

Fireside Dialogues: The Watchdog's Worth

A Behind-the-Scenes Look at the Duffy & Ward Social House

BY SLOANE DUFFY.

The storm that had come from the Irish Sea finally moved beyond the limestone ridges, throwing heavy sheets of gray rain against the leaded glass windows of our private apartment above the pub. Inside, the only sounds were the steady, rhythmical pop of the hearth fire and the crisp rustle of freshly printed broadsheets.

Burton sat deep in his high-backed leather armchair. One of the two or three that are carefully positioned in the places he might stop for more than a few minutes. A half-emptied glass of ale rests on the side table. Across from him, I flipped through the massive pages of *The Thornwick Badger*, a slight, amused smile began to play at the edge of my lips as my eyes scanned the bold ink columns.

"Alfie has outdone himself this time," I said softly, gesturing to the page with my reading spectacles.

"He's calling your new soil regenerator a 'greenhouse giant' and warning the valley to watch out for the blue sparks on the dray lanes."

Burton let out a quiet, rumbling sigh, though there was no real heat in it. "The man looks a gift horse in the mouth and immediately checks it for hidden gears. I am trying to clear the furnace soot from their own children's schoolyard, and he writes as though I've marched a Tripod into the market square."

I set the broadsheet down on my lap, looking across the firelight at him. My gaze softened. "And yet, you ensure the independent press has enough paper stock to run its weekly print. Your advertising buy-in makes certain everyone is paid. I know you like Alfie, Burton—in spite of the fact that he is an unrepentant muckraker. I think I finally understand why you support his little newspaper."



Miss Sloane Duffy, Commodore Burton Ward and Saoirse, The Pub Mascot

I leaned forward slightly, feeling warmth of the fireplace on my face, "It is because he keeps everyone honest."

Burton looked at the dancing flames for a long moment before capturing my gaze. "Nobody should have too much power, Sloane. Not the Great Western directors, not the Parish Council, and certainly not us. It is precisely why we need people like Alfie. If we are going to build a progressive future here, we need someone stubborn enough to question the blueprint."

I nodded in quiet agreement, a mutual understanding passing between us.

"Speaking of people who question the blueprint," I murmured, "This man in the long scarf wasn't entirely a figment of Arthur Pendelton's over-indulgence, was he?"

Burton looked up, his brow furrowing. "Oh?"

"Zuzu admitted to me this morning that she let a gentleman and his spirited companion into the Social House late Tuesday eve," I explained. "She hadn't yet thrown the deadbolts on the door. She said the traveler was remarkably peculiar—but exceptionally polite, so she let them in out of the damp for a quiet pint."

I leaned back, folding my hands. "But here is the curious part: the man inquired about you specifically, Burton. And before he left, he claimed that the two of you have met once before."

As I described him, Burton smiled almost imperceptibly. His eyes drifted back to the hearth, the faint, knowing pull at the corner of his mouth softening his otherwise stern profile.

"Once," he murmured, his voice dropping to a quiet, reflective tone that seemed to travel back through decades of fog. "When I was a child."

Sloane Duffy is a fictional character and co-founder of the Duffy & Ward brand universe, created by Sloane Duffy Media LLC. She rides every morning, manages the books every afternoon, and has never once missed a brew day. © 2026 Sloane Duffy Media LLC.

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