

# Preparation Number 3

Miss Thimblebelly tells of her Spanish adventure leading to the discovery of her famous Preparation Number 3.

## In which the Marquis asks a tale of the Miss Thimblebelly

The Marquis pauses to drain the dregs from his jug, then glances to his right. "However, I am also somewhat interested in the high value of substances of a more herbal or indeed pharmaceutical nature - Miss Thimblebelly, if you would be so kind, could you tell us of your Spanish adventure leading to the discovery of your famous Preparation Number 3?"

## In which Miss T travels incognito in Spain

"Certainly, sir", says Miss Thimblebelly, settling back in her chair. "You should know that although I have often hinted at the extraordinary events surrounding my discovery of the formula, never before have I told the full story.

"In my younger days I travelled extensively throughout Europe, and I discovered that it was most convenient to do so disguised as a commoner." She holds up a hand. "I know some may be shocked by this, but I do assure you there are considerable benefits - one attracts far less attention, for example, which is often useful, and for those of limited means such as myself, it becomes possible to obtain menial employment, often with lodgings included. These by far outweigh the small losses in comfort and the respect one would otherwise be accorded - which, as merely the daughter of a Baron, was not terribly much in any case.

"When I entered Spain I did so as part of a travelling band of Gypsies who mended pots and told fortunes and the like. I had disguised myself sufficiently to blend in with the use of a black dye for my hair and joined their caravan. Now, in my opinion, the reading of palms is perfectly useless for foretelling an individual's future, whereas the close inspection of the ear canal, on the other hand, may yield valuable clues. But in any case, one does what will please the customers, and so it was palm-reading that was my occupation as we travelled throughout Spain. Anyway none of us were really concerned with divining the future, being far more interested in singing and dancing around campfires, and generally having a jolly good time. This was, in the end, unfortunate, for with a little foresight I might have avoided the calamity which was to befall.

"As I said, I was quite unable to actually see the future by reading a person's palm. However by keeping my predictions sufficiently vague, I was able to satisfy my customers. Unfortunately one day after meeting with me, a certain young girl really did meet a tall dark and handsome stranger (with which Spain is positively teeming), and, most excited, ran about praising my extraordinary powers to her entire family, which included her uncle, Cardinal Flamenco. The Inquisition at this time was particularly virulent in Spain, and they looked unkindly, to say the least, on displays of psychic power (however, in my case, fraudulent they might be). As a result I was captured during a raid upon the caravan, and imprisoned in an entirely unpleasant dungeon."

## Lady Kathryn wagers on kidnapping

Spanish dungeons are quite below par”, agrees Lady Kathryn, sipping the coffee that Sally had recently placed in front of her “Rarely do they have the creature comforts (such as separate bread and water receptacles and proper hessian sacking) of those dungeons found farther north.”

“However, I'll wager that you did not remain there for long. Cardinal Flamenco and I have crossed paths on several occasions and he has kidnapped me on more occasions than I care to remember - once even to ensure that his brother Russell would win the Eurovision carving contest! I am sure that you were also able to locate the secret passage that leads from the dungeon of Castillo Flamenco to his bedroom. (I only hope that you were spared the debauchery that I witnessed in there upon my escapes.)”

## In which there is torture, gruel, and plans for escape

“Lady Kathryn is correct that I was able to escape, although whether I was there for long is a relative matter, and at the time it seemed quite long enough, I can assure you. Before hearing of Cardinal Flamenco's other dastardly deeds, and I too am quite keen on learning of these, let me first extricate myself from my singularly unpleasant cell.”

“Naturally upon being tossed inside I immediately set about checking for hidden means of escape, as Spanish dungeons in particular are notorious for being riddled with such. Sadly, I found none. Just as I was becoming acquainted with my cell-mate, a former paella-chef imprisoned for unsubstantiated crimes against gastronomy, the door clanged open and two guards dragged me off for a session of Questioning.

She pauses, and takes a large gulp from a flask of an odd violet shade. Spluttering somewhat, she continues. “I shall not describe in detail what occurred, although I am certain all my listeners are somewhat familiar with the practices of the Inquisition, and can draw educated guesses. When I was returned it was to a different cell, this time with an unemployed turnip farmer, and again no hidden routes of escape. It seemed that there was no pattern to where I was held, and I was simply tossed willy-nilly into whatever cell seemed convenient to the guards.

“I spent several days in the dungeon, being Questioned by various methods. I was able to survive the dunking test by the ingenious use of a hollow straw through which I breathed, though my survival unfortunately convinced the Cardinal's minions I was indeed a witch, and all my explanations fell on deaf ears. I was then subjected to a particularly vile form of torture using a comfy chair, and about which I shall say no more. Oh! My very skin crawls at the memory!

“When in one of the various cells, I spent my time (when I was not composing poetry upon the walls in order to focus my mind) attempting to manufacture amateur explosive using leftover gruel and some of the substances that were concealed in hidden pockets in my clothing. Before my experiments were successful, however, I found myself in a cell that did indeed possess a hidden trapdoor, and I immediately set out through the tunnel to which it was an entryway, taking the other occupant of the cell along with me.

“The tunnel did indeed, eventually, deposit us in the Cardinal's bedroom, where fortunately no

debauchery was taking place. Before I continue, however, I would very much like to hear Lady Kathryn's story, in which she can perhaps relate how \*she\* navigated the pitch black maze and evaded the lion kept therein. Any explanation of the peculiar voting practices of the Finnish Eurovision judge, or the inexplicable category of "Best Choreography" would also be most enlightening."

## Doctor Barrow wagers on his student

"You mention another occupant of the cell, Mistress Thimblebelly. A former student of mine was once imprisoned by the Spanish, and escaped under mysterious circumstances, aided by a woman who..." the doctor glances over the Honourable Clare, "does not match your description in the slightest. The ship upon which he was employed as a scientific advisor had been attacked by privateers, you see, and my student's writings had been deemed heretical, partly due to his lamentable tendency to draw rude pictures in the margins, a habit I was not able to cure him of. Could this fellow escapee have been that same Hans van Nudelbernt?" The doctor proffers a silver coin. "I'll wager it was, and that his great learning was off inestimable value in your escape."

## In which escape proceeds

"Well", says Miss Thimblebelly. "To continue, after escaping the dungeon I found myself in Cardinal Flamenco's bedroom. Although mercifully uninhabited at the time, I did notice it seemed rather unusually decorated, even unfamiliar with clergymen's bedrooms as I am. I merely attributed it as yet another peculiarity of the Spanish (with apologies to Countess Barbara), and thought no more of it.

"Now the task at hand was to escape from the castle. While I am certain that Lady Kathryn's familiarity with Castillo Flamenco has enabled her to devise the most efficient escape route possible, no doubt leading her from the Cardinal's bedroom to freedom beyond the walls in a matter of minutes, I was entirely unfamiliar with my surroundings, and rather at a loss as how to proceed in order to avoid recapture. With my companion (whose name, I learnt, was Manuel), I searched the bedroom for further hidden exits but was unable to locate any, although we did discover several valuable items and some exceedingly interesting diaries. In spite of my discomfort (acquired at an early age) with taking the obvious route, it seemed there was nothing else to be done but to leave via the bedroom door. Placing an upturned wineglass against the door, and my ear against the wineglass, I detected no immediate sounds of patrolling. Thus I opened the door and proceeded out into the corridor.

"Well! Such a sight I had never before seen in my life! The corridor was dank and gloomy, with water dripping from the ceiling stones and moss, algae and fungus growing in many corners and cracks. It was lit in both directions only sparsely, with the occasional torch that flickered weakly in the damp draughts. However this was not what captured my attention. No, it was the tapestries hanging upon the walls, that, although mouldy and rotting, still displayed their gruesome scenes to me. I shall say no more of them except that it was clear that the Cardinal took rather too much delight in torture for its own sake, rather than as merely a tool for the persecution of witches and devil-worshippers. Several skulls, both human and animal, were mounted between the tapestries and torch brackets. Why, this corridor made the dungeons that had been my recent home seem positively cheerful and pleasant!

"Taking one of the gutted torches, I was able to light it once more by filling it with some of my leftover attempts at explosive, that, while it had failed to achieve an explosivity sufficient to have freed me

from my cell, did catch fire and burn quite satisfactorily. (Incidentally, throwing some of another batch of failed explosive into the lion's eyes was how I had been able to evade the beast in the maze - the gruel which was the chief inactive ingredient contributed quite a stickiness to the mixture). Gesturing at Manuel in Spanish sign language to remain quiet, we crept down the corridor in a randomly chosen direction. Rounding a corner, I caught sight of movement, and immediately ducked back against the wall, furiously signing to Manuel that we must, for the moment, keep very still and silent, and that if the person (whoever it was) should come around the corner, he should follow my lead for I would assess the situation and react accordingly.

"In truth, I hadn't the faintest idea what I would do were we to be discovered, but I thought it best to appear confident in order to keep Manuel from panicking."

## **The Doctor brandishes his silver coin again**

"And was the approaching figure my former student Hans van Nudelbernt, whose scientific approach to escape, combined with your own natural ingenuity, formed the basis for your salvation?"

## **In which freedom doesn't really get any closer**

"Manuel and I cowered against the wall - that is, Manuel cowered and I remained circumspectly out of sight. The footsteps grew closer, closer, and then a figure rounded the corner whereupon all three of us gave a start and jumped backwards. Clearly this newcomer was another escapee of the dungeons - dressed in somewhat tattered rags like our own, and clutching a makeshift candle that appeared to have been constructed from pieces of tapestry and string. "Greetings, fellow unfortunate" I said (naturally in Spanish). "This is Manuel, I am Constanza, and we are in the process of escape. May I ask your name?" The fellow twitched and stuttered and then said "I am Hans van Nudelbernt, and I have been imprisoned in this vile place for no reason whatsoever!" I immediately noticed that he spoke Spanish with a both a heavy Roman accent and audible traces of Ancient Phoenician. Clearly this fellow was a scholar. I asked him if he knew the way out. It shortly became clear that he did not.

"Since the direction from which he had come was the direction of the kitchens, which he assured us with a shudder we had no wish to see, our small party proceeded down the corridor in the opposite direction, all of us in somewhat higher spirits than before; Manuel and Hans merrily swapping stories of their respective means of escape from the cells. I was rather impressed by Hans' use of cutlery and Latin in order to escape, while Hans seemed equally impressed by my lion-distracting mixture, which I informed him was more or less the same stuff that burned in our torch with an eerie blue glow. He proceeded to whip out a notebook in which he scrawled furiously whilst bombarding me with questions about my preparation of the mixture, which I was only too happy to answer, particularly since Manuel had a disturbing habit of breaking into off-key Spanish escape songs whenever there was a moment of silence.

"Between Hans' scientific supplies of sulphur, brimstone and coffee (which had miraculously escaped confiscation) and my own hidden pouches of, well, other substances, the two of us as we walked made several alterations to my remaining supply of gruel-based mixture, and were quite, quite sure we were close to our objective of manufacturing an explosive capable of dismantling the stone walls of the castle and securing for us our freedom, when suddenly Manuel, who had been scouting ahead,

ran back with news of an approaching guard patrol, and, with nowhere else to hide, we all tumbled down a conveniently located laundry chute and found ourselves safe for the moment on the floor of the laundry room."

## Onwards from the Laundry Room!

"Indeed, Doctor", says Miss Thimblebelly. "You are quite correct about my assistance in Hans' escape from Cardinal Flamenco, as well as his assistance in mine, and your comments are more astute than you might think, as you shall shortly see.

"Having landed in the Laundry Room, Hans, Manuel and I cast about for an exit from this new confined space. All of us were by now becoming quite adept at this task, as my listeners may have surmised. Thus it took us very little time to ascertain that the sole exit, besides the precipitous and slippery laundry chute that was our means of ingress, was a large and sturdy wooden door; locked, barred and bolted from the outside.

"Whilst my rather fanciful mind wandered on pathways of wonderment about what circumstances might require exactly such conditions of security for bed linen, Hans' more single-track brain continued to churn on the problem that had most recently engaged it - that is, of the insufficiently explosive nature of gruel. Muttering to himself in what sounded to my untrained ear like Arabic, he emptied a considerable quantity of brimstone into one of my own pouches of gruel-mixture. Stuffing a small quantity of this resulting mixture into the keyhole of the Large Wooden Door and then lighting it produced absolutely no result whatsoever.

"Cursing furiously and inventively in Mandarin he flung the pouch with its remaining contents behind him and stormed into a corner to sulk and ostentatiously write elaborate equations in charcoal on the wall. I moved to clean up the spillage, having acquired at an early age a great horror of mess. To my surprise the floor had suddenly become very slippery indeed, and, to the alarm of both Manuel and I, my feet slid out from under me and I tumbled to the floor. So slippery was I now that not only did my residual momentum carry me clear across the laundry room, but I ricocheted off the far wall and came hurtling back again. All in all I believe I traversed the room seventeen times at various angles, with Manuel chasing after me shouting and waving his arms about in quite a dramatic though unproductive manner.

"Finally the commotion drew Hans' attention, and he assisted Manuel in bringing me to a halt through the use of a large pile of (clean, lady Alyssa will be pleased, as was I) sheets, into the soft and lemony-fragranced folds of which I plunged and then extracted myself with great care. During my progress back and forth across the room I had had some small time to think, and had realised how this remarkable and unexpected property of Hans' latest modification might be of assistance in our current predicament.

"With great care we all smeared the mixture on the outside of our clothes, and then used our new slipperiness to enable us to each squeeze under the smallish gap at the bottom of the Sturdy Wooden Door. We now found ourselves in a maze of servants' passageways, and though we were as yet not free from the castle of Cardinal Flamenco we considered ourselves fortunate, for our dishevelled, grimy, and now gruel-covered appearances would surely draw less attention than in the hallways above".

## Contessa Barbara disagrees

"My dear lady, this beggars belief! While you and Manual may well have escaped in the manner you describe, the good Doctor's former student, Hans van Nudelbernt has always been a very large man and no amount of lubricating agent would allow him to squeeze through a 'smallish gap' - or indeed, any credible gap beneath a stout door. Surely you are mistaken in your recollection." The Contessa places a silver coin upon the table.

Miss Thimblebelly raises her eyebrows at the Countess' outburst and places a gold coin upon the table. "Well," she says. "I do realise that much of my tale is of a rather extraordinary nature. It is possible that I can clear up your confusion, my dear Countess, by reminding my audience of certain salient facts. Firstly, I am not sure if the Countess has spent any amount of time in a Spanish prison, but the supply of food is particularly meagre, and all of us were considerably smaller when we were making our escape than we were at the beginning of our imprisonment". She looks over at Doctor von Barrow. "Indeed, my rather different shape, in combination with my differently coloured hair, is probably why you do not recognise me from Hans' description of the woman who assisted in his escape.

"In addition, Spanish doors, while often particularly large and sturdy, do in my experience have a feature of a much larger gap at the bottom than the doors of any other country." She pauses for a moment. "Why this is, I cannot speculate, but it must be awfully draughty.

"Thirdly, and I am not certain if the Countess has much knowledge in the scientific field of lubricating agents, so let me merely say that the serendipitously acquired mixture that aided in our escape was *\*exceedingly\** slippery."

"Well," concedes the Countess, furrowing her brow as she accept Miss Thimblebelly's gold coin, "I suppose it *\*is\** possible, after all. It has been so long since I have been home that I had forgotten how large the gaps beneath some Spanish doors can be (and the unusual measures we must therefore take to keep out the drafts). Still, if Hans van Nudelbernt was as greatly reduced as you say after the harsh regimen of the prison diet, I'll wager that he collapsed from hunger at some inopportune moment during your escape, requiring heroic measures on your part to overcome the guards."

She pushes her silver coin across the table.

## Hans and the Wyverns

"As I was saying", continues Miss Thimblebelly. "The three of us were wandering down a corridor in the servants' quarters, Manuel whistling a Spanish wandering-through-corridors song, and Hans and I lost deeply in our respective scientific thoughts. We were passed by the occasional servant, but they paid us little notice, probably because they were unable to see us under the huge piles of laundry or dishes they bore. Suddenly a flock of wyverns appeared around the corner, much to our great startlement. I was surprised by their unusual colouring, being that we were in the south of Spain and the beautiful blue tinges on their wings are usually only found on the Northern Wyvern. I was even more surprised by what happened next. Hans, who had been shuffling along as if in a daze, (which had concerned me not at all for I had assumed that his mind was engaged with questions of brimstone), suddenly leapt into the centre of the flock and began attempting to eat one of them!

"I surmised, as the Countess has wagered, that Hans was suffering the effects of a considerably longer period of starvation than was I, and could restrain himself no longer. Thinking back to when we had met, and his look of horror when describing the Kitchens in which no edible food could be found, I was certain of it. I plunged after him into the flock, and found it particularly easy to drag him away from the unfortunate beast, for he was now quite unconscious, presumably from hunger and his recent exertions. Unfortunately the wyverns were immediately followed down the corridor by a posse of guards, who were presumably attempting to round them up and take them back to the upper levels where they could usefully serve as draught prevention devices, I now understand.

"They did not take kindly at all to Hans' actions, and it seemed a chase was about to begin. Not wanting to retrace our footsteps which led only to the Laundry Room, I decided we would run in the opposite direction. Slinging Hans over my shoulder I beckoned to Manuel to follow me. His eyes went wide and he gestured furiously that it was foolhardy in the extreme to run towards the approaching guards. However my eloquent arguments (hampered somewhat by the fact that I could only gesture with one hand) won him over.

"We rushed toward the oncoming pack of guards! When close enough to see the whites of their eyes I tossed one of my few remaining pouches of modified gruel at them, not knowing from which experimental batch it came. It served to distract the closest guard long enough for me to hurtle past, Manuel following in my wake. Not looking back we ran heroically through the winding maze of servants' corridors, our ears straining for sounds of pursuit."

## **Hans, Manuel and Constanza - I mean Clare - finally escape the castle**

"The three of us travelled rapidly through the corridors - two of us running and one of us bouncing like a sack of potatoes, (recently discovered in the New World by Duke Peter). The sounds of pursuit grew closer. Under usual circumstances I could have easily outrun the castle guards, encumbered as they were by heavy armour and a considerable assortment of weapons. However I was hampered by the weight of Hans, slight though it was, and Manuel's peculiar limping gait. I was also feeling slightly fatigued by my own experiences of torture and starvation, and wished wistfully for a quiet moment in which to rummage through Hans' pockets for his coffee supply.

"As we were stumbling down a particularly interminable corridor, dodging the increasing number of servants going to and fro whilst evincing little surprise at the chase proceeding towards, past, and away from them, a shout went up from behind us. I risked a look back. The guards had rounded the corner and spotted us! As they charged forward and we attempted to increase our speed away, suddenly everything changed. The sounds of pursuing footsteps faltered! A great commotion began. Turning, puzzled, to see why we were no longer the focus of the guards' attention, I saw them shake their heads dazedly, and begin attempting to grab the nearest maidservants, with obvious intentions.

"Neither questioning our sudden good fortune, nor stopping to observe the debauchery that had begun, our small party continued down the corridors. Gradually the meagre light from the flickering torches was replaced by the beautiful glow of natural daylight, which I had begun to wonder if I should ever see again. We rounded the final corner, and were struck full in the face by the light from a magnificent Spanish sunset. We had come to the western edge of the castle, and the Gryphons' Exit.

"I slapped Hans awake (as I am sure you have had to do many a time, Dr von Barrow), and set him upon the nearest gryphon. As they each were able to bear only one passenger (being far smaller than

the Siberian Gryphon), Manuel and I each selected our own steeds. Manuel, I believe, returned to his native Barcelona to continue his peaceful and relaxing life as a waiter. Hans, still dazed and thus possibly not navigating as well as he might have under other circumstances, I last saw flying south over the Straits of Gibraltar, and I know not where he landed. As for myself, I flew north to France with my single remaining pouch of experimental gruel-mixture.

“As my audience may have realised, the combination of gruel and other substances which I had originally intended as an explosive, became, through the unpredictable nature of Science, my Preparation Number Three, which I now sell as an aphrodisiac and floor-polish. I was never able to recreate a mixture with quite the same magnitude of aphrodisiac effect as was in the batch I tossed at the guards, and it's probably all for the best. Similarly, the substance that I market to the public is not *\*quite\** as slippery as was the batch that Hans discarded, for safety reasons. Although I was never entirely successful in my explosive-manufacturing attempts, I feared I might have to take steps to hinder combustion in the publically available Preparation, again for reasons of safety, however I found that my French gruel-based mixtures never showed any signs of explosivity or combustibleness at all. Possibly there is something odd about Spanish gruel.”

Feeling somewhat peckish after telling the story, Miss Thimblebelly enquires after snacks, petit-fours, perhaps?

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