale of the Thames prospered, except perhaps the osiers and watercress in the marshes.

When one of the wags in the Rouncey Mare off Allhallows Walk remarked upon the fact that there was no superstition associated with so many days of rain before St Dunstan's Eve, it was volubly decided that there bloody well ought to be, and bloody well would be before the tavern closed, so long as liquor sufficiently inspired the collective imagination. Indeed, sometime after ten that night, a handsome and appropriate saying was devised by a drover of advanced years named Boy Simon, but sadly it had been forgotten by the time daylight crept in and announced the dawn of St Dunstan's Day.

The towers and steeples of a hundred and nine churches shivered at the dismal morning and driving rain, and bells slapped out the hour of daybreak as if the water had softened their clappers. Most of the City's population grimaced in their states of sleep and rolled over. Those up and active through the necessity of their various offices shuddered grimly and went about their business in hats and hoods and long, soggy capes. A carter, late delivering for a fishmonger in Billingsgate, overturned on the corner of Windmill Street, and his entire cargo swam off through the neighbouring byways. Shortly afterwards, a magistrate in Rudlin Circus was painfully thrown when his horse was bitten by a passing turbot. The fishmonger was sanguine, however, as sales of fish had fallen dramatically in the course of the week.

One of the hundred and nine churches tolling out that lubricated morning was St Dunstan's Undershaft, near the New Gate, where the aforementioned saint's day was about to be celebrated. Dunstan, a ninth century Norfolk lacemaker, died piously during the notorious Woolcarder's Revolt of 814, and was canonised in 1853 during the Diet of Cannes. He is the Patron Saint of boundaries and hedges, lacemakers, undergarments and impalement, though not necessarily in that order.

In the damp shade of St Dunstan's porch, valiant observers of the martyr's festival (the eleventh day of May) made garlands of flowers and ribbons, and glumly offered small lace keepsakes showing the saint "being martyred on the sharpened fence" for sale to empty streets. The deluge had kept almost everyone away. Large sections of the regular congregation had found drier things to do, and a promised coach party of pilgrims from the provinces, composed in the main of folk from the popular Christian sects the Orford Doxies and the Exeter Terrestrials, had not materialised.

Even the priestesses in the Temple of the Justified Madonna across the road from St Dunstan's had decided for once to wear clothes. They stood, red-nosed and corset-clad, in the windows of the seminary, and occasionally waved encouragement to the St Dunstan's band across the street. Needless to say, the folk of St Dunstan's didn't wave back.

Two streets behind St Dunstan's, an alley too insignificant to have a name of its own led through the rents to Chitty Yard. It was raining there, too.

The yard was a paved square, forty feet across, flanked on one side by the dingy rears of the rents. To the other three it was enclosed by the back of the once-imposing Chitty House. A small fountain, in the shape of a dismayed griffon, stood at the centre and had been dry for seventy-three years. It was full now, of leaves and rainwater.

The Chittys had come into money late in the previous century, thanks to a small miniver business that had flourished at a time when cuffs and collars were worn hirsute. They had built Chitty House as a headquarters and town residence, and occupied it continuously until the last Chitty had died of fur on the lung twenty years previously. Since then, the building had been a tannery, a hostel for drovers, a bordello (twice), a store for timber, an eating house, and a singularly unsuccessful farrier's (one Joseph Pattersedge, who suffered from chronic hippophobia). Now it was empty, with its rafters open to the weather, and its environs were of interest only to vermin, weary beggars or those in need of privacy.

At dawn on St Dunstan's day, four of the latter were assembled in the hidden yard. One was a diminutive, portly Spaniard from Valladolid, who huddled from the rain under the stoop of the storehouse wing, his ruff and waxed moustache as limp

as his expression. He clutched a velvet cape and a plumed hat that did not belong to him. Opposite him, across the yard, stood a rake-thin man of Suffolk descent, an imposing figure over six feet tall, dressed in a simple suit as grim as his countenance. He too held clothes that were not his. Every few seconds, he winced slightly.

The other two individuals in the yard were trying to kill each other.

Lord Callum Gull, Laird of Ben Phie, Captain of the Royal Guard, Scottish to the marrow ("and loyal to the courgette" as the old saying goes), edged around the yard with four feet of basket-hilted steel swinging from his hand. His red hair was plastered to his skull, his linen shirt was sticking to his rangy form, and his breath was rasping through defiantly clenched teeth. He knew well his Livy, his Caesar, his *De Studio Militari* and his Vegetius. He knew extremely well the finer points of *The Art of War*, particularly the one on the end of his rapier.

Sir Rupert Triumff, seafarer, Constable of the Gravesend Basin and celebrated discoverer of Australia, was commanding over a yard of sharpened metal of his own. His black locks hung in ringlets around his brow, his shirt had acquired two extra slits since he had put it on that morning, and he was humming a song about the Guinea Coast for no real reason at all. Triumff had once read the title page of Vegetius, owned a risible translation of Livy,

and often quoted Caesar, even though he had never been within ten feet of a copy. He was not, at that stage, entirely sure what day it was.

Triumff danced and stumbled around Gull in a way that looked almost, but not quite, deliberate. He tossed his rapier from hand to hand. The gesture suggested he was a nimble, gifted swordsman, but in truth had more to do with the fact that he couldn't remember which hand he was supposed to be using. Each exchange of grip caused the slender witness in black to wince again.

With a snarl, Gull lunged for the umpteenth time, and added another vent to Triumff's left sleeve. Backing up rapidly, Triumff looked down at the gash, tucked his blade under his arm like a cane, and fingered the damaged cloth.

"Fuck," he remarked.

"En garde!" barked Gull, and crossed.

Triumff spun hastily, ducked, and came up again holding his sword by the blade, with the basket grip bobbling threateningly at his adversary. There was a pause. Slowly, Triumff adjusted his depth of field from his opponent to the nearer hilt, noticed the blood dribbling from his fingers, and dropped the rapier smartly.

"Poxy thing!" he said, sucking at his sliced fingertips. Blood collected in his beard, and spattered his doublet, making it look as if he had been punched in the mouth. He continued to complain through his stinging fingers.

Gull tapped Triumff on the breast-bone with the point of his sword. The Scot's black eyes always looked angry, even when he was not. It was said in the Royal Guard House that if Gull's lids were ever peeled back during slumber, he'd still glare with the liquid black eyes of an enraged bullock. Now, his demeanour perfectly matched his natural expression.

"Pick up," he said softly, his words gnawing into the air like acid, "your bloody sword, you cussed knave. Though I'll delight in filleting you, I'd rather do it while there's a blade in your hand."

Triumff looked down at the urging sword tip, and then up at Gull, and nodded.

"Right... right... of course..." he replied, turning to look for his fallen blade. To the side of the yard, the man in black covered his eyes, and started in on the Lord's Prayer, *sotto voce*. The man in black's expression increasingly resembled that on the face of the fountain's stone griffon, which in turn suggested that the mythical creature had been intimately violated against its will, and without much in the way of warning.

The rapier had rolled to rest in the lea of the fountain bowl. Triumff steadied himself on the griffon's beak as he stooped to recover it. He grasped the weapon in his uninjured hand and straightened up.

Even during his more sober periods, the weapon had been a bother to him. It had been a gift, a reward for his exploits, bestowed upon him by the

president of the Royal Cartographical Society. It was a Cantripwork Couteau Suisse, or Schweizer Ofziersmesser, an elegant instrument manufactured to the exacting specifications of the Victorinox Cutlers of Ibach. According to the owner's handbill, which had been packed into the presentation box underneath the velvet padding, the device was capable of auto-selecting any number of tools or blades, which it deployed from its ornate brass basket hilt at the flick of a trigger built into the knurled alox handle. One deft touch made it a sword, or a bottle opener, or a device for removing stones from horses' hooves.

Triumff looked down at his weapon. He noted the Helvetic cross-and-shield emblazoned on the tool's grip, denoting the weapon's fine engineering provenance. He also noted, belatedly, that at some point during the whole dropping-it-and-picking-it-back-up-again process, the trigger had been depressed. The Couteau Suisse was currently less well suited for duelling with an incensed Hibernian swordsman, and more for removing cross-head screws. Triumff swore again. He pressed the trigger. The intricate, jinx-powered mechanism inside the decorative basket hilt whirred, withdrew the screwdriver, and meticulously replaced it with a nail buffer.

Triumff began pressing the trigger repeatedly, and, in quick succession, readied himself to open a can, pluck an eyebrow, and do a little fretwork.

He shook his head and held up his other hand.

"Hang on, hang on," he said. "Arsing thing."

Gull stood his ground, glaring.

"Ever had a go with one of these doo-dabs, Gull?" Triumff asked, depressing the trigger with an increased degree of impatience, and consequently selecting long-nose pliers, a fishing rod, a metric rule, and then an auger. "All very clever and fancy, I'm sure, but it's more trouble than it's worth."

"I'm not one for gadgets," growled Gull.

"Me neither! Me bloody neither!" Triumff agreed vehemently. He clicked the trigger one last time and let out a bright, "Aha!" as the rapier blade snapped back into place.

"Right! There you go!" he declared, flourishing the blade. "That's what I was looking for! As you were!"

The energetic flourish had made his vision spin a little. He shook his head in an effort to clear it, blinked dizzily, and took a step forward. A loose flagstone dipped under his foot, and several pints of brown rainwater gouted up his leg, soaking his breeches. He stumbled, and steadied himself, looked down at the stone, and dabbed dispiritedly at his ruined trousers.

"Watch that, Gull," he said, indicating the flagstone. "Loose flag. You could take a nasty tumble on that."

Tried beyond a threshold of patience he had been sporting to observe even that far, Gull screeched

something Caledonian and pejorative, and flew at Triumff. Only fickle fortune positioned Triumff's sword correctly to block the thrust. Gull riposted, and the blades clattered again. He hammered three times more until his sword rebounded from the knurled quillon of Triumff's fluttering weapon.

"Steady on," said Triumff, as if surprised.

Gull threw himself bodily at Triumff, their swords locking like the antlers of rutting stags. He drove Triumff back four or five yards, until the discoverer of Australia slammed hard into the kitchen wall of Chitty House. There, Triumff lurched forward, sweeping his sword around at Gull. It would have been a quite magnificent touché, had it not been for the fact that the *Couteau Suisse* had become, by then, a letter opener. With a strangled and vituperative curse, Triumff selected the rapier blade, again, and swung it wildly, but the distraction had been enough. The Captain of the Royal Guard parried easily, and then cut low, slicing a new pocket hole in Triumff's breeches and a flap of skin out of the thigh beneath. Triumff sucked in his breath as blood, diluted by rain, soaked his leggings. Looking down, he found that one breeches leg was stained red and the other brown with mud.

"Motley!" he exclaimed breezily, and then looked in danger of fainting. He slumped back against the kitchen wall and dropped his guard wearily. Gull's sword was immediately at his throat.

"You're beaten, you bastard," hissed Gull, "and what's more, you're pissed. You might at least have done me the honour of duelling me sober."

"Is this all because of those things I said about your sister?" asked Triumff, absently. "And if it is, can you remind me what I actually said?"

"You challenged *me*, you drunken fool!" Gull growled.

"Oh... really? Then let's just forget it."

Gull stared into Triumff's eyes.

"Not this time," he said. "This time you bleed. This time, I'll give you something to remember me by." Slowly, surgically, Gull drew his rapier-point across Triumff's left cheek. Dark red blood welled up and ran.

"Learn from this, you wastrel. Don't cross me, and if you do, keep up your guard," said Gull. "Though I hear it's not the only thing you can't keep up," he added.

Triumff frowned as the jibe percolated slowly through his drink-crippled comprehension. Then his eyes snapped open, frighteningly sober for the first time.

"You can stuff that opprobrious tattle up your scabby hawsehole!" he exploded. His blade lashed out in a vicious blur that wrong-footed Gull entirely. The blow was instinctive, angry, and undirected by any conscious thought, and if it had been struck with the rapier blade rather than a vegetable peeler, Gull would have been on his way to

his family mausoleum on the shores of Loch Larn. As it was, severed air fell away on either side of the small but razor-sharp implement. There was a brief impact, a sound like cabbage splitting, a yowl, and a spray of blood.

Gull left the yard in a bounding, frantic stride, his portly Spanish second fluttering in his wake and squeaking, "Señor! Señor capitan!"

Triumff slid to the flagstones, his back against the wall. He looked down at something that was cupped in his outstretched hand.

"Gull? Gull, don't go," he called out, weakly. "You've left an ear behind."

The man in black stalked across to the sprawled drunk.

"Agnew," said Triumff, looking up blearily, "Gull forgot an ear."

"Really, sir."

Triumff nodded, and then put a hand to his bloody cheek.

"You'd better call me a surgeon, Agnew," he said.

"I'd rather," muttered the older man on reflection, "call you a silly arse, sir."

At the very same moment that the Laird of Ben Phie was divorced from his left ear in Chitty Yard by means of a novelty potato peeler, the six days of solid rain came to an end. Spent clouds, wrung dry, slouched off grumpily towards Shoeburyness and the sea. A tearful sun, pale as a smoky candle,

appeared over the Square Mile. The City's mood swung.

At Leadenhalle, the cheap was reconvened amid over-enthusiastic announcements of apres-deluge bargains. By the Gibbon Watergate, on the Embankment, the men of the Cisterns and Ducts Guild slouched back the hoods of their oilskins and exchanged knowing, professional nods that hid their relief. In the stable adjoining the Rouncey Mare, Boy Simon woke up and remembered his own name after only a few minutes' concentration.

The City shook itself dry. Casements creaked open in swollen wood frames. Damp boots were upturned on hearths. The residents of the ditch-quarters began to bail out their homes with a blithe London cheeriness that had been called "blitz spirit" ever since the airship raids of the Prussian Succession. The marshy reek of drowned vegetation that had permeated the City for a week began to be replaced by the reassuringly familiar odour of refuse. In Cambridge Circus, pedestrians skirted a beached sea-bass gasping out its last moments on the cobbles.

Within an hour of the sea-change in the climate, one of the Billingsgate mongers sold a pint of shrimp, and there was considerable rejoicing. Within ninety minutes, a troop of the City Militia in Babcock Gardens began the onerous, though unusual, task of returning the barge Mariette Hartley to the river three hundred yards away. Several of

the City's bolder cats were seen for the first time in six days.

Two minutes before St Dunstan's clock tower struck eleven, one of the faithful finally sold a lace memento to a passer-by. The parson of St Dunstan's began a short service of thanks, and his congregation struck up with the Old Seventy-Sixth ("Though the Fence is Sharp, My Lord hath Riches Waiting"). Across the street, the Sisters of the Justified Madonna, who had ceremonially disrobed, pressed most of themselves against the windows, and shouted out messages of congratulation and other heart-warming communiqués.

St Dunstan's flock hurried indoors on the advice of the parson, all except a lingering choirboy, who was later assured by most of the congregation that he was irrevocably destined to have his eyes put out in the Fierce Smithy of Hades.

By noon, the sun had coaxed a mist of evaporation out of the Capital. Every inch of wood: every bridge-post, every newel, every beam, every door in the City groaned and sighed. From the villages and hamlets around the outskirts, it was possible to hear the complaints of the drying metropolis, faintly and distantly, like an elderly relative stumbling out of bed next door. A goat-herd in the Brent Woods, sheltering from the downpour under a broad oak, heard the faraway groaning, and cheered up, anticipating imminent relief from his misery.

At Richmond, the terraces, beds, rows, lawns, mazes, arbours and quincunxes of the Royal Palace blinked away the dew and woke up. Ornamental ponds finally stopped being choppy, and their lily pads drifted to rest, becalmed. The gardeners oiled and unleashed the mower from its lair near the boathouses. The Beefeaters started to whistle as they took off their weatherproofs and cycled off on their patrols. Maids on the south terrace began to beat carpets with wicker paddles, and maids by the wash-house began to hang out a week's worth of damp laundry. Boar and turkey, penned in an enclosure north of the Chase, noted the approach of the Assistant Under-Chef with heavy hearts, and jostled the weakest present to the front.

On a gravel walk along the paddock, Cardinal Woolly of the United Church crunched maze-wards, with two pike-men and a small, obedient civilian in attendance. The cardinal's robes were rich to the point of Papery. The civilian's hose was all but out at the knees. Tugging at his ill-fitting ruff as he followed the cardinal, the civilian moistened the end of his lead-stick on his tongue and pulled open his notebook. He was a nondescript, bearded man with tawny hair, long at the back and absent at the front. His ear was punctuated with a gold ring. His name was Beaver, and being me, your servant the writer, he will have no further words wasted upon him.

"Know then, Master Beaver," said his worship, "that the following declaration may be printed with my approval in your periodical."

"Right ho, Cardinal," quoth I (Wllm Beaver).

The cardinal continued.

"Hereby, it is made known that her most Royal Majesty Queen Elizabeth XXX, Mistress of All Britain, Empress of the Anglo-Español Unity, Defender of the Cantrips, Protector of the Jinx... and so on. You know the form and style, Beaver."

"Ex Ex Ex, uh huh, right ho," I said, nodding.

"Hereby, it is made known that Her Majesty has no comment yet to make on the seriousness of the threat made to the Channel Bridge by the Liberté Gauloise subversives, nor on the unsound rumours reaching our ears from Wiltshire. However, on the matter of the Great Masque this weekend, it is announced that it will now go ahead, thanks to the change in weather. Further, on the subject of the Spanish insistence of an expedition, forthwith, to the new-found Continent, Her Majesty is still awaiting consultation with said Continent's discoverer, Captain Sir Rupert Triumphff."

"Tee-Arr-Eye-umff... uh uh. Right ho. Go on, your holiness."

"Sir Rupert maintains that the Terra Australis is a diverting realm, but largely lacking in precious metals or other exploitable resources. Further, its people are said to be ignorant of the ways of ensorcelment. Given the grave hardship of a journey to

the New South Lands, he considers further missions there unworthy of the cost and effort. In this, the Privy Council and the Church are yet to agree. There is much still to be reckoned out. And all, of course, depends upon Sir Rupert presenting his Letters of Pa... Excuse me."

We paused, at the turn of the paddock walk, as a Great Dane the size of a pony shambled across our path, trailing its lead and carrying a rose trellis in its mouth, complete with climbing rose. The cardinal sent one of the pike-men after it. We could hear his calls of "Easy boy, easy boy!" disappearing down towards the lake.

"Any official comment, your worship, on the rumour that Captain Gull of the Royal Huscarls is currently minus an ear?"

"None whatsoever," snapped the cardinal. "Ask him yourself."

"I did," said Beaver.

"What did he say?"

"He didn't appear to hear the question, sir," I admitted.

There was a splash from the direction of the lake. The hound retraced its steps across our path, dragging a chewed halberd instead of the trellis. The cardinal turned to the other pike-man. I closed my book with a shrug. The press conference was over.

The emerald privet of the Inigo Maze stood before us. A blue kite sporting the Royal Crest scudded along above it, its line secured to some

moving point amid the leafy walls. We heard the unmistakable sound of female sniggering. Woolly straightened his robes, cleared his throat, and headed for the entrance arch of the maze.

“Your Majesty?” he called gently.

I felt suddenly chilly, despite the sun. I rubbed my beard in a nervous gesture particular to myself, and beat a retreat towards the gatehouse on the City Road.

