

"I Oughta Be In Pictures"

Every now and then, General Ulysses S. Grant (U.S. Army, Retired) invites me to visit him for a drink in his condominium at Leisure Barracks. I enjoy it. I'm a civil-war buff, and the General has more than his share of yarns to spin. His most recent invitation reminded me that this was indeed the time of year when President Lincoln sends him a case of his favorite Bourbon. So I expected the usual convivial atmosphere at Leisure Barracks. Instead, the General was definitely out of sorts, far more cranky than I had ever seen him.

"It's MacArthur," Grant complained. "He's become just plain intolerable since they made that movie about him. By now, I thought all us military geniuses had learned how to live together. I mean, we'll tolerate a little eccentricity; we've all had absolute command over hundreds of divisions and we know how that can swell a man's head. And it's not that I'm unwilling to give another man his due. Why, many's the night that Doug and I have refought the battles of his Pacific campaign down to the last detail, and I'll be the first to admit he taught me a thing or two about amphibious operations. But nowadays, he doesn't say a word about military history. All he's interested in is his damn movie. He reads *Variety* every week to get the latest figures on the gross receipts. He says he'll kill himself if *MacArthur* doesn't do better than *Patton*."

"Not much he can do about it, though," I said.

"Ha!" bellowed Grant. "You've never seen him operate! The man has no shame. He organizes matinee theater parties. He even roped Hannibal and Julius Caesar into going. And both of them swore to me they would never go to another Hollywood feature—after they had been grossed out by Victor Mature's portrayal of a Roman gladiator. I can still remember Caesar fuming that Hollywood had no sense of the classical period."

I had not realized that Grant knew Hannibal, and I was about to ask him about something that had been on my mind since the seventh grade: We had been taught that Hannibal was from Carthage, but what language did he speak? No one had ever made mention of a language called Carthaginian; even at the university, I could recall no courses in the subject. But before I could frame my question, Grant was at it again:

"None of us will ever forget the world premiere of *MacArthur*. Doug strode into the billiards room, his corn-cob pipe giving off a whisp of smoke. He was at his most expansive. He had brought a stenographer with him and insisted that his remarks on that occasion be recorded. He said:

Never did I think when I was but a plebe at the Point so many decades ago that I, heir though I was to a military tradition of some meaning through my paternal forebears, might find occasion to serve this magnificent land in a manner which would bring to me an honor greater than that bestowed on any other general officer who served under the flag of our indomitable Republic—the honor of being portrayed in the cinema by Gregory Peck. It is an honor moreover which has replenished a bank account

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previously rendered nugatory. And yet it is an honor of not unambiguous poignancy, for this singular accolade has dissolved the substance of my immortal utterance on the fate of old soldiers. Friends and comrades-in-arms! I say to you: I have not died; I have not even faded away!"

"There's no doubt," I said, breaking into Grant's rendition of MacArthur's remarks, "that Doug was among the more eloquent of the generals."

"Bah!" said Grant as he bit off the tip of a cigar and spit the piece of tobacco out onto the floor, showing outstanding coordination of teeth and tongue. He also spit out a string of expletives, reminding me that his reputation for plain speaking was not undeserved; Grant could make Truman himself blush.

"Besides," I continued, "I think you have no reason to be jealous. True, Doug

has been played by Gregory Peck, but you are ahead of him in one significant respect."

"What's that?" asked Grant.

"You became President of the United States, which is more than anyone will ever be able to say for MacArthur. And he probably wanted the nomination. Anyway, the two of you should stick together; there aren't many of your kind left."

"Yes," Grant acknowledged, "we are a rare breed; we are both Republicans. A lot of people forget that. Still, I'm man enough to admit that I'm just plain jealous. Sometimes I think I'm the only person around here who hasn't been seen in Panavision. Look at George Patton; he's a good leader of men, but does he really deserve all that much attention? You should have seen Old Blood and Guts the night George C. Scott won that Oscar for playing him! And after the news got out that President Nixon had seen the film every night for a month, there was simply no living with him. For the first time in years, he strapped on that silly pearl-handled .45 of his and challenged George Custer to an old-fashioned quickdraw shootout. The fool damn near blew his own foot off! It can go to a man's head, believe me."

I began to get a sense of what was eating at Grant. He had begun to think of himself as a second-class citizen. Perhaps he still felt the implicit rebuke of Mark Twain's famous remark: "I would rather sleep with Lillian Russell naked than with Ulysses S. Grant in full-dress uniform!" True, Grant had been President of the United States; his likeness appeared on coins that were available in strictly limited editions from the Franklin Mint of Philadelphia; school-children could recite his name in proper sequence. But he was not at ease. Yes, old "Unconditional Surrender" himself was suffering from low self-esteem!

"You know," Grant said, "sometimes I think I would make a wonderful subject for a film epic. In fact, I'm working on the screenplay myself." And with that, he produced a thick sheaf of papers.

"Oh," I responded unenthusiastically, remembering that I had finally finished reading Grant's memoirs—and had found them none too scintillating.

"Casting," Grant went on, "is turning out to be something of a problem. I have to maintain my image among a bunch of guys who have been played by the biggest stars

in the world: Rommel by James Mason, Napoleon by Marlon Brando, the Mahdi by Lawrence Olivier, Lawrence of Arabia by Peter O'Toole, Dwight Eisenhower by Soupy Sales; none of them will do for me. What's more, I have a special problem. Robert E. Lee is a large part of the story, so we will need co-stars who mesh."

"Have you talked to Lee about it?" I asked. "Maybe he'll have an idea or two."

"Fact is," Grant answered, "Bobby and I aren't speaking. It's this damn movie. As soon as we began to discuss it, I had the worst argument of my life with him."

"How's that?"

"We had no problem figuring out the co-stars who ought to play us. We had just seen *All the President's Men* and we knew that Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman

would be the perfect pair; well, maybe Redford and Paul Newman would have been better, but we couldn't get Newman because he says it's against his political principles to play generals. Anyway, it was easy enough to agree on Redford and Hoffman, but that muleheaded Bobby Lee insisted that *he* should be played by Redford! Can you imagine that?—especially since Robert Redford is so obviously the perfect *me*!

I couldn't blame Grant. I had often thought how wonderful it would be to be played by Robert Redford.

"Maybe we can still work something out," Grant concluded. "Son-of-a-yellow-bellied-rebel! If Robert Redford ever starred in *Grant*, that would sure button MacArthur's lip! As it is, I have an option on Steve McQueen."

It was obvious, from just that one remark, that Grant was hopelessly out of touch with the mass taste. It would be hard to get financial backing for the kind of project he envisioned. Grant understood as much from the look of concern on my face.

"It's science fiction they want these days, isn't it? Well, all right," he muttered.

And he produced another sheaf of papers, much thicker than the first.

"Okay, sweetheart," he said, "what ya got here is the next *Star Wars*, a genyoowine blockbuster that's gonna rewrite all the records, ya understand?"

It was a side of Grant I had never seen before. He really had learned how to talk turkey. □

THE GREAT AMERICAN SALOON SERIES

by
Joseph P. Duggan



Nick's Big Train Café

At 2800 Tulane Avenue in New Orleans, across from the Dixie Brewery, stands a blighted little frame building with peeling paint and a disclaimer hung above the door: "WE DO NOT SERVE DIXIE BEER." This is Nick's Big Train Café, a celebrated watering-hole in a city famous for its fonts of refreshment.

My friend Eric Wedig had been urging me for months to come and visit Nick's. And with Eric's company and that of a blonde schoolmate I did.

The tiny saloon enjoys wide renown for its smooth and flavorful drinks, and that night, as always, the place was crowded. It took us several minutes of determined squirming to reach the bar. Eric had told us how Nick, the Grand Mixmaster himself, was out of commission with a broken hip, and filling his place behind the bar we found his younger brother John, who is 82 years old.

The blonde ordered a Black Velvet Smash, I a Weller and water.

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A towering Negro named Jimmy, wearing a white, busboy's coat four sizes too small and whose hair was buzzed like a Marine's, shook the blonde's creamy drink. John dribbled my Weller into a glass.

We caught a lot of elbows from the crowd. They were mostly from Tulane and Loyola, flush-faced frat rats in rugby-striped alligator shirts and smooth-faced, slender girls, quiet and tastefully coifed.

I looked the place over. Narrow wooden slats sticky with chipping varnish made up the ceiling, and out of them poked four naked incandescent bulbs. Two ceiling fans, one missing a blade, spun over our heads. High on the wall across the room was a mural, painted in a sort of urban primitive style, of a big train. And beneath it on an overstuffed easy chair sat a frail man, up in years. His feet were propped up by a pillow that rested on a case of Falstaff empties. Sitting beside him in a straight-backed chair and holding his hand was a hangjawed woman with big glasses tumbling over her nose. She was outfitted complete in nurse's garb, cap and white sneakers and all.

I nudged Eric and pointed. "Eric, could that be..."

"It's Nick," he said, and we began to shove our way across the floor.

Nick Castrogiovanni. Yes, he was born right here in N.O. down on Poydras Street some 83 years ago, he told us. He'd gone overseas in the War, served with the U.S. Army in Italy, come back and opened the bar in 1924.

What about Prohibition, we wondered.

"Wasn't enforced."

Nick said he had slipped coming out of the can and broken his hip, but that wouldn't keep him laid up for long.

A crapulous fat fellow in cowboy clothes who called himself Tex harassed the blonde in Cajun accents.

Nick muttered where he wished Tex would go and he murmured Italian blandishments to the blonde.

The nurse warned us not to get Nick too excited, and since my Weller had gone watery, I decided to inch back toward the bar.

Jimmy was sloshing more bourbon into my glass and I asked him if somebody could tell me more about the place.

"You oughta talk to Miss Dora," he said, pointing to his left and downward.