

Hunting Season

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“Life is full of consolations, Lodge,” I mused as I relaxed on the veranda of the Marleybone, contemplating a large and consoling Gin and Tonic. “After every storm, a safe haven, after every fast, a feast.”

“Indeed, Sir. One may hope so. In this life one may hope for a great many things.” Lodge passed me the luncheon edition of the Mirror; just my luck that the lead stories mentioned a Vostok-registered freighter feared lost with all hands in a typhoon, and the reports of the latest famine in China (“Some survivors expected”).

I turned up the old Buckhorn muzzle, waving the afflicted paper aside. “Strength comes through Adversity, they used to teach us at Penn; what does not kill us, makes us stronger. Some philosopher chappie said that, and who are we to question his professional judgement?” I would if pushed have been the first to confess that next to some folk my exposure to Adversity has not been great unless the rigours of Prohibition count, but then I have no ambition to develop enough strength to star in any Circus side-show. All relative really. It is as that Oscar Wilde chappie put it: Arctic explorers may perish of exposure, but those of us in the social whirl perish without it.

“I’m sure I could not say, Sir. Possibly young Mr. McWhirter could give an opinion.” He referred to the head gardener’s brother at the ancestral pile; in the Great War someone on the other side had been unsporting enough to take the chemistry set into battle, and although he survived poor McWhirter’s lungs were about as much use to him for breathing as a pair of kippers, and would forever be so.

“Well, scratch one philosopher from our Christmas Card list.” I looked out over the sun-soaked beaches, feeling somewhat pensive. “But should he be right despite all the odds, my account should be credited with a jolly nice pile of strengthening any time soon!” Looking down at the paper, I reflected that the freighter might yet limp into harbour having weathered the storm and come within a whisker of an awful fate. These things happen; I should know, having just had the same experience. And as always, it had all started SO well...

It had been two weeks since discovering that the most delectable doe I had seen on the isles so far had been what one might say only too compatible with me. We shared the same healthful diet, the same love of sports and sun-kissed beaches ... and had the same taste in delectable maidens, which rather put the tin hat on the business. I had picked my spirits up with the aid of various spirituous pick-me-ups, brushed off the sand from my damaged feelings and forged on regardless. Heedless, as my one and only Sire would doubtless have snorted.

The gardens of Shepherds Hotel are of quite generous size considering that Casino Island is a rather bijou little place, and indeed the strip of quality hotels can hardly be more than four hundred yards until one gets to the Casino and the tour-boat end of town. Still, they are quite full of things to do with tennis courts and croquet lawns, plus one or two impromptu pastimes. Only the day before I had exchanged words with the Management who had taken a dislike to my improvement on lawn darts. This is not Wimbledon; there is no governing body to complain about mixing Lawn Darts rules with a drinking game I picked up in a rather swish speakeasy in Gnu York, and relatively few windows were broken considering everything. But I digress.

We had just been warned off the turf, so to speak, when Toby and I were finishing our medicinal drinks on the terrace bar. A Tonic is a health drink and gin has been recommended against snakebite, so by definition Gin and Tonic is a medicinal preparation. Just then, Toby's ears went right up at the sight of something evidently of great interest behind me.

"Don't look around ..." he said out of the corner of his muzzle, a move the ass has seen equine heavies make in too many George Draught gangster flicks.

The Buckhorn imagination was tickled. "Police? Hold-up men?" I speculated, and then a shiver ran down to my tail-tip. "I say, it's not the bally Temperance League again is it?"

He grinned, and strolled past me. "You can look now – but I saw her first!"

I'll say many things about that ass Toby, but he does have a discerning eye for a neat pair of hooves. By the time I had untangled myself from the scissor-jointed strait-jacket that is a modern deck-chair, he was talking with a decidedly delightful Muntjac doe. She was dressed entrancingly in a blue summer dress with a silken parasol to shade her nose; if those Finishing Schools do not devote a term just to the enchanting twirling of a parasol I would be most surprised.

Well, it never pays to crowd a scene, and if Toby was her cup of tea then so be it; I concentrated on standing elegantly with the rack silhouetted against the skyline. There's a painting of a jolly fine old Highland stag in just such a pose on the walls of my ancestral pile, and it never fails to draw the attention of the Aunts. With such blisters of Aunts as I am afflicted with, anything that can draw their interest must be strong medicine indeed.

So it proved; Toby has a canned spiel that he goes through on first encounters, he says it saves him thinking time while he sizes up the heavenly vision in view, while I say he needs all the thinking time he has just remembering not to drool. As it happened, he had reached the part concerning "I am but a poor adventurer, but my riches are piled high in my heart and soul" when I noticed the doe's eye beginning to wander, and I could see her adorably delicate ears flicking with interest as she spotted me.

I would be the first to acknowledge that Lodge had done his usual exemplary job on the costume that day; the suit was the best white linen that my wardrobe can offer, cut specially for me by Pantz and Sons of Piccadilly. They say that no man is a hero to his valet, and indeed Lodge puts up with much that only a Gentleman amongst Gentleman's Gentlemen would withstand. Be that as it may, if I didn't look a million dollars in that outfit, a pocketful of small change would have made up the figure with sixpence to spare. I may have my occasional limitations but my stock is kept high by a truly heroic valet.

"Won't you introduce me to your silent, handsome friend?" Was the first thing I heard her say, and indeed one could have a worse beginning. Toby's ears went down like yesterday's lettuce salad left to wilt in the sun, as he realised his prospect of whispering sweet nothings into the lady's ear now stood at sweet nothing. But like a good sport he bowed out gracefully, introduced me slightly less gracefully as "The Buckhorn of Buckhorn's Battered Butter Beans fame" and trotted off like Napoleon deciding Moscow was not such an attractive destination when he got there as the travel agent had promised.

I confess that my recollections of the next half hour are rather blurred, not entirely since I insisted on buying the doe a drink to share (which she gracefully accepted, a Champagne Royale blushing pink with just a spoonful of Kir syrup. Important things such as drinks I never forget.) But rising from the pleasant cloud of

impressions I gathered the lady was called Soo Ti, and came from a line of Mandarins that marched back to the start of recorded history, and then some. She herself was San Francisco born and educated, but although I have partied in Chinatown there was nothing of the chop suey house or laundry about her.

“Mandarins. Wonderful things. Father has a plantation on the Malay Straights growing them by the boatload. Peeled and canned in a jiffy, don’t you know.” A second later I realised that I had put my hoof in it once more, and braced for a stinging retort or a stinging slap on the muzzle. Much to my surprise neither came; instead Soo Ti tittered most musically and engagingly from behind her parasol. Another well-spent term at her finishing school there, I shouldn’t wonder.

Anyway, the upshot of it was that I watched her dainty hooves depart along the promenade, my heart as light as her hooves at her promise to return that way the next day. It was a buck who floated on air as light and far more gracefully than any Zeppelin, that returned to my rooms to change costume that day.

“Lodge!” I expounded “You will never guess in a century what has happened today!”

The fellow looked me up and down, and sighed a deep but heartfelt sigh. Thinking back on it, I may have been somewhat like a one-armed soldier walking into a Harley Street paw specialist and challenging him to spot the problem.

“And where will Sir be meeting the young lady?” He looked at me resignedly.

My temper was far too good to spoil with a snappish reply. “Tomorrow at Shepherds – the Good Shepherd guarding his herd, or something apt. Lodge, make a note for posterity of anything I say that strikes you as particularly apt, there’s a good fellow.”

He nodded obediently, but made no rush for the writing-desk.

“Anyway,” I continued, the vision of loveliness still fixed in my mind’s eye. “She is an absolute pearl, a cultured Oriental pearl.”

Lodge gave a discreet cough. “If one might point out, sir, the term “cultured” does not apply to the higher qualities of pearls. It refers mostly to the commercially farmed sort. There is frequent complaint in the jewellery trade of the Japanese flooding the market.”

I clicked my hoof in disdain for his nit-picking. “A pearl of high culture, then, an Oriental delight, a delicate vision the like of which one expects only in ancient tales involving things delicately flitting through the misty woods like ... what are those things that delicately flit through the misty woods, Lodge?”

“Poachers, Sir?” Sometimes the fellow truly has no soul.

The next day I had recalled where I had seen Soo Ti before, it had been from my own window the night I had found out about how closely the adorable Lorelei’s tastes matched my own. Unless there were two such does on Casino Island (and my eyes are permanently peeled for the sight, be it at a quarter mile down the boardwalk) I had seen Soo Ti giving some other gent the brush-off. She had done the same for Toby and shown a kind interest in me; evidently a doe of sound tastes and good judgement.

The crowd around the luncheon counter at Shepherds was much as usual, with the higher priced clientele showing their refinement. My ears went right up hearing one suave Germanic wolf ordering and getting “Eiswein” which is not simply iced wine but a staggeringly rare Teutonic vintage made of frosted grapes that they feel fortunate to make a few thousand bottles of a year, and almost never export. I would have heavily bet against any having made it to these islands, unless perchance heavily

guarded in the Diplomatic bag and decidedly not for public sale. Just goes to show, a fellow may find unexpected delights in surprising places.

I had just ordered my own modest luncheon tipple when the finely tuned Buckhorn ears detected the sound of hooves. It was earlier than I had expected Soo Ti, and as I turned I reflected happily that it never rains but it pours, as I well recall from the playing fields back home. The crowd respectfully parted for a tall cervine lady, a Springbok unless I miss my guess, one of those types where the ladies come complete with their own sets of graceful horns. The idea of Does with horns is a rather odd one to my family, but it looked perfectly natural on her and one could have far worse surprises from a lady, as a college chum discovered when he once dated that spotted Hyena. (What made it still worse was he was majoring in Psychology and realised there was one fundamental female envy she simply could not get, which shattered his hitherto slavish belief in the principles of a certain Sigmund Fraud. But I digress.)

“What ho! Reggie Buckhorn at your service.” I bowed glass in hoof without spilling a drop, a useful trick to know; on other occasions I have fallen flat while keeping the drink intact. One must get one’s priorities right in life. “May I offer a tribute to loveliness?” I gestured to the priest of the cocktail-shaker, who looked unaccountably wary as he viewed the new arrival.

She smiled at me entrancingly: her head-fur was striped and beautifully brushed. “Thank you, sir. A mango juice please, over ice.”

I waited for her to elaborate on the ingredients but to my astonishment that was the full extent of the order. While not as shocking as having a lovely doe order a rare and bleeding steak for dinner, it quite rocked me back on my hooves. Had her dress not been very summer-styled with bare arms I might have suspected there was a sinister armband underneath identifying her as enlisted in some undercover unit of the Temperance League.

I raised my glass to hers, and consoled myself that it had not been her buying me the nursery-style drink. “Cheers indeed! And may I say it is a splendid sight to see so lovely a lady here from the Commonwealth.” It was certainly a nicer sight than the other part African deer I had known; at Eton the prestigious salaried post of official School Bully had been filled to bursting by “Sjambock” Smythe-Nkwame, whose lesson to the Junior classes every Commonwealth Day was that all wealth was now common property and we had better hand ours over or else. I hear he’s in Parliament now, and is hotly tipped to be a future Chief Whip for his party.

The doe smiled disarmingly; that level of instant disarmament would be a wonderful asset to the League of Nations. “Why, thank you! I must tell you, I am absolutely off-duty, right now.”

“Oh, well.” This was a little confusing; in all the films folk who try and offer policemen a hospitable hip-flask at crash sites while they await the tow trucks are told the professional forces cannot indulge while on duty, not off. “I’m permanently off-duty myself, one might say. Never did me any harm.”

Had I not been expecting Soo-Ti to drop by at any minute, I might have been more outgoing, as the Springbok lady (Miss Stella, I discovered) was definitely a sight for sore eyes and a sorer heart. But does are too rare here to risk one of them colliding with the other, don’t you know, and so after a few more minutes of entrancing chatter I had to tear myself away and head for the terrace bar and my appointment with the Eastern Charmer. A funny thing is direction: from the Spontoons Soo Ti’s Chinese roots make her a Westerner, but being born in San

Francisco restores her claim to being an Oriental pearl, and dash what Lodge says about them.

I've waited in my career many a long hour for ladies to turn up, and it was an enchanting sight to see the sight of the Muntjac maiden appearing bang on time like those famous Italian trains one hears about. Her costume was different, a rather more respectable outfit with a darker silken parasol setting off her pale silky fur to a "T". I've never been sure what the famous "T" might be that everyone speaks of, but Soo Ti has it and not just in name.

"Mister Buckhorn. I am so pleased to meet you." She smiled bashfully, twirling that parasol. Her tail did not actually flag, but it twitched entrancingly.

"Call me Reggie! Everyone does!" I tactfully omitted the "*except police and magistrates*" part of that. "Shall we take a promenade?"

It being lunchtime, a few minutes' stroll inland seemed indicated to the Golden Crab, a somewhat uphill and upmarket eatery where a doe of refinement can dine on the finer products of the islands. We might have roughed it by dining out in Tower Hill Park, but the park-keepers tend to get somewhat irate when one snacks on their prize blooms.

Soo-Ti looked around shyly as the Maitre'd showed us to a fine table. "Such a fine place, Reggie! Are you sure you should spend so much?"

I waved a hoof idly. "Fear not! While folk are snacking on Buckhorn's Better Butter Beans, there is honey yet for tea and all such fine things."

This provoked a heartfelt sigh. "Fortunate buck! My family, they fled China in the Boxer Rebellion, left all behind them. We are poor but we have our honour. Little else." There was a short pause and then a delicate sniff.

I hastened to proffer a napkin just as the waiter started to hover like those autogyro pilots only wish they could. I ordered us a shared salad of baby beetroot on a bed of tender shoots of beech and hawthorn. Delicate fare indeed for a delicate damsel.

It is strange how people change in different company. The waiter on the way back took the order of the badger gentleman at the next table like a polite and deferential ghost, but as soon as he was in the kitchen I could hear him yelling like a dockhand to the chef "One meat and two veg, one beet and two hedge!"

Still, the meal went down well without any further crudities, except for the crudités that followed the hors d'oeuvres. Soo Ti proved an exquisitely attentive guest, and was happy for me to chat about the old family firm, which indeed is quite a topic.

"The sire imports tea from your homeland, of course," I expounded, as the salad arrived "but the Buckhorns haven't really entered China as we'd like to."

Her eyes went wide and I mentally kicked myself reflecting on the choice of words. I thought I had fallen flat on my snout again, and was bracing for her to upend the salad bowl on my horns when she blushed, and dipped her muzzle charmingly.

"I feel I am perfectly safe with you, Reggie." Her eyes moistened as they looked up, and I fought to control my beating heart and beating tail. "As if I was your own sister."

"Don't have one, and that's a fact," I told her "or a brother – in fact I have a singular lack of siblings. There's just me, the one and only – and to hear my sire go on, that's one too many as it stands."

"Oh!" Her eyes flashed for a second. "That is so sad!" She gently took my hand-hoof in her own. "So sad."

I don't recall much of the rest of the afternoon, except to add that liquid refreshments were consumed in surprising moderation. We walked through Tower

Hill Park and braved the wrath of the aspiring storm troopers disguised in Park Keeper outfits. Fresh hibiscus never tastes as good as when foraged for and shared.

Over the next few days the pattern was much the same, lunching and promenading with the delightful damsel. She was the very soul of discretion, and indeed was always gone by nightfall, where I do not know.

“Lodge,” I breezed into my room having taken farewell for the evening. “I am the most fortunate of bucks! I know the Orientals are used to some jolly grotesque demons and rather sub-rosa deities for that matter, but Soo-Ti turned not a hair even when I described my sire to her in all his ghastly details! There’s a doe of spirit for you.”

Lodge looked at me most oddly. “Yes, sir.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Lodge, how is it you manage to disagree with me even while agreeing? Are there some mystical arts in which valets are initiated? Not to be insulting, but you would make a fine politician.”

The fellow sighed. “Might I enquire if the young lady asked after your father’s age and state of health?”

“A gruesome subject to be sure, but she spared herself nothing. She was most sympathetic when I told her the sight of me nudged him a pace closer to apoplexy every time. I had to reassure her that my own health is of the finest, early mornings aside.”

“Yes, sir. And has the young lady been as revealing as to her own origins?”

I paused for thought. “To be honest, barring the fact that her people were highly ranked in the local gentry since the year dot and possibly the week before, she has been enchantingly modest. Sole survivor of the line and all that, educated by a poor but honest Aunt whom she writes to every week. Sent out here for her health, she says, after some ruffians tried to kidnap her in San Francisco. Something about they wanted her for the Barbary Beach or the like, but I’d have thought that was more Sahara than California.”

“Very melodramatic, Sir. A tender damsel in need of rescue.”

I must admit, I somewhat got up on my high horse at that and dismissed Lodge for the evening, before making a stately descent to the Shepherds Bar. I had been imbibing very modestly there the whole week, not wanting to oversleep a luncheon date, or have some magistrate insist his was the more urgent appointment with me. The Law is singularly unforgiving at times, generally at the worst possible times.

My mood lightened considerably when I spotted the delicate horns of Miss Stella, who was gracing a table with another lady. What her friend’s exact species was, was quite a question; she had wolf-like ears but a banded tail and charming fur markings, and scented most delightfully of musk. A thing us deer set great store by, don’t you know.

“Mister Buckhorn! Nuala was just telling me about you.” Miss Stella smiled, inviting me to her table.

“Enchanted!” I bowed and kissed the proffered paw, thanking Providence that the two unattached does had not collided as yet. “Reggie Buckhorn, at your service!”

“Nuala Rachorska, at yours. Of the Yekaterinburg Rachorskas. But this is our night off.” She looked me up and down most keenly, as one might a racehorse at Ascot before deciding to chance one’s shirt. I recalled seeing her before; though generally by moonlight and indeed I had passed a few friendly words while she apparently waited for her bus (an oddly pointless thing to do on Casino Island I should have thought, but there’s no accounting for beliefs.)

Miss Stella accepted another Mango juice, and Miss Nuala seemed to have finished her appraising by the time she had accepted a lemon squash. I assumed they were nurses of some kind, as Miss Nuala at least surely kept rather strange working hours and both seemed very cautious of their health.

“Everyone speaks well of you, Mister Reggie,” the stellar Miss Stella began “we see all sorts, and everyone says you’re a Gentledeer of distinction. We wouldn’t like to see you get hurt.”

My ears dipped. “I say! Is this a protection racket? You know, leave the moolah behind the third deck chair on the beach at noon and there won’t be an “accident” involving me and a grand piano falling off the roof? Or forged receipts from a Euro Slave organisation “found” in my pocket when the local police next invite me to chat?”

The doe’s own ears dipped. “Nothing like that! We don’t want anything from you.” Her gaze softened. “Well no, I couldn’t. You’re too nice.”

My gaze must have registered my confusion, as she carried on. “People aren’t what they seem to be. Believe us, we make a living that way.”

“Aha! You’re actresses! That explains the late hours and the natty costumes!” Things seemed to fall into place. “I love a good show myself – are you working at the Coconut Grove?”

Miss Nuala’s huge banded tail swished elegantly. “Well, sometimes we pick up employment there. You could put it like that. No, Mister Reggie, we’re telling you that you shouldn’t take things at face value here. Otherwise you might regret it. Just to warn you.” With that she thanked me for her drink, rose and I waved a puzzled farewell the pair of them.

When feeling rather left in the dark, as is not uncommon around here, I often seek a local street-lamp of knowledge in the form of my rickshaw driver Po’na. Other folk seek enlightenment at the feet of mystics and holy furs who generally dwell at tops of inconvenient mountains with no waiter service; I find I get just as good a result from the worthy fox who hauls me around the island (and generally hauls me out of embarrassing situations at no extra fee, enlightenment thrown in gratis.)

“Po’na,” I addressed him, relaxing in the seat and instructing him to head up to Luakinakina Park for fresh air and solitude. “I am confused. And it is a delicate situation. Two well-meaning and mysterious ladies have given me a heartfelt warning, which is nice of them. Unfortunately I have not the foggiest what it refers to.” With that I passed on the conversation verbatim, though avoiding names or species.

That worthy fox scratched between his ears, slightly puzzled. Suddenly his ears perked up. “Ladies being Outlander-deer with horns also Spontoonie ring-striped lady fur possessing, scent like unto watermelon?”

I nodded. “Like unto a beautiful and ripe musk-melon, a delight to all the senses. I can see there’s no deceiving you. Do you know them?”

A look that started off somewhat crafty and turned to pious innocence washed over the fellow’s muzzle, rather like a fellow sufferer at Eton being asked if he was guilty of a rather well-done prank that was actually providing him with useful ideas for the morrow. “Ringtail-lady of melon-scent treasurer is, also organiser, local entertainers Union. Give-she licenses for Casino Island.”

“Jolly good! So you’d say they’re well-informed and trustworthy types, not prone to flights of fancy? If so, what the deuce were they warning me about? There’s only one new arrival in my social calendar, after all. They can’t mean ...” I caught his expression. “Oh come now, seriously, I mean to say. Soo-Ti of all people? That

exquisite treasure on hooves? What on earth can they have against her? In anyone else of lesser beauty I'd suggest pure jealousy."

Po'na looked up at the rising moon, his eyes wide and his tail swishing slightly. "Outlander-deer small in size maybe big ambitions, affirmative."

I whistle-snorted at the thought. "What, you too? Honestly, that poor orphan doe? As charming as she is honourable ... and you don't need a license for that."

The sturdy fox rolled his eyes. "Missy Rachorska not give license for what she say Muntjac lady do. She say own Union honourable, affirmative."

I gathered up my dignity and returned to the hotel in a frosty silence that would have made one of those clattering new air-conditioners choke on their fan blades in envy. And provide enough chill for every gin and tonic Shepherd's serves in a week, besides.

The next two days were gorgeously sunny, and carried on much as before. Luncheons on the beach, with the demure Soo Ti providing excellent company. She never tired of hearing about the Buckhorns; unlike many folk of American birth she was highly impressed that my Sire was heading towards a title that would thereafter run in the family. But then, until the recent aberration the Chinese have had a proper government these past four thousand years and more, and appreciate such things.

Still, although my eyes were mostly fixed in her direction the deer family have not survived so long without a jolly sharp peripheral vision. Somehow I sensed that there was always someone watching, if not Miss Rachorska or Miss Stella, then one of their nattily costumed friends. It became something of a bore.

It was on the Friday that Soo Ti was ten minutes late for the first time. When she arrived I could see her eyes were decidedly red-rimmed, and she seemed decidedly distracted.

We were on the beach looking out over the jungled expanse of South Island when she broke the news to me. "Reggie, I am having news from home. My Aunt, she is having trouble with the money. She ... is approached by the head of another Clan, he ask for me in marriage. I fear she will have to say yes. Part of wealthy clan then, all debts paid."

I was thunderstruck. "I say! She can't just go around trading you off against the grocer's bills! You don't sell your relatives like that!" I must admit I paused for thought imagining some of my Aunts measured vis-à-vis settling certain tailor's accounts. The notion was tempting. But dash it all, the tailor would hardly advance a button-hook once he had actually seen what I call Aunts for want of a better word.

"If she calls me, Reggie, I must go. Have family duty. No money in family, only good name left to us." She smiled up at me bravely. "Three days before letter go, come back. That long at least you-me." There was a deep sniff, and her tail drooped as she looked across the water. "So much not done here. Never been to that shore even, too late now."

"Leave it to a Buckhorn! Tomorrow we shall go and explore the furthest fastnesses, if you wish. Picnic and such on the beach, then we shall put our heads together and puzzle out a way ahead. I'll make it all right with your jolly old Aunt, never fear. Tomorrow, just you wait and see!"

"Tour of Jungle! Very cheap, ten shells! Rimu Raga show all, tell all!" The voice came from under something like a mop of black string, from which poked a vaguely canine muzzle. It was mid-afternoon and I passed over the ten shell-note as well as the hamper for the fellow to carry. A well-lubricated teatime seemed in order,

and with the prospects of being far from a hostelry I had brought along ample for my own use. Soo Ti hung onto my arm bravely, as we entered the pathway running through the woods facing Casino Island.

This Rimu Raga chappie was an odd sort of Native; most of the ones I had seen at the dances and especially as Guides were quite tolerably well-set up sorts, even the ones that did not remind me too alarmingly of my hurried departure from Samoa. But having arrived after luncheon it looked as if we had the last one in the box; although he was canine it looked as if he had been living on more green salads and less red meat than would suit him. Far from being equipped to carry me home through the trackless jungles, I would have thought him hard-pressed to pull my golf bag. I certainly learned a lot of dubious facts about the island (“See Mone’hama quicksands! Thousand foot deep, never measured by science!”) and would have retained more if not for the charming doe at my side, who was looking around with evident wonder and delight.

“Pomotaha Beach. Very fine! Pirates come here hundreds of years ago, bury treasure, old Islanders say. Treasure never found, they say.” The nondescript canine brought us out of the jungle about a mile past the hotel strip, on a secluded little cove that faced away from Casino Island. I had him put the hamper down and spread the picnic-rugs, after which he skulked back on the path evidently communing with Nature in the raw.

“Reggie! You should have not!” Soo Ti protested gracefully, as I opened the hamper and showed her the delights within. “You have even found Pak Choi – here ?” The Oriental greenery had been something she had mentioned, and by haggling with the stout Oriental shopkeeper on Casino Island I had purchased the plants I had seen growing in his private vegetable garden.

“Nothing but the best, for the best.” I told her truthfully. She insisted on taking charge of the meal, and soon the popping of corks was added to the restful sighing of the waves and the rustling of the leaves. “What could be finer?” I asked the world in general as she handed me a fizzing glass of pink champagne, chilled on ice.

Our glasses chinked, and she smiled entrancingly. “I will always remember this – even when I must go home to another. This has been a day of wonder – here with someone I can trust.”

“Oh, I say,” I remember saying as I drained the glass “don’t let’s worry about that now! We have all afternoon then the Guide can take us back and ...”

Exactly what happened next I cannot quite recall. I have sampled most things that will pour, even substances sold in speakeasies that were labelled as “drinks” with actual quotation marks around them. I would have sworn that looking at any quantity of drinkables I would spot from a distance the point at which I stall benignly, as the pilots say, without any suddenly alarming moves. On that scale, I was cruising along in clear blue skies when the wings and tail suddenly parted company.

“Reggie!” It was a delicate hoof patting my cheek some time later when I next remembered anything. The sun was low and dipping behind the trees as I blearily looked around, and suddenly was as wide awake as if one had grabbed the wrong leads on the motor-car battery.

Scene: one empty beach, save for the rumpled picnic blanket and empty bottles. I only recalled opening two of them, but every one was completely drained. No sign of our trusty Guide. On said picnic blanket, one doe reclining. One doe in considerable dishabille, with an expression that would puzzle an artist tasked with combining shock, surprise and a noticeable dusting of breathless delight.

The Buckhorn ears went out in a close match as far as the shock and surprise goes. “Umm, Soo Ti, surely we didn’t, I mean, I didn’t ...” That was as far as I got before a small tongue licked my muzzle. Huge brown eyes stared up soulfully at me, a tear forming.

“Oh, Reggie. Whatever can I tell my family?” Her ears drooped, as she looked down and tried to smooth her skirts. “What am I to do?”

Well, there are times when a Gentleman can only make one choice if he is to remain a Gentleman. I took a deep breath. Things were not quite as I had planned them, but looking at the adorable maiden – no, lady, I firmly told myself, I had no choice. And it didn’t look like such a bad choice, all things considered. “Soo Ti, I would like you to ...”

“STOP RIGHT THERE!” It is a good thing my constitution is a strong one, not damaged by dissipated living, or two such shocks in a row would blow the jolly old tracks off, as my cousin Captain P would say. Stepping out of the trail were three folk, a group which one would not have thought probable. Our guide Rimu Raga was one, and Miss Stella was another. I was about to remonstrate about it being no time to be jealous and far too late besides, when I spotted that despite the minimal uniform the third one of the team was a Spontoonie Constable. It was Miss Stella who had spoken, and she stepped out to the fore.

“I say!” My ears stuck out at improbable angles as I tried to work out what to say to whom. “The lady and myself are having a private discussion! It may be a public beach, but we were here first.” Soo Ti hugged me tight, her eyes wide but a most peculiar expression on them as she looked at the Springbok. The expression was rather more reminiscent of bayonet charges than marriage proposals.

“Missy Sooty say yesterday, find finest beach nobody disturb. Jolly fine!” Rimu Raga was gesticulating proudly at the scenery. “Plenty tourists, they come to be alone. Today we get here, Missy Sooty give ten shells for Rimu Raga go away and stay away, is fine! Wait a minute and creep back through bushes check she all right before leave her. See her putting something else that fizz in tourist champagne. Is not fine at all! Run back to Hotel beach, see Missy Stella, see Constable Nope’ha on beat. All run back just in time!”

The constable cleared his throat; badgers are not noted as fleet runners but he evidently kept in top trim. “Mister Buckhorn, Sir, I arrived to see you fast asleep, and the perfectly dressed young lady reading a book and looking somewhat bored. She looked at her watch, opened the remaining bottles and poured the contents away, then artfully disarranged her clothing and attempted to wake you. In which she was eventually successful.”

I was about to remonstrate over the shocking waste of fine wines when I noticed that the tender maiden who had been shivering in my embrace was no longer doing so, but twenty yards away along the beach and accelerating at a rate that would make her a hot tip for this year’s Berlin Olympics.

With a most unladylike wicker-snort Miss Stella launched herself on a pursuit course, and as the two figures broke the Casino Island speed limit I spotted that fleet though Muntjac may be, longer Springbok legs pay in an extended race. There was a strangely hollow feeling as both dear does receded in the distance.

“Officer,” I remonstrated “can’t you go after them? They’ll tear each other to pieces!”

The badger scratched his head, and looked down at his shorter legs. “Can’t see as how there’s anything to arrest them for, unless you’d want to press charges?” As I shook my head sorrowfully, he shut his notebook with a snap. “Shouldn’t think they’ll

do each other any lasting harm Sir – neither can afford it, in their respective professions. Besides, technically the beach between the tide marks is out of my territory.” He looked around, hopefully. “If you’d accompany me back to the Police Station I could telephone the Naval Syndicate, they might be able to do something before Monday morning?”

All I could do was sigh, and motion Rimu Raga to gather up the empty plates and bottles for our return trip. The fellow was still telling the Constable about all the Pirate treasure reputed to be buried near the beach, but the officer somehow seemed rather unimpressed. As I took a last look around at the deserted beach, I reflected on my day. “Some folk might find the treasure here, and good luck to them. After all – when you’re digging for gold, I don’t suppose the fact that you’re hunting ill-gotten treasure crosses one’s mind. Around here, at any rate.”

It was the next evening that I heard the finale of the tale; I was glumly returning to my usual moderate ration of gin and tonic (light on the tonic) that a friendly hail announced the arrival of Miss Rachorska. As ever, a light aroma of musk-melon soon perfumed the place, and indeed there is a lady who has no need to buy perfume.

“Mister Buckhorn! Stella asked me to find you. She’s had to go, her licensed time was up. I saw her off on the seaplane this morning.”

“Unhurt, I hope? And the lovely Soo Ti?” I motioned to the barman who filled her order for a barley water; I’m sure these actresses need clear heads for their dress rehearsals.

A surprisingly wolf-like set of teeth bared for an instant. “Nothing that a week growing out her fur won’t cure. She’s gone too, back to the Barbary Coast to re-group and try again somewhere else.” She sighed, and looked up at me. “I can’t fault her tastes though. It’s a rare find these days, a complete Gentleman.”

“Better I’m sure than a Gentleman with bits missing,” I agreed, though none too sure how much of my heart had left on the plane. “Will Miss Stella be returning?”

She smiled. “Well, she might. But she’s sworn not to mix business and fun ... anyway, I don’t think your family would really approve, you know.” She added a few details, thanked me for the drink and departed in a delightful scent of melon.

I raised my glass in salute, not to one but three lovely ladies. One of them may have been a gold-digger but there are plenty of fine houses built that were earned with pick and frying pan on the icy shores of the Yukon. The other two – well, that was a surprise.

“Considering hunting the wildlife around here is famously Taboo,” I mused to myself, contemplating another lovely vision involving clinking ice “What on earth can anyone on Casino Island want with a Hunting License ?”

The End