

THE GENESIS OF HOCKEY

It was the depth of winter—about one month deep. The snow lay everywhere, even on the ground; the sky-lark larked in the sky while the ground hogs hogged in the ground. Baron Bungleston sat in the mead hall of his ancestral mansion of Bluestone in the highlands of Irak, and twiddled his thumbs, or to be more explicit, one of his thumbs, as he had lost the other in mortal combat some years before, when his adversary had bitten it off in the lists.

The baron was sunken in a deep fit of ennui on account of enforced inaction. For the past two months there had been nothing to divert his attention. He had tried to make war on his neighbor and dearest friend, Jumbo Jingle, lord of the adjoining estate of Jinglevale, but Jumbo wouldn't fight, as he was too busily engaged in scientific research. He had his wizards busily employed trying to discover why a man who had his brains knocked out in a "hors de combat" cannot stand up and shake hands with his adversary. He, therefore, had no time to help his friend, the baron, in his difficulty.

So the baron was bored. True, he had witnessed the tearing to pieces of Luke the Leper by his trained bears and had been an interested spectator at the slaughter of seventeen men in the lists during the last month. But what were such womanish practices, such lady-like sights to a man of the baron's ilk? Mere chicken feed. He craved excitement.

"Ho" cried the baron at length to his lusty followers, while he smote the table right mightily and kicked his piper in the bag-pipes, "List to me, lily-livered poltroons, ye scum of witches brewings, ye poor dumbells. Long have ye obtained sustenance at my board. Never have I denied ye anything; and in return all I ask is that ye fight mine enemies for my safety and, when there are no enemies, to fight each other for my delight. Lo! This long two-month there has been no battle for my delectation, nothing more than an odd man killed. Do ye grow womanish? And thou, Sir Dewdad, that bears the scars of many a fight, whom I have chosen as second in command, hast thou turned chicken-hearted? Thou seemest content to sit about each day and to be satisfied with the small score of two or three men's death to your credit."

The noble knight, Sir Dewdad of Dewnothing, hung his head in shame and sighed a sougning sigh into the depths of his unkempt beard. Certain it was he was slowing down on his delivery in combat. The last man he had killed, he had had to hit him three times with his mace before he knocked his head off.

The baron once more smote the table and filling the jug up with beer at his elbow performed a war dance and finally spilled its contents on the upturned face and gurgled down the gullet of the jester who sat at the feet of the baron with mouth wide open, expecting just such a deluge.

"Hark to me, Sir Dewdad," cried the bold baron. "Think me up some scheme to waylay this accursed boredom. Let it be an event full of the clash of arms, the blare of trumpets, the shouts of men in battle, and streaming streams of gushing gore. The resources of the castle and all its men are at your service, but woe betide you if you fail in this task I have set you. Avaunt ye now! Begone! Beat it! Scoot! I give thee three days to think up the scheme for my pleasure."

The bold knight withdrew in confusion, and for three days was not seen in the banquet hall of the castle. Sir Dewdad spent these three days without a wink of sleep except the odd cat doze of ten hours or so. From this nap he would awaken with a start and, after half an hour's rumination, would take his head in his hands and lead himself around his chamber in the depths of despair.

He had thought of burning the castle down and, during the conflagration, of standing on the highest battlement dreamily strumming a ukelele, as the nifty Nero had done in the days when men were men and Rome was the most powerful country east of anywhere. But he had never acquired the technique necessary for the dual role of troubadour and tight-rope walker, so that scheme had to be rejected.

The last day of probation saw the knight in despair. On the morrow he must put forward a scheme to please the baron or suffer the consequences of his Lord's wrath. At last, when he was about to give in to the hopelessness of his task, an idea struck him, it knocked him flat, and it took all the strength of his squire, a strong and rugged young man, and a quart of Haig and Haig a strong and potent old brand, to put him on his feet again, mentally and physically.

Fortwith he sent a communication to the baron, inviting him to be present the next day with his retinue at the bank of Limpid Lake, a small body of water situate a short distance from the castle.

The following day, at the appointed time, the baron with all his panpoly of power, took up his position at the margin of the lake and awaited developments. In front of the assembled company lay a keen sheet of ice, at either end of which had been placed a large fishing net, stretched over a frame to form a boxlike compartment. The baron, curious, questioned his henchmen, but all to no avail. They knew nothing of the proceedings.

When expectancy was at its height and the throng had begun to sway and rustle with impatience like to autumn leaves in the cool breath of a northen breeze, a sound of music and marching men was borne to them on the afternoon air. Over the crest of the nearest hill came a company of men with banners swaying in the breeze. As they neared the pond, the wizard, Hawkeye Hedric, most powerful of magicians in all Irak, could be discerned in the van, a small trumpet in one hand and what looked like two short wands in the other. The remainder of the company was composed of twelve knights with their squires and pages, among whom, Sir Dewdad could be easily distinguished by his long red plume and large feet. The squires and pages were heavily laden with strange acoutrements. A band of minstrels brought up the rear. (I don't know what they brought it up for as it wasn't needed.)

The band of knights marched on the ice to the strains of martial music and, halting in front of the baron, extended to him a royal salute. The wizard then stood forward and, putting his thumbs in his ears, spake thus:

“Oh baron bold in battle brave,
Thy sword hast slain stout soldiery.
Full heavy blows received and gave—
But sufferest now from ennui.
Thy knight, Sir Dewdad, stout and true,
Has plotted up a plan to please,
And overcome, great knight, for you
Your listless longing lethargies.
This game was conjured out of blood
And bloody shall its history be,

With buffet, blow and thwack and thud,
Ad Multos water on the knee.
I'll name them over, every one
Of these stout hearts before thee grouped.
Each many doughty deeds hath done
And never yet his banner dropped.
Sirs Dewdad, Dolphus, Tankred, White,
Keefe, Cassidy, (La Cigale light,)
Lavesque, O'Brien and Fleming too,
McMillan, Murphy ends the crew.
Now to your places get ye men
And show your puissance in strife.
Let ring of steel sound round the glen,
And let each dearly sell his life."

Having finished, the wizard blew three blasts on his whistle-like trumpet and, clamping the two wands on his feet, glided out on the ice, while the twelve contestants arrayed themselves for the fray from the gear that their attendants had brought. The magician meanwhile had capered with many odd gyrations and gestures, presumably invoking the spirits, to the cage at one end of the pond and, bending low, blew his trumpet within it. He then propelled himself to the other end and blew his nose there.

Returning to the centre of the pond, Hawkeye once more blew a blast on his trumpet and the twelve knights, fully accoutred in armour, glided out on the ice. Each had a pair of the wand shaped rods on his feet, and carried in his hands a long crooked club. The assembled throng gazed in wonderment. The knights took up positions so that it was apparent that there was to be a contest in which six on one side were to contend with the other six.

In front of each of the box-like compartments a man took up his position, and the crowd gasped as they gazed on these two seeming apparitions. "Certes," cried the baron, tweaking the jester's nose in bewilderment, "what is yon bulbous, billowing, form? Is it man or beast?"

And well could the doughty baron exclaim, for each of these two men had half a feather bed fastened to their middle and a pillow on each leg.

The magician once more blew the trumpet and, dropping a round stone on the ice between the two opposing ranks, backed off the ice on his hands and knees. There

was a rush of men, a clang of steel, the thud of blows, and the throng on the bank forgot everything but the scene before them.

Gentle reader, did you ever see a school of fish in confusion where a stone has dropped in their midst? Take that for motion. Did you ever see two trains meet while travelling at full career? Take that for collision. Did you ever experience the fierceness and turmoil of a tropical storm accompanied by lightning and thunder? Take that for destruction and noise. Lastly did you ever hear a bunch of college students cheer as their team makes a winning goal in the last two minutes of play? Take that for the cheering of the crowd. Take all these phenomena together, multiply by four, add three per cent for compensating and accumulating errors, and you have a poor idea of that historic contest.

The battle raged furiously from one end of the lake to the other. The stone flew up and down the ice propelled by the blows from the clubs which the contestants swung with might and main. Keefe and Cassidy, two opposing knights, in trying to further the interests of their respective companions, smote each other so that they had to be removed to the blacksmith to be extracted from their armour.

The surface of the lake soon became strewn with articles of war. Gauntlets, helmets, spurs, pieces of mail, bolts and screws, and other odds and ends cluttered the slippery surface, while here and there lay a contestant who seemingly had more interest in the heavens than in the combat at hand. These gentlemen would, from time to time, rise slowly to their feet, perform a few weird motions, and then wobble into the wallowing, walloping play once more.

It had by this time become apparent to the throng on the shore that the aim of this concentrated warfare was to get the round stone, by pushing, pummelling, killing or maiming into the box-like compartments. A number of times it had approached each of these, only to be cleverly stopped by the interference of a pillow or a feather bed. The baron would howl with delight as the fishnet guardian would deliberately turn the stone away by cunningly bringing his head in contact with the missile. The impact on his helmet sounded to the spectators like the ringing of a bell, and the effect of the impact to the

guardian must have been like the ringing of a million bells.

After some thirty minutes play, time had to be called to resuscitate the wizard who had unwittingly put his head in the way of one of the players clubs. During the "rest" period the minstrel's band played for the pleasure of the crowd while the opposing sides tried to repair the ravages of war and the pages swept the accumulation of zeink off the ice. Close inquiry showed that two men on either side were of no further use, so they were carted away to be disposed of later. The two compartment guardians were badly battered, but, as they had the framework to lean against, were allowed to stay in the battle.

The second part of the contest began with a weak blast from the trumpet of Hawkeye, who had not quite recovered from the blow. This part of the contest was much the same as the first but more so. You, gentle reader, have many times howled yourself hoarse at its counterpart. Of course the ranks of the contestants were sadly depleted but still the spirit ran high. Suffice to say the play was finally brought to an end through lack of living material to carry on hostilities. Sir Dewdad on account of his abnormally thick pate was the only one left standing, and he wasn't exactly full of pep. Moreover the baron had suffered a fit of apoplexy on account of the excitement and had to be carried away.

The contest had been a huge success. Sir Dewdad's name was vindicated. True, the outcome of the game was doubtful as the stone had not entered either of the compartments, but the effects were manifold and far reaching. Nine of the twelve knights died from injuries. The baron had a stroke of paralysis on top of his apoplexy and, lastly, a great game had been invented which lives and waxes strong to the present day.

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Four years later, when Sir Dewdad had almost recovered from the effects of the memorable contest, he was summoned to the bedside of the baron who lay dying.

"Noble Sir Dewdad," spake the mighty Thane, "well hast thou served me in peace and war. Thy contest of four years ago lives bright in my memory. For the great service that thou rendered me I now bequeathe to thee my great estate here in Bungleton."