

# Mad for the Mints by Amy Sterling Casil

“Mad for the Mints” is a funny story about how curiously strong and addictive peppermints changed the universe — possibly very much for the better!

Did you not know how Mad King George lost the Colonies? By listening to very poor advice from a curious pair of friends! Girard Callard, King’s Confectioner and maker of “curiously strong mints,” must outwit the King’s bold, hearty and ungrammatical Hessian guards to explain to the King how he is going broke supplying the King’s “friends” with mints. The greedy, mint-addicted “foreigners,” have parked their wondrous silver ship in George’s Hampton Court maze. With the help of the wig-wearing good English horse Phutatorius, the King’s true friend, Girard learns whether “Mad King George” was really mad after all, or there’s more to the story than history tells.

“Mad for the Mints” initially appeared in the July, 2000 issue of *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* and featured a pretty darn awesome cover illustration by David Hardy — most accurately depicting the King and his wig, Hampton Court maze, poor Gerard, the “foreigners,” and of course — the King’s real friend, the wise and good Hounyhymn Phutatorius.

This story was initially written in longhand in a 25 cent notebook at the Writers of the Future workshop in 1999. Because of the mints!

Mad for the Mints

Amy Sterling

Girard Callard peered from the front door of his fashionable London confectionary to see a fine spring Tuesday. New orders for his curiously strong mints were coming in by the score. The lovely spring weather was marred only by the fact that, once again, Mad King George demanded the greatest part of Girard’s mints. Another week’s work done, and Girard had yet to see a farthing of payment from the Exchequer. The King now owed him a full seventy pounds. And how was Girard to collect?

Girard saw that a new customer was making his way up Bond Street at that moment. An oddly-dressed fellow, but a gentleman all the same. He rode a well-turned out white steed, and led a yellow mule behind him. His waistcoat of green baize stretched unevenly over his stout chest and belly. As the gray-haired fellow approached, Girard realized that the coat was fastened one button off. He wore a curled and powdered white wig, which, like the jacket, was slightly askew.

An eccentric, he thought. Perhaps a scribbler, like that odd fellow, Dr. Johnson. Gods, it could be him! This fellow was stout and clumsy, just as Girard had heard the famous Dr. Johnson described.

Just his luck, Girard sighed, as the fellow approached. Everyone knew that Dr. Johnson the scribbler never paid his bills. Just like the Mad King.

“Hullo,” the fellow called as he dismounted. “Have you a place to tie my mule?”

Girard nodded. The mule was a loathsome, spavined creature, yet he couldn’t tell the fellow no. He was obviously a gentleman while Girard was a mere shopkeeper. The jeweler across the way peered disapprovingly from his shop. In ten minutes, word that Girard had a scrofulous yellow mule tied in front

of his shop would be up and down Bond Street.

“You’re the young man who makes the mints,” the visitor said, wheezing with the effort of tying up his mule. His great white horse stood there with no restraint. Girard noticed the creature’s fine mane and tail and its rolling black eyes. A gentleman’s horse indeed, worth several hundred pounds, perhaps more. How as such a horse married with such a worthless old creature as the mule?

“Yes, I make the mints,” Girard said. “Curiously strong, to aid digestion.” Ten bushels were in the back of the shop, waiting for the King’s footmen. And another bushel, hidden carefully, that Girard had promised to the good Earl of Buckingham, hoping against hope that the Earl’s payment for it would be quick and in full.

“So I’ve heard,” the customer said, smiling. There was something odd about the fellow’s voice. Girard could not quite place the accent, though he’d known many foreigners.

“I’d like to try some,” the man said. “Look here, as many as I can get. I’ve brought my own mule to carry them.”

So that explained the difference between the fellow’s creatures. Girard looked at the fine white horse. Surely the fellow had money. Would that Girard had any mints.

“Come inside,” he said. “You may look all you like, but I’m terribly sorry.”

The fellow stopped in the door, fingering his chin and muttering to himself.

“Sorry,” he said. “Now why would a young man like you be sorry?”

“I’m afraid I have no —”

“I wish that I were young once more,” the customer said, interrupting. He fiddled with his crooked waistcoat, then added, “would I? Could I? My name is Collins, by the way. Come to London by way of Caernarvon.”

If Girard knew a single thing, it was that this “Collins” had no Welsh accent. Nor was he any Irishman, as the name suggested.

“I’m afraid I have no mints to sell you,” Girard said. “I’ve received a —” and he paused, for Lem and Rory, the two Cornish apprentices who stirred the great iron pots while Girard added the necessary quantities of oil of peppermint, had come from the back and stood beside each other, staring at the odd customer and pulling at their lower lips in curiosity.

“No mints? Why man, they’re the talk of all London!” Collins exclaimed.

“I’ve received a great honor,” Girard said, cautiously. “Our Lord King George has named me King’s Confectioner. And the greatest part of what I make goes to him.” An honor, aye. Girard with bills of his own to pay, and his wife Anne upstairs, heavy with his child. Going hungry each night for him, though Girard knew that she thought he knew nothing of how she saved what little food she had for his mouth, and the mouths of the lads.

Lem and Rory, who didn’t know a thing about money, drew themselves up proudly, sticking their chins in the air. Collins looked at them, then laughed suddenly. “He has?”

“Yes,” Girard said.

“Well, then you have no digestive mints for the likes of me,” Collins replied. He turned, ready to leave. “Believe me, sir,” Girard said quickly. “Would that I had mints to sell you, for it has been ten week or more and the King has not paid me for all he has had.”

Collins turned back, his mild blue eyes widening. “The King! Not pay?”

Girard nearly laughed aloud, for everyone knew that the Privy Purse was a purse in name only and had not a thing in it since the disaster with the colonies.

But still, Girard was careful. “I cannot think that the King knows,” he said.

“Nay,” Collins said. Then he sucked on his lower lip. “You speak the truth? That the King has taken your goods and made no payment in return?”

“He’s signed bills,” Girard said.

“Bills,” Collins repeated. Again he stroked his chin. “Yes, I know what those are.”

Girard looked sharply at him. “Ho, sir, you jest,” he said. Who was more than a child who did not know that bills were things to be paid?

A child... or a madman. Perhaps this Collins was as mad as the King himself was.

“No, no jest,” Collins said. “I thought only that —”

“My Lord King George’s seal is on the bills.” Girard went behind his counter, where each of the sealed bills lay. “Yet perhaps . . . they say he’s mad. Mad as a —”

“Mad? Aye, so I’ve heard.” Collins’ demeanor changed once more, becoming familiar. His blue eyes twinkled. Again, Girard tried to place the accent, but could not. “They say,” he continued, putting his elbow on the counter, “that the King insists that his horse can speak. That it advises him!”

“They do?” Girard said, though in truth, he had heard this before.

“And that he visits with creatures unnatural. Foreigners, they say, with evil purposes. And that he calls these foreigners his friends.”

“Nay, not good King George,” Girard said. He had heard all this old gossip and more down at the ale-house. He’d even heard that when the King made water, the color of it was blue. Looking over at Lem and Rory, he wished he could seal their ears. The boys’ eyes were wide. They’d carry the whole thing up and down Bond Street directly. A yellow mule and talk against the King for his cobalt-colored urine! Girard was surely starting out on a fine path this day.

How could he rid himself of this odd fellow? It was plain there was naught but bad business to be done with him. Gossip. And royal gossip could land a man in Newgate Prison, or worse.

Girard looked again out the open shop door, where he saw the jeweler lowering his sign, making strange motions with his arms. He looked alarmed.

Then Girard heard a tell-tale creak that he’d heard before. A great wain coming down Bond Street, accompanied by the guttural shouts of German voices.

The King’s Hanoverian footmen.

“Sir, you had best leave,” Girard said to Collins, who merely stuffed his hands in his waistcoat pockets

and smiled benevolently at the boys.”

Six of the King’s tall footmen burst into the shop.

“God bless King George,” Girard mumbled in the direction of their heavy Germanic faces. In their fine royal livery, they reminded him of nothing so much as a prize group of hogs done up with ribbons for May Day. And he thought, would that instead I could give them all a sharp kick in the arse.

Then, he thought, looking at Collins — at least now I have a witness!

“Ja,” the leader said. Then, sniffing, he added, “you know what we seek.”

“He has no mints,” Collins said. “He told me himself. Told me also that the King . . . has not been paying!”

Girard’s eyes widened. He stepped back, holding out his hands. “Now, I never said —”

“Nicht pay? Bah! A lie!” the footman’s leader exclaimed. He looked at Collins. And then the footman said something to Collins in German that Girard did not understand.

“Now, you’re all good men,” Collins said in reply. “Very good fellows.” And he chuckled heartily. “I see there’s business to be done here,” he added. “I shouldn’t have come in. I think I’ll take a ride by the river. It’s a fine day for a ride. Don’t you think?”

He addressed this to the German footman, who nodded.

“Ja,” the fellow said. “Fine day.”

Girard had the impression that the footman was threatening poor, strange Collins. But what could he do about it? He was threatened as well. Their sabres glinted evilly at their sides. And just like that, Collins was gone, depriving Girard of his witness, and leaving him to deal with the King’s angry footmen.

He watched Collins mount his white steed and prepare to ride off. He wished he could cry out, beg for help . . . anything. But the fellow was gone, off down Bond Street before he could say a word. Heavy-hearted, Girard pointed the footmen toward the back, where the ten bushels lay. He prayed they wouldn’t realize anything was different.

As they carried the mints from the shop, one of the footmen, a heavy-faced, dun-haired fellow with a large yellow pimple on the tip of his nose, paused.

“Nein, nein, this doesn’t seem right,” he said.

“What’s that?” the leader asked. Girard watched the man balancing the bushel of mints in his arms. Each tin was only a few mints short. Each bushel was only a half-dozen tins under what was usually packed. The blemished footman couldn’t possibly tell what Girard had done.

Could he?

“Das ist nicht sehr heavy as it were,” the blemished footman continued.

“Aye,” Girard said, stepping forward. “I can see you’ve improved your strength between last week and this. Why, a fine, strong —”

“Show me,” said the head footman, interrupting Girard. He shoved Girard aside and reached for the heavy woven basket in the pimply footman’s arms.

Before Girard could prevent a thing, the basket was passed from one liveried servant's arms to the other. And the head footman nodded as he took the basket, peering inside.

"Das ist richtig," the head footman said. "Ich bin —"

"Right as no rain," Girard said, for he knew some few words in German. "This will be a lovely day, methinks," he added.

Unmoved by his attempt at good humor, both of the footmen glared.

"Ja, Ethelbert," the leader said in his guttural Hanoverian accent. "It is lesser. The little stoat pissed only half a pot this time."

Little stoat? "Not half, you barbarian," Girard shouted, immediately regretting his hasty tongue.

The leader, whom Girard began to suspect was not as stupid as he looked, began to chuckle, a merry sound. Merry enough that Girard smiled a bit, until the man withdrew his long sabre and began to wave it about. In another second, four more bright sabres were unsheathed like so many carving knives being laid out to carve a Christmas roast; a sound that set Girard's teeth on edge and made his stomach sink like a bag of stones to the bottom of the Thames.

And perhaps it was the sudden fear, or the thought of Anne upstairs quietly mending his shirts, heavy with his child, which prompted something more to pop out of Girard's mouth. "'Twas the boys," he said, casting his glance toward the two boys who cowered in the rear of the shop. And at once he was appalled at what he'd said. But words once spoken cannot be retrieved and Girard could only look on his two good lads in silent horror.

The tall leader and Ethelbert of the giant pimple came forward, backed by the other four footmen.

"You blame the young ones?" the leader said, pausing to regard the bright sheen of his long blade in the flickering light of Girard's tallow shop lamps.

"Das ist . . . despicable!"

Then the leader gestured toward the back of the shop, moving his sword arm in a sweeping motion.

"Search everything," he told the other footmen. "We take all we find," he added, keeping his eyes fixed on Girard's face.

Sweat dripped down Girard's nose. His hands trembled. The Earl of Buckingham's bushel of mints was in the back, shut tight in a strong oaken box.

In a moment, the leader had grabbed the lads, lifting each high by the collar of his shirt. The German was so strong that the boys' feet dangled half a foot in the air. Both children were crying.

"Lem!" Girard cried. "Rory!"

"Goodman Callard, help us," Rory begged.

Girard heard the other footmen sliding the bolt to the heavy, rough-hewn door, which guarded the back of the shop. He heard the door squeal as it always did. On normal days, the squeal meant that Lem and Rory were hard at work, carrying supplies in and out. On such days, Girard did not mind the squeak; he even found it comforting. Now, it was as chilling as if the footman had drawn his sword from Girard's neck to his belly.

“They’re naught but boys. Can’t you see?” Girard remembered what the footman’s accusation: that he’d been despicable for casting suspicion on the children.

“You!” he called, pointing at the footman, “put them down! You called me despicable, but what of you?”

The big German smirked. “I do the King’s business,” he said. And he pressed his big blade close to Rory’s stomach. Both boys screamed.

“Holy Christ,” Girard said. “Put the boys down. I’ll tell you where you can find the rest.”

“Ha!” the German laughed, throwing Lem and Rory to the floor and raising a cloud of peppermint-scented sugary dust. “Where is the other mints?”

Girard looked toward the heavy door. “They’re all back there,” he said, pointing in the direction that the other four footmen had gone. He hung his head, looking down at the peppermint dust-covered floor.

“They’ll find it,” he added.

“Oh, ja,” the leader said. Then he delivered a kick to the back of cowering Rory’s neck. The boy cried out in pain and fear.

“There’s no need,” Girard said, jumping forward, only to be stayed by the German’s sharp blade.

The leader turned toward Lem and prepared to kick him with his sharp-toed boot when the other four Germans returned from the back of the shop, their arms laden with red and white tins.

“Here bist they,” said the pimple-nosed footman.

They were all laughing. The leader made again as if to kick Lem, but drew his foot away at the last moment, turning to the others and ordering them to load up the wain with the last of the mints they had found.

Rory and Lem ran to Girard, their thin arms embracing his legs like spiders clinging to a juicy fly as soon as all the footmen save the leader left the shop, carrying armloads of tins. Inside the shop, Girard heard nothing but the bell-like clamor of the tins striking each other as the German footmen hurled them carelessly into the wain.

Girard opened the shop door. He heard the leader coming up behind, but he paid him no mind. Instead, he called out angrily to the others, “You had better have a care. Your . . .” (Girard had to pause for he nearly said “mad King”) “Lord and King, Master of all England and Scotland, the third of his name, will expect these in good condition. Therefore you must keep them carefully.” And just then, Girard saw that the yellow mule remained tied in front of his shop. Absent-minded Collins had ridden his fine horse off without him.

“Do you think we are stupid?” the leader asked him, grabbing his shoulder. Girard tore himself away, forcing himself to glare fiercely up at the bigger, more muscular footman.

“Oh, no,” Girard said, for despite his earlier errors, it was not Girard who was the stupid one in the room.

“You think, ‘these stupid Germans do not know their business,’” the leader said. “Well, you learned otherwise today; this is true?”

“Ja, mine-ah hair-en,” Girard said. The German grinned. Then he turned, gesturing toward the yellow mule.

“Das esel,” he said to the others. They shrugged, as if the animal was beneath their concern and said more things in German that Girard did not understand. “Eselkopf,” and something else. “Nicht for us.”

They all laughed. And as they laughed, Girard took the chance to snatch a single tin from the wain, dropping it into his waistcoat pocket.

At that moment, Girard’s good wife Anne leaned out of the upstairs window and called down to the street.

“In the name of our Lord, let them go,” she said, her voice trembling. Her hand was on her belly.

Girard took one look at her and nodded.

“Yes, love,” he said.

Smirking and laughing, two of the footmen mounted the wain, while the others mounted their snow-white steeds, decked in the King’s magnificent livery, as marvelous as Collins’ white horse save for their mud and ordure-splattered forelegs. The leader rode off in front, the others behind. Girard watched, his fists clenched, as all hope of paying his creditors and even of having some sort of Easter ham or a joint of roast mutton receded down Bond Street. Behind him, Rory and Lem stood in the door, softly weeping.

From above, Anne called down once more: “Girard Callard, you are a fool!” Then she slammed the window shut. Sweet woman, but she did have a temper.

He turned to look at the yellow mule, standing stolidly where he’d been tied. It seemed that Collins’ abandoned beast was the only profit Girard was likely to get that day. Or any other, he thought blackly. It would be Newgate for him. At best, Debtor’s Prison. Anne could bring him gruel each morning. Or perhaps their babe could grow up in a tiny prison garret.

So ended the short career of the King’s Confectioner. He wished he’d never smelled oil of peppermint, much less come up with the recipe.

“Why don’t you just try asking the King for money?” Rory asked.

Girard looked at the boy’s simple, freckled face.

“The King wouldn’t like what the footmen are doing,” Rory added. “If he knew, you’d have your money.”

“And we’d have enough to eat,” Lem added. “Our mistress wouldn’t be so angry all of the time.”

“Hush,” Girard told the boy. “Your mistress is as sweet as sugar.”

Lem crossed his arms and looked at his feet. The mule tossed his head and drew his lips away from his big, square teeth. As if he doubted Girard about the good Lady Anne just as Lem and Rory did.

Girard owned neither horse nor mule. Few shopkeepers did. The creature looked as though his legs could scarcely bear the weight of his own body.

He patted the mule on its neck and studied its ancient, rheumy eyes.

And a thought came to him. Perhaps there had been some Providence in the whole affair. Perhaps he

could ride after the wain and somehow catch the footmen. Somehow plead his case — for they were taking the mints to the King, were they not? Perhaps the boys were right, and the King did not know what was done in his name. Yes, the more he thought of it, the more appealing the idea seemed.

At the very least, he knew that he couldn't stay in the shop with nothing to do. The innocent faces of Rory and Lem accused him. How could he have been so cowardly? Putting the vile Hanoverians off on them.

The upstairs window opened once more. "Fool!" Anne called down. "Cad! Bounder!" Then she slammed it shut again.

One way or another, Girard knew that he had to make it right.

"I'll try," he told the boys as he untied the mule.

The creature groaned like a woman in labor when he mounted him. He kicked it in the ribs and it began to stagger down Bond Street. The peppermint-loaded wain left deep ruts in Bond Street, but the farther Girard rode Collins' yellow mule, the more uncertain he was of just which deep tracks were the wain's, and which belonged to some other cart. And the King's horses, though well-shod, made nearly the same marks as every other hoofed animal that had been ridden down the muddy street.

Soon Girard came to a crossing. He paused; uncertain whether he should take the left fork or the right. He started toward the left, until all at once, almost as if it was a miracle, he caught the faint, yet unmistakable odor of a generous amount of oil of peppermint on the spring breeze, and saw a light dusting of white powder leading toward the right fork in the road. And so Girard went to the right, urging the mule forward as fast as the spavined beast could carry him.

The road was leading him toward Hampton Court: a good half day's ride.

That was one of the King's great houses, though it was said he did not much use it. The closer Girard got to the magnificent palace, the more certain he was that he would find the footmen and the wain there.

And perhaps the King himself, to whom he could plead his case.

Hadn't someone been beheaded at Hampton Court? Or was it merely that the old Cardinal Wolsey had built the house to suit his lavish tastes, then had the manor torn from him to serve the pleasure of old King Henry Eighth?

A very bad man, Henry Eighth, Girard was thinking as he rode down the long approach to Hampton Court. Good Lord, Girard thought, were there any normal Kings of England? Folk said that Henry had worn a wig in his old age to cover his diseased, scrofular scalp. And who had not seen the pictures of Gloriana in her old age? Henry's daughter Elizabeth, a most magnificent, if unnatural woman, chalk-white face glistening with lead paint and vermilion streaked cheeks under a wig the color of Hell's flames itself.

And as these thoughts crowded Girard's mind, a face of nearly such whiteness appeared before him, blocking his way into Hampton Court.

A strange, long, black-eyed face framed by a white powdered and beribboned wig, much like the wig that odd fellow Collins had worn into the shop. A very odd face, with wide flaring nostrils . . . and ears protruding beyond the wig.

Girard cried out. The mule stopped dead, planting his front hooves in the raked gravel, and would go no further.



Then Girard realized it was no man who blocked his way, it was a horse which had emerged from the deep green privet hedge on the side of the path. A horse: in a wig.

And a tall, large-bellied man, quite wigless, his thinning gray hair tied back with a simple black ribbon, his green baize waistcoat askew and pants half-buttoned, emerged from the privet hedge to stand beside the horse. Collins, the same as in the morning, though minus his wig and a bit worn-down, as though he'd ridden hard.

"I see you've made friends with Phutatorius now," the man said, indicating the wigged horse. "And Good Lord man, thank you for bringing back St. Thomas Aquinas."

"Good heavens, Collins," Girard said. "I didn't know what to think." Thank God the fellow thought he was trying to help him, not steal his mule. St. Thomas Aquinas? That was the mule's name! And the horse... Phutatorius?

He was a madman, though he seemed a pleasant-enough one.

Girard began to lose all hope of finding the wain. Slowly, he got off the mule's back. The mule snorted as the wigged horse went to its side and began to nuzzle its neck affectionately.

"You haven't seen the King's men come through here, have you?" Girard asked Collins. Not that such a fellow would notice, or care.

He handed the mule's reins over to the strange fellow, sighing.

Collins put one finger to his chin. "Let me see," he said. "A wain. King's footmen. Yes, I think I have."

"I'm looking for them," Girard said. "They have . . . I need to find them."

"They went right this way," the man said, pointing through the great gate to Hampton Court. Then, he giggled. "So I think," he said. A thoroughgoing madman.

Girard turned to go, his heart heavy. But then he thought a moment longer, and with a shiver, he turned. A madman, with a great white horse. And an accent that Girard could not name. Could it be? With such a man as this, Girard should feel no shame in asking. But what if he was right? He began to tremble in fear. Turning back to Collins, he asked in a very soft voice, "Are you my Lord George the Third? Ought I bow to you?"

"That is my name," the man replied. "But I never like people to bow. It's a very unpleasant view of their heads and backs and posteriors, don't you think?"

All Girard could do was nod. The King seemed neither barbaric nor foreign. Yet still, what should he make of the man? That wonderful white horse, wearing his master's wig! And his clothes all askew like that, even worse than in the morning. "My Lord, forgive me," Girard said, thinking deference to be the best course. Then he started to walk backward, because he had heard somewhere that was the only way to leave the presence of the King. He had the distinct impression that St. Thomas Aquinas, who did not want to walk backward, was staring at him as though he was the mad one. And out of the corner of his eye, it looked as though the wigged horse Phutatorius thought so as well.

The white horse Phutatorius snorted.

"Oh, we were both in disguise this morning," King George said. He patted the horse's wig. "It's his wig, not mine. But I can hardly ride him like that around town, can I? And I'm sorry," he said, pausing a moment. "It was a foolish thing, trying to get some more mints for myself like that. I oughtn't have them."

The doctors say they're the reason my urine has turned quite blue. But it's no matter either way. All the mints are gone again. It doesn't take long."

As soon as Girard had taken in the comment about blue urine and decided that every ale-house rumor he'd heard was true, he realized that the King had said that all ten bushels were gone. All gone! It was a miracle the King was still standing. Why no man could eat so many of the curiously strong mints in so short a period of time and survive. Girard sniffed the air for the scent of peppermint, but he detected none.

"Gone?" Girard said.

"Why yes," the King said. "As soon as my men bring them, I have them take them to my friends and they take them away. On their ship."

"Ship?"

The King chuckled. "Yes, a great silver ship. That's why I thought to ride by your shop this morning. To get some for myself." He paused, looking at his fingernails, seeming to think for a bit. "I give orders," he said. "And they follow them, but somehow nothing every turns out as I'd like. They're doing what I say, you know, though they think me mad. But it's not quite . . . right."

"Silver ship," Girard repeated, very slowly. Why, they were miles from any place ships were launched. Who had ever heard of a silver ship? And even if the King's Privy Purse was a real purse, he could not collect enough silver to make an entire ship. Why, there wasn't enough silver in the entire world to do such a thing, provided someone were . . . mad enough to do it.

"I'll take you if you like, young man," the King said. He smiled at Girard. "I like your face. I did right off."

Then he turned, walking down the path toward the great maze beside Hampton Court. It was a famous place. Girard had heard of it, but of course, had never seen it. "Come, come," he said, gesturing. "Come along smartly now."

"My Lord," Girard said as he trotted to keep up with the King, Phutatorius, and the mule St. Thomas Aquinas, who were setting a very hot pace as they entered the maze and began to wind around and around it, "I think there is something I should tell. It was no lie this morning. The King... you, sir... owe me a great deal of money."

Without stopping, the King said, "Yes, I understand."

Girard didn't think that the King understood at all. He looked for signs of the footmen's wain towering over the hedgerows of the maze. "I think —" he said, then he fell silent.

They'd reached the center of the maze. And there in front of Girard, in the circular middle of the high privet hedge rows, was something that made the wiggled horse, a disguised King and a yellow mule by the name of St. Thomas Aquinas seem as ordinary as a draught of ale and a wedge of Cheshire cheese. The thing was as big as Girard's shop in Bond Street, perhaps bigger, and it looked like a silver fish, or a strange, enormous piece of silver fruit, all smooth and sleek and pointed on one end, jammed deep into the grassy earth on the other. Long, flat triangular vanes, something like the buttressed arches of a cathedral, protruded from its sides.

To Girard, it looked nothing like a ship. It looked nothing like anything he'd ever seen, save those few strange associations in his mind. For how could something made of metal be a fruit? How could it be a fish?

“My Lord,” he said, “what is this thing?”

The King laughed. “The ship of my good friends from a land far away. Sirius, they call it. By coincidence the name of the Dog Star, though they say it is not quite the same one that they come from.”

If there’d been any doubt before, which there was not, Girard knew that the King was absolutely stark raving mad. A thoroughgoing lunatic who belonged in Bedlum, chained to a wall.

“They are such good friends,” the King continued. “I would do anything for them. It is amazing that you have invented these mints, for they tell me that they are the most delicious confection they have ever tasted. Food for their souls, they say.” The King stopped to laugh a moment and finger his chin.

“Your friends have eaten them all?” Bushel after bushel. Everything Girard and his lads had made for weeks . . . all going somehow into the maw (which Girard could not discern) of this weird silver fish.

The King nodded. Then he turned, his mild blue eyes full of sympathy and concern. “I hope I haven’t hurt your feelings. For I know that you thought that I was eating the mints by myself.”

Girard shook his head. How could he collect a cent? He had to humor the madman, for one never knew what someone so lunatic would do. Why, the mild-seeming King might turn on him at any moment. Perhaps spur the wigged horse on to run Girard down. The horse had a fierce quality, Girard thought, despite the playful aspect provided by the powdered wig.

At that moment, the silver fish split open to disgorge what lay inside. Girard stepped back, holding his breath. Thomas Aquinas the mule snorted and began to tremble. Even the wigged horse, Phutatorius, seemed anxious, pawing at the green and tossing his head around, nostrils flaring.

Two glowing figures emerged. Girard went to his knees and began to pray.

Dear Lord protect me in my hour of need.

“It is good,” one of the glowing people said.

Lord, their eyes are too big and too black. They . . . Lord, they have no noses, not that my eyes can see. Sweet Jesus, please come down. Save me with your grace.

“Sweet and delicious,” the other one said.

“Good, good,” the King said. “Oh, my good friends, I am so glad.”

Good God, please send your Holy Spirit. Lord God in heaven, in my bones I know they are . . . wrong creatures. I know these are not men. Yet be they angels or be they devils? Lord God, please do not let them eat me!

At that moment, quite certain that the glowing creatures were not of this world, Girard knelt beside St. Thomas Aquinas the mule, who had begun to back up a quarter of an inch at a time, and whose hot, fetid breath came in damp snorts on the back of Girard’s neck.

“Friend George,” one of the glowing creatures said, “please ask this young man if he will tell us how to make these peppermints.”

“Yes, we have tried to duplicate them, but there are special qualities which elude us.”

“Qualities that feed our souls,” the other one said.

“Qualities we must have. The mint is strong, and warm . . .” and here the glowing creature looked at his friend, saying, “that is not the right word.”

“No, not right,” the other one said. “Food for soul . . . right.”

“But I’ve told you before,” the King said, his voice petulant. “You have asked, and I have given. Even I, the King, may not demand from this young man the recipe. He may make these mints for us, but I can’t ask him to give up his entire livelihood, even for his King.”

At that moment, Girard found his tongue sufficiently to speak to the King. He stopped praying. “But you did, my Lord. You did cause me to lose my livelihood.”

The King turned, his face a picture of dismay. “What?” he said.

“I already told you, my Lord,” Girard said. He’d said his piece to “Collins” in the shop and repeated it to the undisguised King moments earlier. “Every week your footmen would show up. And they took all my mints. Not just a part, all, my Lord King. I have not had anything left . . . for some time. And the bills have never been paid. Drawn on the Exchequer. The paper’s worthless, the bank said. Why, down at the bank —”

Girard stopped himself. Down at the Bank they’d called the King’s paper Spanish paper, which meant it was without worth to anyone. And they’d laughed.

“A madman’s name is no good, they say,” Girard said, feeling ashamed that he spoke so to his King. “Others write in his name. Why not go to Mister Pitt?” Meaning the Prime Minister, the one with the real power.

The King’s jaw worked. It looked as though he was about to cry.

“The truth is,” he said at last, “I haven’t had a penny farthing I could call my own since we lost the colonies. They just humor me. That’s all. Yes, perhaps you should go to Mister Pitt. It is he who thinks I’m mad, chiefly.”

“What does he mean?” one of the glowing figures said.

“What is farthing?” the other asked.

The King turned to face the glowing figures. “Farthing is a man’s money. How he gets things and buys things,” he said.

“Why?” both of the glowing figures said in unison.

The King sighed. “That is a talk we shall have another time,” he said.

And Girard, who had been firmly convinced that the King was a lunatic of the first order, began to question that judgment once more.

“My Lord,” Girard said, hoping that the King had some shred of sanity remaining, “I am ruined. You see before you a ruined man. There is no place for me to go from here but Debtor’s Prison. And I have a wife at home, Anne, and a babe on the way.”

The King’s face was nothing but gentle sympathy and concern. “A wife, you say?”

“Aye,” Girard said. “A more sweet, beautiful wife was never matched with a man.”

The wiggled horse snorted and pawed the grass. “Hogwash,” he said, then he tossed his powdered,

curled artificial mane.

Holy Lord God, the horse talks. It truly talks. Is the King the mad one or is it me? Preserve me, oh Lord.

“You had better be an honest man,” the horse added. “For if anyone ever needed an honest friend, it is my master.”

The King looked at Phutatorius, seemingly amazed, then at Girard. “He’s never talked to anyone else before,” he said. “No one would ever believe me. Now, son, do you believe me?” The King’s face was suffused with joy and wonder. “I have a talking horse!” he cried.

And somehow, with the horse’s interruption, Girard’s fear fled. The situation was strange, true, stranger than Girard could ever have dreamed in the worst sort of ale or gin-fueled nightmare, but how could he be afraid of two such thin, pitiful creatures as the King’s “friends.” Or afraid of a talking horse and a spavined mule with a saintly name?

“Aye, my Lord,” Girard said, answering the King. “You do have a talking horse. And some sort of magical beasts for friends as well.”

The glowing figures shifted beside the ship.

“You make these things,” one of them said.

“Tell us exactly how. We have . . . machines . . . which will duplicate. But there is something about your soil here, perhaps, or about the things you use to prepare them, which we cannot duplicate. Our mints are not so warm, or inviting.”

Girard began to think. He thought a long while before he said anything. And in his pocket was the single tin of mints he’d snatched from the German footmen. He fingered it as he answered the creatures.

“Where said you that you came from?” he asked.

“Far away,” one said.

“Sirius, the Dog Star,” the other one added.

And somehow, Girard knew that they were lying. He liked to think of himself as a canny, practical man. And he had known many a foreigner, for all he had not been able to identify “Collins” accent. A court accent, he now knew. A man in trade couldn’t help but know all manner of foreigners. The mad King might not be as German as Girard had thought, but these two were madder than the King, and, if Girard was right, far more barbaric. Why, they were stranger than heathen Hindoos or Ayrabs.

“And so you sailed from there... in this ship?” he asked.

“Yes, in the ship,” they said in unison.

“And how long have you been in... port?”

The two foreign creatures examined each other with their large, lozenge-shaped black eyes.

“Ten of your years,” one of them said after a moment.

“Why yes,” the King chimed in. “They were about to leave when I came upon the mints. Said their time here was done. It was they who counseled me during that dreadful war with the colonies. Why, it was

good it came to an end as soon as it did, wasn't it?"

Girard turned to the King. He pointed at the foreigners. "You listened to their counsel and we lost the colonies?"

A shadow passed over the King's mild face. He looked down at his gold-buckled shoes. "I suppose that's true," he said.

"Surely, my Lord, you know that England's sovereignty and our trade must be protected. These are not good Englishmen," he said, looking sharply at the glowing foreigners. "You cannot trust their counsel. Look where it has taken you." And at once, seeing the King's downcast face, Girard was overcome with pity. The poor fellow! Bullied about by such freaks as this, and kept a pauper by his own government. All because folk thought him mad. Perhaps he was mad. But the horse did talk.

Where the talking horse had come from, Girard did not know, nor did he believe a word the two foreigners said. But the King, he thought, looking in his broad, simple face, was an honest man. And a kind one, too.

The two foreigners began to murmur between themselves. Girard paid them no attention. Phutatorius whinnied and threw back his head.

Good Lord, the horse agreed with him! Well, where was the surprise in that? He seemed a good English horse. Girard went on. "Now you have ruined an Englishman's trade, and perhaps a source of good pound sterling for the Crown, by listening to the idle banter of these . . . foreigners."

The King's face looked as sad as if Phutatorius had just died, though the horse was alive and well, pawing and snorting joyfully beside St. Thomas Aquinas, who waited stolidly behind Girard.

"We are not . . . foreigners," one of the creatures said.

"What is idle?" the other asked.

Girard turned his attention to them. As with all lying, Godless foreigners, they were motivated by blind greed and venality, he thought. And still he fingered the tin of peppermints in his pocket. He withdrew it and held it out.

"So this is what you want?" he asked.

They stepped forward hungrily. Girard stepped back.

"I'm a man of business," he said. "I'll gladly supply my Lord King George free of charge. But not such foreigners as you!" He glanced toward the King, unsure whether he had spoken too boldly. But the King was staring at his shoes, seemingly lost in thought.

Girard tugged on the King's sleeve, gently. The King looked up at him, utterly confused, and Girard said, "My Lord, you have already made me King's Confectioner. Now I pray you, grant me your license so that I may make these peppermints exclusively. And I will sell them to these... foreigners... at two pounds a gross. And you shall receive —" Girard thought carefully about this next part. "A tariff of twenty percent for those mints they consume here on English land. And should they take the mints from our land, another duty of fifteen percent above that."

The King put his finger to his lower lip and tugged thoughtfully on it. "That is forty shillings for each gross," he said.

“Not exactly,” Girard said. He’d expected as much. The King had already shown he knew little or nothing about money. Girard gestured toward Phutatorius. “At the rate these fellows eat the mints, it’s a lot of oats for your talking horse. And, you can pay your bills straight away.”

The King’s face brightened. “You think so?”

“Aye,” Girard nodded.

“Well, it’s done then,” the King said. He turned toward the glowing foreigners. “You don’t mind, do you?” he asked.

They made a buzzing noise between themselves. Girard crossed his arms and waited.

At last, one said, “Fifteen percent duty, fifteen percent tariff for export.”

Perhaps the foreigners were not so unsophisticated as they seemed.

“And the recipe,” the other one added.

“Nay!” Girard cried.

Phutatorius whinnied as well, pawing the ground.

The King looked back and forth between them. “No, I think not,” he said at last.

“If you do not have him give us the recipe, we will leave, friend George,” one of them said.

“We will never return,” the other added.

The King’s face shadowed once more. “But you are my only friends,” he said, voice full of sadness.

Girard wanted to step forward and say, “not so!” But he held back, for he sensed something passing between the King and the wretched foreigners.

And he saw how the foreign creatures leaned toward the peppermint tin in his hand. They craved it.

Whatever it was about the mints that caused them to consume them in such quantity, it was a powerful inducement. They would not leave. Not so long as Girard Callard was making peppermints.

He leaned over and whispered this in the King’s ear.

“Do you think?” the King asked.

“Watch,” Girard said, opening the tin of peppermints.

The foreigners hunched over and reached toward Girard, strange dark mouths open wide.

“Would you care for a mint?” Girard asked.

“Yes!” they cried at once.

Stingily, Girard doled a single mint into each of their open hands. And he noticed that they had only three long fingers on each, and an odd thumb that looked too long, as if it had an extra joint at the base.

Greedily, the foreigners threw the mints into their mouths, making vile sucking noises.

“Twenty percent tariff here, another fifteen percent duty on export,” Girard said. “And on two pounds and a half sterling a gross.”

The foreigners nodded as they sucked on the mints.

“More!” one of them cried.

“All right,” Girard said. “A twenty-five percent duty on exports.”

“No, no,” the other said. “More mints!”

Girard turned to the King. He gently took his hand, which was trembling. “My Lord,” he said softly. “See how they are?” Then, he paused. “This could be the beginning of a trade the likes of which England has never seen. Who knows how many of these folk live in their land? And how much silver they have amongst them? Why, if they can build a ship like this, they can pay us whatever we ask!”

Phutatorius whinnied again. The King looked over at his wigged horse, then back at Girard. “Do you really think?” he whispered.

“Yes,” Girard said, and he squeezed the good old King’s hand.

King George fumbled at his waistcoat, finally withdrawing a pearl-handled pocket knife. He smiled at Girard.

“Kneel,” he said. “I’m afraid this is all I have,” he added, unfolding the knife. “I never cared much for swords. In fact, they won’t let me touch them any more. Not since I had an... accident.”

Girard knelt.

And with his six-inch pearl handled pocket knife, King George the Third dubbed Girard Callard a knight of the British Empire, with all the rights and privileges that implied. And then he granted him his exclusive license to make his curiously strong peppermints, and exclusive right of trade with the sovereign nation of the people from the Dog Star, all duties previously mentioned entailed to the Crown.

Girard eyes stung. He knelt a long while until the King finally grabbed his shoulder and shook it, repeating that he could stand now, for he much disliked people bowing and kneeling before him unless it was absolutely necessary.

Girard stood, then he gave his last box of peppermints to the foreigners, who fell upon it as starving men to a meal of mutton and potatoes.

And Phutatorius pawed the grass, moving close to the old yellow mule and nuzzling old creature’s neck.

“So you are fond of the saintly Thomas Aquinas,” Girard said to the wigged horse.

Phutatorius cocked his head. “As sure as you’re married to a harridan,” he replied. Then the wigged horse turned to the King. “And it was about time you did something about them,” he said. “I don’t know why I ever bothered to talk, since you never listened to me.”

“By Holy Christ,” Girard said, for what the horse had said about Girard’s good wife Anne was true, in faith. “Whence came you?”

The horse curled his lip and snorted. “Surely you know good Doctor Swift,” he said. “When he returned from his travels, I came with him. I wanted to see this land of well-shod Yahoos.”



“Yahoos?” Girard asked.

“Aye,” the horse said. “And my people are the Houyhnhmn. As far from Yahoo as you can get.” With this last, the horse whinnied.

The King embraced his talking horse’s neck. “And I’m grateful to Doctor Swift. You are my friend,” he said. “My only true one.” Then, he looked at Girard, sighing. “And you, too, young man. How can I thank you?”

The strange foreigners retreated back into their silver ship, making odd, satisfied-sounding sucking noises as they went.

“More,” one of them said. “More!”

“Not until you pay!” Girard called as the opening in the silver ship snapped shut behind them.

He turned back to the King. Anne, harridan or not, was still his wife. And she was at home, hungry, as were the boys Lem and Rory. “I have a babe on the way,” Girard said. “Once these foreigners pay, things shall be better, but my wife has gone hungry, my Lord. And the two lads ‘prenticed to me as well. Is there not something you could provide?”

The King laughed. “Come with me into my house,” he said, gesturing toward the vast expanse of Hampton Court. “Though I don’t live here, the kitchen goes day and night. We ought to be able to pack you a fine feast to take home.”

Girard sighed. “But I have no means to carry it.”

Phutatorius nudged St. Thomas Aquinas. The mule snorted. “He might be willing to carry it back for you,” the horse said.

The King grasped Girard’s hand, laughing. “Yes, he will,” he said. “Indeed, he will.”

“Well, this is a fine day,” Phutatorius said as they walked across the great green toward George’s house, looking up at the clear blue April sky. “Fine in London and fine here. Perhaps even fine back in the land of Houyhnhmns.”

“I have found a true friend,” the King said, patting Girard’s shoulder as they walked.

“Yes, my Lord,” Girard said quietly. He was adding up the tariffs and what he and the King both could expect to earn from the exclusive license. The King mad? Innocent, perhaps, that was all. He couldn’t help but smile as he looked at the old man’s face, the very picture of joy and delight.

“You know I’m not mad,” the King said softly as they walked.

“Aye, my Lord, I know,” Girard said. And he spoke the truth.

*For Jim Blaylock, with a hot chestnut and the half-pound red and white tin*

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