

SHORT STORY AMERICA

A GOBOTO NIGHT

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At Goboto the traders come off their schooners and the planters drift in from far, wild coasts, and one and all they assume shoes, white duck trousers, and various other appearances of civilization. At Goboto mail is received, bills are paid, and newspapers, rarely more than five weeks old, are accessible; for the little island, belted with its coral reefs, affords safe anchorage, is the steamer port of call, and serves as the distributing point for the whole wide-scattered group.

Life at Goboto is heated, unhealthy, and lurid, and for its size it asserts the distinction of more cases of acute alcoholism than any other spot in the world. Guvutu, over in the Solomons, claims that it drinks between drinks. Goboto does not deny this. It merely states, in passing, that in the Goboton chronology no such interval of time is known. It also points out its import statistics, which show a far larger per capita consumption of spiritous liquors. Guvutu explains this on the basis that Goboto does a larger business and has more visitors. Goboto retorts that its resident population is smaller and that its visitors are thirstier. And the discussion goes on interminably, principally because of the fact that the disputants do not live long enough to settle it.

Goboto is not large. The island is only a quarter of a mile in diameter, and on it are situated an admiralty coal-shed (where a few tons of coal have lain untouched for twenty years), the barracks for a handful of black labourers, a big store and warehouse with sheet-iron roofs, and a bungalow inhabited by the manager and his two clerks. They are the white population. An average of one man out of the three is always to be found down with fever. The job at Goboto is a hard one. It is the policy of the company to treat its patrons well, as invading companies have found out, and it is the task of the manager and clerks to do the treating. Throughout the year traders and recruiters arrive from far, dry cruises, and planters from equally distant and dry shores, bringing with them magnificent thirsts. Goboto is the mecca of sprees, and when they have spread they go back to their schooners and plantations to recuperate.

Some of the less hardy require as much as six months between visits. But for the manager and his assistants there are no such intervals. They are on the spot, and week by week, blown in by monsoon or southeast trade, the schooners come to anchor, cargo'd with copra, ivory nuts, pearl-shell, hawksbill turtle, and thirst.

It is a very hard job at Goboto. That is why the pay is twice that on other stations, and that is why the company selects only courageous and intrepid men for this particular station. They last no more than a year or so, when the wreckage of them is shipped back to Australia, or the remains of them are buried in the sand across on the windward side of the islet. Johnny Bassett, almost the legendary hero of Goboto, broke all records. He was a remittance man with a remarkable constitution, and he lasted seven years. His dying request was duly observed by his clerks, who pickled him in a cask of trade-rum (paid for out of their own salaries) and shipped him back to his people in England.

Nevertheless, at Goboto, they tried to be gentlemen. For that matter, though something was wrong with them, they were gentlemen, and had been gentlemen. That was why the

great unwritten rule of Goboto was that visitors should put on pants and shoes. Breech-clouts, lava-lavas, and bare legs were not tolerated. When Captain Jensen, the wildest of the Blackbirders though descended from old New York Knickerbocker stock, surged in, clad in loin-cloth, undershirt, two belted revolvers and a sheath-knife, he was stopped at the beach. This was in the days of Johnny Bassett, ever a stickler in matters of etiquette. Captain Jensen stood up in the sternsheets of his whaleboat and denied the existence of pants on his schooner. Also, he affirmed his intention of coming ashore. They of Goboto nursed him back to health from a bullet-hole through his shoulder, and in addition handsomely begged his pardon, for no pants had they found on his schooner. And finally, on the first day he sat up, Johnny Bassett kindly but firmly assisted his guest into a pair of pants of his own. This was the great precedent. In all the succeeding years it had never been violated. White men and pants were undivorceable. Only niggers ran naked. Pants constituted caste.