

## Handsome Is As Handsome Does

A Reggie Buckhorn tale, Reggie and Lodge © E.O.Costello

As I said to the Magistrate only the other day, life is full of little misunderstandings that people always blow up out of all proportion. He agreed and promptly fined me ten pounds for affray and destruction of property, but for some strange reason seemed quite uninterested in exactly why I had grabbed a shellac of Cole Porterhouse's "Love on the Rocks" off a picnicker's gramophone and used it as an impromptu ocean-going discus. He was far more interested in the literal blow-by-blow argument afterwards when the somewhat peeved stoat tourist got up to demand restitution, payable in the hide of yours truly.

Some magistrates, it has been said, are inclined to be stiff with visitors and travellers whose ways are strange to them. My misfortune was that the beak had already seen me several times in the three months since my arrival in the jolly Spontoon group, and although familiarity might not yet have bred actual contempt it had depleted whatever store of the benefit of the doubt he may have had on first seeing a handsome buck of good family, though I may perhaps say it as should not.

So I was at least spared the somewhat embarrassing task of explaining just why that particular lyric has dropped to the muddy bottom of the Buckhorn hit parade, and is liable to stay there for some considerable time. And it had all started off SO promisingly ...

"Lodge," I expounded one breakfast-time, looking out at the noonday sunshine from the hotel balcony "What could be finer than this? Late Spring without the chilly showers, indeed a Spring balmier by far than the finest Summer day back home. The fresh air beckons and the promise of adventure likewise!"

For some reason the prospect of my getting a running start at Adventure rather than the usual mode of falling into it like a workman's excavation left unlit, had Lodge's whiskers drooping. "Indeed, Sir. Am I to lay out your Tennis whites?"

There was a long moment when I considered agreeing – had I thought of the idea myself no doubt I would have been on the courts that day and things would have been different. The incident with the mixed doubles and the crate of overripe oranges would doubtless have happened a week sooner than it did, but that is another story. But it doesn't do, don't you know, to have one's paid employees coming up with the day's orders rather than carrying them out.

"No, indeed. Fresh air, sunlight and wide open spaces beckon. Specifically – there." I pointed across the waters to South Island, the nearest portion of which was barely a mile away and heavily jungled. But a little further off was a bay, a glittering prize that the hotel binoculars had resolved as an inviting expanse of beach-front watering holes and sun-soaked sands; there had been intriguing twinkles of light that I interpreted as cocktail-shakers being worked with vim and gusto.

Lodge raised an eyebrow. "The beach-ensemble, Sir? Do you think that wise?" He has had a down on the idea since the little episode with the ornamental gondola and the surprisingly souped-up motor that admittedly left me in the soup.

"Wisdom is where one consumes it. In vino, veritas. Yes indeed, the beach-bag and a suitably nautical outfit to wear en route. I shall make a day of it, exploring fresh fields and pastures new. The scenery is reputed to be wild and surprising, but unless there should be a trail of spilled moonshine leading in the jungle direction I doubt I shall need a guide. And in such a case – no guide will be needed, now I come to think of it. What can go wrong?"

To judge from Lodge's expression, the reply could have filled a library. But the fellow knows his job; being my valet and not my librarian he wisely said nothing.

The trip to South Island was uneventful, and I practiced the heroic pose standing in the bows of the water-taxi, nose upraised and horns cleaving the fresh briny air. It attracted some jeers from the louder-shirted types heading back towards Casino Island, probably to the Miniature Golf, Massive Croquet or other such vulgar pastimes. I replied with dignity and silence; in a less gentlemanly and more swashbuckling age a Buckhorn would doubtless have replied with dignity and chain-shot.

“Ah, Wilderness!” Half an hour later I was in my element – not actually in the wilderness, but looking out at an inspiring view of same from a beach-side watering-hole that happily sold more inspiring things than water. “The delights of fine Nature in all its green and succulent splendour.” The bar-tender had proven to be no wild fellow of the forest but a well-trained devotee of his art, and despite the savage, untamed scenery there was no lack of sapphire blue gin or properly chilled vermouth. That is what I like about the Spontoon group, the Natives have the right priorities when choosing which pieces of Civilisation to import.

A late luncheon of stir-fried bamboo shoots and some local breadfruit mousse quite fortified the inner stag, and half an hour later I felt inspired to explore. The bartender, a jovial hamsterish-type fellow, proved a mine of information on the attractions of the immediate area, Resort Bay according to the tourist brochures and North Fluke according to the nautical types (South Island looking on the map rather like an anchor that has bravely tried to swallow a turnip whole.) For help with any more arduous exploration he pointed to a table with various sturdy Native types sunning themselves and looking rather like a gymnasium class at tea-break; evidently the local Guides are picked to be able to carry a customer home if necessary. A useful skill that I filed away for possible future needs.

“Such a glorious day, one hardly feels tempted to struggle through pathless forest and bleak mountain-tops – a thirsty exercise at the best of times, or so they tell me.” I explained, waving a hoof at the sun-soaked sands “I feel in some need of fresh air and solitude, but in reasonable dosages. Somewhere not too far from suitable succour.” The bartender pulled out a tourist map and made some obliging suggestions.

So it was that a quarter of an hour later I had passed the last big Hotel, the Topotabo whose bartender came highly recommended for my return trip. There is a jolly camaraderie amongst the priests of the bottle, and they are often willing to pass around appreciative worshippers. The trail to North Fluke was scenic indeed, with patches of well-tended jungle and Native garden plots plus a few market-gardens being busily worked by the industrious locals to provide tomorrow’s salads. Hard work is a fine and noble thing; I can happily stand and watch it all day.

The scenery was mostly shown as flat on the tourist map I had glanced at, but as I strolled along the edge of the beach there were occasional crags of twenty feet or so that ran down to the sea. These afforded a good vantage point for anyone athletic enough to scramble up them, and in beach costume one feels adventurous. There had been a definite lack of recognisable tourists in sight since I passed out of waiter hailing range of the Topotabo Hotel, and apart from sturdy sons and daughters-in-law of the soil tilling their crops the area was distinctly quiet.

Just then I looked northwards and saw a sight to inspire poets and artists – on the next crag fifty paces up the shelly strand I beheld the shapely silhouette of a doe, sunning herself on the rocks. For an instant I was reminded of that Wagner opera I had once sat through, with big strapping Rhine Maidens perched on every crag (some sturdy tunes to be sure, but I found the production just a little too long-winded by about six hours.)

A closer examination showed a lack of braided blonde head-fur, spears and winged helmets, which was probably a good thing. The maiden was not a one hundred percent match to be sure, apparently being a red deer rather than a white-tail, but as I reminded myself my luncheon of bamboo and breadfruit was also excellent despite not being on the menu at home.

Part of the delights of foreign travel is it broadens the mind most wonderfully, as opposed to sitting in a stuffy London club and broadening the waistline as my revered Sire prefers.

Just then the wind changed and some snatches of voices blew my way, evidently from a sizeable party of folk. Another figure joined the doe, and for a second my ears dipped as I expected to see some stag as husband or swain having beaten me to the post. But the silhouette was decidedly female as well, a ewe by first impressions, and I decided that as fortune favours the brave I should trot over and present my complements.

Rounding the corner of the rocks, I was struck with a vision of massed loveliness – rather like those Adventure yarns where the dashing hero finds the lost valley full of lissom maidens of compatible age and loveliness, in defiance of whatever chances those anthropomorphologist chappies might predict from their population studies. There were nineteen or twenty there of all sorts and species, but all looking extremely fit and evidently just drying off from a sporting morning to judge from the beach towels, volleyball net and suchlike sporting accessories.

Of course, it is a little difficult to plan whispering sweet nothings to one of a crowd, even such a delectable one. I bowed low before the bevy of beauties. “Reginald Buckhorn, at your service,” I swept off the Panama hat and smoothed down the Guatemala collar of the costume. “The Tourist guidebook was fibbing awfully when it said the beaches were the loveliest feature of the island, rather than their dazzling denizens.”

This provoked a few giggles, and feeling encouraged I invited the entire team back to the Topotabo hotel for a tipple. It doesn’t do to stint, you know, and to be honest some of them were the sort of sporting, athletic girls one would not really want to slight. The stately home opposite my Sire’s estate has some ruined ancestral castle that was “slighted” in the Civil War by being torn apart and demolished with gunpowder, and the athletic sort of girls sometimes return one sort of slighting with another, so to speak.

It came as something of a shock to hear one of them speaking in broadest Lancashire tones, an accent one associates with smoking mill chimneys and windswept snowy moors rather than tropical beaches. “Ey, lass, get thi’ tail down ‘ere!” She called up to the red-furred doe who was looking down from her lofty perch with surprised interest. “Gent’s offered to buy us a drink. No askin’ fer a bottle of Moet an’ Chandon, mind!”

I could feel my ears dipping in puzzlement, as I heard a decidedly Canadian accent reply with enthusiasm. I had assumed these were the sisters and such of the mostly male native Guides I had seen back at the hotels; there was a certain hard-trained look to them which matched convincingly.

“Ah. I perceive that even these fair islands are not enough to have produced such beauty unassisted.” I could spot some definite exotics in the crowd; although there is quite a mix of species one sees wearing Native dress, today was the first anteater I had seen.

The canine who seemed to be their ringleader gave a short bark of a laugh. “E looks safe enough, girls. Nay, Mister, ‘alf of us are Spontoonie right enough, rest’s from all owver t’ place. That’s Lorelei tha’s makin’ eyes at, up on t’ rocks. Tha’s got reet good taste, she’s a grand girl.” For some reason she seemed highly amused.

The Gods were definitely smiling on the Buckhorn cause today, I told myself as I led the procession back ten minutes later, heading for the important part of Civilisation, that which clinks and pours over ice. There are always newspaper folk around when one least wants them taking snaps of one’s adventures that end up as Exhibit A in the courtroom, but I would have been pleased to see one obligingly snapping my arrival in the village with twenty fit and charming ladies. Had I taken my banjo along for the trip, it would have made a rather natty variant on the Pied Piper.

From what I could gather the swimming team had been about to head back in to Resort Bay anyway, and my arriving just then had proven good luck all round, except for my pocket-book. Happily I had picked up my allowance just the day before; it would have reassured my dear

Mother to know that today's bar bill was for twenty people and not just my own modest consumption.

"Bartender! Drinks indeed for the loveliest ladies in the Islands!" I waved expansively, as I suddenly expensively crowded the terrace bar of the Topotabo Hotel with Lorelei and her merry friends following. The prosperous gleam in the host's eye was mixed with a look of astonishment; the Buckhorn chest filled with pride as I realised how this must look. One reads of film stars crowded by admirers, and I had not even had to work through rehearsals to get this part.

As he filled the diverse orders which ranged from white wine to eggnog, the arboreal ancestored bartender looked me up and down in evident puzzlement. "There you are Sir – drinks all round for the South Island Formation swimming Team." The squirrel leaned closer and I dropped an ear to listen. "You do know who these ARE, Sir?" He asked with a strange note of concern in his voice. "They're, well, famous around here."

"And quite rightly so! How could such a concentration of beauty go unnoticed? Like hiding one's light under the proverbial thingammy. Fame and glory deserve to go to the fairest ones." There was an odd sound as of some of the established customers choking on their drinks for some reason.

I sought out the fair Lorelei at the far end of the bar, who raised her glass approvingly. It was outwardly a most encouraging meeting – I gleaned that she was working here in the Tourist season for one of the airlines, that she was definitely unmarried and spent all her off-duty time with her friends in sports and practice for the movies. Yes indeed, I told myself – how much better can it get, than to host a whole Bushby Barklay type swimming troupe as the only gentleman around? I had wondered a little about that, but too much talent in a girl can scare some fellows away, and to be faced with twenty is a definite stress-test of the moral fibre.

It suddenly became rather hushed behind me, and I noticed that only Lorelei and I were talking. There was a sort of gleeful expectation in the air; back at Eton the Masters who heard that sort of silence from their class suddenly developed healthy levels of paranoia and double-checked their chairs for drawing-pins and whoopee cushions. I could see the Anteater girl actually taking notes.

Just when I was about to ask Lorelei her telephone number, there was a canine-clearing-her-throat sort of noise, and the Lancashire lass clapped a paw on Lorelei's exquisite shoulder. Her expression as she turned towards me was somewhat stern and yet not unsympathetic, resembling the Oh-dear-Sir-HAS-gone-and-done-it-Again of my Sire's butler when collecting me from the local police station after another perfectly understandable misunderstanding.

"Thank you kindly for the drinks, Mister. We've got to get owwer to Casino, it's auditions tonight. Miss Margot Melson's casting for 'er latest, and we're all in it. All of us, tha' knows?" She shot me a penetrating look, deep with meaning. I could tell that much, but the actual meaning obviously bounced off the Buckhorn bean.

"Well, yes, right-oh!" I beamed, ears perking up. "Just tell me the stage door to wait at afterwards and I'll be there, on the dot! Whenever the dot may be."

The canine sighed, shook her long head and tried again. "I mean, we'd work for free if she let us. In a M. Melson extravaganza – and if that's heard the stories, they're all true. An' summat more besides."

"Jolly good! See what you mean. Respectable girl can't have stage-door Johnnies hanging around calling for her at all hours. Reputation to consider and all that." I confess I had never heard of the film-maker in question; evidently the local Penn cinemas had not seen fit to stock that brand. "Marleybone Hotel for a late supper then, eleven tonight? Of course, bring a jolly pal with you."

The canine lass cast a sharp glance over at Lorelei, who had her mouth open about to say something that was evidently considered unwise.

“Nay, the party will be on till reet late. Miss Melson’s famous fer it. And you’re not on the guest list.”

One of the other girls, a vivacious canine with a stunning figure, whispered something about if I had a sister, she would be more than welcome. Pyjama parties and such were all the rage amongst Vassar girls when I was at Penn, and it sounded as if much the same went on here. “Jolly good.” I always try and stay bright in the face of disappointment; after all there is always tomorrow. “Till next time, then! I hope a good time is had by all.”

At least three elbows went sharply into ribs and midribs as various people began to respond and their neighbours thought better of it. Then, they did all look the definitely hard-trained sort that one sees flying over racecourse fences with the horse remaining on the other side and carrying right along without complaint as long as at least one leg still works. Slender damsels though many were, none looked particularly delicate and indeed a healthier crowd one would travel far to find.

Lorelei thanked me kindly for the drink, and I bowed with some of the old-world charm (courtesy of my I.V. league education) as she and her friends left for the giddy world of bright lights and film cameras. What a team! Had I a sister, I told myself, one could be quite sure she was in safe and appreciative paws there; with such sturdy companions any parent would be sure that however late the party ran till she would stay out of trouble.

“Lodge,” I enthused, returning for dinner and a white suit to replace the beach outfit “the finest thing occurred today. Not only have I met a delightful doe, but met her friends and a more supportive crowd of beauties one will not find.”

Lodge barely missed a stroke of the iron as he pressed the Guatemala collar. “Indeed, Sir? One trusts her relatives or other gentleman friends will not object.”

“Well, that’s the surprising thing about it! There seems to be no trouble from that direction at all. So put your mind at rest, Lodge, there should be nothing like what happened in Samoa.”

“One trusts not, Sir. The locals were most irate.”

I waved a hoof dismissively, but in truth it gave me a pensive moment. Native lands do have some jolly odd taboos, and what is a merry prank to play on a co-ed girl back home has her relatives sharpening the shark-spears in other climes. “Fear not! I have no secrets from you, Lodge, and I shall relate exactly how this wondrous day rolled along.” And I did so, in somewhat expansive detail.

Having finished, I looked at Lodge expectantly. He has many reactions, has my sturdy valet, which range from a passive acceptance of calamity like unto that of Job, to a frantic packing of valises ready for a rapid getaway down the fire escape. A handy barometer of the situation, is Lodge. But on this occasion it was most odd; the fellow was keeping an absolutely straight face, though there was a tic of strain at the corner of his muzzle and his tail was quite trembling in some suppressed emotion.

“Well, out with it, Lodge,” I expostulated a minute later, lest he explode and do himself an injury thereby “In that below-stairs camaraderie of domestics you hear things that secret agents seek for and perish in vain. If the sweet Lorelei is married to a vindictive and jealous Chief Magistrate, that might be something I should know.”

Lodge let his breath out in a gasp: though beavers have remarkable powers that way he had been turning rather blue around the nose from holding it. “Oh, no, Sir, decidedly nothing on those lines. Not exactly. From all I hear, she and her friends were entirely honest with you as far as it goes, as was the bartender. They really are a prize-winning sporting team in these isles, and have many... surprising achievements. One might say they are well-known for being famous.”

“Well, that’s all right then,” I beamed. “Can’t have the probity of bartenders called to question. Civilisation would not survive the shock.” Seeing that I was not likely to get anything more concrete out of him, I dressed and headed downstairs suitably equipped to do battle with

Andre the Maitre'd: with an impeccable suit and a song in one's heart one fears no glorified waiter.

It was two days before I heard more of the lovely Lorelei and her jolly friends. The time had passed very happily, as I practiced my serenading on the banjo. Just in case any sweet-talking of their Lancashire leader was needed, I even added a George Formless track to my repertoire; one really has to be part Cheshire Cat to get the requisite grin, but the tune "When I'm Falling Out Of Windows" is easy enough and seems to be recognised even in the Spontoan group to judge from the reactions I received from passers-by (they all missed.)

It being that time of year again, I was heading out to my favourite International Bookmaker to put a flutter on the Oxford-Cambridge Boat Race. This year I had decided Oxford would win, and as a side-bet that they would overtake their rivals before the half-way mark on the way to Cambridge, somewhere in mid-Hertfordshire. "Tubby" El-Sharishah had cleaned up at Eton one year having wagered his term's allowance on thousand-to-one odds about the Oxford team being captured by Barbary Corsairs before leaving the Thames, though that was a put-up job with his family and the whole class knew it. But I digress. The International Bookmakers are right next to the Western Onion telegraph office for obvious reasons, and coincidentally in a part of town the more strait-laced tourists generally steer clear of.

Although I generally find cinemas rather pale imitations of real life, I have spent a few idle hours there (notwithstanding my Sire's normal grumbling that idle hours are the only kind I have in stock) and noted the posters going up of a premiere that evening. The name of the producer was prominent on the bottom of the poster, a "Miss M. Melson" plus a proud "filmed on location in the Spontoan Islands." Well! For want of a closer encounter, one could do worse than seeing the desirable doe on the screen, and I hastened to the box office to reserve a ticket for the evening show.

Film premiers are something of an occasion here in Spontoan, especially since this is shot locally and has a largely Native cast and production team, to judge from the posters outside the cinema. An interesting aside was this being the Polynesian/European edition, which I first thought was merely free of being dubbed into Californian accents. I had heard of these film variants being vaguely referred to by various companions of the bar-stool, often in meaningful terms too late at night for any meaning to be retained.

I must say, the Polynesian editions are something of an Education – not only do they save on dubbing, but quite substantially on costume. The film was nominally a standard adventure yarn, "Daughters of the Dragon Queen" with all the trappings of same, although the general plot was jolly odd when one comes to think about it. But it could have been dubbed in Serbo-Croat for all I was paying close attention to the dialogue, as Lorelei and her friends were there as supporting cast, in all their Native costumed glory – and as they say, less is more. I left the theatre more determined than ever to secure a date with the delightful doe; no student of the doe form divine would have cut that class had they known what would be on the curriculum!

The very next day saw me equipped with banjo and dressed to the nines and further, ready to head out again to South Island. Lodge assisted me with some degree of trepidation, though inviting Lorelei to dine was surely a simple enough mission.

"Now then, all set." I looked at my reflection, which nodded approvingly and in perfect sync. "Did you order the luncheon hamper from the Topotabo Hotel? Salads for two with enough to spare if she has a friend along, should fit the bill."

"Yes, Sir. All arranged to be picked up. But ... Sir, have you enquired about the young lady and her friends? General opinion downstairs has it there may be something you really need to know."

I fixed him with a steely gaze, “Gentlemen, Lodge, do not snoop. We may overhear things and stumble across titbits while otherwise engaged ... we do not snoop. Kindly remember that.”

The fellow breathed a deep sigh, rolled his eyes and held open the door for my dignified departure. A splendid fellow is Lodge, but from time to time one needs to remind him just who is the mastermind in this establishment.

Half an hour later I was back on South Island with the fresh wind in my nose and my banjo freshly fine-tuned for action. Despite my valet’s misgivings I had done some research beforehand: the fellow to ask about who goes where in Resort Bay is the deck-chair attendant on the beach. He sees all that happens from sunrise to sunset, and for a suitable consideration will tell all.

I found the chap busily engaged in putting up an extra row of chairs. These were of the usual pattern, a vicious complex of scissor joints quite capable of severing tails and fingers of any members of the public determined to assemble the contraption without properly qualified professional help. Rumour at Eton had it the designs were put together by returning troops needing employment and an outlet for the fiendish ingenuity that had been employed in booby-trapping and mine-laying throughout the Great War.

Be that as it may, five shells purchased good and fresh information: the delectable Lorelei had headed out to the West facing shore with three of her friends not two hours ago, and they had not returned past his beat. One rapid Westward departure ensued, with my picking up the wicker luncheon hamper fresh from the hotel’s cool room and carrying it the few hundred yards towards the beach. Fortunately it was only a light lunch.

In five minutes I was on the far beach again, and with a light heart and ears perked up spotted fresh hoof-prints amongst others in the damp sand. Of course Gentlemen do not snoop, but no deer rushes in where fools fearlessly tread, or phrases to that effect. The nearest rock crag was easily climbable without damage to the suit, and very shortly I was downwind in a commanding position to look over the nearest two or three little bays.

Some of my relatives have an unfortunate tendency to “freeze up” when caught in motor-car headlights at night; something in the ancestry makes the family prone to such inconveniences. I decidedly froze up at the sight, almost wishing the shock had been an incoming vehicle; the driver of such always has a chance to swerve or brake to avoid catastrophe. I had no such luck.

Item One: Lorelei in sight, on the next rock crag. Very good.

Item Two: Lorelei was with one of her jolly friends, the ewe I had met earlier. Both perfectly compatible with the salad luncheon I had brought along. Very good.

Item Three: Discovering that Lorelei is exactly as fine a figure of a doe as the film portrayed; one hears such things about make-up and special effects. Jolly good indeed!

Item Four: Discovering the actual reason why such a talented and attractive doe is still unwed and without at least a string of admiring bucks in the picture. She was exhibiting a clear preference for the company of the ewe. Her preferences extended into other spheres of vigorous activity as well, which were also on exhibition. Very disheartening indeed, especially for me.

I left the hamper by the side of the path they would presumably return along, a note explaining I was called away but would be happy if they would accept a luncheon on me. For some reason, I was no longer feeling peckish. It was a somewhat crestfallen stag that returned to the Topotabo Hotel, my very antlers feeling as if they were drooping.

The bartender looked up from polishing his glassware and cast me a sympathetic smile; possibly the deck-chair attendant releases his information free to those in similar trades. “A pick-me-up, Sir? I have a special recipe given to me by a most exotic guest; you’ll wish you had two heads to better appreciate it!” At my glum nod he did something with a slice of lemon and a bottle like a large gold brick.

My next clear recollection was being back on Casino Island, with Lodge paying off some large Native fox in a Guide's un-dress uniform who had presumably scraped me up and poured me into a water-taxi heading home (Lodge providently puts "Please return to..." labels inside all my clothing, which has proven handy on many occasions.) Though I might not as yet have gained two heads, the sensation was that the process was well underway via a split down the middle.

I looked out of the window, regretting my return to conscious thought until I looked down on the now lamplit scene. In the crowd I spotted a very different doe, a petite Oriental Muntjac type who was walking with another stag. At least, they walked together as far as the corner where even from that range I could see her giving him the brush-off; evidently he was of the right type but not quite right enough. Hope suddenly sprung eternal.

"Sir?" Lodge was offering me a large glass of iced water; in my weakened condition I drank the lot before remembering to complain it kills more people than Gin ever does. Just remember the Titanic. "Shall I run Sir's evening bath?"

I drew myself up, brushing my suit down. "Yes indeed. And then lay out my evening dress. The night is still young, and as Alexander probably would have said had he read the Spontoon tourist guide, there ARE new worlds to conquer."

But for all that, "Love On The Rocks" is still at the bottom of the Buckhorn hit parade.

The End.