

3 SEPTEMBER 1666

Humphrey Trencom rolled over and sniffed at the air. He was caught in that blissful state of non-being that lies somewhere between slumber and wakefulness. He was aware of his legs but only as weights. He could feel his hands but only their warmth. Yet his vigilant nose was already alert to the fact that something in the here and now – in this very chamber – was not quite right.

In the time it took to trigger an alarm in his somnolent brain, Humphrey allowed his thoughts to drift back to the world of sleep. He had been dreaming of roasted capons and honeyed parsnips, of succulent woodcock and jellied eels. His sleepy reverie had transported him to the great banqueting hall of Whitehall Palace, where he was the seating partner of King Charles II. His brain had failed to register that this was as unlikely as it was improbable. Instead, it was once again focusing itself upon the long oak trestle that seemed to stretch to the furthest end of the room.

In the dream-filled orbit of Humphrey's head, the tabletop

was laden with partridge pies, pomegranate pastries and quince conserves. There were castors of pepper and galleys of oils, pitchers of chocolate and posnets of sauce. At the centrepiece of this display was a great tower of English cheeses – more than twenty different varieties that were stacked up on a decorative pewter platter. Humphrey himself had supplied all the cheeses for this morphean banquet and he was about to proffer his expert advice to the monarch, who was currently seated on his right.

'And which,' asked the king with uncommon familiarity, 'do you particularly recommend we try?'

Humphrey's favourite had long been the smoked Norfolk tynwood. Gingerly and with great care, he eased it from the base of the tower, causing the pile to wobble slightly. Then, after showing it to the king, he sliced a thick wedge from the tynwood round. He noticed that the pock-marked rind was coated in a thin film of ash that imparted an oaky softness to the lemony flesh of the cheese. Humphrey put it to his nose and inhaled deeply. Ah, yes – there was a tangible richness to the scent. The smell of bonfires and woodsmoke was working its way deep into his consciousness, causing his still-sleeping mouth to dribble with saliva.

It was at exactly this point in the dream that his conscious nose flashed a message of alarm to his not-quite-conscious brain. And just a second or two later, an abruptly awoken Humphrey realized that not everything was quite as it should be on this hot late-summer's morning.

The smell of smoke had not come from the slice of Norfolk tynwood; rather, it was drifting in through the casement

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window – invisible to the eye but altogether present in the sensitive nostrils of Humphrey Trencom.

'Mercy!' he said to himself as he sat bolt upright in bed. 'Something is most certainly amiss.' He straightened his nightcap, which had slipped over his eyes, and swung his legs over the side of the bed. As he did so, he noticed that the room was infused with a dull orange glow. With a growing sense of alarm, he climbed the four steps up to the high leaded window that had a view over much of the city.

The sight that greeted his eyes was so shocking and unexpected that he had to clutch at the woodwork to stop himself from reeling. 'Oh, Lord,' he said. 'Oh, my good Lord.' As far as he could see, from St Giles's in the north to Thames Street in the west, the entire city of London was aflame. Canning Street was a sheet of fire; the Exchange was a mass of burning timber. Botolph's Wharf was ablaze. Even some of the dwellings on London Bridge appeared to be smouldering from within.

It took Humphrey approximately three seconds to comprehend the scale of the disaster and a further two seconds to realize that his own life was quite possibly in grave danger. The parish of St Agatha, less than a hundred yards from his home, was consumed by fire. The Golden Cocke was sending out a funnel of sparks; the Fox and Grapes was a smoking ruin. Humphrey peered through the pall of smoke and realized that the pitched leaded roof of old St Paul's, which he could just make out, seemed to be a molten torrent. Liquid metal was pouring from the gargoyles and splashing onto the ground below.

He raced down the back stairs and out onto the lane. The air was a soupy mixture of acrid smoke – much stronger and more pungent than it had been in his own chamber. Humphrey could smell pitch and tar and burning brimstone.

Foster Lane was crowded with people – women, squealing babies, maids and soldiers. Broken furniture lay strewn across the cobbles. Carts and wagons were blocking the street.

'What in the devil's name is happening?' roared Humphrey to a passing soldier. 'Where should we go?'

'The whole city is afire,' came the reply. 'Get yourself down to the riverside.'

As soon as he realized that escape was still open to him, and that his own life was therefore not in imminent danger, Humphrey's thoughts became desperately focused on his shop.

'My cheeses,' he thought. 'What shall I do with my cheeses?'

Several options flashed through his mind. He could load them onto a wagon. He could pay people to carry them to the waterfront. He could try hauling them down into the cellars. But when he stared down the lane and saw it choked with people, he realized that none of these was realistic. London was on fire and no one would help to save his cheese.

The flames were growing dangerously close. The very air had been heated to a furnace and flames and squibs were dropping from the heavens. King Street and Milk Street were now ablaze and several dwellings on Lothbury were burning fiercely. It was only a matter of time before the wall of fire would reach Trencoms.

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When the flames did arrive, they came in a relentless wave. They latched themselves onto the corner shop – Mr George's, the vintner – grasping at the woodwork before tearing off the roof. Humphrey watched, horrified yet fascinated, as the gable end detached itself from the building and crashed to the ground in an explosion of flame. The Olde Bear was the next to be consumed; the flames – fuelled by tuns of brandy in the cellars – made short shrift of the wattle walls. They then tore through Number 12 and the Olde Supply Store before sniffing hungrily at the parch-dry facade of Trencoms cheese shop.

Humphrey moved as close as he dared to the flames, observing with detached horror the impending ruination of his life. The heat was intense – a pulsing, scalding blast – yet he seemed incapable of fleeing until he had witnessed with his own eyes the destruction of his livelihood.

The flames licked at the wooden timbers as if they wished to sniff and taste the cheeses before taking their first big lunge. The ancient beams, which had been set into the ground more than two centuries earlier, were as dry as an old corpse. London had not seen rain for more than three months and the parched surface of the timber was charred in seconds. Then, all at once, the entire front of the shop burst spectacularly into flame.

The little windowpanes held out valiantly against the rush of heat, but only for a few more seconds. Humphrey could not tell which melted first – the lead or the glass – but he noticed that the famous Trencoms shopfront, bought at a cost of more than twenty guineas, fell from its casement in a dramatic

molten collapse. Moments later, the darting tops of the flames began filtering inside the ground floor of the building, sniffing out anything that might be combustible.

Humphrey was standing dangerously close to the fire – he was less than thirty yards from the shop. In spite of the heat, which was roasting his cheeses, he remained rooted to the spot, watching in detached horror as the flames located their first victim. A large pile of prize Suffolk gilden was displayed on a tabletop close to the window. For the previous few minutes, it had been shielded from the worst of the heat by the thin, leaded window. Now, with that gone, it bore the full force of the flames.

Its surface turned shiny as it began to melt. Then, ever so slowly, its innards started to liquefy. The pile shrank slightly as its solid structure softened. The top cheese oozed into the one below and that, in turn, melted into the large round at the bottom.

Small bubbles appeared on the surface. It began to blister and splutter. And then, all at once, its gooey underbelly began to drip to the floor. The hard rinds still held out defiantly against the fearsome heat. But, deprived of their inner organs, the cheeses soon puckered and collapsed in on themselves. Humphrey's gildens were transformed into a runny puddle.

The flames were encouraged by the ease of their success and pushed themselves deeper inside the building. As the heat intensified, more and more cheeses began subsiding into waxy lumps. They lost their rigidity. Their edges softened. And then – finally – they were slowly unclotted by the flames.

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The charworths leached into the bridgeworths; the stiltons mingled with the blues.

In the midst of this oozy catastrophe, the noble parmesan alone held its shape and form. For more than five minutes it stood proud against the relentless onslaught of fire and flame. But, seemingly disheartened by the surrounding doom, its rotund belly began to shrink and buckle.

For more than two months, this 50 lb drum had brought pleasure and delight to Trencoms' regulars. Now, its rheumy innards were drip-drip-dripping to the floor.

Humphrey knew that when the inside of the shop reached a certain temperature, all of the surviving cheeses would spontaneously combust. He only had to wait a few seconds longer before this sorry moment came to pass. As the bells of St Mary's knelled the seventh hour – the last time they would ever ring – Trencoms cheese shop exploded into a fireball.

Humphrey watched in a mixture of awe and horror. He had already resigned himself to the loss of his shop and had also grasped that this spelled the end of his livelihood. And yet, amid this scene of utter devastation, he took pride in the fact that his cheeses were putting on a far more ostentatious display than all the other burning buildings. The tavern had disappeared in a squib of flame. The Olde Supply Store had burned long and slow. But his cheeses were proving theatrical to the last. Molten, dripping and turned to liquid oil, they now transformed the shop into a spectacular furnace of fire.

It was as Humphrey watched this operatic finale that his nose once again started to twitch. This time, his brain responded in seconds. Ah, yes! His cheeses – his beloved family

of cheeses – were giving him one final burst of pleasure. Amid the stench of burning timber, pitch, dust and ash, there was the all-pervasive aroma of molten cheese. Humphrey could identify no one variety in the pungent concoction of smells. Instead, his nose was infused with a powerful miscellany of scents – one quite unlike anything he had smelled before.

He looked around him and was suddenly gripped by panic. He realized that he was now entirely alone and almost encircled by a wall of flame. He had been so enrapt in watching the cheese-fuelled flames that he had quite failed to notice that the fire had spread southwards and eastwards, tearing its way along the length of Lawrence Lane. The air was heated almost to roasting point and Humphrey could feel his wedding ring burning his skin.

'Great God!' he thought. 'Where's everyone gone? I must get out – I must get myself to the river.'

He allowed himself one final glance at the still-burning corpse of what had only recently been Trencoms cheese shop before turning on his heels and fleeing down the lane, stumbling over charred timbers and mounds of fallen masonry.

His mind was focused absolutely on saving his own skin and it was not until he at last reached the waterfront that he began to assess his predicament with a degree of clarity. As he did so, his thoughts performed several somersaults before turning in a most unexpected direction. He began to ask himself if the fire was the sign that his mother, in her characteristically cryptic fashion, had told him to one day expect. She had always insisted that the Trencom family was await-

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ing some sort of signal from the heavens and that when it came he would not fail but to notice it.

'Watch out for it, Humphrey,' she had said to him when he was still a young boy, 'and seize the moment. The sign will mark your destiny and it will also mark the destiny of the Trencoms. Yes, it will betoken good tidings for our family for generation upon generation.'

As a small boy, Humphrey had often asked his mother to tell him more, but she would only ever offer him one of her customary monologues. 'All the noble courts of Europe once sought our blood,' she would say with a vigorous nod of her head. 'Oh, yes. And we could have married into some of the very greatest dynasties. Tsar Ivan the Terrible proposed to Irene, your great-great-great-grandmother. And King Gustavus II Adolphus of Sweden offered one of your aunts the city of Lutzen in Saxony as her dowry.'

The youthful Humphrey had listened entranced to his mother's litany of royal names and houses. He had heard these stories so many times that he knew, almost to the word, what was coming next.

'Here it comes – here it comes,' he would think to himself, mimicking in his head his mother's strange accent. 'And I could have married Prince Christian IV of Denmark, Norway and the Lofoten Islands.'

'And I,' she said right on cue, 'could have married the Holy Roman Emperor himself – yes, indeed – Ferdinand III. But I didn't like the cut of his moustache.'

Humphrey had involuntarily gulped when he realized that

the well-worn script had suddenly acquired a new and most illustrious personality.

'Really, mother?' he had said. 'Are you sure it wasn't Prince Christian IV – of Denmark, Norway and the Lofoten Islands?'

'Aye,' had been her answer as she spat in the dust. 'Him as well. I could have married them all. But I – we – didn't want to mix our blood with such *inferiors*.'

'Then why,' Humphrey had asked tentatively, 'did you marry my father?'

There was a long pause as his mother, Zoe, looked dreamily at the cob and timber dwelling that had been her home for the last ten years.

'I fell in love,' she had replied, wiping her eyes on her kirtle. 'And I knew that together we could produce the son who would reclaim our patrimony. That's you, Humphrey. And when I saw your nose – when I saw that you had inherited *my* nose – I felt sure that it was only a question of time. We had left our homeland in a welter of fire and flame – and a welter of fire and flame would surely send us back there again.'

What exactly had his mother meant by these words? Humphrey had never known for certain, but now, as he turned his head towards the burning skyline, he quickly convinced himself that the fire was the mysterious portent of which she had spoken. To his way of thinking, the flames that had destroyed his shop heralded something of the utmost importance.

'Why, of course,' he thought, with a tingling sense of excitement. 'Tis certainly the sign of which she spoke. This

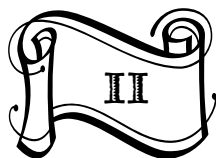
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must be the sign. It has at long last come to pass, just as she promised it would.'

No sooner had Humphrey concluded that the fire was a message from on high than he found a rush of ideas swift-footing themselves through the overheated chambers of his brain. Within a very short space of time, and in absolute disregard of either practicality or logic, he decided upon a dramatic and quite unexpected course of action.

'I shall go to Constantinople,' he said to himself with a vigorous nod of his head. 'Yes, indeed. That's surely what my mother wanted me to do. I shall put these charred ruins into the capable hands of brother John and seek my destiny in Constantinople.'

And so he would. But little did he know that in following the sign and making his voyage, Humphrey was to spark a most catastrophic train of events – one that would not reach its nemesis until the spring of 1969, precisely 303 years and nine generations after his hasty and unexpected departure. It would fall to a certain Edward Trencom, a direct descendant of the precipitate Humphrey, to deal with the terrible consequences of his decision.



JANUARY 1969

The guide clapped her hands and let slip an impatient cough. She was anxious to start the tour. 'Excuse me – ladies and gentlemen. Ahem – if you're ready. Could I ask you – ahem.'

The little group fell silent and she began.

'First of all,' she said, 'let me welcome you all to the tour. It'll last about forty minutes and if anyone has any questions, well, please don't hesitate to ask.

'Now – where shall we begin? Trencoms, as you can see, is housed in a most unusual building. The exterior facade is quintessentially Georgian – red brick, three storeys and finely proportioned – the sort of house in which, Mr Trencom once remarked, many of Jane Austen's characters might have been very much at home.

'Take a look at the fan light over the door. It's original. Look, too, at the sash windows. Most of them still retain their eighteenth-century glass. Yes, sir, you're right, it is very unusual in London – and for that we must thank Mr Albert

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Trencom. He boarded up the windows on the day that World War Two broke out – much to the amusement of the neighbouring shopkeepers – and the panels were not removed until Armistice Day.

'Above the main door, which has been dark green for more than a century, you'll notice the sort of wrought-iron sign that was once a familiar sight all over London. *Trencoms, 1662*. That was, of course, the year in which the shop first opened its doors.

'Yes, sir – you have a question. Ah, yes – so what *did* happen to the original Trencoms? Well, the first shop no longer exists. It was burned to the ground in the Great Fire of 1666 – completely destroyed. It had only been open for four years when it suffered its first great catastrophe.'

The guide shuffled on her feet for a moment and stared briefly at the ground. 'Perhaps I should point out,' she said, 'that the fire was not the only disaster Trencoms has suffered in its long history. It's strange. You see, almost every generation has had to face some accident or other.' She lingered over the word *accident*, as if she wished to hint at something more sinister. 'You could almost say that Trencoms is in some way – cursed.'

The guide had managed to get everyone's attention with this last comment and, in the dramatic silence that followed, she took the opportunity to crack a well-worn joke – one she knew would make everyone laugh.

'Well,' she said, 'let's hope that it doesn't suffer another disaster in the course of the next forty minutes.'

As the group duly let out a collective chuckle, the guide

acknowledged their enjoyment with a knowing nod of her head and pressed on with the tour.

'Now then, just a couple of other things to add. Notice the royal insignia and those three magical words, "by royal appointment". I'm sure that some of you will have seen this on other shops during your stay in London – yes? Hmm? I can see that some of you are nodding.

'Well, I can assure you that a "royal appointment" is indeed a great honour. Trencoms was awarded this status during the reign of Queen Victoria, who was particularly partial to Mr Henry Trencom's double-aged double Gloucester. Prince Albert, incidentally, preferred the salty Gewürtskäse, from northern Bavaria. We had someone on the tour the other day, a German businessman, who actually came from the village where Gewürtskäse is made.'

She paused for a moment in order to acknowledge a new arrival to the group. 'Good morning, good morning,' she said with characteristic jollity, motioning with her hand to draw the man closer. 'Please come and join us. A holiday, is it? Tell us your name. And *do* tell us where you're from. I always like to know what countries I've had on my tours.'

The man looked distinctly uneasy, as if this was the last thing he was expecting to be asked. 'Er – Greece. I'm from Greece.' He spoke hesitantly, in a voice that was heavily accented. 'The name's Papadrianos. Andreas Papadrianos,' he said, extending his hand. 'From Salonika.'

'Ah, good – good,' said the guide. 'We haven't had a Greek on the tour for many a month. A little word of advice – once we're inside, do try a slice of Mr Trencom's haloumi. Delicious,

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it really is. You won't find better outside Greece and that's a guarantee.'

She smiled and asked the man another question.

'Business or pleasure?'

'I beg your pardon?' said Mr Papadrianos.

'Are you here for business or pleasure?' repeated the guide, who was speaking rather more slowly than usual on account of the fact that she was addressing a foreigner.

'Business,' snapped the man, who was clearly annoyed at having to reveal anything about himself. 'I'm here on – *personal* business.'

'I see, I see,' said the guide, who took this as a sign that her nosiness was once again getting the better of her. 'Well now, ladies and gentlemen – and Mr Papa-what's-it – if you're ready, we can enter the shop. I'd ask those of you who have cameras to switch off the flashes as they have been known to interfere with the growth of the mould of the cheeses.'

With that little caution and with one last glance at the facade, the group was ready to enter the oldest, finest and most famous cheese shop in London.



The first and most immediate sensation on first entering Trencoms was the extraordinary smell. The pungent odour of cheese permeated the air, as if the very walls and ceiling were built of great slabs of creamy-white emmental. Whenever customers and tour guides first walked through the door, the smell of cheese momentarily stopped them in their tracks. It

was not unpleasant – not at all – but it took more than a minute for one's nostrils to adapt to such an abrupt change.

The air was at its foggiest and most fusty in the early morning, when the shop had just been opened. It was as if, all night long, the mouldering cheeses had been exhaling in their sleep – yawning, sighing and respiring stale cheesy odours. The Trencoms had long been convinced that, in the depth of their slumber, the stiltons burped and the roquefort broke wind. And why not? After all, every single cheese in Trencoms was a living being – a dense and vibrant clump of greeny-bluey-creamy bacteria.

The family had long ago discovered that many of the cheeses underwent a mysterious transformation during the hours of darkness. They would arrive in the morning to discover that the bell-shaped clochettes – which had been unripe just a few hours earlier – had acquired a new and greenish patina of mould. They would find that some of the couhé-veracs had miraculously divested themselves of their chestnut-leaf wrappers, as if they were petticoats or negligees to be wantonly dropped to the floor.

Many a Trencom had amused himself with thoughts of what really went on in the nocturnal world of cheese. Did the tommes make advances on the picodons? Did the gaperons woo the willowy buchettes? Whatever antics took place during the hours when Trencoms was closed – and no one could ever be entirely sure – the cheeses managed to imbue the shop with a distinctive, if ambiguous, morning odour – the sort of pleasant-unpleasant smell that occasionally finds itself trapped under the duvet of young lovers.

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'Good morning, Mr Trencom,' said the guide as she entered the shop. 'And how are you this morning?'

'Ah, good morning indeed, Mrs Williamson,' he replied, smiling at everyone on the tour. 'Yes, yes – I'm tickety-boo, just tickety-boo.' This was nothing short of the truth. Mr Edward Trencom, the proprietor of Trencoms – the tenth generation of the family to occupy this position – was in the finest possible fettle. He gave his belly a hearty slap and then polished his nose with the corner of his apron. A couple of people in the group sniggered when they heard him speak and several others exchanged glances when they noticed the curious shape of Mr Trencom's nose. But the better mannered managed to keep their composure.

'Here we go, Mrs Williamson – a slice of pencarreg to perk you up for the morning.' The guide blushed ever so slightly and popped it into her mouth.

'And if that doesn't bring you out in goose pimples,' chuckled Mr Trencom, 'then we'll have to prescribe a large chunk of Burgundian clacbitou.' Mrs Williamson smiled, the tour group laughed and Mr Trencom wished everyone a most agreeable visit.



The shop had a green and cream chequered marble floor. During the day, the tiles were scattered with sawdust, rendering it treacherous to anyone foolish enough to enter Trencoms wearing the sort of high heels that were popular with typists and office secretaries in the late 1960s.

Along both walls there were long marble counters topped with glass and brass frames. These allowed customers to view the cheeses on display – a tiny fraction of what was stored in the cellars – while at the same time protecting them from any contact with the breath, or wandering fingers, of Trencoms' clientele. Each cheese sat upon its own handmade straw mat, which had been imported from the Carmargue since the late 1870s. These were neutral in colour and odour, allowing the cheeses to breathe, but not imparting any unwanted flavour.

The shop's interior dated from 1873 – the first and only time when Trencoms had been redecorated. Two Victorian fans – installed in that year – still turned slowly in the ceiling, clicking slightly on every fourth rotation. They churned the air with heavy monotony, mingling all the individual odours into one. If you stood directly below the fans and held your head at approximately forty-five degrees, there was something about the way in which the air circulated that forced the smell deep into your nose. Yet if you stood at the end of the counter, the result was very different – light, fragrant and almost musty. It had long been a tradition among the Trencom proprietors to stand in four different spots each morning and allow the smell to permeate their nostrils. They liked to see how many individual cheeses they could identify in the pungent cocktail.

The walls of the shop were lined with rectangular tiles whose creamy colour matched the sticky inside of a ripe maroilles. Three shelves stood above the counter; each was stacked with rare bottled cheeses from the Peloponnese which were preserved in piquant olive oil. Behind each

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counter there was a ripe, ready-to-eat epoisses and a mug containing teaspoons. Tour groups were always greeted with a spoonful of epoisses and a warm personal welcome. Americans were particularly keen to meet the descendant of a family that had 'been in cheese' for more than three centuries.

'And now,' said Mrs Williamson, 'if you're ready? We shall descend into the crypt.'

It was as the tour group was clambering down the wooden stepladder and into the cellars that something rather peculiar happened – something that was to cast a shadow over the rest of Edward Trencom's day. The Greek newcomer to the group hung back from everyone else as if, out of politeness, he intended to be the last to descend the ladder. But no sooner had everyone else disappeared from view than he made his way back into the shop and hurried over to Mr Trencom.

'They know about you,' he whispered. 'Everything. And you are in grave danger. They've been watching you for at least a week, perhaps more. Even now they are monitoring you.'

Edward Trencom was so completely taken aback at being addressed in such a manner – and by a complete stranger – that his immediate reaction was to rub his nose with great vigour, something that he always did when he was nervous or perturbed. He then fixed his eyes upon the man in a way that suggested he was wondering, firstly, if he had heard him correctly and secondly, if he should eject him from the shop.

'I do beg your pardon,' he said in a tone that retained its customary politeness but was somewhat firmer and more

insistent than he would ever use on his regular customers. 'Can we help you in any way? Were you after any particular cheese?'

'I cannot tell you any more,' continued Mr Papadrianos, who was completely oblivious to Edward's response. 'But even now, you – *we* – are being watched.'

As he said this, he motioned towards the street outside. Edward swung his gaze across to the large glazed window and was startled by what he saw. A very tall man – who looked just as Greek as the stranger standing before him – was peering in through the window. Yes, staring straight towards him. As their two sets of eyes met – and connected – the stranger outside suddenly bowed his head and scurried off down the street.

'I can't talk now,' said the man standing before Edward. 'But watch your back – and be cautious. We need you. All our hopes are pinned on you, Mr Trencom, all our hopes. I'll be back to tell you more. I can't say when, but I will be back. That much I can promise.' And with that said and done, Mr Papadrianos gave a wave of his hand and made a hasty exit from the shop.

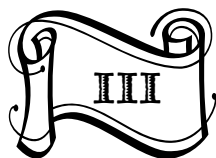
'Well, I'll be blowed,' said Edward to himself as he reflected on the peculiar scene that had just taken place. 'That is quite the strangest thing that has happened to me since . . .' His mind was briefly sidetracked into thinking about the last strange thing that had happened to him. Unable to recollect anything at all, he let out a series of indignant tuts before returning to the matter in hand. 'Now then,' he thought, 'what on earth was that all about? *What* did he say? "We need you.

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All our hopes are pinned on you." Well, well, really! I've never heard such a preposterous piece of nonsense in all my life.'

As he replayed the scene in his head – and allowed himself a little smile – he popped a slice of creamy caussedou into his mouth.

'Oh, no, no, no,' Edward said aloud as he squashed the cheese against the roof of his mouth. 'It doesn't taste quite right. Not at all. Indeed, one could even argue that it tastes as if it's gone off.'



Edward Trencom was in possession of a quite extraordinary nose. It was long, aquiline and marked by a prominent yet perfectly formed circular bump over the bridge. He had studied the architecture of his nose for much of his adult life and never tired of examining its curious shape. He was not a vain man – not at all. Aside from his habit of slipping on a fresh apron every morning, and being a stickler for cleanliness, he had scarcely a care in the world about his external appearance. It was rather an act of idle curiosity – speculation, if you will – that caused him regularly to check his nose in one of the many mirrors that adorned the walls of Trencoms.

There was a time when he felt it was modelled in the perpendicular style so beloved by England's cathedral builders. But no. Such a conclusion denied the very complexities that gave his nose its charm. For the bump over the bridge lent a dash of Byzantine excitement to its structure.

After years of reading and researching, measuring and anatomizing, Edward had reached a few definite conclusions. 'My nose,' he decided, 'combines sensuality' (the bump) 'with authority' (the straightness) 'in a perfect blend of Greek and

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Roman.' Yes. Edward Trencom was in possession of a truly Graeco-Roman nose: one that adhered to Sapphic concepts of beauty yet overlaid them with a strict Virgilian sense of duty.

Although the Trencoms had been in possession of their hereditary appendage for many hundreds of years, it had not always been so finely shaped. The earliest generations of the family had been born with noses that lacked any hint of the traits and characteristics that would one day become their most distinguishing hallmark. There had been no oriental bump. The bridge had none of the Roman straightness. The fine Greek facade had yet to be erected. Those early noses were the product of inbreeding and poor nourishment – malformed and born out of Saxon pillage and rape, bred on offal and turnips, smashed by blunderbusses, broken in ale-house brawls, subjected to the stench of the slaughterhouse, frozen in winter and abused by centuries of over-strong cider and ale. Incest had contributed to the skewed tip. Violent sword fights had left their scars. And although the owners of these noses would eventually dress themselves in elegantly slashed doublets, the flaccid red nostrils would reveal them to be in an advanced stage of deterioration. Capillaries would rupture and wiry hairs protrude from each nostril.

It was not until the mid-seventeenth century that the family suddenly found that an extraordinary nose had been thrust upon it. In or around 1637, a certain Humphrey Trencom was born with an appendage that was clearly out of the ordinary. It was uncommonly long and aquiline and particularly notable on account of a large bony dome that

appeared almost to hang suspended above the bridge. No Trencom had ever been born with such an extraordinary-shaped nose and it was clear to the gaggle of family members crowding around the birthing bed that this particular specimen had come lock, stock and two fine barrels from the newborn Humphrey's mother, the exhausted but deliriously happy Zoe. She, in turn, had acquired the nose from her father, from whom it could be traced back into antiquity, through fathers and mothers and occasionally aunts and cousins as well. There was no obvious logic as to how and when the nose would appear, yet it was present – proud and immutable – in every generation.

By the time Humphrey was born, his mother was the only surviving member of the family to bear such a nose and she breathed a very heavy sigh of relief – and made the sign of the cross three times – when she saw that Humphrey was in possession of the family patrimony. She had performed her duty with perfect timing and others would duly follow suit in the decades and centuries to come. Ever since the birth of Humphrey, each generation managed to produce at least one offspring – usually, but by no means always, the firstborn son – who possessed a nose of formidable shape and sensitivity.

There were times, of course, when it lost a little of its magnificence. Its structure had become temporarily debased during the Regency period and a daguerreotype of old Henry Trencom revealed the dome above the bridge to have listed sharply to the left. But such architectural catastrophes never lasted for long. By the late nineteenth century, the nose was back on form. Edward's grandfather was so proud of his

Edward Trencom's Nose

specimen that he underlined its qualities with a luxuriant moustache. Edward's father had also been blessed with a fine exemplum – one which turned a lustrous pink whenever he drank his evening glass of porter.

When still a young boy, Edward had quizzed his uncle about the family nose. 'Uncle Harry,' he had asked, 'who first gave us our nose?'

His uncle had shot him a steely look and given an even sterner reply. 'That subject is strictly forbidden in this household,' he said with a shake of his head. 'These noses have been the making of our family and they have also been our downfall.'

He paused for a moment in order to wipe his dewy eyes with his lavender-coloured kerchief. He thought of Peregrine Trencom – Edward's father – and a tear rolled down his cheek. He thought of George Trencom – Edward's grandfather – and a second tear splashed to the floor.

'But what do you mean?' persisted Edward. 'You must tell me more.'

'God gave you your nose,' replied Harold, 'and so you must use it. But never ask questions about it. And never go in search of its origins. Never, never, never. From this time forth, Edward, your nose is a subject that is strictly forbidden in this household.'

And that – for more than thirty years – was that.