

It's Called Soccer
Jason Shannon

“Yeeeehaw! My hounds almost got that damned varmint! Did you see that?”

“Indeed,” drawled Lord Sir Lionel Kensington, unenthusiastically, removing his pith hat as he turned the doorknob to head inside.

The estate was remote and isolated, which was the understatement of the century. About a half-day's ride into the hinterlands from Port Louis, one could be forgiven for thinking the ocean could simply swallow everything up around them, and London would neither care nor even know about it. Though it did make for interesting hunting.

“You head inside, my dear boy. I'm just going to go have a word with the missus.”

Lieutenant-Colonel Cletus McCormint was already through the door of the clubhouse, his muddy gloves strewn onto one of the high-backed leather chairs, his hands on the decanter of brandy.

“Y'all hurry on back now, ya hear? I'mma whoop your sorry British behind at billiards.” He sloshed a healthy pour into his tumbler glass and guzzled. “Next time, I'll bring you some of Kentucky's finest. An estate like this deserves more than this pisswater.”

“It would be much appreciated,” drawled Sir Lionel, stepping back out the clubhouse door as his American guest violently snatched up a billiards cue.

The clubhouse was a good mile and a half north of the manor, a stately, three-storey Georgian house which Sir Lionel had made his own these past three years. He mounted his horse once more and took off at a canter, eager to be away from his uncouth guest.

There was a chill in the air, the rolling hills of tawny green all around. The clubhouse and the manor were the only structures within view, from east to west, the sky huge above him and his horse. For as much of a boil on the rump of the Empire as this posting was, he had to admit the southern sky at night, which he and Eleanor often marvelled at, was a site to behold. It reminded him of Van Diemen's Land in his youth. Much clearer than Cape Town.

Arriving at the manor, his house servant rushed out and helped him dismount. He elegantly removed his riding gloves and handed them off to the boy.

He found his wife in the solarium. She was in her finery – tight bodice, conical skirts, a fine hat, powdered face, and a French cigarette – whilst she enjoyed tea time with their female guests. The Mrs. Cletus McCormint, a young belle named Annalouise, was not as refined as her host. Her hair was tied back sloppily and she wore ill-fitting hemp clothing. The Kensingtons thought the ongoing dispute in the colonies was affecting the textile manufacturing capabilities – that was a polite way of putting it – of her native country, but wouldn't vocally hazard such a guess. The third woman was Isabella Ramona del Ferdinand, the cherished paramour of Marshal López in Paraguay. Things were not going well for Asunción at the moment, and Her Majesty's government had unofficially seen Miss del Ferdinand to safety, here at the ends of the Earth.

“Oh, darling,” ejaculated Eleanor, bounding from her chair, “were you and our esteemed American guest successful? Did you slay any warrachs?”

The damned foolish fox, thought Sir Lionel. No sport in them. They didn't run when they smelt the scent of man. If the colonials down here in Stanley Town weren't careful, they'd slay them all without any resistance from God or Mother Nature herself.

"No, my dearest wife, the southlands dog evaded us once more. I fear this part of the island may have been denuded of them. Nothing will beat a proper English fox hunt, I'm afraid."

"Let's get you out of your hunting clothes," she said, ushering him into the other room and ignoring his comment on the dogs.

As soon as they were out of the room, she snorted. "That infernal trollop, the sooner she's on a ship, the better."

Sir Lionel, now unbuttoning his jacket in the dressing room, said, "Is the Spanish bird really so wicked?" No doubt his wife would make comment on the woman's amorous relations, her not being married to the marshal.

"Miss Isabella is but no problem at all. Why, her English is better than that American blowsabella. Have you heard the bird laugh? It sounds like a sow being bred."

"Indeed. Her husband is quite the blunderbuss as well," said Sir Lionel as he poofed up his moustache with some fresh wax. "He wants me to get snookered in the clubhouse whilst we play billiards."

Then a brilliant epiphany suddenly blossomed in Sir Lionel's mind. "Dearest wife," he said, ebullient, "ready the quill and some stationary. We shall send out dispatches at once."

"Husband, what queerness are you at now?"

"The quill, the quill, with all speed," he said as he sailed across the room to a stationary desk. "I say we stick it to the colonials, what? That vazey podsnapper down there wishes to challenge me for a ninepence at billiards. Well, I say we start referring to that very sport under the name badminton."

"But Lionel, we haven't a badminton court."

"No, I mean the sport itself, the one I'm to play presently, shall be called badminton."

"But there's already a sport called badminton," said Eleanor, confused.

"Ah, but there's the rub. Whenever someone refers to that sport, we shall pompously correct them, and say that particular sport is American badminton."

Eleanor held the quill with an utterly perplexed look on her face.

"Well, hop to it, lass. I still have mates in Parliament, even if they have abandoned me down here at the very edge of the world. And we'll send dispatches to the Hapsburgs as well, and Prussia, and Calcutta, and Cape Town. Have the young Miss del Ferdinand send out a missive to Asunción, and to Lima, and La Paz. Wasn't your maternal aunt a distant relation to Dom Pedro in Rio de Janeiro?"

"But, husband... this whole scheme, it seems rather twattish, nay?"

Sir Lionel merely grinned devilishly.

“Eleanor, dearest, I must go. The buffoon awaits. Say nothing of this his wife, I don’t want anyone in Washington or Montgomery hearing of it.”

Donning a new jacket, Sir Lionel went back downstairs, mounted his horse with the aid of the servant boy, and rushed back to the clubhouse where the hounds barked loudly in their kennel.

Stepping inside, Mr. Cletus McCormint had already imbibed a healthy measure of the ‘pisswater’ brandy, lounging in a chaise lounge beneath a mounted rhinoceros head. Around the room were the taxidermied heads of lions, hyena, gazelle and zebra. A stuffed jaguar from Sir Lionel’s brief posting in the Guyana Territory was nearby.

Mr. McCormint had Sir Lionel’s elephant rifle laid haphazardly across his lap. “What a fine piece. Y’all ever get the chance to use it?”

The American was clearly noticing the lack of an elephant head in the spacious clubhouse.

“Unfortunately, no,” said Sir Lionel. “He strode over and snatched up the precious firearm. “Shall we play? I would like to place a wager on this game of badminton.”

Cletus McCormint looked at the Brit, dumbfounded. “Uh... don’t y’all mean billiards?”

Sir Lionel was already racking the balls.

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