

Boys' Night Out

One Thursday evening in November the “boys” were meeting in the Rose and Crown. They referred to these weekly 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 late 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 had long been welcomed as an “honorary guest.”

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 rode the storms with his dogs and wolves.”

“Wolves,” said Colin, “are not cats. Where do *they* come from?”

“Well,” said Tom, “cats were the familiars of witches, weren't they? They rode the storms with their cats.”

“Really?” murmured Maud, sipping her stout. “I don't see what witches' cats have to do with Woden.”

“Saxon gods and medieval witches,” said John, “I don't think so. The phrase is not found earlier than the mid 17th century.”

“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 that's 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 *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 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 Saxon gods and witches' familiars.”

“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'. Ask the Professor.”

'The Professor' was the nickname the group gave John, a retired academic who had moved into the village many years ago. He had soon become accepted among the villagers, but 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” and a scowl from Maud.

“Thank you,” said John. “Yes, the Nile is now dammed at Aswan and the old cataract's 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 had been 'raining catadupes', isn't it more likely to have been changed simply to 'raining cataracts'?”

“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.”

“If,” said John, “you mean Greek '*katà dóxan*', 'beyond belief' is a bit far fetched; it means rather '*according to expectation*' - not quite what we mean by 'raining cats and dogs!'”

They all laughed again.

“In any case,” added Maud, “why Greek? What's wrong with good plain English? '*Katadoxan*' is even sillier than 'catadupes'.”

“I agree,” said John.

“All right,” said Harry. “I suppose you have a theory for this, Professor?”

“As a matter of fact, I have,” answered John. “More than just a theory. 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 in Latin sometime in the 15th century. 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 lightning flashed and it thundered, he'd say 'All will be well. Michael's let

loose the hounds of Heaven; the cats will be driven 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.”

“To continue,” said John. “Reynfred's cries about the cats of Hell and hounds of Heaven became proverbial among the people of the neighbourhood. Whenever there was a thunder storm they would say 'Ah, it's Reynfred's cats and dogs again.' As the saying spread and Reynfred faded from folk memory, it became 'It's raining cats and dogs again'. This saying became more and more widespread till by the 17th century it had reached such currency that the Breconshire poet, Henry Vaughan, could use it in his poems of 1647 – and, of course, we still use it today.”

The “boys” looked at one another and some wondered if John really had found that manuscript or was just spinning them a yarn. What, dear listeners, do you think?