

“The Horns Of a Dilemma”

A Reggie Buckhorn Story: Reggie and Lodge © E.O.Costello
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It was that ass Toby at the Croquet club who kept on going on about there being no joy without alloy, two sides to every coin and enough et ceteras to stock a reasonable grammar class if one really wanted an in-depth on clichés. Of course Toby can't help his species but it is irritating. I returned the irritation by beating him at every game, completing the platitude-fest by pointing that pride goeth before a fall.

But all this would have vanished like the veriest smoke cloud in the wind if not for what happened last week, leaving one feeling much the same as when some boulder in a Stanley Steamer flashes past one's bonnet at eighty miles per, leaving one with unpleasant speculations about how many whisker's worth of fresh air separated the speeding metal. Speeding metal, indeed! That was part of the story, without a doubt.

It had been one of those July days when the Spontoon Islands do their party-piece imitation of an open-air sauna bath, and humidity is going flat out to beat its old one hundred record. The ceiling fans at the Marleybone were going full tilt and I was trying to stimulate the local ice industry (plus making the deserving G&T wholesalers happy) when I saw a snout I'd not clapped eyes on in many a long year. Tommy Travers, of all people! I had been at University with him, and he had mystified us all by insisting on vanishing into the army. There was not much wrong with old T.T. in the brains department, and with his red fur green was really not a colour a reputable tailor would suggest he wear. His people had oodles of boodle, so what my pal really saw in the delights of muddy trenches and early-morning reveille was quite a poser.

Be that as it may, I hailed him and he recognised me right away – asking if I was an old grad by now, or merely an old undergrad. I could reassure him that I had received my papers, if not quite covered in academic glory then at least not covered with shame – and enquired what he might be doing in this neck of the jungle.

Well! It seems that he was not destined to be Officer I.C. Flagpole painting at base as we had all chaffed him, and he has wangled his way on various official jaunts around the jolly old globe at Government expense. Not that he ever said as much, but he might be the sort one reads about as having gone to Manchuria to see the view and come out with the Japanese Army's latest top-secret mess tin designs. At any rate, he is with a Delegation, whatever that may mean, and is currently hanging up his hat this month on Moon Island just across the waters.

It occurred to me that a change of scene might be as good as a rest, and when he suggested the Officer's Mess the old ears went up: it is rumoured to have a chef whose cuisine is as far away from bully beef and navy beans that it is positively antipodean, but being a strictly invitation-only place those rumours had been tantalisingly just out of reach.

Duty beckoned and he had to make his exit, but not before making a luncheon date for the following day, a Thursday when he had the afternoon free after working with the Natives on an exercise. If one believes the pulp comics they sell on Casino Island, these sort of islands are all stiff with batteries of 1918 vintage “Kokonuttenwerfers” as abandoned on German Samoa, that and a large general staff of witch-doctors who can call down a barrage of curses to make any artilleryman's tail bristle in envy.

“Lodge!” I expostulated to that worthy at suppertime “Tomorrow I am summoned to dine at the Officer’s Mess, and the question of clothing arises. What do you say to the tropical ensemble, lunar topee and all?” When first deciding to head this direction I had commissioned a rather natty safari outfit, suitable for whatever derring-do required to be done. It had resided unloved in the wardrobe since my arrival, having discovered there was more civilisation than I had anticipated, and to hear the Guides talk any unaccompanied visitor steps off the path into the Pacific’s main supply of quicksand and leeches.

Lodge raised an eyebrow. The outfit had not been a favourite of his. “I fear, sir, that appearing dressed as a nondescript military gentleman lacking all the badges of ... allegiance, might be misinterpreted. There are many such around here, to judge from the newspapers.”

“Dash it all, Lodge! A fellow would look out of place in white tie and tails in a camaraderie of khaki. One must make an effort to blend in.”

Lodge made an effort, himself. “Very good, sir. But at the very least, I recommend leaving the topee severely alone.”

“It’s part of the outfit, Lodge. You wouldn’t recommend I mix a safari suit with the old top hat, would you? The suit goes together, and that’s that.”

I’ve no idea how the fellow does it. Lodge said not another word, but his eyebrows spoke volumes. And the lunar topee stayed in its hat-box.

Thursday dawned perfectly sunny but with less of the steam-bath about it: I was up bright and early and taking my coffee and toast by ten o’clock, while some of the more fanatical denizens of the hotel were out hammering the tennis-balls with a suddenly renewed vigour.

“Moon Island! Wider than the Nile! I believe some Tin Pan Alley dweller sang about it.” From the hotel veranda one can just see a corner of that island, which is not actually off-limits but most tourists get a little disconcerted about all the Archie pits on the hilltop and the big piles of coal making the place look untidy.

“I believe it was a Moon River, sir. If sir refers to the popular song.”

“Pshaw.” I waved a hoof at Lodge; sometime the fellow has less soul than an encyclopaedia, although at other times he is as handy to refer to. “Whatever, I shall be dining there and seeing the views, such as can be seen from between the fortifications. I shall not be taking the old Kodak with me, as by repute military sorts tend to get a little huffy about such things. Besides, I doubt there will be anything particularly scenic on show.”

I was wrong, as it turned out. And at the time, I had rarely been so happy to be wrong.

The crossing was uneventful and the meal with T.T. proved delightfully up to expectations; with so many grand hotels in the Spontoons there are many places for an aspiring chef to train. One thing they are not generously supplied with is wide open spaces; on Moon Island they have to squeeze in all the facilities tolerably closely, and both the outdoor exercise yards and the firing range are within a cricket ball’s toss of the Mess.

So it was that I saw her. There were a round dozen young females strenuously throwing themselves over the exercise course while carrying unconscionably large knapsacks, and being dressed much like the denizens of the Officer’s Mess I assumed they were some Amazonian militia unit. The view was quite striking, and improved markedly when the twelfth one heaved herself into sight from the far side of a log

wall. She was not twenty yards from me, a slender doe with raven-black head-fur and light grey fur elsewhere outlining an athletic figure that had my tail disobeying standing orders and flicking itself dizzy. The doe looked around from her lofty seat straddling the wall and tossed her head back, her eyes a fiery flash of triumph.

T.T. noticed my gaze and reaction, and chuckled. "You're wasting your tail-waves there, old bean," he observed. "That collection of hellcats is from Songmark, and they have a certain reputation hereabouts. I wasn't here a day before I'd heard quite a bit about them."

"Pray tell," my ears might have been pointing his direction but my eyes were decidedly glued on the vision of loveliness in cervine form, now swinging between two ropes on a log frame. "In particular, that divine doe – the one any Hollywood studio should snap up at once if they need a star. The role of Diana the Divine Huntress springs to mind."

I heard T.T. sigh, and recalled that he knew me of old. "I'll ask around. They come here once a week, that I do know. But you might be better off looking elsewhere, from what I've heard."

"Chaste and aloof maidens all, I take it? Jealously guarded and chaperoned by cruel matrons, no doubt?"

For some reason T.T.'s drink went down quite the wrong way; a shocking waste of good pink gin. When he had stopped spluttering, he filled me in on what background he had picked up; Songmark being apparently no finishing-school but a severely practical course in self-help in whatever situation a venturesome lass might find herself in. "Dulce et Utile", I murmured, my eyes still following the vision, "Sweet and useful. They used to say a Yale man should be presentable at a dance and invaluable in a shipwreck. One quite understands the notion has caught on elsewhere."

T.T. made discouraging clucking noises, but stumped off to ask for local intelligence, while the object of my adoration threw herself across more obstacles with energy and grace. Eventually he was back. "Her name's Molly. Prosit." Was what I understood him to say, and with a heartfelt "Prosit!" in return I finished my glass in a libation to loveliness as he added details. That she had been a bootlegger's daughter detracted not a dash from her appeal; bootleggers have provided me with many of the finer things in life and it appeared they had not stopped at drinkables.

As even the longest day has its ending, the graceful Miss Molly finished her exercises and followed her jolly friends out of sight. From what else I gathered from T.T, it would not do at all to present myself at her college threshold and simply invite her to take tea – Songmark not being the sort of place with convenient balconies for wooing, and indeed looking rather more like a genteel prison camp by his description.

"Lodge," I declared on my return, "excel yourself. Spare no effort with the starch and clothes-brushes, I must shine!"

"Indeed, sir. At what hour is Sir meeting the young lady?"

I cast him a glance calculated to wither several acres of lush jungle. There is only one thing worse than being predicted, and that is when fellows get it right. "That is in the lap of the Gods, Lodge – and one must seize the moment they choose to stand and spill it, or rather the Goddess from their lap. Carpe Diem and all that – seize the carp when offered, lest it slip away forever."

I spent the afternoon in something of a haze, which was hardly accounted for by the well-lubricated luncheon. Once suitably attired it occurred to me that one might

do worse than take a stroll to Eastern Island and view the lie of the land, and following thought with deed I set hoof ashore there some half an hour later.

A bouquet of flowers is never handy when one needs it at an instant's notice, so I took the precaution of bringing one along. For all I knew this Songmark place might make a habit of sending its charges out to do good works after classes, and "be prepared" has been my motto since the week I was a fawn scout. It was a busy week with a sad misunderstanding at its end, but that is another story.

My heart and ears sank somewhat when I recognised the place from T.T's unflattering description; it resembled the Moon Island barrack buildings but with less charm courtesy of the barbed wire fence. There was but one obvious entrance and it was not unguarded; fortunately of its two guardians the fiercer-looking one, a bear maid of enormous proportions and sullen demeanour, left her post to walk along the fence. That left a friendly-looking mouse holding the fort, to whom I bowed and presented my bouquet and my complements. She was one of those I had seen exercising with my raven-haired goddess, and having introduced myself I enquired if Miss Molly was receiving visitors.

The murine maid seemed to find this highly amusing, and commented that it was more than her ears and tail were worth to let me inside. Looking around furtively, she said she had a photograph of Molly available, and could tell me where to find her at the weekend – but it would cost me five Shells.

A small price to pay, I told myself as I parted with the quaint Native currency – until the guardian picked up the newspaper she had been reading, bowed and presented it to me with advice to look on Page Ten and then scam!

I am sure the editors of the "Daily Elele" wish everyone paid such a price for their journal. True enough, on the tenth page there was a photograph of Miss Molly with some friends, evidently coming first at some dance contest. The local style looks decidedly energetic, and the costumes entrancing – with the further good news that dance classes are held every Saturday on Casino Island, and the address. A dear piece of information, but well worth the money. Had I purchased the paper from the news-vendor it would have been ten cowries, but I consoled myself that the money was for knowing where to look.

As the bear returned to her post and asked her companion (Beryl, I discovered) what was going on, I decided to quit while I still had health and finances intact, and headed back with the precious paper and hooves that felt as if they were walking on clouds.

Unfortunately, the Gods seemed to have taken a dim view of me that weekend, for though I turned up in time and spruced up to the point at which even Lodge could do no more, my athletic angel did not attend. It was a fine spectacle though, and only whetted my appetite for more. There is a definite deer (and specifically doe) shortage around here, my folk not being exactly native to the Pacific, but the Spontoons seem to have a more generous ration than one might expect in Polynesia.

I did see the avaricious mouse again but decided against further enquiries in that direction: chances are she would accept another five shells and announce "Molly's not here."

On such a small island it is surprising how people can vanish, and Miss Molly did so until the next Thursday saw me back on Moon Island with flowers and tropical-issue chocolates ready to introduce myself. T.T. had spotted her already and like a pal he pointed me towards the firing range, where I expected to see the charming damsels gingerly potting at paper targets with their purse pistols.

Sometimes the Gods laugh at us poor deer. Just as I rounded the corner there was an appalling crash as if someone had cracked a whip the size of a bridge cable, that stung my ears most painfully. Five seconds later the experience was repeated, and then I spotted the cause.

Miss Molly was lying out on the rifle range most tenderly squeezing the trigger of the most monstrous piece of artillery I have ever seen. The healthy young cannon must have been seven feet long, and when she fired again the air shook and a ten-foot piece of ground was flayed of its dust and debris. With a blood-curdling shriek she picked up her giant-slayer, folded the bipod and charged forward at full tilt towards the target, a roughly formed dummy of plaited palm fronds backed by an iron plate. The impact on the plate had raised enough sparks to set the dummy smouldering but that was not enough for Miss Molly (and neither was its head-section having been blown clean off; evidently she does nothing by halves.) She reversed her weapon and with the butt end struck a mighty blow in an area that makes a chap's eyes water to contemplate, then added injury to insult and injury by some vigorous impromptu surgery with a saw-backed bayonet the length of her forearm in a virtuoso demonstration of "frightfulness".

As she reduced the unfortunate mannequin to shreds, she threw her head back and gave a laugh suggestive of her having a hyena for an elocution teacher, her hair flying and her eyes blazing with a hellish keenness. The range officer was shaking his head but saying nothing; evidently he at least was not surprised at the performance.

I left the range with my ears ringing and my heart sore, the bouquet in my paw wilting already. Though she is a delight to look upon, Miss Molly would not be safe company, especially when the time came for parting. It would not just a case of love lying bleeding, but innocent bystanders as well – and one can imagine the sort of souvenirs of a fellow she would put on her wall. I am very attached to my horns, but that might change should she decide a new rifle-rack would add to the décor.

"Lodge," I commented that night, wearily slipping into my bath-robe and contemplating my lucky escape. "Should any rabid-looking wolverine ladies appear requesting a date, do not dismiss them out of hand. One could indeed do worse."