

The Strange Ride of Gunga B. Dass



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I can't be certain of the veracity of the following unfinished story. It was told to me by a tribal associate, Gunga Dass, who was once a respected court official at the time of the Hybrid-Spider *Shogunate*. I set it down more or less faithfully as he related it to me. The account dates from his younger days at tertiary brainwashing, and therefore a degree of interpretive skepticism is permissible since he may have been given to youthful embellishments; but I believe that in essence it is true. Here is the unfinished account:

We rode out of the long tunnel into the howling wilderness of sand.

“I can’t see!,” shouted Jung Chou. The sand reeled around us and our horses whinnied, half blinded by the swirling elements.

We rode on through the storm blowing from the Western Desert. The three of us: Sydney Fox, the intrepid explorer, Jung Chou, the reformed fourth-wave transsexual, and myself, the narrator, by name Gunga Dass. I was at the time an entomologist specializing in the study of human-arachnid hybrids, a novel subphylum which had started to proliferate in the Wuhan region of Islamochina.

The horses slowed and walked on reluctantly, tossing their heads skittishly.

“That way. There is the camp over there,” shouted Jung Chou over the terrific noise of the storm. We changed direction, moving now away from the wind. Two furlongs ahead I made out some darker objects. Those must be the entry posts, I thought.

We approached more resolutely, relieved that we had found our way at last.

And then it happened.

My horse, Oxfoot, jolted suddenly and slid downwards. I held the reins tight, but to no avail. The slope was abrupt, and I went over the bucking head.

The landing was soft, and I was unhurt, but momentarily stunned. Collecting my wits, I saw that Oxfoot was still down, writhing in pain, bewildered, trying to stand.

“Easy, my friend. Easy.” I stood and crossed over to where he was lying. His forelegs were twisted under him, broken.

What had become of Jung Chou and Fox?

I called out, but heard nothing except the whinnies of my steed. The wind had died down now and I could see more clearly. The slope that we had tumbled down angled steeply up to a jagged ridge. I looked around and discovered that we had landed in a huge bowl-shaped crater several hundred yards in diameter.

My magazine held just two remaining bullets, both of which I discharged into the brain of the suffering animal.

Now I set my purpose to exiting this giant hole, but grappling with the fine cascading particles I immediately slid back. I sought for a firmer, less steep slope which would be easier to climb. But everywhere the yellow sand sloped upward at an angle of about 70 degrees to a height of at least 40 feet.

Here and there on the lower reaches, I noticed narrow holes dug into the cliff face.

Then I became aware that I was being watched. As though from nowhere, two pig creatures appeared. They stared inscrutably.

"Welcome, Gunga Dass," one said.

I had seen them before. I recognized both Malarky and K.B. Harris who had been simply mid-level farm coordinators when I had known them, that is, sometime before The Great Riddance. I recognized Malarky by his rainbow wig emerging from a jaunty fedora through which two ears poked slyly. K.B.Harris, a Berkshire of improved but uncertain gender fluidity, was made known to me by zer cackling laugh targeted at nothing in particular, and a slightly reticent pinnochio extending forward from the snout area.

"Help me out of here, you two." I ordered.

They didn't budge. They continued staring at me. Harris said quite clearly, "You crossed a border too far, this time, Gunga Dass." Then she cackled, since presumably she found this funny.

"What do you mean?"

Malarky adjusted his fedora and said, "You are our prisoner. You can no longer order us around."

"Dashed impudence," I said.

They continued staring. I detected a smirk on both their faces, and what appeared a calm assumption of superiority.

I tried a gentler tone.

"Then would you mind showing me a way out of this, this ... crater?" I did my best to sound polite.

Harris stared slyly and Malarky stared too. Their eyes narrowed in a show of feigned cleverness. Malarky waved a trotter and I caught a movement from the corner of my eyes. Dark shapes flapped and wriggled, emerging from the holes threaded into the sandy slope. What were they?

The dark shapes moved closer. Now they came clearly into view. I saw a huge crowd of green and black chickens assembling. They were waving the banners of a monstrous regiment of screeching fowls, and clucked ferociously.

Harris now spoke, cackling like a hyena from a dark continent. "Take him to the grain hole. No mercy!"

At once the flock clustered around me, pushing and shoving with their beating wings. They pecked and kicked at my legs with practiced insolence, slashing my jodhpurs in several places above the knee. Fortunately, my recently-purchased Barak S. Patton Cavalry Riding Boots (bespoke from Abdul of Jermyn St, Londonistan) gave adequate protection to my lower limbs. I fell down in blind panic, covering my face from this jihadist attack.

Now the birds dragged me with their powerful beaks over the sand. I was shoved unceremoniously into a circular kiva-like

hole. In command of this company was a lustrous green rooster of immense power and size. It did not speak, but glared at me with the authority of a true believer, its eyes nictating violently. I fell back onto some canvas grain sacks labelled "Red Comb Poultry Feeds: Produce of Carter and Hussein Agricultural Collective." In smaller letters I made out a warning about the punishments to be meted out to anyone who dared to remove the sacks from that collective.

I must have passed out from exhaustion or fear since I slowly became aware that the world was dark, lit only by a searchlight which rotated slowly at the top of mast a few hundred feet from this place of imprisonment. At the edge of the kiva strutted two chickens. They occasionally clucked and thrust their beaks up and down rhythmically. Otherwise, the night was quiet. I must have slept.

I awoke as a bright sun stung my eyes. My ears were assailed by a strange wailing sound which appeared to be coming from a loudspeaker attached to the top of the searchlight mast. Around the perimeter of the hole the strutting chickens still patrolled. They crowed loudly as I stretched my anguished limbs and sat up.

The immense green rooster arrived, flapping imprecations and pronouns around like a Pre-Grieving-Time College Professor. He unraveled a rope ladder which cascaded down. I climbed up hesitantly, unsure of the reception I would receive.

"Now dig sand. Now dig sand! He screeched and the other birds repeated in unison, almost prayerfully. They flapped their wings towards a rusty shovel lying nearby.

From the corner of my eye, I caught sight of hundreds of chickens prostrating themselves and pecking rhythmically.

Then Harris and Malarky appeared suddenly, smirking and still in the process of affixing dorsey's to their pinkish chins. I noticed that Harris's pinocchio had become more prominent,

curving backwards over the head, probing and flagellating as though eager to connect with the brain tissue.

"Now dig a hole! A deep hole. A round hole. Then you can eat! We like holes, we live in one. Ha ha ha ha," said Harris, emulating I thought, an ancestral namesake.

I dug and dug. My toil became a round hole of at least a half hogshead in volume, the sand piling up to one side. This was tiring work. The hot morning sun beat down. I thought of the ancient writings of Alexander Sol-Hen, who was once forced to labor in a Northern Michigan Gulag.

"Now fill it up again" Harris smirked, and Malarky smirked too.

"Damned impudence! Dashed if I will!" I announced. "Who ordered you to make such intolerable demands?"

"Never you mind who ordered it. They did." And Malarky and then Harris indicated vaguely out at the blue sky above the crater rim.

I can't be sure, but I thought I caught a glimpse of some giant lizard-like tongue, silhouetted against the blue canopy of sky, flickering and rapidly disappearing beyond the ridge.

And Malarky whistled just like a pig, which he was. And Harris whistled too.

I am not naturally a coward, but imagine for yourself the predicament I was in. I was by this time very hungry; I had not had a bite of food or sip of water since Jung Chou, Sydney Fox and I had struck camp on the previous day.

Now Malarky strode forward, ambulating with moderate success on his two hind legs. He held out in his trotter a freshly-plucked uncooked carcass, possibly of a crow. His ring-festooned snout quivered slightly.

"Eat this crow!"

I sank back in horrified disgust.

"And you can thank your European Goddess that you have such food to catch and eat," he said. I gazed in amazement. This was some kind of *déjà vu*. I had read this exact line, slightly modified, in a story of long ago, by Rudyard of Rangoon.

But now, my hunger was such that I grasped the grisly object and sunk my teeth into it.

(Here the account ends)

Gunga Dass never managed to relate to me how he escaped from this predicament. But escape he must have, given his eventual rise to prominence. I had eagerly awaited a continuation of the story. This, I was led to believe, would be an account of his lengthy imprisonment and the privations to which he submitted, forced on him by both swine and poultry alike. Above all, I wanted to understand the role of the lizard men in his incarceration.

And so I arrived at his hexagonal living quarters expecting him to relate further episodes of the tale. Alas, he was not to be found. I made enquiry at the neighboring hexagon, crossing the courtyard containing the feeding troughs near which the lizard men were rumored to live. The door was opened by a rainbow-haired ninth-wave feminist sporting a cheap Dollar-Store Dorsey. Zie told me, very much *sotto voce*, that she had heard sounds in the night. That was all.