

The Pipesman To The Prince

∞ A Short Story ∞

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The Pipesman To The Prince

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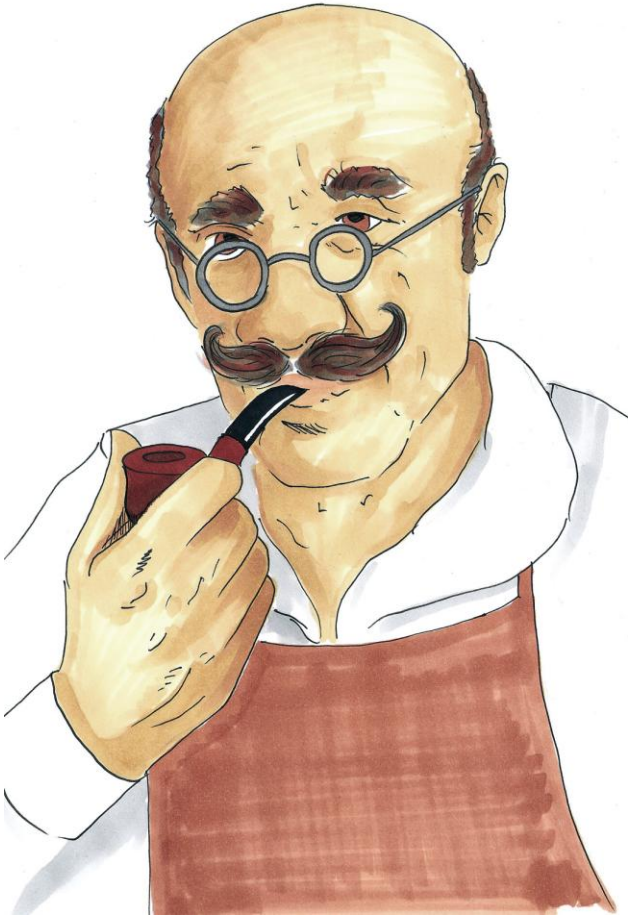
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Dedication

To all who knew, go easy...



Introduction

This is a tale of a time gone by. There are lessons here that we were lucky enough to learn.

May we never forget...

Over in a quiet, cobbled cottage in a quiet, cobbled town there worked an old pipesman. Paulo Gepetti they called him and that was his name. He was a humble man who made for the best sort of pipesman. And he was a good man at that; a generous man; a family man. He stood, oh, about yea high, leather apron and all, and he wore his mustache curled. Not wispy curled like the baker, but stout, thickish, like the barkeep. Glasses weren't ever far from steady eyes.

As pipesmen were concerned, not a pipe tool could be had what Paulo didn't own. Everything had its place, too. Some things had spares. Oh the others had spades and chucks and things to set tenons. Gepetti also kept things with no concern for pipes. But what's more is he could use them on things that most didn't know needed fixing. Some say he'd even shod a horse once, on a bet. Or was it a dare? Anyway, he was as famous for fixing as he was pipes.

Pipa Gepetti pipes were known. They were so known, in fact, that people came from all around. Rumor didn't tell that he would speak to it, the briar that is; for that matter was fact. Rumor told, though, that it would speak back. Together they'd cut magic out from

ebauchon and plateaux. Rustic nose warmers and freehand bent brandys, straight tomatoes, rhodies, and all sorts of churches. Always made to fit the man, they were. The easiest ones were for those dearest. But he was happy with his own, which wasn't overly long or underly long because it was just so.

Ol' Gepetti could carve a pipe, alright. In fact, his were so good he hadn't had to make one in, oh, quite some years. That is, of course, until a man came calling on one; a man of at least some means; a man who wanted only the best.

His door knocker was wrought in the shape of a wise old owl. The bird smoked a pipe that puffed and he wore a fine bowler and waistcoat. A right proper old bird, he was. In his claws he clutched a ring that was rung exactly as expected.

Paulo worked in a workshop that was built just for him. There was one well-worn work table and two matching stools. You'd imagine when someone came calling that it got quite crowded. More so when that someone was as thick a man as he who came knocking.

"Welcome, welcome!" cried a Paulo who'd been waiting. Words travel fast through small places. "You're late, though," with a wink. "Please, please. Come in." Paulo wasn't quite

working, but he was fidgeting a few hand tools and a box of old stems to make it seem as such.

"I don't remember having an appointment. Do I...do you know who I am?" as if that was what mattered. The man's words were tempered but something more spirited hung below. This one wasn't used to being spoken to like a regular chap.

Dressed to the nines, polished up boots, good strong jaw, smelling of musk and mahogany... "Why of course. The great Prince Garbanzo. I am happy to be at your service." Gepetti whiffed around with sarcasm, but his intentions were well, even if he was only just a count that insisted his own princehood. Gepetti didn't care much for titles.

"Please, please. Prince Viktor will do. You must be Gepetti." The Prince stood taller than the pipesman, but wasn't much off in age from Gepetti's eldest son.

Gepetti saw him over the top of his glasses this time. "Please. Call me Paulo. How may I be of your service, Prince?"

"Come now. You know who I am and I you. Your reputation precedes as I'm sure does mine. I am searching for the finest of pipes that my good money can buy. I will not have any

other make it. The price is no matter. You make them custom, yes? Have you samples? Let's see them, man."

Other than the name on the door, and the tool in his hand, you'd not know it was a pipesman's table. There wasn't even any ash or dottle. In fact, there weren't samples to be had or pipes to be sold. Again, each was made for the man.

"Pull up a stool, let me pour coffee. We'll talk a bit first." They weren't questions, though they weren't exactly requests. Paulo had his ways and they were genuine; it didn't matter if he was a Prince or a Count or just plain Viktor. His manners held him from saying so too, but he wasn't so sure that the Prince's would...had the table been turned. "Tell me about yourself," he said, turned, working from the kettle.

"Oh, I'm just a man, but I enjoy the finer things in life, Mr. Gepetti. My brandy cellar, show horses, a good hunt, a roaring fire, the finest ales, and the richest smoking tobacco. That's where you come in..."

Those were mostly things that Gepetti himself enjoyed, but they felt fulsome from the young Prince. "Yes, yes. We'll talk pipes. Tell me about yourself... About your family... Do you take sugar and cream?"

"No, thank you. I'm not a coffee drinker, myself," but he didn't stop him to pour it. "What's there to know, really, that's not already been told?" True that there was gossip. It was a chance, though. An opportunity to be someone genuine. One that Gepetti always afforded. "Name your price, Mr. Gepetti," he condescended, with his wallet, which was the Count's way. Gepetti's opportunity was one that he would buy his way out of.

"My price... I will make your pipe, Prince. I will be started right away." He knew just what kind of man and just what kind of pipe. "My price is this, Prince Garbanzo: pour me a glass of brandy. Your pipe will take forty days."

"Forty days?! Can't it be any sooner?"

"I'm afraid not. Good things take time. Surely you can appreciate what goes into fine craftsmanship. Like a cellared wine, or a good hunt..."

"Well I would at least like..."

"Uh uh." It was the only time Gepetti cut the other man off. "You came here for a *Gepetti* and you will get one of my best. I have in mind exactly the right pipe. I think you will be quite pleased."

"I'll select the briar, then."

"Have a wonderful day, your highness," he said with a sweet and *trust me* sort of smile topped with a wink.

"Alright. But I will bring more than just your brandy, Mr. Gepetti. We'll meet again after this month. Thank you, eh, Paulo."

"You are quite welcome Mr. Garbanzo, and it was a pleasure meeting. You will see your pipe on the fortieth day. Take care, Prince."

The man didn't finish his coffee. If he didn't exactly return the parting sentiment, it was because he was a little confused by their exchange. Oh he understood it all quite clear, it was just that he wasn't often not fawned over. It left him wondering just exactly who was in charge.

As for Ol' Gepetti, that was enough to call it a day. Everything he needed to carve the Prince's pipe was right there at arm's reach. Everything he needed to inspire it, though, he had at home. With apron hung after tidying up, he was good and headed on his way.



Every day he worked, taking little or no break and every day he returned home to a set supper only to return to the Prince's pipe the next morning. He never even spoke a word about whose he was cutting. For thirty days and then six again he took his time cutting and for thirty days and six again he took no other work. Even the season had changed. To everyone that came calling, there was left the same answer tacked up on his door. It said:

Sorry, friend, I haven't time today, but I hope to help you when I can. Best, P.

The whole village was buzzing before the Prince ever came down to the pipery. But now, and more specifically after their handyman wasn't there to be handy, they didn't know what to think.

On the seventh day after the month that passed, two things of merit took place: Gepetti finished the pipe and the Prince came knocking yet again. One of them was early and one of them was as the pipesman planned.

Perhaps he hadn't considered himself a friend, maybe he was just so excited that it made little difference, or maybe it was something else entirely, but the door sign didn't stop the Prince. He knocked and he entered and in with

him walked a bottle bearing the name of an old French king. Paulo had very much intended his sign for this man and he knew he'd be the one it wouldn't catch.

"Good day, Mr. Gepetti. I see that I've found you well," proclaimed the Prince.

"Good day to you, Prince. I hope that you and yours are all well. It's a fine morning. How may I be of service?" knowing fully how and exactly why the Prince had come. But it wasn't yet the fortieth day.

"I've come to check on my pipe. Is it done? Can I see it? Here," stamping the bottle onto the table, "I've brought payment. This is the finest brandy there is. It's from my private collection." With it was dropped a leather purse full of coins.

And it was a fine vintage. The squat bottle was rounder than it was tall. Things were blown into the glass punt that Gepetti himself couldn't carve from wood. A matching, charging stallion graced its stopper. Paulo spun it through his hands and up to the natural light through his window. "Isn't that something'," he said. Its color was a deep caramel and the lettering was golder than the jewel-maker's gold. Speaking much more to himself, with a finger in the bottle's bottom horse "how do they do that, I

wonder." And again back to Garbanzo. "Thank you for sharing. That is somethin'. That is special."

"Shall we?" The stopper made a nice, sucky thunk when he popped it. "Do you have a few snifters?"

"Oh no, not this one. This is too fine a brandy for me. Too much. Thank you, but you enjoy this one, Prince."

"That's your payment, though. It's what you asked for. I would still like to see my pipe, though. Is it ready?" Refitting the stopper was like swallowing a lump of his pride.

"It's not quite ready yet, Prince. Another few days should do. And just a glass of brandy will do. That bottle is beautiful. Thank you for sharing. Is there anything else I can help you with?" It was true that he wanted the pipe's wax to rest, but it was ready. It was the Prince that wasn't, though.

"I'll be back tomorrow, Gepetti. I expect you'll be ready." He treaded towards threatening, but he knew no other way.

Over his glasses again, "Have a good day, Prince. Take care, and I'll see you

tomorrow." Just slightly, he pushed the purse away, too.

The great Prince Garbanzo took his bottle, his money, and his leave. This one wasn't as confusing for him as it was frustrating. He wanted his pipe. And who was this *pipesman* to turn down such a bottle? The Prince knew just how he'd show him.

Paulo did what he did best; sharpened his tools, cleaned his bench and headed home to a set supper table.



This next day was one that Paulo looked very much forward to. The walk to work past the baker and the apple seller's carts was especially sweet. He stopped and said his hellos and then his good days, but wouldn't answer for the sign on his door beyond "just a few more days." To the Prince, he was peddling more than pipes, now, and it would be his best work yet. It wasn't long for a knock after aproning up again. Thirty days and eight; just two before forty.

This time the Prince's bottle bore no name beside a barrel bungler from down the road. Its

glass was punt-less and smoked and made a shoddier stamp on Paulo's bench.

"Morning, Mr. Gepetti. I trust you had a productive evening." He slid the bottle just a smidge further into the room.

"Oh yes, thank you. We had a nice meal. Very lovely." As he said it, the thought of an invite occurred, but he put it in a special place to save for later. "What's this?" he said, plucking up the bottle. "I have a glass, Prince, but I'd prefer you drink your rot gut outside. Pipe's still not quite there."

"Oh no, Gepetti. I brought you the finest brandy yesterday and it was too much. This..." swinging, un-stoppering and then stamping down the bottle again "is for your payment. Drink up!"

"Hardly worth my month, Prince. It's rather an insult, really. I can clean my tools with that one, but it isn't for drinking," with a bit of a laugh. "Thank you again, Prince, but that's not what I had in mind. Just a glass of brandy, thank you. And I suspect your pipe should be finished tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? And what of your payment? I'm a man of my word and you will have your brandy, pipesman. But I'm at a loss. Neither I've

brought were worth your while. Would you reject a third bottle from a Prince?"

"Just pour me a glass of brandy, Prince. That's what I ask. We'll discuss it when you see your pipe on the morrow. Don't trouble yourself about it until then." Gepetti wasn't in the business of making Prince's mad, at least not purposely. But his words were terribly unnerving.

"On the morrow, then, Mr. Gepetti. My patience is growing thin." The Prince turned to take his leave and the bell above Gepetti's door jingled.

"Before you go!"

"Yes, Mr. Gepetti."

"Don't forget your, ah, brandy," it sloshed in the bottle when he held it out.

"Keep it, pipesman... Clean some tools."

"Very well, Prince. Take care," a sentiment that was answered only by a jingle and a slam.



Thirty days and nine had come at long

last. *Close enough*, would be the mind of a Prince who'd been trying for a few days. What did Ol' Gepetti know?

Paulo was back at jumbling around jars of washers, some tools, and a box of stems and mouth bits. Every speck of dust and carved curl was swept clean from the floor. Some were popping in his hearth; the rest rode the tinder box. Coffee wasn't on the stove and no snifters were pulled from their place. But on the piper's table, set out to a bottle-less one-knocker of a Prince, was a small wooden box topped with a ribbon bow and a brass key.

"Welcome, welcome," called the pipesman to the Prince. "And a fine day it is today."

"Indeed. You are well, I see," but his eyes were fixed on his prize. "Is that...mine?"

"It is. Go on...open it. I made the box as well. I hope you like it."

It was quite an exquisite box, really. A rich, deep mahogany inlaid with bold briar and a hearty brass lock. The initials *V.G.III* were carved well enough that they should have been pressed by a machine. Viktor brushed his thumb to feel that they were as smooth as glass. He thought of his father's father and then of his own. Untying the ribbon, he freed the

key, and unlocking the lock, he loosened the box topper. It wore hidden hinges that held it propped open.

"Is this some kind of joke?" Gepetti's smile sunk from both ears at the Prince's challenge. In fact it wasn't. In fact, it was some of his favorite work.

"I don't understand," though he understood just fine. "Do you not like it, Prince?"

The Prince dumped the box and the pipe plunked across the table. There wasn't another hidden, as he'd hoped. "Mr. Gepetti, I came here asking for you to carve me the finest of pipes. What is this? I am a very rich man. I told you that price was not a matter. You chose to charge brandy, not me, now where is my pipe."

"It is a fine pipe. One of my finest. I have only ever carved one other... You said it yourself, Prince, you are a man of means. You can buy yourself the richest of pipes. If you would give this one a chance, break it in, I think you might find it quite rich, quite to your liking."

"You're serious?"

"I'm terribly serious. Indulge an old man. If it's not perfectly to your liking, I will carve you

what you want, free of charge. But I've not been wrong, Prince, and I don't intend on starting now."

"Alright. Pack it...you're a pipesman, and you seem to know best."

"Oh no, not here. Please join me for dinner tomorrow evening. At *my* house. I already have the brandy, and we can pack our pipes. It's not an invitation that I often extend, but it would be an honor."

It took the Prince quite by surprise. Gepetti's reputation did precede him, but the last few days were frustrating, and the pipe that he made was lackluster. Something about the man, though, was rather honest. His heart was on that table and the Prince knew he had to pick it up. "Alright then. Dinner. Tomorrow. What should I bring?"

Gepetti smiled and his smile turned into a good laugh. "Thank you, for finally asking." Paulo moved so he could put a slap on the Prince's shoulder and help him pick back up the pipe. "You can bring bread. No tricks; just bread. See the baker, he'll know what kind. My address is there," on the card on the bottom of the box. "Bring your pipe."

"I'm trusting that you aren't wasting my time. You have one more day, pipesman."



This time the Prince came knocking on a different door. Gepetti wasn't home yet, on the fortieth day, though it was half past his quitting hour. Prince Viktor's knees were buckled by the smells from the supper table when he was asked inside.

"Please sit, may I take your coat? Paulo should be along any minute. Can I pour you a drink?" His little wife was as charming and true as they came; a genuine matriarch; the only with whom the pipesman could have made such a family.

"Thank you, Mrs. Gepetti. Your house is lovely. Can I bring the bread to the table?" More than fourteen settings made four loaves make more sense. The Prince thought that the baker was playing him like Gepetti and his bottles, but it appeared as though they'd just plain needed that much bread.

Gepetti's Mrs. tapped a glass and bottle in front of the Prince and pulled the cork. It didn't look much different than the second bottle that he brought for Gepetti. It may have been the very same, even. He'd think Gepetti was playing

him, but three more just like it sat on a shelf. So, to Gepetti, the Prince drank.

Paulo's home was cobbled like his carving shop. However humble, his cupboards were full and his fire was roaring. It was dark, but it was warm. The ceilings weren't high like the Prince's, nor the cups and plates as fine. Hell, the brandy wasn't a bottle he would cellar, but for once in a great long while, the Prince felt home. *What does Ol' Gepetti know?* he thought. And the man himself was no sooner home and kissing his wife than he was greeting the Prince.

"Papa!" came calling kids that were previously nowhere to be found. From out of the woodwork they came. He greeted each like they were the only one and one by one, they took their seats.

Gepetti owed and offered no apologies to the Prince, but for his wife he explained that "lots needed fixing, alright. At least two months' worth! Sorry I'm late, Mama. Shall we eat?"

The Prince was served a heaping helping first, and he dug in right away. Paulo shuffled, but it was one of his girls that said "Please, mister. We wait until everyone is sitting." Paulo shrugged and then the Prince joined him in waiting. When all were sat and all were served,

Paulo spoke some words of thanks and then he said "Mangia!"

As with his work, Gepetti liked to take his time to enjoy a meal; he made sure he did it right. His bread wasn't buttered by the time the kids were through. Most of them were patient. Eleven of them, all, ready to get up and go, having to wait, not all that interested that the man was a Prince. Even Garbanzo was long done before the pipesman, but he indulged in some small talk. It *was* mostly talk of pipes and good blends, and if anyone could hold a chat on pipes it was Ol' Man Gepetti; the finest of the pipesmen.

To one of his sons, Lord knew the Prince couldn't remember which, Paulo said, "Please go fetch my pipe and pouch." To the next he said "matches," and to the third, "an ash bowl and knocker, please." Each of them lit like a lantern. "Shall we, Prince? Let's pour that brandy now," waving his new friend towards the open, snapping hearth.

His boys couldn't hide their excitement to bring their Papa's pipe. Gepetti pulled two turned tampers out of his vest pocket and tossed one to Garbanzo. "I made these today. Let's drink to a good meal before we strike up our pipes."

Mrs. Gepetti, and right about on cue, walked in

a small table to set between the two men. They had a floppy hound dog that sprawled in front of the fire that made no bother that the man was there.

The Prince pushed a glass to Gepetti and thanked him for dinner. He un-stoppered the bottle and splashed some brandy into Paulo's cup. Gepetti sat staring. The Prince splashed just a little more. Gepetti furrowed his brows and even made a little smirk. When the Prince leaned in to fill the glass, Gepetti took the bottle. "That's enough, Prince. That'll do."

"Alright, Gepetti, what gives? We've had a tough week as far as brandy goes."

"Oh, nothing, Prince. Can I tell you something that my Papa taught me? He taught me to live life like you pour your brandy. Let me ask you, how did my wife pour your brandy?"

"If I remember, she didn't."

"Precisely. My brandy is your brandy, Prince. She let you pour your fill from my bottle. When you poured first, I thought: *does he think I'm saving it?* The second splash: *don't do me any favors, boy.* And when you filled my tumbler: *does he think I have a problem?* My brandy is your brandy," and he slid the Prince the bottle. While Garbanzo poured his own

Gepetti turned his glass over into the hearth. His dog damned near hit the ceiling from the explosion. "Ha HA," said Paulo, with a slap of his knee. The Prince slid the bottle back so Gepetti could pour. With a big smile he said "Thank you, Prince. Don't mind if I do. But just a little for me. Let's pack pipes."

Garbanzo pulled the pipe from his pocket that wasn't exactly rich enough for his tastes. Gepetti pulled his from his pouch. The Prince almost didn't believe his eyes. His pipe was exactly as Gepetti's pipe was: not overly long or underly long because it was just so. They were both stained so that much of the grain was hidden and they were both straight billiards. Or dublins, maybe, with not too much a taper.

"Now about that pipe, Prince. *Go easy* at first; it's not broken in yet."

"I know, I know. Start with a half." But the way he said it wasn't hurried or annoyed. He was walking the pipe carefully around his hands now, starting to realize that it may be quite special after all.

"No, no. Nonsense. You can fill it, but *go easy* so it doesn't get too hot. Once it's good and caked, have at it. I've got some mild flake that

I've pressed myself. That's what I break in with, if you'd like, but I have whatever you'd prefer."

The Prince packed what Gepetti packed and then they both fired off a charring light. At once the Prince was transported, and then they lit again. It was like magic. Never before had he ever experienced a Gepetti pipe, and in the home of the man himself. Gepetti made sure that it was an experience that money couldn't buy.

"Do you know what is special about this pipe to my boys?" The Prince didn't know what he was driving at. "It belongs to their Papa. Much in the same way that yours belongs to a Prince. It doesn't need to be rich to be special. Does it draw alright?" His only answer was a throaty, smoky moan.

The pipesman sold the Prince much more than his pipe. And he certainly didn't need to make him another. They traded creamy rings of smoke and, finally, the Prince shared stories of himself and his family. It was a good night for a pipe.



About the Author

Andrew S. Cioffi works as a disability services professional at a local university in Boston, MA. By night, though, his dreams of dragons and samurai were calling enough to start writing things down. With a passion for great stories and great mythologies, he is equally inspired by comics, graphic novels, chambara films, progressive metal, and high fantasy of all sorts. Aside from hours spent enjoying the finest teas and pipe tobaccos, Andrew is an avid archer and skeet/trap shooter. His other talents include all things cooking and eating. But his biggest inspiration comes from his family. Born in Everett, MA, and well-traveled throughout the Greater Boston area, he now lives in Malden with his wife Christina and three amazing kids.

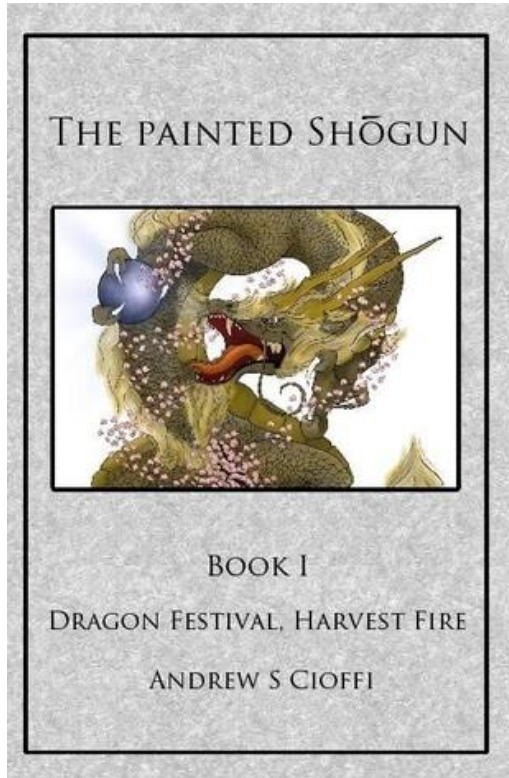


About the Artist

Benjamin R. Cioffi is a graduate of Salem State University with a degree in Art Education. He currently teaches in a special education setting. He is the younger brother of the author. Ben is a talented illustrator, painter, sculptor, digital artist, glassblower, story teller, writer, archer, and musician. Ben's other publications as illustrator include *The Gospel for Children* (2011) by John Piantedosi and Ben Cioffi, and *Dragon Festival, Harvest Fire* (2013).

Also Available By Andrew S. Cioffi

The Painted Shogun – Book I
Dragon Festival, Harvest Fire (2013)



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Glossary of Terms

Billiard – A classic pipe shape; typically found with a straight shank and un-tapered chamber. Some would say “basic” or “plain,” but others would disagree...

Briar – A root wood with the perfect qualities for the crafting of smoking pipes.

Bunger – In this case, a man who hammers the corks into liquor barrels.

“Churches” – Short for Churchwarden. A long stemmed smoking pipe. Favored by those who tend towards a cooler smoke. And shire-folk.

Czech tool – The three pronged pipe tool pictured at the end of the story. Any piper worth his salt has lost hundreds of them. One has been included here so that it may never go missing again...

Dottle – Either the plug of un-burnt tobacco leftover at the end of a pipe, or a mix of said tobacco, burnt bits, and ash that it tapped or blown out after smoking.

Dublin – One of the earliest and most classic pipe shapes. The tobacco chamber is tapered, giving the characteristic cone-shaped bowl.

Ebauchon – A partially shaped block of briar that has yet to be drilled or shaped into a pipe.

Freehand Bent Brandy – Freehand is a carving style. A “brandy” pipe is one whose tobacco chamber is shaped like a brandy snifter. “Bent” refers to the curve in its stem.

Nose warmer – Nickname for a short-stemmed or short-shanked pipe.

Plateaux – A partially shaped block of briar that has some burl and bark attached; the bark is left intact to accentuate the final pipe.

Punt-less – A “punt” is the indent at the bottom of finer bottles of wine. The absence of one here refers to the low quality of the brandy offered.

Straight Tomato – A straight stemmed pipe with a short, round, squat tobacco chamber.