

Cobbler's Clinch

by Chris Wright

Mr. Cornelius Clinch emerging from the back of the shop, neat and impeccably shod, an expression of conspiratorial expectation etched upon his features.

Owner of 'The Footbinder', purveyor of shoes and hand tooled suitcases to the gentry of Muswell Hill and the surrounding countryside, Cornelius had plied his trade in my father's day and, it is rumoured his father's day. His real age was the subject of earnest debate and it was thought that at some stage in the august establishment's life, proprietorship had passed from father to son — nobody could say for sure when.

"I can recommend a Jeffrey West for a gentleman such as yourself — not a shoe for everyone, but a man of your bearing..."

"Thank you Cornelius, I was rather thinking a brogue, perhaps Loake's?"

"A brogue sir? For you sir? Loake is a very traditional house, a good shoe, one of the best — suspect temperament on occasion..."

"Good god man! I'm purchasing a pair of shoes, not a wife!"

"Sir..."

The smell of new leather, reminding me of childhood, my father's shoes laid out in the scullery, Jackson, the butler, shirt sleeves rolled up, applying the polish with vigorous strokes of the brush. Molly, giggling in the pantry, rosy cheeked and rumpled clothing.

"Elbow grease..."

"Sir?"

Cornelius at my elbow, a box, tissue paper spilling over the sides, a pair of outstanding brogues, unsullied and factory fresh.

"If Sir would observe, the storm welt, a shoe for the big occasion, a shoe that will guide sir through the dismal passages, a shoe that will roar in the face of adversity and ..."

"Really Clinch, please try and exercise a modicum of restraint — I want to purchase a shoe that I can walk in, not one that will pick a fight ..."

“Sir”

This good fellow, sorrowfully disappearing behind the curtain at the back of the shop, the creak and groan of a stepladder and the slow climb of an old man. The sudden curse, the slow collapse, curtain bulging outwards then billowing as Clinch's descent, more rapid and less deliberate than the climb ends. Clinch emerging, one collar awry, dust besmirching the impeccable black jacket, long strand of hair escaping the crown, creeping down across the shoulder.

“For Sir, the last pair, Church's, a prince amongst men sir. The cobbler of choice for your father sir...”

Seated now, the silver handled shoehorn, the loosened laces.

“The 73 last sir, welted leather sole...”

The chestnut brogue the same colour as Hermione's soft curls, the leather embracing my feet. I stand, observe my stance in the mirror — the shoes, perfect and the knife edge crease of my trousers breaking at the front, settling at the heel behind.

“Clinch, I'll take the Church's, have them sent to the Mews, this afternoon.”

“A most excellent choice sir — and how will sir be settling his account?”

“Cash Clinch, Cash”.

Outside, the world a poorer place, a shell suited urchin racing past on shoes that light up - I spin the umbrella, a swift jab, a hook and natural order is restored. Justice is done. I stride on, briskly up the street, hail a cab.

As the cabbie performs his turn, I lean forward and in the pale yellow light of the early evening sun, Cornelius Clinch holding a Samuel Windsor to his aquiline nose, his nostrils flare and a little point of colour appears on each pale cheek as he breathes in the sumptuous perfume of the hand crafted split welt shoe.

