

on the origin of Boy Troupes

Miss Thimblebelly looks abashed for a moment, and surprised at the hubbub that her innocent remarks have caused, then smiles brightly at the Marquis. "Indeed, my dear, it is certainly proper that you should hear this story, for it is thanks to your own deeds that it ensued. Most kind of you to allow this interruption of your thrilling tale". She slides the Marquis another sliver coin.

"When I first heard the rhythmic beats of this new European (for so I thought, being unaware of its origins in Darkest Africa) Jungle music, I found myself possessed of a great desire to dance. So dance I did! And dance, and dance, feeling myself grow ever more ecstatic, until finally the sun rose, and I realised that all the other poker players had finished the game and gone home.

"I simply had to hear this music again. Unfortunately the performers had continued on their tour - to Spain, so I discovered, and having no desire to once again fall foul of the Inquisition in that country, I could not follow. So I searched among the performing troupes of my own country, but alas, no music like it was to be found among any of them.

"I found myself disheartened and dismayed, but then said to myself "Clare", I said, "Clare, you silly old goose, do it yourself". So I recreated as best I could on my instruments of choice the magical sounds that had so enraptured me, and gathered together a small group of likely seeming lads to perform it.

"I had envisioned singing, and dancing, and the playing of music, and the wearing of colourful costumes in velvet and brocade and with many sequins, and though at that last they proved to be quite adept, the bugle is really not an instrument for the beginner, and neither is the harmonica, and have you ever tried to dance with a harpsichord?

"This necessitated a slight change in plan, and, leaving the playing of instruments to others, I concentrated on getting them to sing, in marvelous harmony, and dance (naturally in a synchronised manner, as is all proper dancing). I was somewhat successful in this regard, however to my great dismay and embarrassment they never did master any other performing skills; not juggling, nor puppetry, nor sword-swallowing, nor fire-breathing, though I became quite a dab hand at most of those myself during my efforts to teach them."

She demonstrates using a smouldering cocktail (formerly a flaming cocktail), that has been sitting on the table.

"No, they preferred to concentrate on their hair, of all things, and I had not the heart to dissuade them, nor the heart to break up the group and send them all back to their former dreary lives. During the course of their training they had all become exceedingly close, and I, rather fond of them.

She blushes, "Though I hasten to assure my audience that there was nothing untoward or improper in my affection for the boys. I named them the Fruit Market Boys, and with trepidation sent them out to perform. And they were remarkably popular amongst the young people at fairs, with songs such as "Shape of my Radish" and the very modern "Analogue Getdown", which I confess I don't understand at all, and the rather saucy "Up Against the Wall (of the Milking Shed)". So much so, indeed, that many of their audience learnt to write, in order to send fan letters to their favourite boy, (their favourite usually being the blonde one, Jamie, which I confess is rather inexplicable to me as he has the least mathematical talent of them all).

"So I pride myself on having had something of an educational effect on the youth of many small

English villages, although I must take some responsibility for the veritable plague of similar troupes that has since swept the countryside, leaving devastation and famine in their wake. Also the wearing of highly inappropriate garments by young women at their performances, consisting of barely more than a scrap of shiny fabric. And the apparent increase of homosexuality among young men. Although I rather suspect that last was not entirely my doing”, she finishes in a confidential whisper.

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