

## Boys' Night Out

It was the fourth Thursday in November and the “boys” were meeting in the Rose and Crown. They referred to these monthly meetings as “Boys' Night Out”; but old boys they were, for only one of them was younger than 60. That was Joe who had taken early retirement in his 50s and had not long moved into the village after working in the City.

Also among the “boys” was Maud, a formidable spinster of an indeterminate age whose mission in life was to keep an eye on the village and make sure that no vicar in her parish should depart from the 1662 Prayer Book. She was accorded the status of “honorary boy” and regarded young Joe, a former city dweller, as rather effete, though she never said this as she had no wish to upset the other boys.

They were just waiting for the last of their number to arrive. In came Brian, soaking wet, and glad to see the first round had been bought and his pint was waiting for him.

“Phew,” he exclaimed as he hung up his coat, “what an evening! It's raining cats and dogs out there.”

“Cats and dogs,” said Jack. “That's an odd expression when you think about it. I wonder where it comes from.”

“I read somewhere,” said Dave, “that it is to do with the old Saxon god Woden, the one the Vikings called Odin. He was thought to ride the storms with his dogs and wolves.”

“Dogs and *wolves*?” said Colin, “What about the cats, then?”

“Well,” said Tom, “sailors used to regard black cats as harbingers of storms and cats were the familiar of witches. They rode the storms with their cats.”

“Did they?” murmured Maud, sipping her stout. “But I don't see what witches' black cats have to do with old Saxon gods.”

“Saxon gods and medieval witches,” said John. “I don't think so. The phrase is not found earlier than the mid 17<sup>th</sup> century. If I remember rightly, it is first attested in Henry Vaughan's collection of poems called 'Olor Iscanus'.”

“Olor Iscanus!” exclaimed Brian. “What's that when it's at home?”

“That,” said John patiently, “is Latin for 'Swan of Usk' – that's a river in south Wales. Henry Vaughan came from that part of the world.”

“Of course,” said Joe, “it's nothing to do with ancient gods and witches. It's simple really. People used to have thatched roofs; and thatch is only straw after all. In storms dogs and cats would shelter in the straw; but if the storm was heavy it would wash them out – so it rained cats and dogs.”

The other “boys” greeted this with laughter.

Poor Joe was a bit put out. “What's so funny?” he asked.

“Only a city dweller could believe a story like that,” said Maud.

“Why?” asked Joe.

“Because,” answered Harry, “you don't know much about thatch. A properly thatched roof is naturally *water resistant* and it slants, in case you hadn't noticed, so that water runs off.”

“So,” said Tom, laughing away, “the cats and dogs would have to be lying on the outside of the roof to be washed off. What cat is going to be outside in the rain?”

“And,” spluttered Colin amid his laughter, “have you ever seen a dog on a house roof? How's it going to get up there?”

“Oh,” said Joe. “That's what I was told by my Mum when I was a boy. I always believed it; but I now see it's daft. I suppose it's an urban myth of town dwellers.”

"Don't worry," said Brian, trying to cheer him up. "It's no worse than the story my old daddy used to say of how the city streets would flood in great storms, washing drowned cats and dogs along with it."

That brought on more laughter.

"Yes," added Brian, "a rural myth no better than Joe's urban myth."

"Just myths," said Maud, "just like those other theories."

"Maud's right," said Jack, sipping his ale, "they're all myths. Saxon gods and witches, I ask you!"

"Yes," added Colin, "myths. The original phrase was 'raining catadupes.'"

"Catadupes?" queried several voices.

"Catadupe," replied Colin, "is an old word for 'waterfall' or 'cataract'. It's raining cataracts."

"Umph," said Jack, "not exactly a well-known word is it? Ever heard of it, Professor?"

'Professor' was the nickname the group gave John. He was a retired academic who had moved into the village many years ago. He had soon become accepted among the villagers; many said, somewhat unfairly, it was because of his eccentricities. But it was mainly that John liked the countryside and village life, but he still kept some ties with academia.

"Yes," said John, "Catadupe, or Catadūpa in Latin, was the name of the first cataract on the Nile near Aswan."

"Well, I'll be damned," interrupted Harry with a laugh.

There were blank looks from some of the other boys.

"Thank you," said John. "Yes, the Nile is now dammed at Aswan. The old cataract is no longer there."

There were one or two laughs amid the groans from the others as the penny dropped.

"To continue," said John, "catadupe was occasionally used in English simply to mean a cataract or waterfall. But if the original phrase, coined by somebody, had been 'raining catadupes', isn't it more likely to have been changed simply to 'raining cataracts'?"

There were various odd murmurs among the boys.

"I seem to remember reading somewhere," said Brian, "that it was originally 'catadox' which is Greek or something for 'beyond belief'; 'raining catadox' - raining beyond belief."

"It is Greek," said John, "and it's actually 'kata doxan'. But saying it means 'beyond belief' is stretching things a bit, I think. In my opinion it would more likely mean 'according to expectation.' I don't think 'raining according to expectation' is what we mean by 'raining cats and dogs.'"

They all laughed again.

"In any case," added Maud, "why a bit of Greek? What's wrong with good English? 'Kata doxan' is even sillier than 'catadupes'."

"I agree," said John.

"All right," said Harry. "I don't suppose the Professor has a theory for this."

"As a matter of fact, I have," answered John. "More than just a theory, indeed. But first let's fill up our glasses again."

"A good idea," said Maud. "Someone's talking sense at last."

After they had all recharged their glasses, John began.

"As it so happens," he said, "I recently came across an old manuscript in the archives of a village church in Worcestershire. It was written sometime in the 15<sup>th</sup> century and is in Latin, of course. Among other things, it tells how at that time there was an anchorite - that's a sort of hermit - called Reynfred who lived in a cell attached to the Parish Church."

“Reynfred?” queried Jack. “What sort of name is that?”

“Medieval,” answered John, “though I believe it is still occasionally used. But to go back to my story. Whenever it was windy and raining, Reynfred would exclaim 'Beware: the cats of Hell are abroad!' But if lightening flashed and it thundered, he'd say 'All will be well. Michael's let loose the hounds of Heaven to drive the cats back to Hell.'”

“Michael?” asked Joe. “Who's he?”

“The archangel,” sighed Maud. “Don't you know your Bible?”

Joe thought it wise not to say “No” to Maud and just murmured “Oh.”

“Hounds of Heaven?” mused Colin. “Is that where Francis Thompson got the idea of the Hound of Heaven from?”

“I wouldn't think so,” said John. “Reynfred's hounds are angelic powers of some sort, but the Hound of Heaven in Thompson's poem is Christ Himself.”

“Besides,” said Maud. “It's not relevant to John's story. Thompson's poem came five centuries later. Go on, John.”

“Thank you, Maud,” said John. “To continue: Reynfred's cries of 'Beware: the cats of Hell are abroad!' and 'Michael's let loose the hounds of Heaven' became proverbial among the people of the neighborhood. Whenever there was a thunder storm they would say 'Ah, it's Reynfred's cats and dogs again', though whether in belief of Reynfred or in mockery is not clear. In time, as Reynfred faded from folk memory, the saying became 'It's raining cats and dogs again'. This saying spread beyond the village and its neighborhood, becoming more widespread so that by the early 17<sup>th</sup> century Henry Vaughan was familiar with it, though I don't suppose he knew its origin. It had reached such currency that he could use it in his poems of 1647 - and, of course, we still use it today.”

The boys just looked at one another till Jack broke the silence.

“Did you *really* find that manuscript?” he asked. “Or are you pulling our legs again?”

John said nothing, but merely smiled as he sipped his ale.