

## *Steamed Punks*

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The crash startled Edwards, making him look up from his desk. Two rough-looking men advanced towards him, dripping self-assurance like damp in the four-penny doss house they inevitably sprang from. Behind them, a pedestal rocked to and fro; an exquisite Roman vase smashed into a thousand pieces at its foot.

He sighed. The museum cataloguing would have to wait. With arthritic fingers, he laid down his fountain pen, perfectly horizontally, above the ledger.

The shorter of the two toughs smirked. ‘Oopsy. Shame about that. Terrible accident. It would be a pity if there was another.’

‘Hurr, hurr,’ chimed in the taller.

*So, extortion’s the game. Never a dull moment.* ‘No matter, it was only a cheap replica,’ said the wizened historian.

Doris, his octogenarian wife, who had been out-front in the ticket office, shuffled in behind the rogues. She braced herself on a walking stick. Her legs weren’t what they used to be.

‘Robert, these two haven’t paid. Oh, and look what they did. Should I...’ Her question was cut short as Edwards gave an almost imperceptible shake of his head. Looking disappointed, Doris re-sheathed the sword-cane which she had begun to draw.

‘Gentlemen, I suggest you leave now, whilst you still have the opportunity,’ Edwards spoke calmly, simultaneously sliding open his desk drawer. He took out a brace of flintlock pistols, which he laid, like cutlery at a place setting, under the pen and to either side of the leather-bound book.

The big bruiser snorted and pulled out a huge butcher’s knife from beneath his coat, brandishing it at Doris. Looking on in amusement, Shorty sneered, ‘Look, old fella, you’re out of your depth. You don’t want her cut up now, do ya? So, make quick with them val-u-bles.’

Lightning fast, Edwards seized the pistols in front of him and, still sitting, arms outstretched, fired off the single shot in each.

Astonishment on Lofty and Shorty’s faces, the lead balls exploded into the centre of their foreheads, and, as one, they keeled over backward. Edwards replaced the still-smoking guns back in the drawer, picked up his pen and continued with his work.

Doris shook her head sadly, ‘Silly boys, shouldn’t bring a knife to a gun-fight. I’ll get this mess cleared up.’ Later, she would spread the story at her sewing circle and there would be a period of calm before anyone else chanced their arm.

No one messes with the Margate Literary and Scientific Institution.