

Under the Influence

There was one year, St. Patrick's Day was on a Friday, and we had a game the next morning. Don't ask me who scheduled this marvel. Whoever it was, he needed to be given an excruciating punishment. A mere lashing would not do. Something more on the order of castration, boiling in oil, dismemberment and hanging, all at once, might more properly fit the crime. Luckily, the game was only a friendly. The Houston Police were trying to get a team going and we were hosting a fixture to help them along in the process, all relatively informal.

There are police rugby teams all over the world. I've played against police teams from Scotland, Wales and New Zealand. There's even an international police games, where the competition consists of all manner of athletic endeavor – track and field, nightstick noggin knocking, competitive con collaring, rugby, et cetera. Police from all corners of the globe attend and compete. The Houston Police Department seemed to think it was time they joined the fraternity.

Well that year, as I was saying, we were playing the police the day after St. Patrick's. You've got to understand that St. Patrick's is a big deal for O'Malley's, and by extension, the Caballeros. A lot of the guys volunteer to help run the bar for the day. It gets so crowded O'Malley needs all the help he can get. Those who don't volunteer, come for the party. It's the social event of the year. O'Malley's is definitely the biggest party in the city come St. Pat's.

Friday was a particularly long day. I had taken off work, come early for the drinking, volunteered the evening shift, then got back to seriously enjoying myself until closing time. After everything shut down at two, the volunteers were supposed to help clean up. And, we did, at least as much help as a bunch of drunken ruggers could be at breaking down after the party of the year.

Somehow along the way, we managed to stash a few beers, just in case they might be needed later. It turned out that they were. Those of us who were left, Michael T, me, Dopey, Denny and some other die-hards weren't ready to quit just yet. Inertia had set in as well. We weren't ready to go home either.

After the clean-up, we broke out the stash in the parking lot and started a typical rugby gab-fest. It started out with, "Do you remember the time...?"

Then it moved on to, “There was that try I scored...,” and “How about when we beat...?” Past glory is never as great as when viewed through the lens of an inebriated mind.

Of course, sooner or later, we had to get around to singing. We premiered with a few rounds of “You Never Get Laid on Saturday Night”, moved on to “Barnacle Bill” and then “I Used to Work in Chicago”¹:

A woman came in and asked for a jumper,
A jumper from the store...
A jumper she wanted, so jump her I did.
I don't work there anymore.

The more ribald the better of course.

Perhaps I should have mentioned that O'Malley's is located in a nice quiet neighborhood a few blocks off the main road. The neighbors are a good sort, generally speaking. They put up with a lot from O'Malley's being in their midst, especially on St. Pat's. I think they must have tin ears, though, because somehow they couldn't appreciate a four a.m. concert by a gaggle of croaking ruggers. Someone called the police to complain. The nerve.

Then the cops have the audacity to arrive in mid-chorus of “Foreskin in the Sky”, a rousing ditty sung to the tune of “Riders in the Sky”²:

...Foreskin, foreskin, foreskin,
Hanging down below his knees.
Yippee-yi-AAAAAAAAA,
Yippee-yi- ... Uh-Oh.

Twenty-seven cop cars pulled into the lot, lights flashing. At least they were considerate of the neighbors and left the sirens off. They hit their brakes in unison, slid across the parking lot, spewing gravel and coming to rest mere inches from us, basking our little choral assemblage in their cruisers' headlights. We felt honored to finally be in the spotlight and our talents displayed, but the commotion had struck us dumb. We forgot the next line.

¹ Vincent, Larry, I Used to Work in Chicago, ca. 1945.

² Jones, Stan, (Ghost) Riders in the Sky, 1948.

The cops all jumped out of the cars, hands on side-arms, and commanded, “Break it up!”

As I mentioned, we’d already stopped singing, so we assumed “Break it up” meant to disperse. We turned and started heading for our various cars.

“Freeze!” the men in blue shouted together, again as if on cue. We did as asked. We didn’t want to be shot over our singing abilities.

“We’ve had complaints about the noise.”

We were aghast. How could anyone not appreciate the recital? We had certainly been enjoying it.

“Um, sorry,” we replied on our own cue. “We were just done anyway.”

“You bet you are. You’re all going in for P-I.”

Damn. If we had just cut a verse or two out, we’d have been long gone and home free. Instead, they loaded eleven of us up in patrol cars and headed downtown.

They booked us all into the drunk tank. As you can imagine, it was a bit crowded on St. Pat’s. We had to wedge ourselves in between the other miscreants and hardened criminals: killers, rapists, father rapists and the occasional inebriated, if only for the day, party-goer. Michael T and I were lucky enough to squeeze into a spot on the bench running along the back wall. The rest of the choir plopped on the floor wherever they could. It wasn’t long before our snoring was blending in with that of the other tank denizens.

Come morning, a big, burly cop, flat-top and no neck, brought breakfast into the tank. He set the tray down in the middle of the cell.

“Come and get it,” was all he said as he turned and left.

Breakfast turned out to be stale donuts and small cartons of milk. Michael T and I tried the donuts and confirmed they were inedible. Most of the other felons remained sound asleep.

We did find, however, that the donuts, broken into pieces, made perfectly acceptable ammunition when thrown with a little bit of skill. We started bombarding Denny and Dopey who were scrunched on the cell floor across from us.

Denny was too far gone to notice and continued to snore. Dopey, on the other hand, flinched with each incoming round. Finally, after a particularly accurate shot to the side of his head, he half-opened one eye and observed the remains of the last donut. He grabbed it with his left hand and gave a limp-

wristed toss back at us. I think Dopey was back asleep before the bit of donut left his hand.

His errant throw only made it about half-way back to our perch on the bench, bouncing off the head of a particularly large man lying on the floor between us. There was a rumbled “grrr” that escaped from his vicinity and rattled the cell bars, but no other movement.

We, of course, thought this had great potential, and redoubled our bombardment of Dopey. He made feeble swats at the glancing blows from the incoming bits until there was another direct hit to the side of his face. Again, he grabbed it and half-heartedly heaved it back at us. Again, it only made it as far as the behemoth lying between us. Although he remained immobile, a hissed “God-dammit” came from the man-mountain this time.

Now, with the cataclysm imminent, we renewed our attack with vigor. It wasn’t long before Dopey had enough, scooped some more bits into his hand and flung them ineffectually in our direction. Once again, they didn’t get past the mound of man on the floor. The largest piece bounced off of the slumbering giant’s nose.

“Mother-fucker!” erupted from his mouth as he leapt to his feet making a landing that shook the concrete floor. He was amazingly nimble for a man so large. His advance began in the direction from whence his irritant had come.

“Who’s throwing shit?”

Denny and Dopey lay in his path, Denny still dead to the world. Dopey was passing through the semi-conscious phase toward coherence. He noticed the small hillock approaching him and the dawning realization of the situation injected a shot of adrenaline. That accelerated his journey into alertness, instantly.

“I didn’t do anything,” Dopey said, immediately jumping to his feet, too. His half-hearted denial was belied by the residue of donut-bits lying around the spot where he now stood. His predicament began to manifest itself in his consciousness.

“I’m gonna kill you, you little mother-fucker!” confirmed the man-mountain.

The colloquium of the tank was now entirely awake and taking sides on this vexing situation, odds generally being about ninety-seven-to-one against Dopey. Even Denny was alert now, though still seated on the floor. He had backed himself up behind Dopey. Michael T and I were still on the side behind

the mountain, though on our feet and moving closer to the impending fray.

“Settle down in there,” came a shout from outside the cell bars. It was the burly jailer who had returned, but not alone.

As we turned toward the bars, flashes went off, blinding us. Had the press come to document this huge bust from the night before? Would our high crimes and sour notes be splashed across the front page of the Houston Chronicle? No, it was only Bryan Dodgen and Geoff Hawkins, come to bail-out their teammates in time for today’s game. Somehow, they had talked the jailer into allowing them in to photograph the perpetrators as they sat in the tank. After a few quick snapshots, the jailer opened the cell door, releasing the tension of Dopey’s near-death experience, and, by the way, the incarcerated ruggers.

On the way out, I asked the man-mountain, “Ever played rugby?”

A man of that size and agility would always be welcome on the rugby pitch.

“No,” he responded. “But I’ve seen it. No pads. Head banging. Looks like fun.”

“It is,” I replied. “You should join us some time.”

“I’d love to,” was his answer.

So, Dodgen, in true benevolent rugger spirit, bailed him, too, and he came with us.

At the pitch later that afternoon, we were short players, as might be expected for a March eighteenth game. I had to fill in at prop and we drafted the man-mountain, Ben was his name, to play the other prop. He required a few quick pointers.

“So what’s a prop?” he asked

“It’s one of the forwards,” I answered. “He’s in the front row of the scrum. You’ve heard of a scrum?”

“They talk about it on TV, when a football play goes south.”

“Yeah, well that’s not exactly right,” I clarified. “The scrum is actually a very organized way to restart play after a stoppage.

“The two packs of eight forwards bind up with prop-hooker-prop in the front row, the two second-rows behind them and the back-row, flanker-eight-flanker, in the back. Then the two packs come together to form the scrum. The scrumhalf puts the ball in the tunnel between the two teams and the contest is on.”

“So what do I do?” he inquired.

“You’ll be tight-head on the right. I’ll be loose on the left. The Doc will be between us. Just push like hell when we come together.”

And, he was ready to go.

Come the first scrum-down, I took a quick glance across at my opponent, and who did I see? There, flat-top and all, was the burly jailer, ready to crush me to powder if he could. His face was blank, though, concentrating on the task at hand. I averted my eyes, hoping he wouldn’t recognize me, or the stale beer smell still reeking from my body. I’d rather just put that little episode behind me.

The cops, though enthusiastic, lacked experience. We beat them rather handily. Ben played well, for his first time. Then, there isn’t much skill required when it took a bulldozer to move him. Lugan was his surname and he immediately became “Lug”.

It seemed that I had remained incognito, too. The burly cop never made any sign that he recognized me. That is, until the end. As the two teams shook hands, he smiled at me and said out of the corner of his mouth, “Are we going to get some donuts now?”

Damn.