

## 1. A Tune in the Distance.

WHEN BARNACLE bugled, Herself sat up like a greased bolt well primed for the mallet. Her big eyes were bold and round, they never got over the surprise of things; and the face on her, all just smashed crabs in the morning.

‘Get out of it now’, said Herself, ‘or you won’t be stupid drunk at any Games the day’.

‘What about you then an all?’, Jake made brave to wonder.

‘I dreamt’, said Herself in a most undreamy way, ‘that we are going to have a visit from the police’.

‘Why would that be now?’ wondered Jake, tempting the morning chill with a cautious snout.

‘I wouldn’t be surprised’, announced Herself in jovial style, ‘if it had something to do with that upturned boat, whatever yourself and the boy do in there, not that I want to know, no, never, bikes is good enough for me’.

You might be surprised right enough, Jake thought in a private sort of way: but she never noticed this, what with it being private like. No, she just sat there like a bolt in biker’s leathers, that was the style of her, and the big eyes looked down at him, threatening-like, they weren’t so dreamy any more. So Jake fired himself over the edge, legs first just as usual. But instantly was he hurled away by a passing storm of civilisation: and he in consequence put a shirt on, on himself, and looked round for the boots.

‘Was that Barnacle bugling the now?’, the bold bolt wondered.

Maybe the boy Finnegan was home from wherever. Whatever wherever meant, though it wouldn’t be hard to guess at it; women and whisky, no doubt, though maybe not in that order of

appearance. Jake got hold of the harpoon at the head of the bed and balanced himself into the boots.

‘You’re a great one for the modesty these days’, Herself was mocking, ‘are you thinking of marriage?’

That was a bad move! She shouldn’t have said that about modesty, no, the whole place knew all about her and modesty in her young days, oh yes. Hadn’t she gone and run away with a gentleman from Hussaria till the brothers went after her and told her he wasn’t from anywhere and just a cook to boots, or bottles; and talked her home again where she could think things over? And right enough, she had plenty of time for that over the years, by the time the brothers let her out of the shed the Hussar would have been long dead and longer gone.

By then, of course, there wasn’t so much left of the looks at all, though someone got in quick - some people said a man on a digger called Stilson, others swore it was a man with a beard though there wasn’t a name - and that’s how the boy Finnegan came along, poor half-wit soul that he was!

Jake was wondering if he would murder Herself right there and then, he’d put a harpoon through a lot more than her in his day! Between the eyes, be-damned, and onto the bash for as long as it lasted! But the big eyes just looked at him, blinkless and daring. She must have hidden the whisky on him, then. So no chance of murder. Not till he’d found it anyway. She could taunt him at will. Why else do you think she had mentioned marriage? Jake didn’t like dirty talk about that sort of thing, it made him uneasy, somehow. Fine for them that was suited to it, no doubt, married women and that, fine. No more than an excuse to be flaunting themselves in the

public streets and peering with malice into each others perambulators! And showing off their plates, of course.

Bu there was never any need for the likes of himself to be tearing into it. He'd nearly done it once, a lucky escape. Himself and a dame with ribbons called Helena had been engaged, that's what they called it then, the ancient relations had hinted about the sacred turf and there might have been celebrations of an old-fashioned type after a suitable passage of years.

But no. They were stravaiging one day in the great metropolis, when what did she see up ahead but a sailor with a parrot on his shoulder and the two of them singing a lusty and loving song about Far Valparaiso. Well if they were! The dame Helena, who had always had a weakness for sentiment, let out a fearful cry - quite obviously long-suppressed - of the most romantic longing: and she was gone. Gone!

Well, people heard afterwards that they settled, herself and her sailor, and the parrot too of course, in the black heart of the bush: but it didn't work out, that was the modern way of things, even in them days. So the sailor dedicated his remaining years to storming the face of the desperate oceans, while she - she came home and retired in shame to the ancestral plot. She was never seen much afterwards, though she came out at times when the dark was down and the ripe moon was a-full and a-glisten up there like a big spring crouched up on the back of the beach: and then later she could be heard, people said, belting out a piteous air characterised by that old refrain - Oh Far Valparaiso! Yes.

Herself heaved herself out of the sack too. She was dressed. No time to be wasted. That was the sort she was - as if you couldn't

tell with a look! There was no doubt about it: she was on watch, and it was for trouble that she was watching.

Barnacle bugled again - surely the boy Finnegan wasn't teasing him, or worse? - but he sounded cheery enough, if you listened with care and attention. Yes, Barnacle was bugling: the morning had most certainly begun.

Jake eased himself down at the fire and looked into the remains of it. He kept the Ôpoon close, in case of a pounce from her, you can never be too careful when they're in that frame of mind. But she was attending to her toilet, robustly. Jake whipped into the scuttle and raked: but no. Sometimes there would be a giller there, sometimes not. Now it was not. A provocation at dawn for a man with a thirst. And Herself on the pan was whistling a tune now! It would be a wise soul who kept clear the day! And even wiser later when the day warmed up and the black mouth of the night approached, with all its possibilities for excessive naughtiness!

Jake cradled the ashes and wondered about the window. But she was silent now, and maybe close. Toilet all over? He made a few twists from the paper there and arranged a pagoda like he'd seen once at the whaling, or maybe after something from the black pot in Finnegan's little laboratory. The paper there detained his attentions a moment. It must be a fearful place nowadays, Oban, with the naval invasion and all them riots! And there was more trouble than ever in Hussaria too. It was all very confusing.

On top of it a wigwam of sticks, then, and after a good cap of the black stuff in the scuttle. But there was still no sign of the giller, and it was surely time to be thinking about beginning to warm up. It would be a long day, the way it was looking.

He went out in a puzzle and fired the ashes to glory though there wasn't a breeze. Into the potatoes. Buried somewhere? Herself was singing now, in tones of stern vengeance. And rattling pots, there would be no peace for the morning at all. She was warming herself up for something, though what could it be? Was something going to happen at last? Or was it just another turn of spite? Why was she wearing her leathers in bed? Had she been digging during the night? Would he search for new-turned soil? Have a look in the dunghill? Probe with the Ôpoon? Do without it for a while? Search Finnegan's laboratory and risk his scientist's noble wrath?

Someone appeared at the kink in the road. A woman. Surely not dressed like that! Yes, a girl. My, but the confidence of them nowadays! From the top, black beret. Hair gloss, provocative and sleek. Neck gloss too, and soaring. No ears visible, but presence presumed. Torc at throat, old sign of divinity. How did they ever get them on: or off? Then a tight waistcoat, dark, over a white and pouting blouse. A grey, pleated skirt with bold suggestion of athleticism. Perfectly black leggings disappearing under. And short boots with tall heels, which hefted the ensemble most prettily aloft.

The girl approached briskly. Yes, it was the one they called Adeline. Jake was wondering if the shirt and the boots would do: but it was too late to flee and the Ôpoon always drew the eye anyway.

'Good morning Mr. Jacob' cried Adeline in those high, brave tones which always signify possession of the most imperishable virtue.

In high, brave tones too cried Jake back, 'Have you found out who your father was yet?'

But there was to be no answer. Bootees, legs, pleats and blouses strode past briskly on the morning air. After they had passed you could see away far in the distance the poor old sheep out on the bog there, just keeping themselves to themselves, the way they usually do at that time of the morning and that time of the year.

The boy Finnegan was in the laboratory. The roof was curved to the keel and the far end pointed, they'd cut her in half when the first Kelvin came out and turned her over but she did the job fine. Tip-toed on bucket, the boy had his eye to a hole in the garboard strake in case the authorities came along and started some trouble, that's what it was mainly there for, not counting purposes of general observation. Jake eased himself onto the other bucket, his own one, close and handy for the boy's black pot.

'Herself is looking for trouble', Jake said, but for a long time Finnegan was pressed to his belvedere in silence. Then he came down, and he looked fine in his plus-twos and the trials boots with the big buckles. The Ôgarry was checked and feathered in eagle. He floored the Ôgarry and smoothed his eagles. A bugling was heard in the very close vicinity, and Jake scooped a beaker-full from the pot.

In strolled Barnacle backwards and blinked. A good distance was kept from Finnegan and a full set of eyes on him too. Barnacle looked hard at the feathers a-garry, quaffed with outstanding dignity from his pharmacist's beaker, and backwards strolled outwards again. All was decorum, decorum was all.

'I don't trust Herself in the moods', said Jake.

'No, nor me too', said the boy smoothly.

'And she's hidden the whisky', Jake said, 'it would be a pity if there wasn't anything else about'.

‘Whatever you think yourself’, said the boy.

‘Oh well’, said Jake, ‘a sensation maybe’.

Finnegan sat on his bucket and looked wise for a while. There was a silence too, it always goes well with the wisdom. A bugling, in tones of the most insolent triumph, was heard in the near distance. And the gentlemen then shared a small sensation from the little black pot, in the form of a generous beaker each; and quite soon sparkles of light began gently to spot.

‘There was a crowd in the bar last night’, said Finnegan, ‘here for the Games’.

‘Yes’, said Jake.

The boy pressed on. ‘There was one of them, a dame looking for a man called Jacob’.

‘Was she a singer at all?’, Jake wondered.

‘An old song about love’, crisply said the boy.

‘Love where?’, says Jake, stretching the legs: but you could tell fine he was interested.

‘Far Valparaiso’, said the boy, just as crisp as a new cinder.

‘Was she sober?’, Jake wondered.

‘I wouldn’t go that far’, opined the boy, jaunty as you like.

‘In that case we better get stuck into more of this stuff right away’, said Jake: and having done so, they proceeded in orderly fashion for the Games, where everyone was hurling away, and the quarter-ton hammer was belting off into the firmament. Jake heard a roar from the crowd. A man in a white vest, though the rest of him was dressed too, had taken a fearful swing at the hammer. Jake watched it streak straight into the sun: it did not appear to return to earth at all. He remembered Finnegan’s sensations. He wouldn’t be coming down for a long time yet, no, nor maybe the hammer neither.

There was no sign of the boy; he'd be stravaiging the crowd, no doubt, unless he was in for one of the events.

Talking of events - where was the bar?

But now a woman was coming towards him. A young one too, well youngish anyway. She spoke. Who could she be speaking at? A sturdy one in trousers, if you didn't mind, and tastes as muscular as her manners would be correct. The nails on her were good and long, and the elbows well out for the balance. She was wearing a wee badge, too, it said MICF on it, whatever that was. There was two sorts of men with her, a long one and another one who looked asleep.

'Mr. Jacob?', asks she.

'Is that me?', says Jake, not taking chances.

'We are from the mediums of information', says the nails and the elbows.

'Who's looking for him anyway?', asked Jake.

'My name is Vanessa', says the sturdy lass.

She wasn't bad looking either, a tidy bit of gear indeed. It was a wonder Finnegan hadn't spotted her already. Then a glass flashed in the sun; the boy was over the park in a tree with the binoculars. He wouldn't be long now.

'So who are you then?', asked Jake.

The long one with the short hair who looked as if he were a stranger to spirits cried, 'I am Crawford, Mr. Jacob'. He tried to shake Jake's hand, but Jake still wasn't taking any chances.

And what about the other one who seemed to be asleep?

'That', cried Vanessa, 'we call Bubo. He merely pretends on account of his modesty'.

Jake threw in a quick tack. He said in a fashion that was bold and inspired at once: 'You'll be on holiday and up for the Games. By Jove, you won't get better Games than these anywhere. And there's a bar too in case you are all thirsty, there's a fearful heat in the day and worse to come'.

Jake noticed at this point that the sun had gone from the sky. But it wasn't dark. And even as he wondered, he saw the whole sun calmly heave himself above the trees and take up his usual station in the heavens. Elevation, azimuth and luminosity all perfectly normal.

Vanessa stared hard at the eyes of him. Jake wasn't sure if he liked the stare, but a grown man has to take the rough with the smooth. He didn't like the way she held out the elbows either, it looked like she was no stranger to using them. Or maybe it was just an advanced education, it seldom made any change and then usually for the worse.

'What are you on then?', she demanded, in a very modern idiom indeed.

'Oh, just the drink', said Jake, 'mainly'.

Bubo opened an eye and looked very suspiciously at Jake. Then he closed it again, and appeared to return to a condition of sleepiness.

'You wouldn't be from the police?', said Jake, in a tone of the most elevated ingratiation, 'by Jove, if the police ever need a hand, I am the very man for the job, yes'.

Crawford, in a tone of due regret, said that they were not, actually, from the police at all.

'We represent', said he, perhaps by way of compensation, 'the most important cultural form of this present century'.

‘And what is the MICF doing here?’, asked Jake, getting bolder by the moment.

‘We have come’, announced the elbows sternly, ‘to record for our visual posterity an interview with Major Gweene, who will be arriving shortly. Also with an indigent such as yourself. You look to me like an indigent who can talk’.

‘I can talk right enough’, said Jake, ‘but it’s bad for the thirst’.

‘We will supply drink’, Vanessa said crisply.

‘Four bottles and forty cans’, said Jake, amazed at the speed modern people did things. ‘You better make it six. And sixty. We’ve got other stuff if we run out’.

Bubo opened a eye that would put you in mind of something very nasty indeed, and he looked hard with it at Jake. But wait, who was this coming here? Plus-twos and feathers? And a handsome pair of binoculars? Yes, it was Finnegan.

Jake said, ‘This is Finnegan’.

Jake didn’t like the way Finnegan was looking at Vanessa. Nor did Vanessa. But you can never be sure. And Finnegan wasn’t worried anyway, he’d looked a lot harder at a lot worse. Something was going to happen, you could tell. But what? Or more exactly, when?

Finnegan took a bottle from an inside pocket and removed the cap with his teeth. He upended the bottle and almost at once whatever had been in it was in him. Vanessa looked very disapproving as he did this. Then Finnegan put the neck of the bottle to his mouth and began to blow over it. A strange tune was soon to be heard in the distance. And getting closer. Vanessa’s eyes began to glaze, and for a moment she seemed to sway. Was she going to fall down?

Finnegan, provocatively, stopped his tune. He ran the tip of his tongue around the rim of the bottle, and put it back into, the bottle, his inside pocket.

'I'll be at the dance later', announced the boy and wandered away.

'He's not bad at it when he isn't on anything or is sober', Jake said, feeling it proper that something like that should be said.

Vanessa ignored him. She stared after Finnegan - the feathers of him could still be seen in the crowd - and her eyes glazed again. She swayed. But she did not fall down. There would maybe be plenty of time for that later. It would surely be a bad thing for her if she had unusual sensitivities to a good tune!

Bubo was now entirely and determinedly awake. Music as ever a tonic to nerve! Even his eyes were open, both of them now, and they were watching Finnegan with very great care indeed. He had a black notebook out, and was writing things in it. Jake wondered what that might mean but he did not know. Maybe he would find out later. A black notebook wasn't a very good omen - all things considered. But time would tell. It usually did, now, when you stopped to think about it.