

# *Stories from the Porters' Lodge*

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*Stories from the porters' lodge, being the reminiscences and researches of Obadiah Beare, Porter at St Michael's, or "The College Next Door" as the scurrilous denizens of St. Bride's refer to it.*

*Cambridge 1909*

*Prologue:*

I wish to make it plain that I am neither a spoon-fed, milksop, dilettante nobleman nor a cauliflower eared, knock-kneed possessor of muscles but no brain cells. Just because a man works in a bakery doesn't make him a Bakewell Tart and just because a man works in a Cambridge college he doesn't have to emulate his so called betters. I maintain my employ here because I gave my word to Dr. Owens that I would serve him, after he saved me from a gang of cutthroat schoolgirls down by Peterhouse. I am a man of honour and stand by my promise. (And the pay is exceptionally good. As my Poll says, "finicky morals butter no parsnips.")

If you are liable to be offended at the contents of this memoir, then bugger off now. This isn't Cambridge as depicted in the writings of some coddled and addle-pated lady of leisure who never sets her silk-girded foot off the pavement in case she steps in a pile of horse muck. This is the *real* Cambridge, one dear old Queen Alexandra would have kittens if she knew about, although I daresay King Edward wouldn't bat an eyelid.

As long as there have been horses on the streets of Cambridge, and flourishing roses to bear witness to the fact, there have been gentlemen who ploughed their own furrows, heedless of the demands of society or the constraints of the law. Whether the present occupants of Cambridge colleges or their metaphorical forebears, men have always broken the Articles, stretched the law to its breaking point and generally given the fico to the world. That's the way of things and has been since Noah sailed up the Thames, letting the elephants off at Wapping to graze.

I digress. As my Poll says, "Stick to the point, Obadiah, you silly sod."

Will what I write be true? Every word. Will it be libellous? Most likely. Will it be fearless? To the hilt. Down from Crecy, through Agincourt and Waterloo, whenever there's been a call to arms, the Beares have responded. If there's a banner of truth and courage being flown, there'll always be a Beare behind.

*A brief history of St. Michael's and its role in keeping Britain great*

Nothing changes under the sun. People say that these are days of particular wickedness and vice and that it wasn't like that when they were young. As usual, people talk a load of old cobbles. I've seen the old newspapers they have in the college library, and those so called "good old days" weren't one long picnic in the sun with nobody doing anything worse than swatting the head of a daisy with their snickersnee. Rape, murder, robbery, it was all going on back when King Edward was just a twinkle in his old dad's eye.

There has been a college on this site since the times of Good Queen Bess and if I say that its visitors are said to have included Will Shakespeare and Kit Marlowe you'll have a pretty good idea what used to go on. All boys dressed as girls and "once more into the breach". My Poll says, "As long as there's been men there's been mollies and renters. Probably back to when old Julius Caesar came along and his lot brought the Roman empire here, they'll have been lifting their togas and jiggling their styluses." Well educated, my Poll.

Back in the days of doublets and hose, a secret society of men met at St. Michael's; they were at the behest of Elizabeth, maintaining her honour against the foreigners and any others who sought to breach our wooden walls. They did a roaring trade rooting out spies and tipping the buggers into the sewers in the old town.

Imagine the scene. Old Willie Shakespeare is standing at the college bar, weeping into his pint of sack, bewailing the fact that his lovely boy's being less than forthcoming with the old legover, when there's the sound of a tucket, and Her Majesty appears, shaking her wig and in all of a tizzy because some swine's selling all her secrets to Jonny Spaniard. Senor Jose Maria Jimenez, he's called, dealer in Jerez wine and state papers, said to be the most dangerous man this side of the channel. He'd given Queen Bess's men the slip, and they couldn't implicate the swine, not for all the frills on her Majesty's corset.

Stopping only to wipe the froth off his beard with a convenient pair of hose, Will leaps up and says, "Bess, I'm your man."

"Shakeshaft, you silly sod," quoth she (probably sounding remarkably like my Poll when she's acting posh), "what can a pen wielder do when my fine soldiers have failed to apprehend the scallywag? I was hoping one of the gentleman of the college would be here to oblige."

"Sorry, old gal, they've all gone to the bareknuckle event. Like to see a bit of flesh get pounded. There's just me here, being Jacques-all-alone with my pint, although..." at which point he makes a flourish with his cloak and sends sack flying everywhere, "I may be a poor thing but I am thine own to command."

Bess sighs and shakes her pearls. "All right, old cock. Sort the blighter out and I'll hire your company for a play. Fat knights getting into scrapes or some such rot."

Well, our Will finishes his drink and realises he's in a bit of a hole. He's told Her Majesty he'll ferret the traitor into the light and if he don't he'll be losing his head. Literally. At which point fate takes a hand, *deus ex machina* like, as my Poll would say. Kit Marlowe himself appears, large as life, and twice as lewd.

Kit Marlowe—there was a bloke. If he turned up on the doorstep today he'd feel right at home with the present day members of the college, although maybe St. Bride's would be more his sort of place given his penchant for shift lifting and rapier thrusting.

"I heard you promise the old gal you'd do the business," he says, twirling his codpiece. "Want a hand?"

Now, old Will had a soft spot for Kit, so he replies, "Abso-blooming-lutely old cock. Got a trail for us to follow?"

"Oh yes," says himself with a sly grin. (I know it was a sly grin because old Will wrote all this up and left it in the college vaults.) "Let's hie us to London and the Mermaid Tavern. And bring your sword. This is one occasion when your quill won't be mightier than your steel."

So him and Kit set up this Jimenez good and proper. Lure him to an upper room in a tavern back end of beyond (well, back end of Shadwell, but that's the same thing), and get him embroiled with a young actor laddie who'd whip off his doublet and show his singlet for tuppence. No sooner has the

foreign gent concerned started fiddling with his codpiece, when an artist springs out from behind the arras and captures the whole scene on canvas. Threatens to sell it to that scandalous pamphlet “Newes of ye Worlde” unless the man hies himself home. England one Spain nil, I make that. That tradition of service has continued.

For all that some of the undergraduates and fellows at St. Michael’s have got the morals of alley cats, and smell like them sometimes, they’re true servants of the Empire, and I serve them as such, to the best of my abilities and with the aspiration to be the top of my portering profession. A Beare may be first, a Beare may be second, but there’ll never be a Beare bottom!

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My account now comes within the realms of living memory, at least that of the college’s tortoise, Gazunder, who has remained loyal to St. Michael’s since he was barely out of his eggshell and who still sees fit to take a leaf from Owens’s hand and nips over to St. Bride’s to pee in Dr. Peters’s slippers. Gazunder was brought home from the Med by Midshipman Fotheringay-Fanshawe (known to everyone as Midshipman Easy and you can guess why) and is a great favourite of all the students. Alas, one day he was attacked by a bunch of marauding snails but had no clear recollection of the incident as “it all happened so fast”.

Ah, sailors. A girl in every port and port in every girl. Or in the case of some gentlemen, a boy in every hold and a hold on every boy. We’ve had plenty of them in this college, men who went off to man the wooden walls of England. From Admirals of the Blue who preferred foremast jacks to Spice Island Jills, to captains who sailed under a letter of marque and made their fortunes with little short of piracy. Still, desperate times call for desperate measures – you can see the coast of France from Dover and that’s as much of Jonny Crapaud as we want to see!

I can tell you a story from those days that’s never been committed to paper. It concerns an illustrious ancestor of mine, Prevarication Beare, who was steward to Captain Roderick Hampton, who served at several of Nelson’s less well known naval encounters but missed Trafalgar as he’d gone home for a refit on his foremast and a respray on his wooden leg. (Hampton lost his limb when his dining table was shattered by a carronade off Gibraltar but, as he told old Prevarication, he saved his meat and two vegetables.)

They were sailing up to the Baltic, ice in the rigging and so blistering cold it was freezing the (cannon)balls off the brass monkey where they were stored. (My Poll taught me the origin of that saying – she’s so clever I call her Polly Math. She whacks me when I do.) They’d heaved to, or whatever they do when they park up their boat for the night, and had sent a cutter ashore to “liberate” some provisions when they spotted a French Corvette – La Parra – sitting on the quay of a little port. Young Hampton was never one to let opportunity go a-begging, so they mustered up a cutting out expedition as quick as you can say “St. Bride’s is a den of buffoons”.

All went ticketiboo – our jolly jacks got aboard, bundled the Froggies into the hold, cut the cable and set out to sea – when they discovered they had an important personage aboard, in the guise of one of Napoleon’s finest, Le Compte de Trinh-Duc. He was in his cabin and in flagrante delicto with a French lieutenant for whom women weren’t plat du jour! Cost old Nappy a pretty penny in gold to get the old sod back and my distinguished ancestor, as the bloke who discovered the Comte with his backside bare, copped a share of it.

In honour of his service, the Captain Roderick gave Prevarication a small house in a new model village he was creating and – in a moment of high emotion – he named the village after the

partnership which had so baffled the frogs. It still raises a tear in my eye when I think of those cold Baltic patrols and the sweet sight of Beare Hampton.

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It is now behoven upon me to describe the recent trial of Horace Maypole, ex-porter of this establishment, who attempted to defect along the road to the old enemy.

I'm not talking about the Old Bailey, but a kangaroo (more like cockatoo!) court here in the senior common room. They assembled twelve good men and true and put him in the dock. Now, when I say dock, I mean an upside down table they made him stand in, while they sat on two rows of benches like a load of silly beggars. And as for twelve good men and true...I told my Poll that the only words that counted for the St. Michael's lot were "twelve" and "and".

They charged Horace with being a traitor, having an offensive face, and disgracing the college. Which is coming it a bit, seeing as most of the fellows here would be a disgrace to a drunken party of costermongers flashing on the front at Brighton. Owens tarted himself up in the role of the judge, of course. He allowed himself to wear a robe—his game, so he got the best part in it. Looked more like he was wearing a pair of my old nan's velvet curtains.

I wasn't officially allowed to listen to or watch the proceedings, but it's surprising how much dirt accumulates by doors and how long it can take you to clear it, down on your knees with your eyes and ears at keyhole level. Unfortunately I missed some key bits both when one of the cleaners came along and when my knees started to play up. I guess they'd have hung, drawn and quartered Horace if they'd got the chance—or made him perform on the stage at the Glasgow Palace Empire for a week, which would be almost as bad. But all they could do was sling him out on his ear, and that not even literally, as the mob from St. Bride's were watching, ready to act. All our lads could do was shoo him off, brandishing their slide rules and umbrellas or whatever else they had to hand.

I daresay he'll be snitching about everything to those scurrilous pansies at St. Bride's, as I write, and they're welcome to him.

Now, please understand that I'm not blind to the faults at St. Michael's. The long vacation can bring out the worst in our "gentlemen" (I use that word ironically). You can see them disporting themselves in the Fellows' Garden with nothing but a pince-nez or a copy of some academic journal to hide their embarrassment. Not that they ever seem embarrassed, the narcissistic lot of brazen hedonists. My Poll visited the college one day to return some embroidered covers she'd been mending, came round the gazebo a bit sharp and nearly had her eye put out. She had to go back three times just to make sure that she really had seen what she thought she had. Very meticulous, my Poll.

Summer also means cricket. You can imagine that the denizens of St. Michael's get all excited at the thoughts of donning their flannels and college ties (usually in place of a belt, which is healthier than what they usually use them for) and flouncing around the field trying to look attractive.

You can imagine that they form a successful team and winning has become a habit. I'd wouldn't say winning at any cost: they might be totally unprincipled in their university dealings but when it comes to cricket they play scrupulously fair. No itching powder in the opposition's boxes or pins in their pads. Never an LBW appeal unless it's plumb in line and no trying to hit them in the wedding tackle. Luckily Owens doesn't play the game, not since he was discovered shouting for a catch behind when the ball had clearly only come off the batsman's pad. The cad.

You might think Michaelmas term and the first indications of winter would bring a respite from the acres of bare flesh that can be encountered here when you're least expecting it, given the risk of

frostbite to delicate areas or a badly aimed snowball catching you on the parson's nose. No such luck. The fires in the Junior Common Room are so roaring that the students whip their trolleys off at the slightest provocation—more risk of singeing the Sunday parsnips and sprouts rather than freezing them off. My Poll says it brings a whole new meaning to braising a snorker.

Come Christmas it's a time of festivity up at St. Michael's, especially as the undergraduates have gone home by then. The fellows get ready to light the Yule log, bring in the goose, deck the college with holly and ivy and get ready to play snapdragon. The provisions for high table would make your eyes jump out, turn circles and go back in again. Hams the size of the rhinoceros in the Zoo, turkeys like ostriches, and a hailstorm of sprouts. Wine flowing like the Cam, too – and some of it probably just as nasty to drink.

Come New Year, they ring in the new, ring out the old, wring out the dirty linen and bring in the cat. Once they were so drunk they brought in a stuffed sloth instead. Poll said it was quite at home among the old buffers.

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One of the greatest moments in the history of St. Michael's came some ten years back when a certain, greatly missed lady whom we all revered and served, graced us with her presence at luncheon and ended up staying until very nearly midnight. Was she amused? I should say so. Maybe it was the sight of all those "gentlemen" (I use the term loosely, as loose as their britches), done up like dogs' dinners. Owens was even sporting a kilt, sgian-dubh and all! I reckon he was trying to impress the old girl, Her Majesty having had such a thing for John Brown. It certainly brought a flush to the royal cheek, to see him swirl along.

Afraid for Her Majesty's dignity if the breeze got up, qhoth I, "Dr. Owens, is anything worn below your kilt?"

To which he replied, "No, Beare, it's all in working order." Luckily for us Wednesday proved calm, and all sails hung down over the mainmast.

College porters get to hear many a thing they sometimes wish they hadn't. Not that I hold with Poll's opinion that those who listen at keyholes only hear ill of themselves. For a start, I don't stoop so low as to listen at doors (my dodgy back wouldn't let me, even if my conscience would!) But sometimes I find myself having to deal with the gripper rods for the carpet and naturally will be on my knees by the door frame.

And I have never overheard ill of myself, just things which intrigue me. You can imagine that cries along the lines of, "If you must put that there, please could you warm it first," are fairly common on college premises and nary an eyebrow gets raised at them. But how is a man to sleep without his mind boiling over at the meaning of, "I'll only do that if you put the porcupine down and butter both the crumpets"?

Anyway, Poll has said to me many a time that my big ears would get me into trouble one day. Of course, she was right, as I found out yesterday. I was passing Owens's room, when I heard Poll – my Poll! – saying, in a breathless voice, "Owens, take off my shawl."

Can you blame me for breaking my rule, stopping and listening some more? Can you blame me for being horrified when I then heard her say, "Owens, take off my dress"?

I was quite winded, rooted to the spot and unable to determine a suitable course of action when I heard, "Owens, take off my corset."

That propelled me into battle. I was about to burst through the door and challenge the cad to a duel for seducing my fine gal, when Poll herself came storming out. Face red, eyes blazing, a pile of garments in her arms, *fully dressed*, and saying over her shoulder, "And if I catch you wearing my clothes again, Dr. Owens, there'll be hell to pay and no pitch hot!"

As I hid behind the door, in case I should be unjustly accused of snooping, my heart soared. What a woman...

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St. Michael's is a great seat of learning. At present they're working on what they call powered flight. I don't approve. I said to Poll, "If God had intended us to fly He'd have given us wings."

To which she replied, "If God had intended you to be clever He'd have given you a brain. Seeing as He hasn't we must assume it's the Divine wisdom for you to be a numbskull."

Poll loves the notion of airships. The fellows have promised to give her a guided tour of one if it ever gets built. Given half a chance she'd be up there flying on it, but she turns a bit peculiar with heights. She was dizzy when we scaled the bell tower at St. Michael's and gets seasick on a punt up the Cam. I suppose we must count our blessings, though. If the fellows are *up there* they can't be *down here* getting under my feet and causing trouble. They've tried to launch something like an airship before, of course. And a right mess it turned out. Sabotage, they said, probably originating in St. Bride's. The contraption wouldn't get off the ground, no matter how much they stoked up the engine or wound the elastic or whatever it is they do to these things.

My theory? In a word, Owens. They will let him tinker about (in fact he tinkers with a sight too many things in a sight too many places). I suspect he tinkered a bit too far and caused an unresolved dislocation of turbine resonance leading to magnetospheric turbulence and lack of escape inertia. Or, in layman's terms, he pushed the button that says, "Caution. Do not push this button." Either way the airship sat on the ground like a big pair of deflated knickers tied to a washing basket and going nowhere. Eventually they sorted it. Not through Owens's calculations, reams of paper though they took up. Not through any of the fellows' efforts with screwdriver and spanner.

What's the solution when all else fails?

Poll.

Poll took a monkey wrench and belted the engine one. Then it was up and away, with all the old sods tossed up in the proverbial blanket heading off into the ether. Rule Britannia!

It isn't the first time she's come to the college's aid in an emergency. Last Candlemas, some villain gained access to the premises and raided some of the private correspondence and papers kept in the library.

The first names which sprang to everyone's mind, as they flapped about in their dressing gowns, looking at the mess the villain had left, were Jonty Stewart and Orlando Coppersmith, from *next door*. They're just the sort of arse-pinching, muck raking, lickspittle piles of horse dung who hate St. Michael's so much they'd do anything to see it ruined. And that Peters woman probably put them up to it. Sheridan she calls herself now. Hm.

Anyway, we had visions of them selling the material to the News of the World or some other equally disreputable rag, good for nothing but to wrap your pie and chips in. If even one tenth of those stories that circulate about St. Michael's were revealed not only would it fill a whole edition, it would have middle England choking on its kippers. Even the naughtiest vicar, one who secretly burns with

desire for his curate and holds a passion for the bishop, would be shocked at what has been held *here* in its day.

But my Poll wouldn't entertain that notion. Some of the most scurrilous material—just the sort of stuff Jonty Stewart would have gleefully stuck down his corset and escaped with—was left behind. As was the college's silver and a quantity of cash, so ordinary thieves were out of the question, too. "Beats me, old girl," I said to her, as we cleared up the mess and helped Dr. Owens get the papers back into order. "If you eliminate both a common burglar and old lardy-pants then what have you left?"

Poll looked at me, looked at Owens, rolled her eyes in that way she has that makes me think of goose-feather beds and her in them, and said, "Just as well the burglars weren't looking for brains because they'd never have found any in your head, would they?"

I looked at Poll, looked at Owens—he smirked in that way he has that makes me think of him in a goose feather bed and doing who knows what and me being at least five hundred yards away at the time—and said, "I may not be the shiniest knob on the brass bedstead, but what, prithee, is it I am not aware of?"

"Obadiah, old fruit," Poll replied, addressing me as though I were only seven and a half and couldn't get to grips with my four times table, "what exactly is missing? Is it Dr. Flintoff's scientific patents? Is it Dr. Peter's private diaries that Dr. Owens purloined last year? Is it anything of importance or is it the blithering sea serpent stuff?"

"Sea serpent? Dr. Hartley's thesis?" I shuddered in recollection. Two whole weeks we'd had him going on about nothing else but the thing he'd seen off Dungeness, how it was the great primeval monster from the deep, a living dinosaur or some such. In the end, we had him dispatched off to Lyme Regis, ostensibly to look for fossils but really in the hope that he'd be buried under a landslip. "Who'd want to steal that load of old twaddle? Someone running short of toilet paper, I suppose." "He has a rival." Owens neatened a pile of papers and filed them away again. He has a deft hand, his lordship. Doesn't bear to think what he does with it. "Chap called Dawson. Wants to usurp his discovery and get him elected to the Royal Society."

"He wouldn't get voted to the Royal Cambridge Music Hall with that load of old cr...crud. Plagiaristic, speculative nonsense." I had a sudden pang of remorse. They may be a load of twerps, but the members of the college are *my* twerps and nobody's allowed to vex them. Except me. "What will he do when he discovers his loss?"

"Go and steal it back again, you old custard head. Just the sort of jape he'd want to get involved with. Look—Dr. Owens is gasping at the thought of the fun."

I didn't look. You never know what Owens is gasping with. "Poll," I said, weakly, "put the kettle on, will you, my dear? It's all been too much."

"Of course, old cock." She said, smiling. "And I'll find a bit of Dundee cake. Men need sustenance at times like this." At which she winked...and I hoped that sustenance would keep me going through to bedtime.

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*I have been requested to convey Obadiah Beare's sincere apologies that he is unable to fulfil his obligation to complete this manuscript, but he's "having a touch of the old trouble", as he puts it. Touch of the old trouble my Aunt Fanny! The silly old sod was performing his porter's role at St.*

*Michael's annual founder's dinner last night (of which more anon) and came home in what he would describe as a tired and emotional state. Tired and emotional, my aspidistra...*

*"Poll, old girl," quoth he, as he headed for the po for the umpteenth time, "I fear I have drunk my half glass of wine from a vessel which was dirty."*

*Dirty glass my astrakhan collar! Half a gallon of wine and all the rest to chase it down with. Serves him right if he's poleaxed on the bed. And woe betide him if he makes a mess.*

*What a night! I was helping the college staff to prepare the buffet, wrapping pigs in their blankets, stuffing the chicken parcels and keeping Owens's hands off the sausages. I saw the dray arrive with the wine and beer and wondered if we were entertaining the entire battalion of guards.*

*"Well, Poll, when we celebrate, we do it in style!" says Owens, as he cracked open the champagne.*

*"Will you take a glass with me and wet the evening's head?"*

*I couldn't refuse, could I? Nor the second or third. I'm not sure who was more pickled, me or the onions! Being a true gentleman, he paid for me to take a cab home. I wish he'd paid for Beare to go and stay somewhere and not come home banging on the door at bugger it o'clock saying he feared he had misplaced his keys. Misplaced my Woolwich Arsenal! Dropped them down the lavvy, most likely, the great hairy pillock.*

*And now I have to hasten away to help clear up the college hall. Saint Michael alone knows what state it'll be in, but at least I've been promised a handsome inducement by Owens. One guinea for putting the place in order, two if no questions asked. Looks like I'll be keeping mum like I did last time.*

*It's frustrating, though. Ever since last year's equivalent knees-up I've been wondering about things. What did they use those handcuffs for? Why were there three feather boas that looked like they'd been dragged through the streets? And who was the wiry looking bloke with the odd marks on his arms, wearing nothing but a deerstalker hat and a smile...?*

*Anyway, I shall take this opportunity to put some facts straight before I draw a line and write, "The End". Of course Beare, the silly old tart himself, when he's sober, will fret about leaving a job unfinished. He even hates leaving the running of the porters' lodge to anyone, especially when the "anyone" is young Farrell. He's a good lad, with extremely pinchable cheeks at both ends if you get my drift, and Beare's been teaching him the ropes this last year. He's proved himself capable, but there's always the worry that such a comely young piece will make himself a target for one of those muddies oafs at St. Michael's who can't resist a pert behind nor a twinkling young eye.*

*If Beare's off anywhere I always promise I'll keep an eye on the young sprat—a nasty job but someone has to do it—and ensure his virtue is kept intact. I'll keep the same wary eye on the college's safe, wine cellar and collection of unusual postcards. You never know where introgressive specimens like some of those undergraduates from St. Bride's will try to strike next. When I see them, I can see where Darwin got his ideas from. Anyway, I've got the keys to all three on my ring and anybody who wants to go poking around will have to apply to me.*

*Talking of poking around, spring's in the offing, although with this flipping cold she's a long time showing her hull on the horizon. In April the sap rises and so does many another thing round here, and when I say that spring and beds feature in many a man's imagination I don't mean the season and flowers. The squeaking and creaking that goes on in some of the undergraduate rooms here all hours of the day and night takes some believing.*

*"What's that noise, Poll?" Farrell asked me, this time last year when thoughts had turned to oats and the spreading of them. "Have we got mice?"*

*"We have not," I replied, irate at the implication.*

*"Oh. Maybe I should go and investigate."*

*"Don't you dare. I promised your mother when you brought her here for Mothering Sunday that I'd preserve your innocence and preserve it I will if I have to put bromine in their brandy and take a pair of pliers to their nethers." I shook my feather duster at him. "When the springs are creaking, don't go peeking."*

*"But..."*

*"But me no buts. You'll see things you won't understand."*

*"Ah," he said, as if light had dawned. "It's to do with serving King Edward and Queen Alexandra, isn't it? Secret business."*

*"It's to do with queens indeed," I said, wishing to tell him no lies. "And the affairs that only they understand."*

*Bless him. Maybe I'd better go and pinch his cheeks right now...*