

The best laid schemes o' mice and men

Gang aft a-gley;

An' lea'e us nought but grief and pain,

For promis'd joy.—Robert Burns



**S**HERWIN ROYCE, our ambassador to a major Latin American country, held a staff meeting once a week, and each time it came the turn of his agricultural attaché to talk, Royce could feel his toes curling in his shoes. There was something about the man that always made the ambassador sort of itch, and when he talked in his evenly spaced twangy syllables Royce inevitably thought of a player piano that was going to clank on and on until they all were swaying stupefied in their chairs to a mechanical polka of fertilizer experiments and hog statistics.

"Have anything today, Bill?" he asked.

"Yes, I have," the attaché said, maintaining a perfect record of disappointing his chief. "I was down in Catumiri yesterday. That's out in the middle of the interior, about 100 or so miles from Itumbara, which is the major city around there. . ."

To summarize Bill's remarks, it seems that in Catumiri he heard that townspeople in nearby Santa Maria were just about overrun with rabbits. In fact, it was being referred to as a plague.

"Overrun with what?" asked the ambassador.

"Rabbits."

"I see. Go on," the ambassador said and absent-mindedly wrote on a small pad "rabbits." Then he said, "You did say 'rabbits'?"

"Yes, sir, rabbits. You know, bunnies."

"Bunnies," the ambassador wrote under the word "rabbits." Then he asked, "Well, how serious can a bunny plague be?"

"Quite serious, sir. You see, they're eating up just about everything in sight, at least, that's what I was told."

"Well, that's too bad. I hope it all works out. Anything else, Bill?"

"No, sir, except I think you ought to know a couple of Peace Corps kids started this rabbit thing. It was a project to help provide food for those people and particularly protein because you see. . ."

The ambassador suddenly interrupted with, "Our Peace Corps?"

"Is there another?" Bill asked back.

"Do you think it's really bad?"

"They say it is, sir."

"How long does it take to get there?"

"About two days. You can fly commercial to Catumiri. Then take a bus to Itumbara and the next day go

#### HENRY B. RYAN

*Our author writes, "I joined USIA more than seven years ago to see the world and so far have seen Brazil, where I served in Rio, Brasilia and Belem in various capacities, the last being that of Press Attaché. In a crash program to broaden my horizons, the Agency has scheduled me to go to Vietnam early next year as one of its elite corps of puce berets working in the hearts-and-minds field."*

*Before entering the Government, I worked in Chicago in the publishing and printing industries, and, among other positions served as an Assistant Editor for World Book Encyclopedia and Managing Editor for the INLAND PRINTER, a business magazine for the graphic arts.*

on to Santa Maria. Or if you like you could. . ."

"I'm not going, you are. I think it better be sometime this week. Take a look around and see how serious it is, and let me know."

A week later the ambassador opened the same kind of meeting with the rabbit problem. The little piece of paper that said "Rabbits Bunnies" was now clipped to a letter from the Mayor of Santa Maria who said rabbits were running wild in his town and eating everything in sight. If he couldn't control the situation, he would lose the next election. He did not blame the Peace Corps Volunteers, for whom he had the highest esteem. The idea, as a way to help a poverty-plagued community, was an excellent one. It might have been all right, the mayor explained, if his constituents had been more adept at raising rabbits but nearly all of them got out of the simple enclosures provided, not only got out but prospered and multiplied. "My God, how they multiplied," he wrote. The Peace Corps couple, he continued, would probably have known how to cope with the situation, but they had left. Therefore, could the ambassador provide some sort of specialists to help deal with the problem before the next election?

Then Bill reported. "God, it's wild. I mean, they're everywhere you look. I even saw one on a bus. There isn't a garden of any kind left in town. I'll tell you, fellas, you just can't imagine. . ."

"Ideas anyone?" the ambassador cut in.

Poison was rejected as too dangerous. Well, O.K., someone said, how about just moving everyone out temporarily while a platoon or so of US riflemen cleaned up the situation?

"I'm afraid I'd have to draft the words for a unit

citation," Royce answered.

"If there were only some way we could get them to stop. . . to stop. . . well, you know," said the economic counsellor.

"Hell," Royce replied, "we can't even manage that with our own high school kids."

The following week there were important new developments. The mayor of Santa Maria had written Royce another letter, this one with a more hopeful tone than the last, indicating, in fact, that the townspeople possibly were on the way to solving their problem without massive US intervention.

Today, Royce had in his hand a folder made up by his secretary who noticed pieces of paper accumulating on the problem. She put them in chronological order, with the ambassador's handwritten notes on top. The folder had to be titled, so she took her clue from one of those notes and in capital letters on the top wrote RABBITS BUNNIES, figuring loads of times government titles don't make any sense anyway. Look at that one she was just reading about, "Operation Overlord," which meant we planned to try to clobber the be-Jesus out of the Germans in Normandy. The title made the ambassador wince, but there was not time to change it.

He opened the folder and read the second letter from the mayor, who with his top counsellors had outlined a plan of action containing the following points:

1. A massive effort to catch all stray rabbits was to be made by local authorities and deputized citizens. But they would need equipment and hoped the ambassador could prevail upon his country's aid administrators to provide a large quantity of long-handled nets.

2. Once the rabbits were caught, they would be put into great pens made with gnaw-proof metal staves. Could the ambassador send some?

3. The rabbits were to be segregated by sex in separate pens. But who can tell a rabbit's sex? Preliminary experiments, the mayor said, had shown that no one in Santa Maria could with any reliability. So what was also needed was at least one specialist, a rabbit sexer.

4. Rabbit raising would be carried out exclusively by the municipality, the rabbits to be sold at reasonable rates. But each time a rabbit was sold, the citizen buying it would get a certificate showing whether it were male or female. To buy more, he had to present the certificate, and naturally, he would damn well be given the same sex on subsequent rounds (presuming, as someone pointed out, local authorities learned to tell the mamas from the papas, or the US specialist stayed there forever).

"The whole thing is pretty socialistic," the political counsellor said.

The ambassador answered, "The way we're going to look at it is this. The greatest source of energy in our country, nuclear fission, is developed and controlled by the government through the Atomic Energy Commission. The greatest source of energy in Santa Maria, rabbits, is also going to be developed and controlled by the government through the new rabbit administration. I don't see how we can complain." Then he asked the agricultural attaché what he thought of the mayor's solution. It sounded all right, Bill said, certainly worth a try.

"Then I want you to find out the quickest way to get gnaw-proof staves, long-handled nets, and a rabbit sexer. And let's not go into too much detail about all this with Washington."

To understand fully that last remark, it should be realized that Ambassador Royce had specialized in foreign affairs at Georgetown University and graduated with honors. From there he went on to do work at Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, where he had been considered an outstanding student. This was followed by a brilliant career in the Foreign Service during which he had been involved in many highly important and extremely delicate negotiations. He had already served as an assistant secretary of state and now was ending his career at an important post, after which he planned to do a book he had already decided to title "The Challenge to American Diplomacy of a Changing World." Obviously, he did not want to finish his service overly identified with rabbits. Unfortunately, however, this being a dull news period, a US correspondent sent back to his paper a little feature story saying, in short, rumors were going around that Flopsy, Mopsy and Cottontail had our diplomats in a dither in that part of the world.

A few days later Royce received a letter from the Assistant Secretary of State for Latin America. It said simply, "What the hell is this? Regards, Sam," and enclosed the story. A long, explanatory, confidential telegram was sent back. The ambassador's secretary titled it "Subject: RB Situation."

Soon the file was growing, as things like this went back and forth - "Subject: RB. Send estimate dollar cost for outlined US aid." "Subject: RB. What percent expense can be defrayed with US-held local currency?" "Subject: RB. How soon can mission expect delivery nets?" "Subject: RB. Send any press comment RB development and control projects."

The ambassador, incidentally, got to be very fond of this RB designation because it kept him from having "rabbits" scattered all over his communications. But one day the military attaché began wiring Washington about some reconnaissance-bombing planes the host country planned to buy in Europe. The attaché's secretary headed his telegrams "Subject: RB," and pretty soon things like this were happening: (From Washington) "Subject: RB. What are possibilities of interesting government there in buying comparable American RB?"

(From post) "Subject: RB. Post does not repeat not understand Department's thinking, but possibility of government buying RBs out of question. Problem is to eliminate existing surplus."

(From Washington) "Subject: RB. Press comment received here says available hardware your area unable to bag fast European RB. Appreciate your evaluation and that of local officials."

(From post) "Subject: RB. Post not aware RB of European extraction. Local authorities believe they can be snagged effectively with long handled nets. Post concurs."

(From Washington) "Subject: RB. Assistant Secretary to visit post next week to discuss RB matter. Please discontinue communication this subject until then."

But before the assistant secretary arrived, someone in the administrative section, responsible for receiving and

distributing telegrams, nudged the man next to him and with a handful of the RB wires said, "Hey, Smitty, I got a sneaking suspicion we been screwing up in spades."

"That's what we get paid for, isn't it?" Smitty said.

"No, seriously, look. Divide these telegrams this way, and it seems like there are really two RBs, and they're completely different. I think one is an airplane, but I'll be damned if I can figure out what the other one is."

"Let me see," said Smitty. He studied the thing for a while and then said, "You know, I believe you're right. Now what?"

"Well, we could quit."

"First, let's see what Max thinks." Max, head of the administrative section, decided there was nothing to do but show the whole mess to the ambassador.

"You see, sir, in some cases RB seems to refer to some kind of an airplane, and in other cases, well, I just don't know." But what really puzzled Max was the ambassador's reaction. After all, this had the smell of being one of the biggest communications foul-ups he had seen in fifteen years of service and all Royce said was, "Well, Max, suppose you just let me study these for a while, and don't you worry about it." Really, he wanted to give an award to Max, who had just shown him how to prevent the assistant secretary from making his trip. Of course, he would have to disobey the order about suspending communications on the subject, but under the circumstances that seemed eminently warranted. So he began to draft a telegram.

"Subject: RB. Post believes there has been a communications mixup both here and in Department. (Put them on the hook, too; they were just as much at fault, after all.) Has come to our attention that telegrams titled RB probably refer to two subjects. Believe in following wires (here, he listed the numbers) RB refers to Reconnaissance-Bomber, whereas in following (more numbers) RB stands for. . ."

What the hell did RB stand for exactly? He called Max, but Max hadn't the faintest idea. He didn't even know who put that designation on. The ambassador called in his secretary and asked if she knew who put it on.

Why, yeah, sure, she knew. He put it on there himself.

"I did not, damn it. I don't even know what it stands for," he said.

"Honestly, I got it from. . .," she started to say "you," but the look on his face warned her that something else would be better for everyone. "Well, I took it right off that folder of yours, the one that's all about this subject."

"Get the folder, Doris." There was a fatalistic quality in his voice. It was as though he said, "Pull the trigger, Doris." She did.

"Oh, this damn folder. I wish you'd take that silly title off it."

"Me. But it's your folder and your title."

"Doris, I am not a typist. I did not put that title on there."

Again, she saw it was time to level off. "No, sir, of course not. I did. But I took it straight off the piece of paper which you put on top of all the correspondence on the subject, obviously the title for the operation."

"Operation!" he thought. "Damn it, Doris has been stealing books from the Marine Guards again. I'll

probably get another complaint from the sergeant." Then he asked, "What slip of paper?"

She flipped open the folder, and there it was, his little note made on the day the subject first came up—"RABBITS BUNNIES."

"And so from this slip of paper you took the title for the folder," he was speaking in slow, even tones almost like the player piano style of the agricultural attaché, "and from the folder you took the subject title for the telegrams, and so RB on all our telegrams to the Department stands for 'Rabbits Bunnies'."

She began sort of dithering until he said, "That's all right, Doris. Don't worry about it. It's nobody's fault really. That will be all, thanks." Then, back to the draft of the telegram. "RB stands for. . ." Now how in hell was he going to end that sentence. He had two days to figure it out.

By the following afternoon he had it. "RB stands for Rabbit Blight." How was that? Tremendous.

But, alas, telegrams, even in this age of electronic marvels, are tricky things, plagued with a recurring ailment known as the garble. What causes it? - sometimes the elements, sometimes temperamental machinery, sometimes a daydreaming operator.

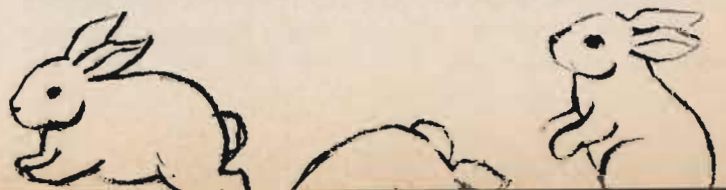
So that last sentence, sentence of toil, agony, but of final inspiration and triumph, arrived in Washington, "RB stands for Rabbit Bite."

Officially the Department took it at face value, but before long, letters from Washington colleagues lashed the Ambassador's ego with quips like, "Incidentally, is whiskey good for rabbit bite?" "Do they attack or just bite when cornered?" "Are you biting them, or are they biting you?"

Meanwhile, the serious business of cleaning up the Rabbit Blight in Santa Maria began to move forward. First, two agricultural specialists arrived from the United States. One was tall, thin, with crew-cut blond hair; the other, tall, thin, with crew-cut blond hair and slightly crossed eyes. "He's the one," everybody said. "He's the sex fella." He was, too.

The staves arrived, and pens were built. Domestic rabbits were confiscated and put into them, their owners receiving promissory notes from the city to be redeemed as soon as the first sales were made. The nets came also, so posses were formed, and the great chase was on. It was a ball for everyone at the beginning, and a few rabbits came into the city's pens as a result of people charging down streets behind flying bunnies. Frequently, streaking villagers crashed into each other at corners of buildings while two rabbits dashed off to freedom. Often they went creeping, stalking, slowly, softly, and then WHAM, and usually missed.

So for the first few days it was sheer fun and sometimes profit, since the government paid a bounty. But after that, it became apparent that nets were not going to solve the problem, so rather elaborate traps were built under the supervision of the two imported specialists and put all over the town. These did do the job, and twice a day bewildered-looking dogs, cats, chickens, mice, rats, armadillos, lizards, and a good number of rabbits were emptied out of them.



number of rabbits were emptied out of them.

The blight was coming to an end. Already the city was selling rabbits back to its own citizens and to nearby communities. It was paying off its promissory notes and had employed a supervisor for the pens, plus an apprentice sexer. Another employee was responsible for bookkeeping, sex documents and inventory. Santa Maria, in fact, was entering a period of moderate prosperity, something it had never dreamt of. The town hall got painted, a new coffee set was ordered for the grammar school, a rain shelter was built at the bus stop, and a man was hired to sweep out the park with a palm frond every day.

When reports of all these good times came back to the embassy, the agricultural attaché was shot off to Santa Maria again "to hunker around," as he put it, and see if it was all true. He came back ecstatic. Santa Maria was blossoming. Well, budding, anyway, which was truly refreshing after its centuries-long wilt.

That was all the ambassador needed to hear to give birth to another message in the RB series. He drafted it himself, a perfectly straightforward, deftly cast, thoughtful report on "pioneering economic development measures for small, rural communities." Sometimes, however, as he worked on it, his imagination would drift off into a brief little news story. "After a long and distinguished career of political analysis and negotiations in the world's major capitals, Ambassador Sherwin Royce has astounded diplomatic and academic circles by entering the economic field. He has just produced what may well be a definitive work on development of small, backward, rural communities. His paper on the matter, recently released by the State Department, is based on his own imaginative work in such areas."

His "paper," when finished, very solemnly explained what great gains had been made with small, inexpensive, but highly productive units. His embassy's work, he said, was an example to developers to seek a simple item, not too complicated for villagers to understand, but which yielded high return for minimal input. Then he gave the history of the model project in his country, explaining how he and his aides planned out the project and put it into execution. He related how, as might be expected, it hit a few snags, but went on to show how he, assisted by his staff and at all times working closely with local officials (always an essential in this kind of work, he pointed out), overcame the initial difficulties. Finally, he sketched the successful fruition of the whole project, very much as planned when, with his Peace Corps colleagues, he determined to try the rabbit experiment in Santa Maria, perhaps even a little better than planned.

But there was to be yet another snag in the Royce development project. It seems that the couple who boarded the two Peace Corps Volunteers during their stay in Santa Maria still had the original pair of rabbits brought to the town, and for sentimental reasons refused to give them up.

The city government regarded this situation as a potential disaster. Those two rabbits, plus, it must be admitted, others brought in subsequently, had nearly destroyed the village once, and they could do it again. The law could not be defied.

The rabbits must be surrendered. But how could

the mayor make the offenders see that? Worst of all, since he had started pressuring them, they had stopped turning over the offspring, and now they no longer could because it had become impossible to distinguish them from the originals, and the old couple would not risk making a mistake. So now they already had five rabbits.

All this was brought to Royce's attention by the agricultural attaché whom he had sent out to the village with an information specialist and a photographer. The idea was to get some good photos to send to Washington illustrating the Royce Plan for Rural Development as well as to work up some hard-hitting copy which, when combined with the pictures, would make a snappy press kit. This was to be handed out at a conference the ambassador planned to call for local newsmen.

When he learned that the project was again in jeopardy, an endless series of new RB messages began floating through his imagination, feeble messages, whimpering messages, all of them backtracking, explaining, rationalizing, blaming incompetent officials and unwilling citizens, showing how the plan was sound but the execution fumbling, a result of local ineptitude.

The upshot was that the agricultural attaché was dispatched again, and finally, through long, hard, skillful, and at times seemingly hopeless, bargaining, hammered out the following agreement directly with the rabbits' owners.

A. The rabbits would be surrendered in return for one of those Western-type spotted ponies the couple had once seen in a movie. Their children would like it almost as well, and it might be more useful.

B. No harm was to be done to the original rabbits. They were to be returned to the Volunteers or maintained throughout the rest of their natural lives by the United States Government. (The attaché wondered how the Smithsonian Institution was going to like a matched pair of bunnies.) Nothing was specified about the three progeny. (But then, who could tell which they were. Maybe the Smithsonian wouldn't mind five.)

C. The pony was to be selected by the volunteers and presented by the ambassador. (This presentation item made the attaché squirm, but the couple wouldn't give in on it.)

When it was all worked out, the attaché told the couple he would present the proposals to his government for approval and report back to them as soon as he could. The ambassador, he knew, would scream about the whole thing, but still, it was a good package and a damned hard one to get.

Royce, in fact, was fairly pleased. An experienced diplomat, he recognized a victory snatched out of what seemed an impossible negotiating position. Now, there was more communication in the RB series, and these messages may well have been Royce's greatest coup in the whole affair. There was not the faintest hint that the United States of America had been backed into a corner by an illiterate, bull-headed old farm couple out in the middle of Purgatory. Instead, they rang like a grand and fitting finale to a great international experiment.

The plan was this. The whole project was to receive formal recognition. There was to be a great celebration. The rabbits were going to America to live in the same

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land as those fine Peace Corps youngsters. A wonderful pony was coming down from America, sent by those same youngsters. The whole thing symbolized friendship and exchange of peoples—well, animals, anyway. The rabbit warrens were going to be blessed by the priest. Everyone would give a speech. It was to be a memorable day in Santa Maria and throughout the world of rural development if not, indeed, of diplomacy.

The fact is, it really was very much that kind of day. The ambassador, as it turned out, actually enjoyed getting out and meeting simple farm folks, perhaps because they made an unbelievable fuss over him. During the day, the mayor shook everyone's hand at least six times, and the priest blessed everything in sight. After the ceremonies, there was a great outdoor barbecue, beef, not rabbit, which was suggested but rejected as inappropriate. The pony was a tremendous success. Everyone who could get on a horse rode him, and the ambassador even patted his nose.

All's well that ends well, and all ended well for Santa Maria, but the agricultural attaché still faced one small chore—removing the bunnies at the end of the day. They were kissed, patted, crated up, and taken to the bus stop. The attaché was embraced by the old couple, blessed by the priest, and had his hand shaken six times by the mayor. The bunnies were put aboard, the attaché followed, the couple cried, the priest put an arm around both of them, and finally the bus rolled away.

At Catumiri, Bill boarded an airplane, along with the bunnies, who in their crate were placed in the rear of the cabin. Now, on this particular airline passengers don't worry much about the steward. They consider themselves lucky if the doors close and both the propellers stay on. They are surprised and relieved if both the pilot and the copilot show up for the flight, although after taking a second look their relief diminishes substantially. So, to repeat, passengers do not worry much about the shiftless, scraggly, dirty steward, and as a result, he doesn't worry much either, except occasionally about the plane's capacity to stay airborne.

"What do you suppose is in this crate?" he wondered at about 6,000 feet. "Open it and find out," he decided as the plane plummeted to about 5,500 feet. "Where?" he asked himself as it bucked up again to about 6,300 feet. "Well, probably right there where it says uh, let's see, 'DO NOT OPEN'." So he gave it a little jimmy and a pry, a pound or so with his fist, a twist and a shake, and suddenly a rabbit jumped to the floor and began hopping up the cabin. While the steward, amazed, was still watching the first one, another pushed up the top, and he was out, too, gambolling after the first. Finally, the steward yanked up the top, and immediately the other three were free, and all five cavorting in the aisle.

"Well, the hell with them," he figured. He didn't even see them. Rabbits? Rabbits running loose on an airplane? You're crazy.

So zig-zag, first on this side, then on that one, hoppity-plop-sniff-sniff here, hoppity-plop-sniff-sniff there, up the cabin they went.

Now, growing accustomed to the flight, the attaché began to relax for the first time in a long while. He

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thought about Santa Maria, how everything had gone well there, and how, thank God, it was finally all over. Royce, of course, would probably damn his work with faint praise. He could almost hear him saying, "Not bad, Bill—on the whole, not too bad." Well, by God, he had saved old Royce from being the laughing stock of the Foreign Service. What did it have to be, the Treaty of Vienna? The Marshall Plan? He took a tough assignment and did a good job with it. Probably the ambassador couldn't have come out of it half so. . . . What was that in the aisle? He must have imagined it. Anyway, the next time Royce. . . What was that against his leg? He thought he felt something. . . Next time Royce. . . WHAT. Oh, dear God. Those two beady little eyes were looking right up at him. He refused to look back. Finally he did, a quick peek, and sure enough, there they were, all five, bouncing and sniffing, having a grand time, with everyone who wasn't passing out from air sickness calling and clucking at them.

Well, the hell with them. Rabbits? Rabbits in the aisle of an airplane? Who ever heard of such a thing? He looked straight ahead. He was the only one that did.

But if he didn't recognize them, at least one, that one at the edge of his seat, seemed to recognize him. It just sat and stared at him. "Well, go ahead, stare," he thought, "I'm not going to watch." He looked straight at the seat in front of him. Pretty soon another rabbit came up and stared. The attaché sneaked a sidelong glance. They were all there. "Damn it, get lost," he hissed out the side of his mouth, but it was no good. They would hop around, but always come back to stare at him.

When the plane finally landed, he reluctantly admitted ownership, and asked the steward not to open the door until they caught the rabbits. Everyone who was able joined in the chase, bumping, banging, and stumbling around while the tower asked if there was something wrong aboard and the ground crew kept knocking on the door until it got the steward's attention, whereupon he stuck his tongue out at them and went back to the hunt. Finally, with only three rabbits caught, a woman who had been nearly invalidated by the flight insisted on getting off and the hell with those dirty beasts that shouldn't be on an airplane anyway and if they didn't open that door she was going to put her bag through the window and go out that way, understand. As soon as the door was opened, a rabbit sprang from nowhere and darted down the ramp. The steward yelled to a crewman at the bottom to catch him. The crewman got set, made a lunge, missed, and fell flattened on the steps. The rabbit hopped down the length of his back and off to freedom. The last one was less successful and was trapped in the pilot's seat.

The attaché arranged to have the crate left beside the airplane while he rounded up some porters to carry it to the front of the airport where a vehicle from the embassy was to meet him. They would be along shortly, the porters said, so the attaché returned to the plane.

When he got back, he found the escaped rabbit sitting on top of the crate. Apparently having discovered that freedom is a lonely experience, it had returned to its friends.

"Move over," the attaché said, giving it a shove, and sitting together, they waited for the porters. ■