

# CHRISTMAS AT BLACKHEATH

extracted from

## HIS MAJESTY'S GRAND CONCEIT

by

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

John, 2<sup>nd</sup> Duke of Montagu (1690 to 1749)  
Master-General of His Majesty's Ordnance

*In which the Christmas season is celebrated, a brief excursion taken from any talk of the king's fireworks, and guests are both japed and challenged*

I bethought myself what a fine thing 'twould be if I had the participants in the king's grand endeavour around to my country house on Blackheath for a celebration of the Christmas season. I kept better stocks of food and drink there than in London, the house was fully staffed and more amenable to guests, and my wife, Mary, was down from Boughton House in Northamptonshire for the Christmas season. The house is not above ten miles from London, so a carriage ride of a couple of hours would not be too great an inconvenience. Blackheath is close to Woolwich, too, for those of the party who lived and worked there. I chose the eve of Christmas so that, once well wine'd and feasted, they could either take themselves home severally or stay the night and return to London for Christmas Day.

There were two good reasons for wishing to entertain them; well, three if you include my fondness for food and drink and good company. In the first case—and in all truth—I was sick and damned well tired of nothing but fireworks. My life had been kidnapped by the bloody project; me, who is the first to climb aboard a sinecure when such a bauble is dangled before me. Sure as mutton, the king knew the extent to which I would become embroiled, and he must have been laughing himself silly over it. All well and good to counsel Chas to delegate, but one can only follow that path if one hath no vested interest in the thing. Beyond royal displeasure, which I might possibly weather,

there were other inducements of a fiduciary and financial nature that kept me to the task.

My second motive for a festive break was that I wished to find some way of inducing harmony amongst the players because it was quite evidently wanting. We'd hardly make a success of this thing if we stood against each other like warring factions. 'Twas high time to lay signature to the Peace of Blackheath-la-Montagu.

And that third motivation of mine, my fondness for the kitchen and the cellar, would be happily satisfied in fine style. My cellar and kitchen in town were always excellent, but Blackheath was far superior. I had my staff lay in a fine goose, a brace of quail, fillets of plaice and ham for a soup of pease. Mincemeat and apples they had in plenty, and vegetables preserved from the autumn, so nothing was wanting there. I had them send a boy off for the freshest of Wallfleet oysters, for meat is nothing without such a sauce. And we had suet and flour and plums enough for a fine pudding, which we would grace with a brandy custard. Aye, we would welcome the baby Jesus into this vale of tears in fine style. We rarely decorate the place, as we are more often at Boughton over Christmas, but this year my forced presence in London warranted some festive flummery; holy and mistletoe along the picture frames and I know not what. By the time our guests were to arrive at four in the afternoon, the house looked very well and welcomed visitors to its front hall with an enticing aroma.

Christmas is a time for jollity, and there is nothing that amuses one's guests more than a harmless bit of fun. I was ever one for the handicraft joke, which goes beyond the wielding of words and uses devices to achieve its ends. There is an endless list of simple household items that can be pranked to make 'em work in surprising ways. Or not work. Mary looks askance at this practice, oft times chiding me for these excesses, but no harm is ever done through laughing and good humour. I recall the time fondly when I had my gardener at Boughton change the direction of one of the fountains so that, when a concealed *fontainier* was turned on, the guests were sprinkled! Merely sprinkled I say, though some reported the incident quite differently. But I have no truck with Quaker-faced sourpusses, so let them say what they might. A mere sprinkling, 'twas.

I had sent a carriage to Curzon Street for the French and Italian

craftsmen, and they were first to arrive. The second carriage from Woolwich arrived not long after with the two firework men, doffing their cloaks and gloves and bringing with them a cloud of cold and a whirl of snow. I had no sooner shut the front door, and seen all our foreigners into the drawing room, than Chas Frederick and Jas Morris arrived almost together, each with his lady wife upon his arm. I felt it important to have Morris along with his wife. I valued immensely his workmanship, devotion and solid British character. He was a fine foil to our French and Italian artisans, and I was sure I could count upon him to hold up his end at table. I have to say, I would have scarce recognised him in the street as I had only ever seen him in his working clothes. Here before me, wigged and powdered and dressed, was a transformation.

I had Lady Mary escort Lucy Frederick and Elizabeth Morris to the drawing room. Tom Desaguliers was last to arrive, alone as he always is; although smiling and wishing me well for the season, there was ever a distance betwixt us, try though I might to find a way through. Perhaps my trying was, itself, counter to my intention, and served only further to drive a wedge? A curious, austere and inscrutable young man I thought him then. But, had I known then what I later learned, I feel I would have seen him in a different light. I knew not that his wife was heavy with their third child, was unwell with the burden and would otherwise have attended him tonight.

I had not long taken delivery of a tierce of fine Amontillado from my merchant in Spain, so with glasses of it in our hands, we started off the festivities right well. I have this curious drinking glass, an identical match for the other eleven, save that it hath a small hole drilled in its rim, just below the edge. When one hands out the drink, one must be careful to offer the glass to the chosen guest so that he takes it with the hole closest to himself. Thus, when he tips the glass up to toast, the wine dribbles out and makes a God-awful mess.

‘Good will and cheer to the season!’ I cried and raised my glass.

‘*Salut*, good health, *santé*, cheers,’ rang out all round as the rest raised their glasses and drank.

Frederick was the first to fall prey to the evening’s japes. I had chosen him because I knew he would see me as the perpetrator and join in the merriment, and so it transpired. His first surprise at applying

more Amontillado to his chin and cravat than he did to his tongue caused laughter all around, including his own. Presently, the bell sounded, and we joined the ladies in the drawing room, but before we went through to the dining room to take our places at table, I called for a brief pause. I had decided upon a very perilous social experiment, but I do so love to take gambles, and I rarely lose a wager.

‘Ladies and gentlemen,’ I began, ‘before we sit to dine, I would like to tell you a story. It is a salutary tale for Christmas, for this is the time of goodwill to all men, be they of other countries or other creeds, or from far places, for we are all one in God’s eyes. When I served the first King George as governor in the West Indies, I knew that the worth and usefulness of the islands under my charge was founded upon the labour of slaves. Since then, I have come to the view that no man is free until every man is free. To that end, Lady Mary and I have seen to the education and welfare of several of our Negro brethren. Please welcome Ignatius Sancho, who hath lived here in Greenwich since the age of four years and is welcome in this house in freedom.’

Our protégé, Ignatius, stood forward from the door where I had asked him to wait and bowed deeply. He was a fine-looking fellow, some thirty or so years old, and of stalwart and loyal disposition. He was well turned out for presentation, wigged and with his best suit of clothes. I ever felt that Ignatius, and our other charge Francis, were embodiments of the sons Mary and I had lost in infancy.

‘Ignatius is a writer, a poet and a musician.<sup>i</sup> Before we sit for dinner, I would like you to hear him play one of his own compositions.’

I waved him over to the harpsichord and bade him sit, whilst our group formed a loose circle about him. I could see that they were all intrigued by this crossing of their bounds, some more than a little discomforted. But if they felt discomfort now, it was as yet nothing to what I had in store. Ignatius played us a menuet of some minutes, with such delicacy and refinement that I knew in my heart I would win the next round. Music crosses over and brings concord.

‘Though he is carved in ebony,’ I cried, ‘Ignatius is made in God’s image. Come with me, all of you, into the dining room.’

It is a beautiful thing to see a well-laid table, with the silverware just so, the napkins neatly folded, the glass and china sparkling, and all blessed with the gentle light and scent of well-placed beeswax candles.

A multitude of dishes had been laid on; there was the goose, the quail and the fish, the great tureen of ham and pease soup, and many other delicacies awaiting us. Red and white wine, Madeira, port, and I know not what else stood in waiting carafes.

As they gathered around the table, I paused them again.

'See,' I said, waving at the table, 'fourteen places are laid, yet we are but thirteen. Unlucky so. Tonight, the composer and poet Ignatius Sancho will dine with us to bring our number to fourteen.' Lady Mary smiled widely, privy to this little subterfuge, but her eyes moved quickly about the company.

Silence, 'tis said, speaks with a voice of thunder. All those around that table were stuck upon the butterfly pins of their society, their station and their place. After my announcement, 'twas as if some person had reached up and stayed the hand o' the clockwork of the world. Even the candles appeared to hold their waver. Not a mere performing curiosity to incur light applause before dinner; a living, breathing man with mind and appetite. One amongst us. Thus, we stood.

Warming my heart, and rewarding all my expectations, Jas Morris spoke first.

'Come, Mr Sancho, sit between Elizabeth and me. We would know as much as you can tell us of your life.'

Guests breathed out, chatter broke forth, chairs were pulled out, and much seating and getting comfortable occupied the moments before I called again for silence. We bowed our heads and held hands around.

'Give us grateful hearts, oh Heavenly Father, for all thy mercies, and make us mindful of the needs of others not so privileged as to sit with us at this table. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.'

'Amen.'

Now, with a great hurdle jumped, and a bold experiment validated, 'twas time for more lightness and cheer. I made a wager with myself that Frederick would not again be the victim of another jape, but as we were now fourteen around the table, the odds were long. The handicraft joke I had planned needed a thick soup so the victim could not see the bottom of the bowl, and I had arranged it so the tureen was nearest my place. I had a trick up my sleeve...

'Here,' I cried, 'who's for a bowl of soup?' 'Tis a thick broth of pease

and ham.' I seized bowls, filled them with the ladle, and passed them along. They picked up their spoons...

'*Mon dieu!*' came a cry along the table as de Cleremont discovered the frog at the bottom of his bowl. Oh, how perfect it was that one of the Frenchmen should have taken the tricked bowl, but thankfully not Servandoni for I was sure he would take it ill.

'Fear not,' I laughed, 'for 'tis but made of green sealing wax.'

The gentlemen laughed loudest—even de Cleremont—for they were already primed, and the ladies followed when they saw that it was but a jest. The laugh of the victim renders parole for the rest to join.

'Fie, Charles,' said my wife in mock earnest, 'your japes are beyond the pale. I always tell you this: you will drive more away than you will ever endear.'

The laughter of all was an antidote to her words, and this signalled the opening of conversations around the table whilst people helped themselves from the plenitude of dishes and tipped much drink down their throats. I caught snatches of conversation: '...named me Sancho after the character in Cervantes...', '*...ici il pleut continuellement...*', '...three times what it was worth...', '*...magari trovarli in Italia...*', '...only freed once Lady Montagu had...'; '...ebony? Don't see much of that...' and so on. All signs that things were running well, oiled by drink and victuals. And not a blessed word about fireworks.

Next came my jape with the fish. Before we entered the dining room, I had had my people bring in one salver with a cover upon it. This I passed to Andrea Soldi, recommending a rare treasure of the sea to him. Alas, when the cover was lifted and the dish revealed, he had but the skeleton of the fish, the bare bones of his meal!

'Usually,' I cried to the table at large, 'I make no bones about the food, but today I make no fish about it!'

More and more, the party was attuned to laughter, only Tom Desaguliers being reluctant to drag forth a smile, though he was well enough content to be with us. So, the meal went its way with fine food, fine wine and fine company.

Presently, the dishes were taken off, a fresh table cloth brought out, and then the meal concluded with the triumphal entry of the pudding and sundry sweetmeats and fruits. More wines were brought out, glasses replenished and all went swimmingly well. An excellent even-

ing was had, and all guests chose to wend their way home, late though the hour had become. There were no more Christmas Eve japes after the fish. Lady Mary was right; sufficient unto the day... No one was discommoded, no hurt was given nor received, and each laughed with the other.

But I think the greatest jape I pulled off that Christmas Eve was to have such gentry, denizens of the Royal Court and London society, sit down to dinner with a black man.

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<sup>1</sup> Lord and Lady Montagu had educated black slaves, Francis Williams and Ignatius Sancho. Montagu chanced on Sancho while he was still in the thrall of his "owners" in Woolwich and took a fancy to him. He became a resident at the house in Blackheath some time in 1749. His compositions, poetry and letters are extant.