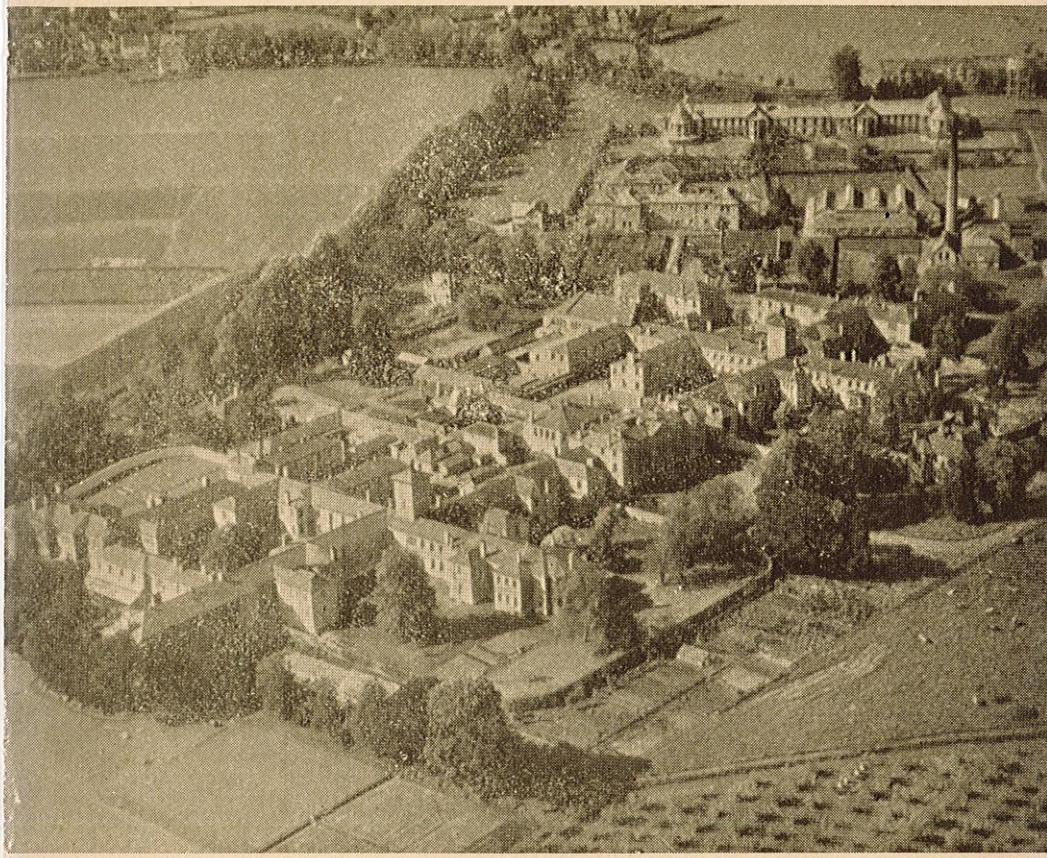


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A Seat for Ned

By Eric Walrond

"This is it, driver!" cried Ned Bewley, his hand on the doorknob. The taxi swerved alongside the curb and Ned leaped out. He was long and slender in the legs and big in the shoulders and like a rah-rah boy at a Harvard-Yale football game in the 1920s he was attired in a raccoon coat. The yellow silk scarf fluttering gaily about his neck had polka dots on it. His apple-round cheeks shone like walnut in the light of the taxi-meter.

"What's the damage?"

"Three bob," said the driver in a hoarse Cockney voice.

"Keep the change," said Ned, giving him two half-crowns.

The oyster chop house, the chemist's shop and the all-night cafe were ablaze with light. The news vendor's kiosk was placarded with signs in Greek and all the Latin and Scandinavian tongues. Here and there in the darkness of a doorway lurked a female shape. Hanging in a shop window were strips of sun-dried meat, bottles of Chianti in their fibre coverings and bunches of black grapes with the bloom still on them. Not even the levity of someone tickling the ivories or the boop-a-doop doop of a crooner broke the silence.

He strode across the pavement and pushed open the door of a pool room. A classy piece of window dressing: large, high-ceiled and brightly lit up and with Ginger in a condition of dreamy lassitude, his legs crossed and his white folded arms grimy with machine oil, lounging against the wall.

"I'm looking for you," said Ned, breezing past him, "Come on!"

He flung open the raccoon coat and took out a roll of pound notes. He split the roll in two and put one back in his pocket. Then, with Ginger sleepily tailing him, he pushed open the door at the farther end of the room.

"Anybody downstairs?" asked Ned, stuffing the notes in Ginger's hand.

A half-smoked cigarette adhered to Ginger's grime-edged lower lip. Unsteady on his feet, swaying gently and with alcoholic fumes on his breath, Ginger took the notes and counted them. Then, with his hands trembling, he folded the notes length-wise and clasped them between his fingers.

“ What’s the matter ? ” cried Ned. “ Got the St. Vitus dance or something ? ”

Ginger slowly passed his arm up over his forehead. So far that evening he had had only one drink, enough with its rich taste of egg and brandy to make him tenacious and dogged—a glass of Russian stout at the pub on the corner.

“ Why don’t you lay off the stuff, fellah ? Don’t you know yet that it’s no good to you ? ” A music-hall artist who “ rated ” top-line billing, Ned had found that soft shoe dancing and tobacco and alcohol did not mix. They were as oil and water. He was in consequence both a non-smoker and a teetotaler and although just as a friendly accommodation he never went out without a well-stocked cigarette case and would even accompany a friend into a pub (without consuming anything more potent than lemonade) he could still on occasion be a little intolerant. “ Suppose I started burning myself up with liquor and yellowing my insides with nicotine,” he cried, scared by the thought of the light jellied rhythm no longer oozing out of his legs, “ where d’you think I would be ? ”

“ Still in Chicago, I expect.”

“ Running an elevator in the Loop at eighteen dollars a week ! ”

Ginger glanced down at the winding flight of stone steps. Then he turned and looked up at the stairs and round at the side door leading to a dark alley.

“ You mean a lift, don’t you, Ned ? ”

“ Let’s go,” growled Ned, beginning the descent.

He clattered down the steps and entered the room with a burgeoning sense of power at work within him. His cheeks were tinged with a reddish glow and his astrakhan cap was pushed far back on his head. And the expression in his light brown eyes was cool, diamond-hard, predatory. This is it, he told himself, slow and crisp and precise of step as he moved towards the poker room in a corner of the vast, ill-lit basement.

“ Got a seat for me, Senegal ? ”

The big ebony six-footer from the French Ivory Coast shook his head. “ I’m sorry, Ned, I’m full up.”

Ned proceeded to satisfy himself that the Senegalese with his antipathy to slummers was not trying to keep him from seeing how ‘ the other half ’, cast up like flotsam from the Seven Seas, lived or

rather contrived to get by. (The have-not powers had begun to turn the heat on what Benito Mussolini called the ' plutodemocracies ', but the ' plutodemocracies ' were themselves in the depths of the Great Depression.) He looked into the poky, smoke-laden room. Round the table in the centre sat seven men in their hats and overcoats. The long stringy neck, beneath a Velour hat, of someone sitting with his back to the door was familiar.

“ Come on, Sky, cash in.”

Sky turned and glanced upward:—“ Hi, Jelly Legs.”

“ Come on out before I turf you out.”

A wry smile gathered about Sky's thin lips. He yawned and stretched, flexing his arms. Then he proceeded to stack the poker chips in front of him in neat, easily counted piles. He was not sorry to be pulling out. He had had quite enough of the dizzy whirl. When at midnight Senegal had switched over to a big game he had not been doing too badly. He had decided to stay on after all the small fry had been weeded out, but exercising what Ned would have called a “ piker's caution ” he had begun to incur the taunt of being a stone waller. Now, while still fighting to hold his own, a big gust of wind had blown in. No, Sky had no fault to find with Ned's timing. None whatever.

“ See him go, will you, Ginger?” whispered Ned over his shoulder, occupying the seat Sky had vacated. “ How does everybody play?” He flicked the edge of the card which had been dealt face downward to him. Ginger, hovering behind him, watched the cards fall. He had one foot on the cross-bar under the side of Ned's chair, his elbow was resting on his knee and between the fingers of his hand Ned's money was on display.

“ I play call or pass,” said Coolie.

Ned gazed across the low-spreading circle of light that fell on the table's green baize cloth.

“ Why, I didn't see you, Coolie. Where have you been keeping yourself, fellah?”

“ Oh, I'm about.”

Coolie, a Negro of Hindu admixture, sat with his chair tipped back against the wall. “ ' Who you say you is? ' He wasn't hard of hearing. He was merely stunned. He was on the jetty cording up timber floated down the Essequibo River when the water-police

launch chugged up and the johnny jumped out. 'I'm the Mayor of Georgetown,' the johnny told him for the second time. Ocean Shark gave a snort. 'Well, if all-you is the mare of Georgetown, I'm a Buckston stallion'. And he went on tightening the rope round the logs."

Coolie flipped a chip in the pot.

"You could always tell," he droned on, "when he had a good fossicking season. He would go to the finest livery stable in town and hire a carriage with four black thoroughbreds and ride around in state. The top of the carriage would be thrown back whether the sun was shining or not and there he would sit with his bare muddy feet sticking up on the back of the driver's seat. Every time he lighted a cigar it was with a five dollar bill. He'd never pass a tray with fruits or preserves at some 'poor great' body's front gate without ordering the coachman to stop. He would get out and walk over to the tray and lift up the edge of the napkin. 'Anybody home?' he would shout over the paling. They would peep through the shutters of the jalousie windows but wouldn't stir or say a word. Then Ocean Shark would carefully tot up the price of the mangoes, the guava jellies and the custard apples or whatever 'twas they had on the tray and whatever it came to he'd put it down in silver and without touching a thing drive on again."

"What's the matter," cried Ned, rapping with his knuckles on the table, "Is everybody asleep or something? Come on men, let's play stud. I check. Two deuces check."

"Don't look at me," said the dapper little Cypriot sitting next to Coolie, "I'm hauling."

"See-sawing up and down," said Coolie, turning over his cards, "from a carriage with a liveried footman on the Parade Grounds to the water-logged bottom of a mine shaft and with everything kerosene oil, fat pork and corn meal on credit from the Portuguese. 'What all-you worrying about money for?' His sister was always on to him about his wild extravagance and it was only to please her that he finally gave up gold prospecting to work on a sugar estate. 'There's still plenty of gold in the bush'. Nobody would see him for months on end. Then, alone up there in the river bed with nothing but water fowl and coral snakes and marmosets to keep him company, Ocean Shark would develop quite a thirst. It would be nothing for him when he drifted back to town to walk into a Portuguese rum shop and buy up everything on the shelves,"

“ For consumption on the spot, I suppose? ” asked the Cypriot with a twinkle in his eyes.

“ You didn’t know Ocean Shark! ”

“ Whatever became of him? ”

“ Oh, he was killed in a cane field riot. Tried to break a strike.”

“ Two deuces check! ”

Ah Sung, almost as though he had a wife and ten children in Hong Kong to support, put a chip in the kitty. Ned at last had a ‘ caller’. He turned and as his eyes travelled from the frayed cuffs of Ah Sung’s overcoat on up to the dirty engine-room rag around his neck Ned’s mouth fell open. He had seen plenty of smallpox scars in his time, but none to beat the Chinese fireman’s. Ah Sung’s face looked as if a charge of buck-shot had been exploded in it.

“ How did you get in here? ”

Ned had never seen a Chinese seaman in Soho before. They usually congregated in the East End.

“ Got mo’ right in here than you,” said Ah Sung with a funny kind of laugh.

Ned moistened his lips. “ How much did you bet? ” he asked, gravely regarding the Chinaman.

“ Five shillings.”

“ Don’t you know that the worst thing you could possibly do is to bet at me when I’ve a pair showing? ”

“ What’s the matter,” spluttered the Chinaman, “ You talky, talky so——”

Ned plucked a pound note from between Ginger’s fingers. “ I raise you, I raise you a pound! ”

Ah Sung’s hat, a tall black one perched uncertainly on top of his head, danced gently from side to side. His long bony fingers moved like crabs’ legs as he gathered up the poker chips. “ I back raise you,” he said, piling more and more chips into the kitty—yellow ones, dark green ones, bluish pink ones. “ A pound more! ”

Attracted by the Chinaman’s agitation Senegal entered the room and stood with a scowl on his face behind Ned’s chair. Ned turned and, looking up at him, chuckled:—“ I believe the Chink is really trying to bluff me out of the pot. How does he play? ”

“ He is only playing what you see before him. Nothing more.”

Ned snatched the cluster of pound notes out of Ginger's hand.
“ Set in! Set your yellow mangy hide in! Everything you've got! ”

Ah Sung complied without a moment's hesitation, almost with alacrity. He pushed all the chips in front of him into the kitty. Then he ran his fingers round the inside of the box jutting out against his stomach like a drawer from under the table's edge to make sure it was empty.

“ Show and take,” said Senegal.

“ Three deuces! ” cried Ned, eyeing the Oriental's cards—ace, king, queen and ten of hearts. “ What you got? ”

Ah Sung turned up his hole card and slapped it down in triumph. Sure enough, it was the jack of hearts. “ Straight flush! ” cried Ah Sung, raking in the pot.

Ned relaxed. He had had fun——a little sobering but fun none the less. He pulled out a platinum cigarette case and opened it. Then he leaned forward and extending the case to Ah Sung, offered him a cigarette:—“ You smoke? ”

Ah Sung, richer by about twelve pounds and immensely pleased with himself, began to laugh—a laugh that was for a moment a little on the hysterical side, as if he was the repository of a secret clearly withheld from Ned and could even afford with impunity to crack a joke at Ned's expense.

“ Opium, yes; tobacco, no.”

Ned snapped the case shut. Then he glared round at Ginger; but Ginger, supporting his chin on the palm of his hand, sleepy-eyed and imperturbable, was incapable of even a silent exchange of glances. He was too far gone.

* * *

ANSWERS TO FOOTBALL QUIZ

1. The striker should be cautioned or ordered off. If play has been stopped by the referee to deal with the offence it should be restarted by an indirect free kick to the opponents. If the ball was out of play when the offence occurred it should be restarted in the normal way.
2. He should award an indirect free kick for obstruction.
3. A player may join his team at any time during the game. Extra time is considered part of the original match.
4. No offence has been committed. The goalkeeper was not in possession of the ball.

