

The Great Fuss and Fume Over the Omnipotent Oom

True: the Man's Magazine

January 1965

by Charles Boswell

"Wily con man and conservative bank president, athlete and love-cult practitioner, the remarkable "Doctor" Bernard was all of these. He was also the Omnipotent Oom, whose devoted followers included some of the most famous names in America."

A year after the first World War, a middle-aged male calling himself Dr. Pierre Arnold Bernard--who also was known as the Omnipotent Oom--suddenly appeared in the village of Nyack, 15 miles up the Hudson River from New York City, and bought the show place of the area. This was an estate more than a century old, and Oom got it cheap, reputedly for \$100,000.

The dominant structure on the estate was a three-story brick Georgian mansion containing some 30 rooms, erected by a French pirate. Oom's purchase also included eight other handsome houses, plus numerous outbuildings. The entire cluster stood in a 78-acre park enclosed by a high iron fence.

The realtor with whom Oom dealt obtained no information concerning what sort of doctor he was or where he came from. In fact, Oom frightened him, although not intentionally. It was just the way Oom happened to look. He was heavily muscled, had a large head covered with close cropped hair, and his grayish-green eyes were so sharp; that they seemed to fix whatever fell within their point of focus, the way the pin of a collector fixes a butterfly.

Oom moved in immediately, with his retinue. It consisted of his wife Blanche, a lithe, handsome woman years younger than Oom; cooks and maids; gardeners and groundsman; and chauffeurs for Oom's fleet of automobiles. Over the years the fleet included such classics as a Minerva, a Rolls, a Pierce-Arrow, a Stutz, a Lincoln, a Packard and a Stanley Steamer. This last was Oom's particular delight. He often drove it himself, boiling down to New York and returning with the car full of guests. Some stayed only for weekends, but many remained for months.

At the entrance to his estate Oom placed no name. But he did have this inscription cut into the stone pediment above the gate:

HERE THE PHILOSOPHER MAY DANCE AND THE FOOL WEAR A THINKING CAP

Like any small town, Nyack had its gossips. The original rumors had it that Oom was a physician whose talents were utilized by unmarried ladies of wealth who found themselves in an embarrassing family way. This Nyack could take, for it represented no hazard to the citizenry at large.

But with the appearance of the inscription above the gate, Nyack grew uneasy. The town feared that Oom was a head shrinker and that he was converting the estate into a private bastille for nuts. What if some zany inclined to violence should break out?

To confirm or deny the suspicion, Nyack invoked the skills of its own CIA. The spies commissioned were an operator in the local telephone exchange and the postman who delivered Oom's mail. But the

intelligence obtained was not easy to analyze. Oom talked over the phone long-distance and corresponded with many people, including leaders of society and figures prominent in the arts. Some addressed him as Doctor Bernard, others as Oom.

And still others, mostly women, called him "Loving Guru." The women often told him they felt the need to walk around him three times and then reach out and touch his "lotus feet." Most puzzling to the local snoops were the letters addressed to the "Mystic Order of the Tantriks of India," in Oom's care. What the devil was a Tantrik? A Nyack librarian searched out the answer.

A true Tantrik is a practitioner of Tantra, a ritualistic system in certain religions of the Orient. The rites are grossly licentious and are most often invoked in veneration of the Sakti, the Hindu goddesses of female energy. But sometimes Oriental men and women with a yen for one another invoke them just for kicks. A couple skilled in the rites, which involve Yoga breathing and Yoga control of muscles of the loins, are supposedly able to make love hour after hour without diminution of male potency and female desire.

So that was it, Nyack concluded Oom was running a love cult. The local prudes clucked and gasped their alarm. Oom, obviously, was a danger to the young of the community and would have to be run out of town.

But the Nyack police refused to act. Oom was a big taxpayer. So the prudes complained to the New York State Police, then a recently formed, eager-beaver organization mounted on horse. The night they received the complaint, a squad of troopers galloped to Oom's estate and swung down from their saddles near the main building.

Oom had converted a portion of the first floor of this building into a meeting hall. Up front was a raised dais facing rows of seats. As the troopers approached, Oom's several dozen guests, all decorously clad—the men in dinner jackets and the women in evening gowns sat listening to their host deliver a talk.

Oom spoke earnestly and authoritatively on what he called the Art of Reversion. "I'll teach you," he told his audience, "to reverse your circulation, to reverse your circulation not once but several times a day. Many ills afflicting the average human arise from our static habits of posture. We are the only animals who constantly go about head up and feet down, never altering the position of our internal organs or the stresses we place upon our muscles."

Oom paused to adjust a mat on the floor. Then he flipped over gracefully and stood on his head. "Ah," he sighed, "how much better I feel! Reversing the course of my blood brings new life to tired tissues."

At that moment the squad of troopers burst in. Their sergeant did a doubletake at the sight of Oom practicing Reversion. But then the sergeant recovered himself and began reading from a document: "Dr. Pierre Arnold Bernard, you are charged with. . . ."

Oom tumbled from his upside-downed and landed lightly on his feet. He leaped from the rostrum to face the sergeant. "You charge me with what? Officer, look around you. Whether you realize it or not, you are in the midst of a group of ladies and gentlemen, at a private gathering, on private property. Get out, or I'll slap you with a damage suit."

The troopers retreated in abashed disorder, never to return. But their abortive raid had repercussions, for the New York papers got wind of it and ran the story, blowing it up with all they could unearth on Oom's lurid history. In this way the sedate citizens of Nyack learned a confounding lot about the strange

man who had landed in their midst.

For there is no doubt that Oom was incredibly strange. No other character in recent history has possessed a personality so amazingly contradictory and so amazingly diverse. He was variously a conservative bank president and a sharp con man, an athlete and an advocate of weird love-cult practices, a public-spirited Chamber of Commerce executive and an entrepreneur with but little feeling for his community's concern over the immovable carcass of a huge decaying elephant.

Oom made up the name Oom around 1905, when he was 30. It had a mystical sound and went well alliteratively with Omnipotent. Also, somewhat later, Oom invented the name Pierre Arnold Bernard. A generation before there had been a Dr. Claude Bernard, a great French physiologist, and it flattered Oom to be mistaken for this doctor's son and the heir to his talents.

Actually, Oom was born plain Peter Coon, in Iowa, in 1875. In after years he told two stories about how he spent his young manhood. Sometimes he said he was from Saint Louis but more often he boasted that he had studied in India and had been granted the degree of Shastri, the equivalent in the western world of a D.D., a Ph.D. and an M.D., all combined.

The facts are that Oom worked in California as a fruit picker, salmon packer salmon packer. then as a barber, and in 1905 fell in with an imaginative youth who called himself Mortimer K. Hargis. This worthy convinced Oom to give up barbering and shear the public without scissors.

In San Francisco the pair established the Bacchante Academy, which catered to young women interested in learning hypnotism and "soul charming." A stiff tuition was charged, perhaps deservedly, for Oom and his associate "professor" taught their pupils more than had been bargained for, such as the mysteries of relations between the sexes. Complaints of a moral nature lodged against the academy proved ineffective for several months, since its operators skipped from address to address well ahead of the police. Then Nature—in the form of the San Francisco earthquake of April 18, 1906—put the academy out of business. The earthquake also caused a fissure in the relationship between Oom and Hargis. Oom turned to learning. He got together a sizable collection of books and read like crazy about mystical Hindu practices.

In 1910, Oom blew into New York City and opened an Oriental sanctum on West 74th Street. A graphic idea of what went on there may be gathered from an incident occurring in May. Two girls, Zella Hopp and Gertrude Leo, fled to the district attorney and complained that Oom had held them captive for several weeks. The D.A. picked up Oom on charges of abduction and clapped him in jail to await trial. But in the end there was no trial, for at a preliminary hearing Oom so scared the wits out of the misses Hopp and Leo by glaring at them that they left the state. And in the doing the girls embarrassed the D.A. by leaving him without a case.

Oom slyly returned to the sanctum business, but now embellished his operation with the high-sounding name of the New York Sanskrit College. He occupied quarters on upper Broadway, and when the cops kept too strict a watch on him there, he moved to West End Avenue. His detractors contended he taught Oriental philosophies of his own invention—a racket to get neurotic women under his domination for the purpose of fleecing them. In a ridiculous way, a trick of Oom's once fizzled on him. A globe he claimed to illuminate through personal magnetism blew a fuse and was found to be hooked up by concealed wires to the house current.

Soon after America's entrance into World War 1, Oom invented television or a reasonable facsimile thereof. He lured to his sanctum the mothers, wives and sweethearts of service men, and at \$50 a head

permitted them to "see" and "talk with" their loved ones at the front. To perform these miracles he used devices--trumpets, screens of clouded glass and reflected images from photographs.

Toward the close of the war, Oom expanded his activities by opening a "physiological" institute on Riverside Drive. It was at this point he christened himself "Dr. Pierre Arnold Bernard." Business boomed so, he found it necessary to take on several assistant "doctors." He claimed to banish the discomforts of a universal female complaint, but many of the women who flocked to him soon found he hadn't helped them--and squawked. George A. Whiteside, counsel for the Medical Society of the County of New York, charged Oom with practicing medicine without a license--indeed, without medical education or training--and threatened prosecution.

Oom quickly struck his Riverside Drive tent, only to pitch it in a fancier neighborhood, on East 53rd Street near Fifth Avenue. Meanwhile he had had the good luck to meet and marry a charming, cultivated young woman who was accomplished both as an exotic dancer and as a practitioner of the physical and aesthetic benefits to be derived from Yoga exercises.

The woman was Blanche De Vries. She possessed a scholar's knowledge of Oriental philosophy and she gave direction to Oom's hitherto helter-skelter reading. Also, she knew costuming and stage lighting and she had a feeling for the truly dramatic. Lastly, she was friendly with a clique of wealthy, socially prominent women interested in the esoteric, and she saw in Oom the makings of a guru--a teacher of Yoga and other tantrik practices her rich friends would really go for.

The most important of these women was Ann Harriman Sands Rutherford Vanderbilt, who had been left a widow with several million dollars by two husbands and would soon be left a widow with many millions more by her third. For while William K. Vanderbilt, the yachtsman and railroad magnate, was on his last legs physically, he was as healthy as a Morgan or a Rockefeller when it came to money.

Mrs. Vanderbilt considered herself the arbiter of New York society, and perhaps she was. But even rich society arbiters have their difficulties, and Mrs. Vanderbilt felt hers were enough to get her down. Together with a dying husband, she had on her hands her two daughters by her second marriage, Margaret and Barbara Rutherford, both still in their twenties.

The girls had looks, charm, and millions of their own, but both were unhappy with their husbands and had already decided on divorce. Margaret was married to Ogden L. Mills, the Republican leader who a decade later would become Secretary of the Treasury under the late Herbert Hoover, while Barbara was the wife of Cyril Hatch, a New Yorker of substance.

At their first meeting, Oom and Mrs. Vanderbilt hit it off. All smiles, he gave her a benign form of his hypnotic eye, listened sympathetically to her troubles, and then led her into the exercise salon of the 53rd Street studio he and Blanche De Vries had fitted out in Oriental splendor.

"The word Yoga," Oom explained to Mrs. Vanderbilt, "comes from the root yug, meaning to join. It signifies the union of the body of the disciple with the visible world, and of his or her spirit with cosmic consciousness. Further, Yoga has the sense of a yoke, or discipline, which the neophyte must learn in order to attain perfect happiness."

Mrs. Vanderbilt much preferred the exercise salon to her husband's sickroom and she proved herself Oom's apt pupil. Soon she mastered the simpler Yoga contortions for meditation such as the "tree posture," the "noose posture," the "tortoise posture," and even the more difficult "supine thunderbolt posture." While they tired her in the muscle department, they so refreshed her in spirit that shortly she

felt she could cope with almost any problem.

Mrs. Vanderbilt considered steering Margaret and Barbara to Oom's place for similar therapy, but realized this might be dangerous. Suppose word of it reached the gossip columns. East 53rd Street was far too close to home. Mrs. Vanderbilt consulted with some of her rich, middleaged friends who had also become Oomites and they agreed that a sanctuary was needed at a distance from the city.

Almost overnight, Oom found himself showered with more money than he had ever dreamed of and chieftain of a tribe of both male and female followers to which he gave the first occult-sounding title that occurred to him--The Mystic Order of the Tantriks of India. This tribe at the outset consisted of no more than a dozen members, but eventually it would number well over 200, and would carry on its roster some of the best-known names in America.

Mrs. Vanderbilt put up the bulk of the money, but there were other contributors. With only a part of the funds pressed upon him, Oom bought the 78 acre estate of the French pirate at Nyack, hired servants, and stocked the garage with fancy automobiles. Then he began acquiring animals for a menagerie, for surely no Tantrik Order worthy of the name should be without some. As a starter, he bought elephants, llamas, lions, chimpanzees, and several families of small monkeys.

It was fortunate for Oom that the New York State Police raided his domain at the time they did and found him standing on his head and giving instruction in the Art of Reversion to a well-dressed and fully-dressed-audience. For this was in the early days of the colony, when Oom was cautiously feeling his way, and when with equal caution his followers conducted themselves with great decorum. But as time went on, the antics on the Nyack estate grew wilder and wilder.

Weather permitting, some of the male Tantriks adopted breech-clouts as a costume, while certain of the ladies went about in revealing saris. Oom built a swimming pool on the property, excavating beneath what had formerly been a huge, glass-enclosed greenhouse. Thus the sun's rays made the pool usable in all but the coldest weather.

Nyack gossips, however, Placed a different interpretation on why the pool was covered. Perched in trees and on rooftops beyond the walls. of Oom's estate, they watched from afar through field glasses and later claimed they had observed men and women riotously bathing together in the nude.

Whether or not this was true, it is a fact that Oom never thought of himself as a chaperon-far from it. Many of his followers had more or less permanent quarters on the estate, while others visited over weekends and holidays. Where and with whom they slept did not disturb Oom.

One of Oom's disciples once confided to an outsider, "sex is discussed as naturally as hypnosis reincarnation. Doctor Bernard believes that men and women can learn a lot about living by learning a lot about playing and loving. He teaches the Oriental view of love as opposed to the restrained Western idea. Love, in its physical aspects, is akin to music and poetry. It unites men and women with the infinite.

Oom discouraged drinking; he felt that alcohol diminished sexual desire. On the other hand, he favored art and literature of a certain sort, for often they excited it. Over the years, Oom accumulated a library of 7,000 books, and although many concerned merely the mumbo jumbo of occultism, he could boast as fine a collection of strictly pornographic works as any in the country.

Oom ornamented his estate with tennis courts and a softball diamond, and converted one building into a

gymnasium, with billiard and card rooms adjoining. Oom was a skilled and inveterate gambler, yet cagey enough to permit his more generous sponsors to win from him fairly often. During a night at the card table, it was good business, he felt, to lose a few hundred dollars if the victory encouraged the winner to make a contribution in the thousands to the Tantrik Order.

Oom and his followers played poker and bridge, but hearts was their favorite game. In hearts, the queen of spades is the key card. Oom put a handsome, 50-foot cabin cruiser on the Hudson, docking her near the Tantrik colony. The cruiser was for the exclusive use of the Oomites, for river outings, and Oom christened her--in gratitude, presumably--the Queen of Spades.

But all that occurred at Oom's place was not of a recreational nature. He held regular classes for instruction in the many facets of Yoga, which included not alone such postures as Reversion, but Yoga fasting, breathing and intense concentration. Oom's disciples learned from their Loving Guru what he claimed were the benefits to be derived from retracting the tongue, inhaling through one nostril and exhaling through the other, and sitting cross-legged hour after hour staring at a finger held to the tip of the nose. Only in following such disciplines, Oom contended, could a Yoga practitioner learn to "think about the unthinkable" and catch a glimpse of what lay "behind the beyond."

Soon after the State Police raid, Oom and his wife became dissatisfied with the austere, Occidental decor of the meeting hall housed in their Georgian mansion. Madame Bernard draped the big room with gold and purple hangings and dimly illuminated it with Egyptian sconces fixed to the ceiling. Then Oom placed an ornate throne for himself upon the rostrum and invited his followers to loll about on divans piled with pillows and cushions.

During Tantrik ceremonies, Oom sat on his throne wearing a turban, a silken robe and baggy Turkish pants, and flourished a scepter. While so engaged, he invariably smoked one of the long black cigars to which he was addicted. The cigars were so strong that they caused him to spit frequently, and while he kept a cuspidor handy, his aim was not always perfect.

A frequent Tantrik ceremony involved the initiation of new members. "To join the order," and Oomite later disclosed, "the novitiate must first have confessed all sins, all secret desires, all inner thoughts; must then promise to abide by Doctor Bernard's orders and must finally take the Tantrik vow.

"The novitiate looks upon Doctor Bernard as a high priest--indeed, as a sort of man-god. He kneels before Doctor Bernard and recites: "Be to me a living guru; be a loving Tantrik guru." "Then all present bow their heads as though in church and repeat in unison: 'Oom man na padma Oom.' It is sung over and over in a chanting monotone, like the beating of drums in a forest, and is supposed, if kept up long enough, to induce a state of ecstasy."

" Margaret Rutherford secured a divorce from Ogden Mills in 1920 and Barbara Rutherford got hers from Cyril Hatch the year following. But both of Mrs. Vanderbilt's daughters, at a terrifically high rate of tuition, had long since become Oom initiates and regular residents of the Tantrik retreat. Apparently it was Oom's task, as he understood it from Mrs. Vanderbilt, to obtain for the girls new husbands who occupied rungs on the social ladder on a par with their own.

Oom scored brilliantly in the case of Margaret. In early 1922, a famous Englishman, Sir Paul Dukes, K.B.E., came to the United States on a lecture tour. Sir Paul had been knighted for his services to the Crown as British secret agent in Western Europe during the early years of World War 1, and then in Russia toward the close of the war. He had, in fact, taken on a sort of Scarlet Pimpernel role and rescued from the Bolsheviks a number of Czarists who had close ties with the British Royal family.

Sir Paul's interest in Yoga led him to Oom's colony. He liked what he found there and remained as air instructor in acrobatics. He and Margaret fell in love in Oom's gym while he was teaching her to perform on the trapeze and flying rings, and in October, 1922, they were married.

A wedding among the Tantriks was a great event. Following a civil ceremony, a second one took place in the throne room of the cult, with the cultists attending and Oom presiding. Over their usual costumes the men present wore monks' robes, the women nuns' habits, and the bride and groom were carried aloft in coffins. The setting down of the coffins symbolized the burial of an old way of life and the resurrection of the wedded pair into a new state of Tantrik being, aflame with love. At the sound of a trumpet, all hands threw off their somber super-garb, and as an orchestra struck up began dancing. The coffins, covered with linen cloths were tipped over and converted into banquet tables, and the revelry continued until dawn.

Oom also found a suitable husband for Barbara, although not so readily. He dug up his old associate from the West Coast, Mortimer K. Hargis, who hurried East and appeared at the Tantrik colony. He called himself Winfield J. Nicholls and claimed to be a writer. Nicholls was his real name, he explained, while he merely used Hargis as one of his literary pseudonyms.

Writer or not, Nicholls could really make with the words when it came to courtship. Soon he had Barbara following him around doe-eyed and beaming admiration over his every word. In August, 1924, they were married, first by a justice of the peace and then Tantrik-style, and they spent their honeymoon in Maine.

Ex-Oomites say that for Oom's part in arranging the marriages of the Rutherford sisters, he collected \$400,000 from Margaret, \$250,000 from Barbara, and \$400,000 from Mrs. Vanderbilt. True or not, soon after both girls got hitched, Oom went on a considerable spending spree. He added to his realty holdings by buying in South Nyack a fine estate of 40 acres and nine residences, and in Upper Nyack a choice waterfront property of seven acres and three residences.

But if money was paid both to secure husbands for the Rutherford sisters and to insure that their marriages would last, it was money down the drain. Both girls broke from the cult and their Tantrik mates in 1927. Margaret dyed her hair pink, danced briefly in a Broadway show, secured an uncontested divorce from Sir Paul Dukes, and then married three more times in the next few years. Sir Paul as too much the gentleman even to think or speak of her disparagingly. But he did develop a caustic attitude toward Oom. "I've left the colony," he announced a bit later, "not because of any criticism of it from the outside world. Rather, I could not stand to see Doctor Bernard use his ascendancy over others as a means to amass material wealth."

In her flight from Winfield Nicholls, Barbara boarded an oceanic liner bound for Europe. Nicholls caught up with her in Paris, where he attempted to commit her to a mental institution and get control of her fortune, estimated at \$10 million. But Mrs. Vanderbilt suddenly appeared, hired lawyers, and blocked both moves. Nicholls eventually agreed to secure a Nevada divorce and relinquish all claim to Barbara's riches for \$100,000.

On his return to the States, reporters gave Nicholls a hard time. They accused him of marrying Barbara for her money--solely for her money--and charged that Oom had been author of the plot.

"You're quite wrong," Nicholls protested, and their went onto make a statement famous for the way in which it colored the truth. "Under Doctor Bernard, all of us at Nyack tried to work out a sensible scheme of balanced living. As a matter of fact, in our earnest, happy, normal colony we always consider brains

as more than equal, matrimonially and otherwise, to all the millions the richest heiress might come into. Indeed, we've even traveled along the road to an ideal republic far enough to admit that brains may look down on wealth, if mere dollars mean recognition.

"What is love?" It is the leaping high of the soul and flesh and spirit into a fine flame. When the flame smolders, giving off dust and hot, dry ashes, it is best to put it out. For Mrs. Nicholls I can only say I have the highest respect and finest affection. She is an earnest woman trying with great sincerity to solve the problems of life just as any little schoolteacher unhandicapped by wealth or great position might also strive."

Had Oom hired the top publicists in the country, he could not have got better advertising than from the scandals involving Mrs. Vanderbilt's daughters. These events fired interest in Oom all over America, and suddenly he was swamped with applications for membership in his Tantrik Order.

But Oom chose wisely whom he would ask in. He and Madame Bernard invited to the colony such men as Augustus Thomas, one of the foremost dramatists of his time; Francis Yeats-Brown, the author of *Lives of a Bengal Lancer*; Dr. Percy Stickney Grant, who had quit the pulpit of a fashionable Episcopal church in New York because of his belief in divorce; Henry Goldmark, the engineer responsible for building the locks of the Panama Canal; Dr. Frank Crane, the Dale Carnegie of his day; and Leopold Stokowski, the conductor.

And among the horde of women who came were Diana and Viola Wertheim, daughters of the multi-millionaire merchant, Jacob Wertheim, and the nieces of Henry Morgenthau, Sr.; Claire Lea Stuart, the dancer; and Elsie de Wolfe, who married Sir Charles Mendl, the British diplomat. In an autobiography she published, *Lady Mendl* included amusing photographs of Oom teaching her to reverse her circulation by having her stand on her head.

National and even international fame did not in the least endear him to Nyack's puritans. Now they considered him, in fact, a threat graver than before to the morals of the community, and especially to the morals of its youth. There was even talk of a local Ku Klux Klan contingent storming the colony to burn crosses and while the klansmen failed to appear in any recognizable body, the Tantrik enclave was on one occasion marched against by an irate crowd of Nyack citizens.

This portending invasion arose out of an absurd situation which had nothing to do with morals. In the early 30's, one of Oom's elephants, Old Mom, fell ill. At 92, she was his eldest, and weighing as she did upward of two tons, she was also his largest. Out of respect for her size and the obvious severity of the malady afflicting her, Oom employed 20 veterinarians to attend her.

But in spite of all the vets could do, Old Mom died. Oom hitched up the other elephants and they performed the doleful task of dragging the huge carcass to the lower edge of the sloping Tantrik property. Then workmen on the estate dug a grave and Old Mom was pulled in and covered over.

Some weeks went by before word of the event reached the village, and by the time it did the story had undergone considerable embroidery. Old Mom, it was reported, had been buried smack in the middle of an underground stream feeding Nyack's water supply and there was nothing on earth more poisonous than a dead elephant!

A great crowd of angry Nyackians armed themselves with clubs and whatever other weapons came to hand and marched for the Tantrik preserve. A newspaperman phoned Oom of their approach and he strolled down alone to meet the angry throng. His gaze is what halted them momentarily but it was what

he told them that permanently destroyed their resolve and cleared the way for future happenings.

"You guys are all wrong," Oom explained, pointing to a mound of earth. "There's Old Mom's grave and the town's reservoir is far up the hill, as surely you must know. Which way does water run? Any idiot who believes it climbs has my permission to dig up the elephant, but I won't be responsible for her odor!" Then Oom laughed--something he rarely did--and soon the crowd started laughing with him. Somebody read aloud the line cut in the pediment above Oom's gate about this being a place where a fool "might wear a thinking cap" and suggested that it certainly seemed applicable to the present situation. In the end the Nyackians who had come to lay siege to the Tantrik colony did an about-face and dispersed in peaceable frame of mind.

The incident marked the beginning of a radical change in the relationship between Oom and his followers on one hand and the villagers on the other. By now the bite of the Depression, spreading throughout America, had already sunk deeply into Nyack. Local merchants at long last realized that Oom and the Tantriks were beyond question their best customers, and that as such--regardless of the bizarre idiosyncrasies--they should be shown due deference.

Oom soon found himself invited to join Nyack's volunteer fire company. He accepted, and while he attended no fires, he put to use the red-and-gold medallions issued for his cars. The medallions permitted him to race about the country-side immune to charges of speeding. Next, Oom was elected first a director and then treasurer of the local Chamber of Commerce, posts in which he took avid interest. He cocked an alert ear to what was going on in the financial affairs of the area and learned that the controlling stock of the state bank, in the neighboring village of Pearl River, was up for grabs. He put in a bid for it, got it, and then named himself the bank's president.

With a big stake now in the economy of Nyack and adjacent communities. Oom worked to improve conditions and in the doing utilized the talents of his Tantrik followers. Once a year he paraded his elephants and caged animals through the streets of Nyack as prelude to a circus held on the grounds of his estate, open for the day to the public. Oom, smiling broadly and bowing to all and sundry, rode in the parade as mahout of the lead elephant. His Oomites performed as stars of the circus, in the roles of clowns, dancers, acrobats, tumblers, contortionists and tightrope walkers.

In addition, Oom was the moving spirit in the building of an outdoor sports center in Nyack for boxing, wrestling and baseball. The center boasted a grandstand seating 6,000 and was brilliantly lighted at night. Oom, in fact, has been called by a number of sports writers the "father of night baseball," and he brought to Nyack such offbeat teams as the Pennsylvania Redcaps, the Cuban Stars and the bearded boys from the House of David.

In 1939, Lou Nova--on his way up the heavyweight ladder for a crack at Joe Louis' title--became an Oomite long enough to train at the Tantrik colony for his coming fight with Max Baer. Oom taught him such Yoga exercises as pranayama, which improved his breathing, and uddibardi, which toughened up his stomach. Oom prophesied that Nova would "outwind" Baer and drop him in the seventh round, since seven was a mystic Tantrik number. At that, Oom wasn't far wrong. For Nova did stretch Baer cold on the canvas, although it took him 11 rounds to do it.

Oom's secretary, Percival Whittlesey, a Harvard alumnus, married Diana Wertheim, and that left Diana's sister, Viola, as one of the few single girls remaining in the colony. But Oom soon fixed things for her. He imported from California a young man he claimed to be his nephew, Theos Bernard, and Theos, in turn, claimed he was the only Caucasian to have been initiated into the secret ceremonies of the Tibetan lamasery at Lhasa.

Viola and Theos married and left the colony to go to school in New York. Viola studied medicine (and eventually became a renowned physician specializing in child psychology), while Theos took courses at Columbia leading to a doctorate in Oriental philosophies. All might have gone well had not Theos, in the manner of Oom, fallen victim to a compulsion for practicing and teaching Yoga. A woman Theos taught reputedly went crazy, and her husband sued him for \$25,000. Then Viola divorced him and he married Ganna Walska, the Polish opera star. But soon Ganna discovered that she, too, couldn't abide his dedication to certain Yoga postures, especially Reversion. In her petition for divorce, which was granted, she complained that Theos often stood on his head for as long as three hours at a time.

A year or so before America's entrance into World War 2, Oom closed down his Tantrik colony and lent most of the buildings to representatives of the Wertheim family, who used them to house refugees from the Nazis. Percival Whittlesey took charge of the program and as a consequence suffered terribly. In January, 1941, Walter Groebl, a 17-year-old pro-Nazi from Georgia, drifted into Nyack, sought out Whittlesey, and shot him five times with a .32 revolver. Whittlesey miraculously survived.

Groebl escaped, but Oom launched an all-out campaign to find him. He hired detectives and their Sherlocking proved successful. In April, they nabbed Groebl in Minnesota and brought him back to New York. Because of his youth, a judge went easy on him. Instead of prison, he was sent to Elmira Reformatory.

By the close of the war the population of Nyack had tripled since Oom set up shop there a quarter-century before, and land had soared value. Oom unloaded a part of his real estate at a fat profit, and the purchaser, ironically, was a fundamentalist religious sect whose evangelists preached dictums sexual abstinence directly at odds with the free loving Tantriks.

But Oom kept the bulk of his property, putting in a golf course and an airstrip, and he called the establishment he now operated the Clarkstown Country Club. It was a public, not a private club--a country hotel, really, complete with a social director, jazz band and conventional entertainment. Oom's wife, always an adaptable sort, assisted Oom in running it.

In 1947, Theos Bernard made the news again. Dispatches from India brought word that he had launched a second expedition to Lhasa, the Tibetan capital at the top of the world, had been set upon by Lahouli bandits high in the Himalayas and killed.

For sequels to their stories on the slaying of Theos, a contingent of reporters descended on Oom at his Clarkstown hostelry and found him puttering about the grounds. He appeared mild of manner, bald and tubby--a far cry from the old Oom of lean muscularity and hypnotic eye. He said he was sorry to learn of Theos' death but declared he knew no more about it than what he had read. On the other hand, he seemed to enjoy talking about the heyday of the Tantrik colony. "People tell me I'm supposed to have gotten a million dollars out of the Vanderbilts," he chuckled. "A million bucks! Out of the Vanderbilts! If I could do that I wouldn't be a mystic--I'd be a magician!" Then he added that he had seen neither Mrs. Vanderbilt nor either of her daughters for years and years.

Oom wore no turban or robe. Instead, he had on a baseball cap, sweat shirt and dungarees. Asked if he was still interested in Yoga, he grinned and said: "Yoga's my bug, that's all. Like another guy goes in for running a Boy Scout troop or collecting stamps. But I don't teach it any more. How could I pay \$20,000 a year taxes on this place and spend my time teaching Yoga; Today I run a country club, just like any other country club, only better than most. But it's open to anybody with a checkbook." When the reporters left, Oom was squirting a hose on a rhododendron bush.

Oom lasted another eight years. His club prospered, but it never interested him the way his Tantrik colony had, and he closed up shop. In the early 1950's he sold the bulk of his remaining real estate, some for a housing development and some for the site of what is now the Hilltop Elementary School. With the last sale went Old Mom's grave. The big elephant's bones, resurrected from the earth, are today objects of zoological interest to Nyack students.

Oom died on September 27, 1955 at the age of 80. He was sick only a few days, at the end of a summer marked by severe heat waves. His wife could not recall that he had ever been sick before, not with so much as a headache. By this time, Nyack boasted a daily paper--the Journal News. The paper gave Oom an obituary of two full columns on the front page, plus a carry-over inside. And in all this outpouring of words, every word was favorable.

--Charles Boswell