A BALANCING ACT

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As the heavy oaken door to Wombat Manor swung open to reveal the svelte outline of its laird's chatelaine mine eyne dazzled and became fixed upon the vertical line of quivering chatoyance issuing from the depths of the baroque chrysoberyl ferronniere which, like a third eye, made up with her own two a trefoil whose three-fold reflection of the waning January sun distilled the essence of light. Her civilized purr broke through my optical enchantment, and as she pressed into my hands an elegant little hamper of ample weight I found myself being given subtle instructions supplementing the telephonic message that had brought me thither.

We marched down the gallery toward the door of The Marsupium and a moment later I was closeted with the eminent Dr. Wombat himself. Dressed in a plum velvet jacket with amethyst buttons and sateen lapels, on his head a tasselless maroon fez having a Greek key frieze running about its base, and on his face a mien as somber as that appealing countenance could assume, the gastro-nome phascolome sat on a Spanish point of Columbus's landing on Guanahani, or Watlings, or San Salvador, as you prefer.

I voiced my surmise that this was apparently no ordinary day for my friend. At a gesture from him I took my place beside him on the love seat, placed my hamper on a tabouret in front of us, and waited for the savant to speak.

"This is a day of remembrance for Truganini," quoth he.

"And who might that be? An offspring of Paganini and Maganini?" I quipped.

The wombat vouchsafed me no smile. "She was no fiddler's kid nor your ordinary lubra, either, but the last Tasmanian," he explained. "At her demise a hundred odd years ago that 20,000-year-old race became extinct."

"The last Tasmanians of whom I am aware," replied I, "were both named Thompson and both left-their natal isle for Hollywood, where one became Errol Flynn and the other Merle Oberon; and the two of them are now extinct, too."

"Today I am fasting in honor of the Tasmanians," said the wombat lugubriously.

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I refused to succumb to the wombat's gloom. "Far better than that ascetic ritual would be some positive action to commemorate those vanished worthies." I opened the hamper, and a fruity aroma filled the air.

The doctor's hair-covered rhinarium involuntarily twitched.

From the hamper I retrieved a cooky the size of a saucer, held it to my nose, inhaling the fragrance and rolling my eyes heavenward, and recited the ingredients in a tone designed to be of increasing resonance: "Flour, eggs, milk, sugar, molasses, nuts, pineapple, rum!"

The wombat sat on his paws and swallowed nervously. "What a delicious flavor rum has," he counterpointed in a weak voice.

"The alcohol has all gone to meld and weld the other ingredients into a light, moist, toothsome whole." I nibbled off a bitelet of the cooky and savored it.

The good doctor was visibly debating with himself. He then spoke with sudden resolve. "’Tis true I wish to honor the memory of Truganini and her vanished brethren; but does it behove me, who believes in the Golden Mean, ne quid nimis, meden agan, and dui masze, to tip the balance of a day toward ritualistic asceticism? The ancient Tasmanians lived in balance with nature. Better far were it that I dedicated my novel word game 'Balance' unto their memory and at the same time, by revealing it to the world, contributed to the gaiety of nations and simultaneously freed myself from the stigma of fanaticism. Besides, your hamper has put a damper on my solemnity and hindered my rite, so there is nothing else left to do."

I interrupted his Johnsonian musings by whipping a linen napkin out of the hamper, tossing it on his knees, and pressing a cooky into each paw, while observing that Aerius of Pontus would undoubtedly have approved of his action.

"Delicious," he murmured, "remarkably similar to those that my housekeeper makes." He removed his fez and deposited his extra cooky in it.

"Now, about ‘Balance’..." I settled myself in anticipation.

"One might say it started with a note in M. P. Hearn’s Annotated Wizard of Oz mentioning the regretfully recently retired Martin Gardner’s astute observation in the February 1972 Scientific American that the word WIZARD is symmetrical: W is the fourth letter from the end of the alphabet, D is the fourth from the beginning; I is the ninth letter from the beginning, R is the ninth from the end, and Z is the last letter, while A is the first. One, four, and nine are moreover the squares of the first three whole numbers after zero. A rare word indeed, but lacking the perfect symmetry of HOVELS, in which H-O-V and E-L-S both give an even ascent forwards and descent backwards in the alphabet. That is not true of W-I-Z and A-R-D."

"Right," he added, "beautiful."

"Admittedly, letter pairs H-O-P, O-V-A, and W-I-Z of the alphabet are especially: O is the eleventh human number, P is the first and last reptiles; whereas WIZARD is the average Roman alphabet number most being symmetrical. ‘Balance’; for if that too," he mused, "bid fair never at the beginning to the end of WIZARD."

"Nonsense," I retorted. "No, it is not the flexion, or phonics, or any combination (an example of WIZARD) more than WIZARD."

Meanwhile, our hosts and their companions had risen to two cups of fruit juice.

"Excellent," he continued, "seeing himself with one hand, I say."

1 2 3 4 5
A B C D E
F G H I J
K L M N O
P Q R S T
U V W X Y Z

"So the word looks as if," he said, "precisely as the Wizard of Oz.

"That’s why," I reasoned. "No, you didn’t notice!

"Well, then..."

"If this is true, Fell fellow..."

The wombat’s leg braced itself on the table, "I find it most remarkable, doctor."
Right," I interjected, "but those squares - 1, 4, and 9 - are beautiful."

"Admittedly," retorted the wombat, "but the numbers of the letter pairs H-S, O-L, and V-E, figured from the beginning or end of the alphabet, whichever is nearer, are 8, 12, and 5, respectively: 8 is the cube of the second even number, 5 is a peculiarly human number - five fingers, five senses, five years in a lustrum, and so on; and 12 is the number of multifarious important sets of things from twelve ounces in a pound troy through the 12 months to the 12 pairs of cranial nerves in mammals, birds, and reptiles; while the sum of 5, 8, and 12 is 25, the square of 5, the average number of letters in the Hebrew, Arabic, Greek, and Roman alphabets, the age at which men are most vigorous and women most beautiful... but let no superstitious numerology becloud 'Balance'; for..."

"Not only that," said I, interrupting his flow of speech that bid fair never to cease, "but if you amputate the S and place it to the inflexion S on WIZARD."

"Nonsense," rejoined the worthy wombat, "ARD is also an inflexion, or at least a formant, as in DASTARD BASTARD SPANIARD (an example, not an accusation). Also there are lots more HOVELS than WIZARDS."

Meanwhile, as the wombative wordster had finished his cookies and risen to fetch a slate and two crayons, I took a thermos and two cups out of the hamper. The beverage proved to be mango juice.

"Excellent for clearing the palate," commented the doctor, busy himself in writing out the following alphabetical arrangement with one hand while he replenished his fez with the other:

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1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13
A B C D E F G H I J K L M
Z Y X W V U T S R Q P O N
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"So the wizard involved was the Wizard of Oz," I said.

"Precisely," replied the wombat, "but I prefer to think of him as the Wizard of Oz."

"That's what I said," said 1.

"No, you said 'Oz,' I said 'Oz.'"

"Well, then," I responded,

"If the wonderful Wizard of Oz.
Fell from his balloon, would he boz?"

The wombat retorted,

"I find that your query is really quite dreary,
For it's staying in the basket that coz."

"Let us not stray into Limerickland," I cautioned, "but get back into the basket, that is, into 'Balance.'"

"Besides the Wizard of Oz..., the wombat went on undeterred, "there were the Wizards of As, Ahs, Ays, Is, Ease, Awes, Ohs, Ooze, Uz, Errs, Eyes, Ows, and Oys. Alas, I knew them all ... and also the Wizard of Oise."

"Balance!" I cried. "Are there any other WIZARD words?"

"Precious few, dear boy. There's BOW'DLY and WIVER'D, neither too good. Then there's CLOLOX, as Chinamen call a certain proprietary household bleach. If we make a BIG TRY or TRY BIG we can find some two-worders: GOSH, LT., GOWD, LT., I FLOUR, PX LOCK, VHJ USE, WE LOV'D, WE RIV'D. More I cannot think of. If the Latin alphabet were the same as ours and did not lack j, u, w, or at least j and w, VIVERE 'to live' would be a prize; and if a, ã, and ö were not tacked onto the end of the Swedish alphabet, then TROLIG 'probable' would be a winner.

"That's for six-letter symmetricals. For four-letterers we have ARIZ (abbreviation of Arizona and dialect for 'arose'), BEVF, GIHF, GRIT, KLOP, LSER, TRIG, VURE, VOLE, WOLD, and, if we allow names, ZAZA and ZOLA. All these words are symmetrical, but more than that, they are balanced; each letter has its pair according to the alphabet here" and he pointed to the alphabet on the slate. "There is also another type made up of words composed of pairs of letters one after another, for example, FUSH, LOIR, LOLO, LOSH, LOVE, LOWD, RIVE, SHIR, SHRI, VELO and VERT. Six-letterers of this class would be SHRIVE, SHIRAZ, ZARISH. SHIV'ER just misses, but it balances. FLOURISH is a failed eight-letterer of this type, but it also balances. When we set such limitations on ourselves, however, we must be prepared for disappointments: EVOLEV is almost EVOLVE, and RUBYFI is almost RUBIFY."

"How," I queried, "can you construct a word game from such a paucity of prospects?"

"Oh, I'm not saying that there aren't other symmetricals or successive-letter-pair words that you could ghoumed around long enough. But my game goes beyond the concept of single words and spreads out over whole phrases, sentences, and even farther. Symmetricals and successive-letter-pairs were merely my starting point. You will note that in all the words I have cited each letter balances another according to the alphabet on the slate. The object of Balance is to start with a given word, take the letters that balance each of its letters, and extend the word to a phrase or beyond, as far as you can go and still make any real or grammatical sense. The starting word does not have to be a balanced word itself. You end up with surprising things and get more sense than you do from most palindromes.

"Let me give an example. Take the word ROSE: R must be bal-
"but get on undeterred, Awes, Ohs, them all ... words?"

If the last j, u, w, prize; and if we have, and, if we have symmetrical, has its pair in the alphabet of words containing FUSH, ELO and VERI ZARISH. SHI called eight-lettered, but such limitation for disappointment."

"A more experienced or pertinacious player might take ZZ WHILOM ROSE VANDAL and add the word GRIZZLY to use up the Z's, thus generating TIROB from the new letters GRILY. He might then go on from TIROB to O, BRIGHT by adding GH and thus also generating TS from GH. TS could then combine with O to give SOT without further addition of words, and the player would end up with GRIZZLY SOT, WHILOM ROSE VANDAL. This would win over WHILOM FUZZ ROSE VANDAL etc. because it is longer, ends without taking advantage of the permission to add a balanced pair to complete one's play, and probably makes more sense. Of course, play can go in quite another direction: ROSE-ILHV; ILHV into SILVER, leaving HHIV into BRIGHT, leaving GHIV into TYING, leaving HMV; HMV into HIM, leaving RV; RV into GIRL, leaving ORTV. Now, but for that cursed V, we would have the idyllic TOR GIRL TYING HIM BRIGHT SILVER ROSE. What can we do? Try taking that V, substituting it for the T in TYING; add a FOR, thus generating ULI; add the T to ULI; take advantage of the balanced-pair finish rule and turn TULI into TULSI; this leaves us with an H; add that to TOR and make THOR. Then, after rearrangement you have the sentence GIRL THOR ROSE YYING HIM FOR BRIGHT SILVER TULSI - this indisputable winner contains a whole story, maybe even an epic!

"Note that Balance is artistic. All players will generally recognize the superior set resulting from play."

"You certainly don't know where you are going to end up!" I exclaimed. "The messages you get are cryptic - somehow reminds me of the atbash or atbash cipher used in Jewish mystical or allegorical writing where each letter of a word is replaced by the letter that stands as many places from the end or beginning of the Hebrew alphabet as the replaced letter does from the beginning or end. Thus aleph is replaced by thav or tav, beth by sin or shin, and so on. Your replacement alphabet could be called the azby."

"Right you are," agreed my friend. "And the book of Jeremiah contains three examples of atbash: 25:26 and 51:41, where SheShaCH stands for BaBel, and 51:1, where LeB QaMaY (literally,
'heart of my enemy'; 'midst of them that rise up against me' in the King James Bible) stands for KaSHDiYM ·Chaldeans. While writing out these words he noted that the vowels, written small, were not taken into consideration because they were not written in Hebrew and that the digraphs CH and SH represented a single consonant. At the same time he wrote out the following alphabet:

A B C D E F G H I J K L M
N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

and continued, "We might also play around with replacing each letter of the alphabet with the letter corresponding to it in the other half of the alphabet. We could call this anbo. The Hebrew mystical and allegorical alphabet cipher would correspond to this. In azby the commonest - ETAOIN SHRDLU - letters are generally balanced by infrequently occurring letters: A-Z, E-V, F-U cause the most trouble. Anbo would eliminate this for A and E at any rate, but somehow anbo doesn't seem so neat to me as azby."

"I can see why you call the game Balance," I remarked to the masterful marsupial, "every complete play has an even number of letters and each letter is balanced by one occupying the corresponding place according to azby, but still there may be individual words with an odd number of letters. You are allowed complete freedom of word and letter permutation, but must always stay in balance. BALANCE itself generates YZOZMXV; I wish that could be 1015 WISOS. WORD generates DL 1W or WILD."

"Yes, once I got VERT GIRLS SOUGHT WILD WORD FIGHT," said the doctor.

"Since Martin Gardner's observation started you on this game why don't we play a set starting with his name, although proper names may not generally be de rigueur," I suggested.

And so we did, and this was the winning play: WIMBLE MARTIN GARDE'N INVOLVED IN GRIM WORM LIVOR TIZZY.

"Who knows," said the wombat, "that may even be true."

My learned friend's face was again tranquil, his eye sparkling. He rang for the chatelaine and requested her to set a place at the supper table for me. "We are going to have eggplant," he announced. "You won't be able to tell it from oysters," he announced. "You won't be able to tell it from oysters."

The housekeeper glided from the room, smiling her enigmatic smile. It occurred to me that the French souris means both 'smile' and 'mouse'.

The wombat dozed. I took the slate, started from the word AM-BIDEXTROUSLY and began wrestling with ZNYRWCGLFHOB. Why don't you do the same?