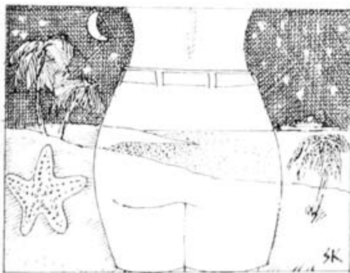
BERMUDA SHORTS

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS



We had a surf-and-turf vacation—a week in Bermuda as house guests of friends, then a week as cottage renters in Bethany Beach, along the Delaware shore. I had hoped to gather weighty intelligence from both places, to bring you news of social trends and political struggles, but all I succeeded in gathering were a few purple oleander petals—sweetly perfumed and deadly poisonous. The pages of my Bermuda notebook are still flecked with sand and smeared with suntan lotion, the grit and grease of summer maunderings. Brushing the grains away, the better to read my penciled notes, I find the ravings of a man touched by the sun.

Sunday. We have left our host and hostess by their pool and have taken a bus to Horseshoe Bay. The sandy shore here is partitioned by coral outcrops, creating a set of attractive semiprivate beaches. We choose a corner compartment, kick away a few beer cans and subside into our individual beach habits. Harry (older son, 21) builds sand castles and watches the tide crumple them. He works hard at it—a busy idler. Philip (younger son, 19) throws a frisbee out to sea—aimed generally at Madrid—in such a way that it sails back to him. An astonishing sight: Phil playing catch with an invisible sea-god, one with a pretty good arm. Diane (wife) is supine; eyes closed, arms extended, thumbs pointed inward like those of a sleeping baby.

I sit on a towel, gazing at whitecaps and thinking about King Canute. Why did he command the tide to recede? Some say he did it out of hubris, or cosmic *chutzpah*. Others claim he did it to prove to his worshipful subjects that he was not omnipotent. I like the latter version; it suggests a limited monarchy, the rudiments of parliamentary government.

Of course, Canute *was* powerful. At one point he ruled not only his native Denmark but all of Scandinavia, Scotland and a large part of England. In college, I once had to write a paper on the history of Denmark and came across a choice comment on Canute in the *Britannica* that went something like this: "He raised the level of civilization in Denmark by sending Englishmen there."

Something similar might have been said of Bermuda. Although the Spanish navigator, Juan de Bermudez, discovered it (in 1515), the English settled it. Bermuda didn't make England rich; the place was too small, the soil too thin. Like Plymouth, however, it provided a haven for English dissidents in a time of religious strife and much bloodshed. The green little island struck a deep chord in the English imagination, some Edenic yearning for a simpler world, one that would be free of clashing dogmas and warring kings.

Andrew Marvell saw it all—Charles' beheading, the triumph of Cromwell, the Restoration—and lived to tell the tale. In his *Bermudas* the new inhabitants sing a song of relief and self-congratulation:

What should we do but sing
His praise,
That led us through the watery
maze
Unto an isle so long unknown,
And yet far kinder than our own?

A lesser poet of the same period, Edmund Waller, was even more rhapsodic: "What fruits they have, and how heaven smiles/ Upon those late-discovered isles."

My stomach rumbles with a just-discovered hunger. It is time, I tell my family, to go.

Monday. Our friends live near a little bay lined with black coral, where white boats are anchored. To reach it we had to duck through an oleander hedge and traverse a neighbor's wide yard. A huge brown dog greeted us and eyed me dubi-

ously. "What kind of dog is that?" I asked our host.

"That's a rottweiler."

I addressed the beast tactfully. "Good dog," I said. "Nice rottweiler." He seemed pleased.

Our host is a scientist. He brings order to the Bermuda landscape by calling off the names of the flowers and trees we pass. Their names are poetry: Hibiscus, morning glory, ice flower, poinsettia. When we arrive at the little bay, he wades in. He examines shells; he stares long and hard at jelly fish. A scientist's total concentration.

Our hostess is a writer and social researcher. She swims the way she writes, with firm, methodical strokes, making a smooth progression through the ripples. And she swims far—beyond the boats, even beyond the tiny bay.

Wednesday. It is raining, and I am secretly pleased. I've had more sun than I bargained for; my forehead is peeling. I can now understand why Robert Benchley, according to his son Nathaniel, "always greeted daylight with a certain amount of resentment."

Most of us are slouched around the livingroom, reading. Our host is perusing the local newspaper. "There's a big debate going on about capital punishment," he informs us. Two black men have been convicted of separate murders—in one, the colonial Governor was killed—and are scheduled shortly to be hanged. Some of Bermuda's black leaders have been trying to get the sentences reduced to life imprisonment.

"The debate hasn't been very edifying," says our host. "Here's a letter to the editor arguing for execution in the name of fiscal prudence. It's cheaper to hang them than to feed and clothe them for another 40 years."

I return to my book, *Slavery in Bermuda.* On vacations such as this one I have learned to take little or no reading with me, and rely instead on local resources, on the *lisant du pays,* if you will. The book, plucked off our friends' shelf, tells me that in earlier times slaves were hanged for the most trivial infractions—stealing a master's fork, for instance, or leaving the premises without permission. In those days nobody questioned the efficacy of capital punishment. Public executions, in England as well as in Bermuda, drew large, festive crowds. Summary justice was a spectator sport.

Still, compared to its draconian counterpart in the West Indies and the United States, Bermuda slavery was a piece of cake. There were no big plantations, no factories in the field, where slaves might be worked to death. True, families were separated, but not as frequently as in the American South and never by more than 20 miles—the entire length of the Bermuda archipelago.

The result seems to have been less soul-destruction. Bermuda's 33,000 blacks—60 percent of the population—appear less self-conscious about race, less *ethnic,* than other blacks in this hemisphere. They are segregated, by and large, and they remain bogged down in the service trades, while the professions and most of the good jobs are monopolized by the white minority. Nevertheless, they somehow manage to carry their burdens gracefully and without a trace of servility; and they have a word for any task beneath their dignity: *infradig.*

Well, the weather is clearing up. Worse luck, someone suggests a dip in the bay. I rehearse my speech: "Good dog, nice rottweiler."

Thursday. The four of us walk along a high road by the sea. Mopeds, bicycles and shiny black taxis whiz past. Below us, to our right, between the road and the ocean, is an astounding scene. The Sonesta Hotel, a long white curve against the blue water, spans the entrance to the bay. So people sitting on the Sonesta beach do not see the ocean, they see the Sonesta. One pays many dollars for this privilege.

Diane pronounces the scene unsurpassably ugly, and she is certainly right. Yet something about it appeals to me. It reminds me of the posh watering holes I occasionally visited with my parents; resorts offering tennis and shuffleboard and badminton, where waiters in striped pants served tall, iced drinks at tables by the sea, where potted palms fluttered deferentially, and where gorgeously tanned blondes sashayed across the terrace in bright yellow shifts with matching sandals. Those places were monuments to hedonism, sybaritic beyond surmise, and the Sonesta, down there in that magenta gulley, is their authentic heir.

Friday. We are going home. U.S. Customs has arranged a preflight inspection at the island's airport, and now we stand in line, clutching our passports, awaiting clearance. I am a shade anxious. I bought Cuban cigars for a friend in New York. They come individually wrapped in metal tubes that I have sequestered in my jacket pockets. During the brief Carter-Cuba thaw, travelers were allowed to bring Havana cigars into the U.S.A. Then the lid was again clamped on. A taxi driver here told me that Customs officials enjoy confiscating these cigars—and smoking them.

We get through Customs—few questions, no search—only to run afoul of another line. The uniformed officials at the end of it are looking for guns and bombs. I walk through the arched metal detector: Lights flash, buzzers buzz.

"Sir," says a woman holding a metal disc, "stand over here, please." She brushes the disc over my clothes: more buzzing. I empty my pockets of cigarettes, keys and coins: I still buzz. The woman places her hand over my heart and squeezes. "Sir," she whispers, "are those cigars?"

"Yes."

"You may pass," she says.