

The Yuleman Cometh

A Palooka Tale

by Jonas Knutsson

“Hey, don’t step on the leprechaun.” warned Joe The Owner.

“What’s good and happening?” Viddi Golbranson skipped over the little green man sprawled out on the floor of The Palooka Bar. “A Bud please, by way of celebration,” announced Viddi.

“Your train just come in?” asked Joe. In the staid and sober course of ordinary life, the mug would have been on the table before Viddi had spoken.

“My brother’s parole officer just had a baby, big as a whale.”

Joe’s sigh punctured Viddi’s ebullient mood. “You’re running up the national debt of Touristan and your account’s longer than a Quaker’s face in a cathouse.”

“I’m resolved to remain seized of the matter.”

“No dinero. No cerveza”

“What about my most favored client status?”

“You’ll be restored to your former glory as soon as you start shelling out for the libations.”

“This isn’t the way of gentlemen... What’s with Mr. Lucky Charms?”

“Got caught in the crossfire. Rhino tried to lay a wish list on some fellow tricked out as St. Nick. Yuleman turned out to be a wisenheimer, said all Rhino was getting was a lump of coal to match his head. Rhino wasn’t afraid of making his discontent known. Hulk had to drive Santa to the Methodist Hospital in Hoboken. Gazoo here’s just little worse for wear.”

“Didn’t Hulk do his duty as bouncer and step in?” Viddi could boast of some expertise in the field.

“Actually, Hulk biffed him. Turned out he’d a wish list of his own.”

“That big brute Abu Ghraib-ed Sparky and me,” rumbled the prostrate elf, to Viddi’s disappointment as he’d been hoping to roll the martian.

“Your own sweet fault for calling Hulk ‘Lurch’,” Joe shot back.

“Got a gig at The Gummibear Nursery School in less than an hour,” groaned the verdant victim. “I can’t show tanked up without Santa. It’s run by Methodists stricter than King HeroOOOOOOWWWW!!!”

In a posture of mental repose, Beardy looked around, failing to see the emerald pixy under his heel.

“Tramp me down, will you?” The diminutive one made no attempt to stand up as he spoke.

“You were already down. Joe there’s a leprechaun on your floor.”

“I’m not a leprechaun.”

“And I’m not stupid.” declared Beardy, taking umbrage at the implication.

“I’m an elf, Einstein”

“There’s no such thing. You’re just a midget.” The handful of upper-lip hairs Beardy’d cultivated over the last decades bristled at the affront.

“We’re little people.”

“You just said you were elves,” growled Beardy.

“I meant us midgets. Oh, I’m so plastered.”

“Mister, if you weren’t lying on the floor, you’d be lying on the floor.” Beardy turned his attention to the contents of the shelves behind the bar table.

Without warning, the leprechaun, like Lazarus of old, sat up. “I’ve two more Santa costumes in the trunk. You gotta fill in for us. With Sparky spending Christmas in the slaughterhouse, we need that account.”

“Not a very dignified profession if you ask me,” mumbled Viddi as he began to scour The Palooka Bar for someone with whom to negotiate a temporary allocation of funds.

“There’s five hundred clams in it for whosoever ain’t too dignified”.

“Sir,” remonstrated Viddi with a wounded sense of propriety, “personally, I resent having baksheesh brandished at me, but I know for a fact Beardy’s a little short of funds...”

All too late, Hasrubal Nebucadnezzar tried to skedaddle down Second Avenue when Viddi and Beardy hurled themselves into his cab.

The shorter Santa Claus kept leaning forward, tugging at Hasrubal’s sleeve as he provided him with gentle but firm guidance. “Why you stopping?”

“Is red light.”

“Get your license riding herd? Step on it and be careful.”

With liberty and abandon, Beardy sipped from an ornate red bottle.

“You imbibing on the job?” declaimed Viddi with as much indignation he could muster through the enormous white forest of his beard.

“It’s grog.”

“Hold your horses, Omar. This isn’t Le Mans in Italy. Greg who?”

“Gammelstein Grog. The Katzenjammer kids distill it from dead pine trees.”

“That’s hobo juice. We’re supposed to be professional entertainers.”

“But it’s a Christmas mead.”

“Smells like dead fish in formaldehyde. Your first time on asphalt, chief?”

“They told me it’d put me in a festive mood.” Beardy took a hearty sip of the celebratory potion.

“Well, in that case...”

Tottering in front of the forbidding uptown building, Beardy had an epiphany, of sorts.

“It’s the Yuleman,” slurred Beardy.

“We’re the Yulemen here,” countered Viddi.

“You had Principal Yuleson in 12th grade, Viddi. He happens to run that joint.”

“So he knows I’m on the beam.”

“After what you did at the Christmas Ball, he swore he was going to saw your legs off.”

“Errors of youth. Tree should’ve been bolted down.”

“He said you made Hitler and Mussolini look like a pair of yodellin’ cherubs.”

“That man adored me.”

“He tried to have you transferred to a school run by the Foreign Legion.”

“I was taught to share,” explained Viddi. “Besides, Mama Yuleson thought my Mojo Mead was Bristol Cream.”

“She went into convulsions for weeks,” reminded Beardy. “Thought she was Anna Magnani. He wrote to the Surgeon General to grant your mother a postpartum abortion.”

“You don’t say such things about a child,” admonished Vidди, “even if that child happens to be grown up.”

For quite some time, the toddlers at Gummibear Child Development Center had badgered Ms. Salmagundi about Santa’s imminent arrival when no fewer than two men in red burst onto the scene.

“Why are there two Santas?” inquired little Sebastian.

“Double the lolly,” exclaimed the taller Santa, reeling ever so slightly.

With intended stealth, Vidди kicked Beardy in the shin. “That’s my twin brother Tonto.”

Vidди slid the tape into the *Panazenith* cassette player, both items borrowed in haste from the estate of Beardy’s Grand-uncle Biffo ‘The Hipster’ O’Hourahan, whose claim to fame was having thrown a glass of absinthe in Hemingway’s face at Harry’s Bar in Venice. The version of *Silent Night* by Russian avant-garde composer Alfred Schnittke did not have a very jubilant clang to it, coupling Slavic melancholia with a trenchant critique of Western materialism.

“This hillbilly music’s freaking me out,” wailed Beardy as the wee ones covered their ears.

“Are you with some sort of cultural diversity program?” asked Ms. Salmagundi.

Vidди responded with the famous Vidди wink, a testament to the highly improbable supposition that everything was under control. “Not to worry. Santa’s on the beam. Hohoho. What’s shakin’, kids?”

“What did your mom get you for Christmas?” interrogated little Sebastian.

“A bottle of Haig.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s brown, golden brown, like ginger ale.”

“Can I have some?”

“You’d better stick with Bud till you’re twelve.”

“Okay, Uncle Tonto’s going to tell you a story,” promised Beardy, sensing the conversation could hardly be leading somewhere anyone wanted to go. “Once upon a time, I saw this G.I. Joe tricycle at Schwarz,” continued Beardy, “but Mama Claus didn’t have no dough. So I sneaked in with some rust paint and...”

“Hohohohoho. Time for a Yuletide song,” interrupted Vidди, once again kicking Beardy surreptitiously in the shin.

“I want to hear the rest of the story,” lamented little Sebastian.

Into the classroom marched Principal Yuleson with a quizzical look on his Old Testament face. “Why are there two of you fellows?”

“Tonto’s my apprentice,” explained Vidди, “learning the ropes.”

“He stole a bike,” confided Miranda, wiser than her four years.

“Take it away, Tonto!” exhorted Vidди, stamping down his heavy boot on the flimsy floor boards.

“I’m fresh out of Christmas carols.”

“But you’re from the burbs.”

“Told you a thousand times,” whispered Beardy. “The Barbary Coast isn’t a suburb.”

“Took a lot of Golbranson lobbying to get you this gig. Just shut up and sing.”

“Ms. Salmagundi, why do Santa and Tonto smell so funny?” wondered the cherubic Sebastian.

“And now for the Yuletide Song,” hollered Viddi over the dwarfish throng to Munich Rally enthusiasm.

*“There was whisky in the bottle when we came.
When we came. When we came.
But there was none, when we were gone.
There was none, then we went heim.
None when we went heim.
When we went heim.
And when we went, we were lame.
We were lame when we went heim.*

*When we came heim, we came heim.
There was vodka in the glass when we came.
There was vodka in the glass when we came.
And we were game. And we were game.
And we drank it all the same, all the same.
‘Cause we were game.
And there was vodka in the glass when we came.
There was virgins in the house when we came.
There was virgins in the house when we came.
But they were lame. And we were game....”*

“That’s quite enough, you rascalions,” shrieked Principal Yuleson, raising his grandfather’s briar cane high.

As Viddi and Beardy cut a drastic retreat under Principal Yuleson’s barrage of briar blows, little Sebastian bit Viddi in the thigh, clinging to him by his teeth with an innocent’s determination. The trio darted through the door of The Gummibear Nursery Establishment, cannonballing straight into Principal Yuleson’s mother Brunhilda, sending her walker skyward.

In spite of her highly nervous disposition, Ma Yuleson had reached the age of ninety-seven in splendid health, although her niece Truthilda alleged she had in fact shorn two years off her age during her uneasy transition from the Roaring Twenties to the Depression.

The sight of Viddi’s face however...

The next morning, Viddi and Beardy lumbered into The Palooka Bar, more subdued than was their wont.

“Those Christmas guys went out of business,” confided Joe The Owner. “They’ll be doing Amos and Andy routines in Palm Springs. A client sued them over some fracas uptown.”

“With some people you never know,” stated Viddi flatly.

Beardy glared into his mug. “Maybe they felt unappreciated. Those kids can be a tough crowd to work, and the teachers are little better.”

“Yeah, Ms. Salmagundi was kind of standoffish when I brought over the bill,” sighed Viddi as he indicated his mug had stood empty long enough.

Jonas Knutsson committed arson at five. When Jonas was ten someone not unlike Viddi Golbranson tried to throw Jonas into a duck pond. Jonas enjoys the distinction of being the only person to be expelled from a prestigious German film school before commencing his studies.