

HARLAND'S DICE

He sits sullen at the bar, awaiting the great discovery that he is in search of to appear magically from within the depths of the glass placed in front of him. He is a lonely man with a hangover that is spawned from the pits of the very hell whose existence he has begun to question.

"Hell's bells." He murmurs, head heavy with the weight of both last night's escapades and the knowledge that there will surely be more to come. The barkeep pours him another larger and places it on the table with the care and grace of a nurse removing sutures.

"That'll be good for wha' ails yer."

"As a man of science I can empirically state that is a false claim." The barkeep laughs and replies:

"That there's yer problem Charles, always THINKIN' too much. No good will come of it."

"I can't keep this up Harland. I have years worth of research and notes and specimens and samples clogging up my study from floor to ceiling, but I don't know where to even begin putting it all together. I know that hidden somewhere amongst that vile maelstrom of data there is a great discovery screeching to be unveiled, and I am confident that I am the man to do it. I just need to assemble the pieces of that grand puzzle. And yet I find myself here. Again. Lost. Directionless, and dismally hung over..."

"I was never good at puzzles, me. I always preferred dice. Dice are simple, like. Unpredictable. Roll 'em, see what comes up. Put the numbers together. Get a new fmg. Diff'rent combinations, making a new number together. Almost like creating a whole new thing, just by chance." Harland muses whimsically, but Charles is not listening. He is lost within the ceaseless gnawing of his guilty conscience reminding him that he must work more, work harder, work better. He is on the verge of greatness, but he is sitting on the precipice twiddling his thumbs.

"...whenever I get all confused like Mr. Darwin I always turn to the good lord. Perhaps you should try and see if he can advise you on yer scientific endeavours."

“Bah. You may be right. Perhaps I should have followed my father’s advice and become a member of the clergy. Things would have been much simpler, that much is without question.”

“I would beg to differ Charles.”

The owner of the voice appears beside him with a face populated by lines and contours that tell tales of roads less travelled. His face is obscured in part by a thick, bushy brown beard and he has eyes that stare not so much at Charles as around him, through him and into the next few weeks of his existence. It’s a gaze that he finds somehow both disconcerting and hypnotic. “Church provides no man with answers, only the right questions.”

“You are a religious man yourself then?” Charles asks, draining his glass a little.

“Religion is not a word of which I am overly fond. So, Charlie, can I call you Charlie?”

“I would prefer that you did not.”

“Listen Charlie, what exactly is it that you feel is crushing you? What burden could possibly be so great for a man in your position? You look well dressed, well fed...you have...I can see a touch of ill health in your character, but otherwise you seem to be a man of good fortune.”

Charles winces at the mention of his health. His ‘spells’ have been increasing in both frequency and intensity of late, but the fact that his illness has reached the point that it is apparent to strangers is troubling to say the very least.

“Indeed. The fates have been kind to me. I have recently returned from a great voyage across most of the New World and now I have a storm of ideas and theories barking like banshees in my ear. My problem is not lack of ideas or opportunity so much as direction. Threads left untied and such.”

“I see. Barkeep. A wine, if you please. You are a young man Charlie, you have your whole life ahead of you to make mistakes and discoveries. You should be embracing your time on earth, making an effort to enjoy yourself.”

“I rather fear that enjoying myself is altogether the root of the problem.”

“Ah...I see you have the devil of last night’s drinking on your back. Not a trouble that’s ever afflicted me too severely I must confess.”

“You are in possession of a most glorious immunity then, it would seem.”

“Indeed.”

“May I ask your line of work, good sir?”

"Ah, you embarrass me Charlie. In the presence of a great man of science, I am loathe to admit I am a common tradesman. A carpenter."

"Both skills have their place. I could hardly do my work without the aid of chairs and tables, let alone a roof above me."

"This is a truth."

"I doubt I could perform with any great degree of competency at your trade as much as you could with mine. Have you skill with classifying barnacles into their various genii?"

"Ah Charles, you would make a monkey out of me!" The stranger's smile plays impishly across his face.

"I apologise I meant no offence."

"None taken I assure you. In any case, my knowledge of the differences between Ibla Cumingii and Ibla Quadrivalvus is rudimentary at best I'll be the first to admit."

Charles expels the contents of his mouth in a sudden storm across the table.

"I'm...I'm sorry, I do apologise." He scrambles to wipe up the mess from the bar. Harland throws him a tea towel and laughs heartily.

"Heavens Charles, I've not seen you so surprised since Ms. Angeline run in here and lifted up her dress to reveal her undergarments to all and sundry!"

"Yes. I'm sorry. I did not expect to encounter a fellow practitioner of zoology."

"I'm no zoologist Charlie. I don't like labels. Religion. Science. Labels are cages in which we trap ourselves with like-minded companions so we can spit and snarl at those beyond the bars."

"You sound...the way in which you speak. Have you travelled to the East perchance?"

"Yes. My home is across the ocean. A small town in the desert, you would not know the name if I spoke it."

"I apologise once more for the mess. I'm terribly embarrassed."

"You are the only one who can make yourself feel shame Charlie, I would advise a different course. I think a diversion is in order. A game, if you will."

"What game do you suggest?"

His companion smiles and raises his glass before answering:

"A test of stamina perhaps? Of the drinking variety?"

"A drinking contest?" Charles replies with a sly grin. "I'm afraid this is a skill at which you will find me all too adept. I spent five years as a sailor of sorts you know."

The stranger returns the grin and they order a pint each.

“To your health.” Charles says.

“To yours.” The other replies he tilts his head back and pours the beer down with almost supernatural ease. Charles hurries to do the same. He matches him for speed but lacks his casual ease of movement. Amber liquid spills into Darwin's beard and down his throat.

“Another round.” Charles demands haughtily. “So tell me, what brings you here to London? Are you in search of employment or do you simply make a profession of challenging confused men to contests which damage sobriety?”

“Oh, my work takes me where I am needed. I am also a teacher, to those that will listen. I have never felt comfortable staying in one place for any great length of time. And in answer to the second part of your question; I approach people in the manner to which they are most likely to be receptive. You would not take your educated discourse to teach to first graders would you? Half your words would be Cantonese to their ears. But in a university hall, you would be well received.”

He downs the second pint in a breath and nods for Charles to do the same.

Charles drains his glass, with cogs turning in his head all the while.

“Listen, forgive me if this is an odd query, but do I know you?”

“Not as well as you used to Charles. That much is certain. Another round!”

“No, wait, please, let us pause for a second.”

“There is precious little time in this world for pausing Charlie. Let me ask you a question. What mark do you want to make on this world? What great accomplishment do you wish to make the mission of your life?”

“The work of science, without question.”

“Well, yes, science is a box of in which we are all too fond of placing things. The problem, I believe, Charles, comes from when we can no longer fit things in such a box. What do you call an object which cannot be placed within the box of science?”

“I don't follow you.”

“Drink up. See if that helps loosen your thinking.”

They down another pint. Charles feels the liquor sitting heavily in his belly, the stranger continues without hesitation.

“What do you do if you wish to categorise an animal, like say, one of your barnacles?”

“I take it to my laboratory and I analyse structure, orifices, size, colour...”

"Of course. What then, if you wished to analyse an elephant, would that fit into your laboratory?"

"No, not even close."

"Does that then mean that the elephant is NOT an animal?"

"No, simply that it does not fit inside the lab."

"Quite so. So my question to you then is do you wish to change the world itself, or rather deepen and expand mankind's perception and understanding of it?"

"The latter, indubitably."

"Well then, another drink?"

"Now hang on..."

"Round four! The world needs new ways of thinking Charles. We can't go around praying to the sun and thinking that the earth is the centre of the universe until the end of our species now can we? We have to move forward. Beyond tradition, superstition, religion."

"Yes. I would agree."

He downs the fourth pint and waits for Charles to do likewise.

"Can I bore you with a story from my travels in the orient?"

"Please! I have yet to travel to the Asiatic shores. I am particularly interested in the regions betwe..." The stranger cuts Charles off mid-sentence and proclaims:

"In much of China, they follow the teachings of the Buddha; a figure of supreme virtue. Free of lust, greed, sinfulness, vanity. They follow his footsteps towards a life filled with kindness and charity. A wonderful philosophy. The problem is Charlie, most people don't attain many attributes of the Buddha save being bald and fat."

"The virtuous path is not an easy one."

"By its very nature. Another round?"

"I must confess sir, after five years with sailors I am yet impressed by your fortitude."

His companion smiles and then disappears his share of the fifth round down his throat.

"Yes. There are those who would seek to follow the Buddha. And that is the right course for those people in this age. But new times are coming Charles, and new ways of thinking are needed. The old words are not well suited to the people of this age. The old *books* are not well suited, if you follow me."

Charles' face darkens as the words, in the form of moving air, send vibrations humming through his ear, collide with his cochlea and carry the messages as tiny

electrical impulses to his brain. He thinks of all the nights he has longed to share his initial notions of his Great Work. Thinks of how he is terrified of the reaction from his father, his colleagues, strangers in the street. The church has demonised many a great man of science: Galileo, Copernicus, Newton. What if he shares their fate? How great would his discovery have to be in order to justify a lifetime as a persecuted pariah?

"There are those who would work in opposition to new ideas." Charles replies tentatively.

"Charlie, are you a fan of the works of Victor Hugo?"

"Yes, very much so."

"He is a particular favourite of mine. Perhaps one of the best writers I have read in the last four or five decades." Charles is slightly confused by this comment, given that he would swear that the stranger could not conceivably have yet seen his thirty-third birthday. "I think Hugo summed it up best when he stated: 'All the forces in the world are not so powerful as an idea whose time has come.'"

Charles drinks. He drinks slowly. In his head great wheels are turning and the sound of their machinations drowns out all else in the room.

"Another round!" He demands with a new and sudden vigour, but the barkeep is nowhere to be found. Charles stands up to scan the room for Harland. "Alas! Our humble host is nowhere near to help us facilitate our challenge, and I have catching up to do!"

"No bother." Says his companion with a mischievous leer. He takes the jug of water from the table and uses it to fill two of the many empty glasses that sit between them.

"Ah, yes, perhaps some less fortified refreshment would be wise...I fear the room is starting to move like the one I slept in whilst at sea..."

"You aren't getting off that easy Charlie!" The stranger replies. "Watch closely now!"

He takes a dishcloth from behind the bench and whips it with a playful flourish. He then moves it slowly back and forth, his face held in mock imitation of a cheap roadside magician. "Pay attention now Charlie, nothing is as it seems...though this would seem to be a simple dishcloth and the glasses set before you would seek to proclaim themselves mere water, a closer look reveals..." He holds the dishcloth in front of the glasses, obscuring them from view. Charles watches, and grins with child-like glee, enjoying the show all the more for the warm buzz that is pleasantly clouding his head.

“Voila!” The cloth is whipped away in a colourful blur, revealing two glasses filled with cold, frothing, amber liquid.

“Chicanery!” Cries Charles with an almost embarrassingly high-pitched squeal. “Good show! Good show!” He applauds the trick and raises a glass to inspect the result, first with his eyes and then with his tongue. “A veritable miracle!” He pronounces joyfully.

“No, a simple charlatan party trick I assure you. Although one that has been greatly popular in the past I must confess.” The pair clink glasses and down another round. Charles has lost count and, if his attempts to stand are anything to go by, a great deal of his balance.

“Steady there sailor...” The stranger jibes.

Charles waves the taunt away with his hand and staggers towards the bathroom.

“Forgive me. I feel a trip to the lavatory is in order.” He mumbles as he departs.

Inside the bathroom everything is cool, calm and white. He favours this particular establishment for this exact reason. Charles has a particular odium for poorly kept bathrooms and in his pleasantly inebriated state the solitude and serenity afforded him by the pristine stall is bliss. He relieves himself and washes his hands, but turns the tap too hard, resulting in an explosion of water over much of his waistcoat.

“Blast!” He swears in remonstrance. He hurriedly takes the handtowel and begins to rub at the wet patch, knowing full well how hopeless his attempt will be. Irritated, he throws the towel down onto the ground and attempts to make his exit. Sadly, the combination of intoxication and irritation has had an entirely adverse effect on his balance. He steps directly onto the towel and watches the world spin suddenly backwards as his feet lose purchase of the floor and fly into the air in front of him.

It seems that a small eternity passes in between the moment that he departs from the ground and the moment when he regains contact. In that time, gracelessly free falling; it occurs to him that the events that have transpired this evening have been strange perhaps to the point of the supernatural. That the stranger to which he has been talking is not an unknown figure after all, but rather a figure of great fame and significance. It furthermore occurs to him that the time for his idea has come, consequences be damned. What further thoughts he may have had during this airborne epiphany will never be known, because in the next instant his head collides with the cool tiled floor, and smears its perfect white with a small and sudden pool of crimson.

When he wakes he finds Harland standing over him with smelling salts, tapping gently at his face.

“Mr. Darwin? Mr. Darwin! Oh thank the Christ himself you are ok!”

“Yes, aside from the pounding of great war machines in my skull I believe all is in order.” Charles murmurs quietly. The barkeep raises him to his feet. He touches his hand to his head and his fingers come away sticky.

“Come sit in my quarters Mr. Darwin, we’ll get you all fixed up.”

Charles follows him through a haze of opening and closing doors, feeling dizzy and as though he is lost in a dream. He sits on the couch as directed and feels the bandage placed gently on his head. He desires sleep. On the table next to him are piles upon piles of coloured cubes.

“I see you’ve spied me dice. Quite a collection that is. I’ve had friends retrieve them for me from all o’er the globe. Oh, Mr. Darwin. Your friend went into the bathroom a little while after you did. He said he’d ‘attended to your wound’ or summat, and said to give you his apologies as he was called away suddenly. He left you these notes.”

Charles touches the side of his skull with cautious fingers. Now that the blood has been cleared away, his fingers can find no trace of injury. His knowledge of the human form is substantial, and Charles is quite aware of the fact that a fall such as he has sustained given the amount of blood he produced would have required a sizable wound. And yet, aside from the warm white buzzing in his skull, it is as though he had never fallen at all. He takes the mass he of crumpled pieces of paper from Harland and unfolds them. Inscribed there amongst a multitudinous landscape of creases and folds are samples from his own notes and observations that he has scrawled in various notebooks. Alongside these are notes and comments made in a careful and deliberate hand that he does not recognise. He sees suggestions, reflections, recommendations. Charles murmurs softly as he reads over them, cursing the warm confusion of intoxication that is currently afflicting his brain. Even through the haze he can see that the pieces to the great puzzle have been arranged and sorted and are awaiting placement. As his mind whirs with possibilities and battle plans his eyes devour the webs of information, processing, interpreting, consolidating. Only when he reaches the end of the diagrams and observations does he notice the small

sentence written in what appears to have been an afterthought at the end of the final page:

"An intelligent hell would be better than a stupid paradise."

- Victor Hugo.

He picks up a pair of Harland's dice, plays them thoughtfully between his fingers, and rolls.