

10. Wept, but Lightlier, the Boy Some More.

The world president of Big Digger and Dozer International had a big mouth like a big torn pocket and his name was Stilson though the boys just called him Big. He also commanded the respect and affection of each and every employee of BDDI, which was just as well for them that he did. After the disaster, he came at once, or as soon as his global responsibilities would allow him to anyway. He was a grand sort of soul in a major sort of orange boiler-suit with, not un-naturally, much insignia of rank in the way of numerous pockets and patches, while the hard-hat was decorated with gold-leaf and the cigar was enormous.

He had spend a lifetime building his company to a position pre-eminent in its field: and the dreadful losses consequent on Major Gweene's ceremonial charge were a matter of great and personal distress to him. Immediately on arrival, he began to shout for the m-d emeritus designate, but Finnegan and Jake were keeping well clear in the laboratory, Finnegan up on the tip-toes on the old bucket with his eye to the crack in the garboard strake.

What does he see next, then, but the world president peer in at a window of the cabin and roaring; is there anyone there? After a while who should come out but the personal assistant Helena, all sweetness, and the president went meek. Helena even made a small curtsey and the president doffed his hard-hat and bowed. Then the two of them went back in the window - there was maybe a cup of tea on the go - and stayed inside for a time that was longer than any normal person might think necessary for a cup of tea or just about anything else either. But they came out after a while, Finnegan could tell they had got on fine the two of them: but that

was old hospitality for you, no harm in that and a bad day if it ever went out! Finnegan quite distinctly heard some of their discourse: and thought it improper not to attend.

Said the world president Stilson, taking the cigar out of the torn pocket just for the general courtesy levels, 'I used to give it to a bird round here years ago, it wasn't you was it?'

Helena blushed ever so meekly and said, in a tone that might improperly be thought to signify regret, that she was very sorry, but no, it was maybe her with the bike, the last one that was here.

Adds she, bold as you like, 'In those days I was getting it from a few of the boys in the bush, the husband was away at the sailing and anyway I was well-tired of him by then, he was just an impulse in the first place and impulses don't last'.

The world president Stilson gave the personal assistant Helena a distinctly funny look and said he would maybe see her later on: and went at once to survey the field of battle and loss.

Of the two hundred machines which had stormed into action at the back of the Major, many had disappeared altogether. The central section of heavy crawlers and power-assisted shovels and articulated dump-trucks had sustained terrible losses. They had raced straight for the worst part of the bog, and gone down almost at once. Some parts were still to be seen; a cab here, an exhaust stack there, perhaps a section of blade or auxiliary hydraulic arm reaching piteously from the mud, or in one or two cases the heavy-duty tracks turned to the sky, where the machine had simply capsized and -as yet - failed to sink.

Among the lighter machines, too, the carnage had been dreadful. Many of the half-tracks and wheelers were down to the axles and some were very much worse than that, already reduced to

the status of tilting and irrecoverable hulks, and some more surrounded by a pond of churned mire where the machine in a panic had tried to claw itself out of peril. A handful - but a small handful - had succeeded. Others, however, settled some more even as Stilson watched.

And yet more lay in a burned-out tangle, where the machines in their charge to the sea had collided and overturned, some exploding at once, and others on fire and trailing smoke as they raced across the track of the oncoming fleet, adding further confusion and collision to the desperate scene. And out on the flanks of the ruinous plain were clearly to be seen the wrecks of great numbers of the giant dump-ore waggons and self-propelled mixers: one of which was still slowly but surely revolving with its mouth agape and staring blindly at the pitiless sky.

The world president sat down and wept. But after a little while he stood up again, took a cigar out of a top patch-pocket, and stopped weeping. For already, the work of recovery was under way. An army of self-drive hire-cranes and heavy recovery-draggers was at work. Lightweight girder-section roadways had been pulled into place, and on these the mighty rescue machines crept forward, secured their hooks and padded strops, and hauled away. Already, thirty machines had been dragged from the muddy depths, and stood in a sorry row, but waiting for little more than their drowned drivers to be dug out and tossed aside, and a good hose-down generally, to get them back into action again. Even as the world president watched, a crawler dozer of the largest type broke surface; and a little beyond this happy scene, two light diggers were being dragged back to solid land too.

No more than two days of the construction schedule would be lost and three or four consecutive seventy-two hour shifts would soon make that up. Stilson, then, strode back purposefully towards Helena and the cabin, as if there was something of importance on his mind.

Even as he strode the accommodation facility for the first construction crews was being anchored in place, a moth-balled five-legger semi-sub just as planned, the great legend GOE high on the side of the derrick wind-wall, the tanks blown to get her right up and work her close into the shallow water, the derrick silent and still and the drill floor emptied of its usual kit and mud and pipes. And scarcely was it in place but work got under way.

Hundreds, perhaps even some thousands, of ruffianly but good-natured workers were to be seen swarming in the superstructure, and when the boats were launched they raced ashore fighting and brawling in a most unseemly sort of way. But in a matter of hours, with the assistance of those diggers and dozers still operable, they had begun the causeway out to the site of the man-made accommodation island. By the following afternoon - and after, it should be said, a night of prolonged riot and drunken trouble - the causeway was faced and surfaced, and the dump trucks in a steady roar delivered vast boulders (usefully recovered from the recently demolished mountains in the near distance) to the spot.

The island grew: and continued to grow at an astonishing speed. The ruffians worked forty-eight on, six off, with every second Saturday free for leisure and waste, which was more than adequate for their sanitary, nutritional and recreational needs; and quite soon the island had been ringed with electrified close-mesh chain-mail to keep thieves, agitators and general troublemakers out. High

halogen arcs which doubled as night-vision sensors and alarms were also installed in accordance with the latest theories of business administration. Then the central gymnasium, netball court, inter-denominational chapel and combined reading-room and library arrived, in prefabricated armoured-cardboard packs, and were hurled together: followed by lines of dormitory huts, with built-in provision for dogs and handlers and low-intensity disturbance-control weaponry. At each corner of the island stood a lattice watch-tower, topped by an observation post surrounded by a modest platform from which the officers of the site Security force (who were, by virtue of their natural authority, also the office-bearers of the management-labour site-council) could ensure that nothing untoward was going on throughout the compound. Suspended on quick-release free-fall mechanisms underneath these platforms were emergency bunker-modules, in which the Security officers could overnight in appropriate comfort in the event of impending trouble.

That was the accommodation island built: and as the five-leg semi-sub was now redundant to the needs of the construction-phase workforce, it was dragged ashore on a big spring and abandoned in shallow water, where it was soon forgotten.

The inclined Dollman-trussed box-girder section was assembled and positioned in record time, with no identifiable fatalities, and the cantilevered arms supporting its security-lift provision raised in a morning: whereupon the causeway was mined and blown, in the process hurling a low-velocity random-rubble boulder straight through the observation post of the nearest alloy-lattice watch-tower: at the top of which, at that unfortunate moment, three Security guards had been playing cards. In the cause of haste, common on any major constructional project, their bodies

were tossed to the ground and carried off in company wheelbarrows to the on-site cemetery for hasty, but perfectly respectable, burial.

After the funeral, at which Silson made a dignified speech, Jake and Finnegan, following instructions, let it be known that a formal sherry was to be had in the old cabin, for those who wished to partake of it and for whom it was not too early in the day. Helena thus handed round careful measures, though perhaps the glass she gave to Stilson was more handsomely charged than any of the others. Finnegan was not a suspicious soul, but once again he wondered. Stilson announced in the course of this polite and solemn gathering that he had decided to remain in the district until the construction phase was completed, and production had got under way. He enquired as to the availability of lodgings. Jake said in his old way that there was plenty of room in the cabin, he would maybe be getting a job himself on the site for a while, and what with the long shifts everybody was talking about, he wouldn't be home much at all. No, nor the boy Finnegan either, what with the imminent commencement of his management emeritus role, and bonus-contract responsibilities and all.

Helena said that this would be a good idea, the world president would be handy for the site in the event of any problems with the restored fleet, and Stilson said he would just move in right there and then. And that is what he did.

Finnegan took a stroll down to the island for a look at the shattered watchtower. Already it had been pulled down, for the alloy lattice had been badly damaged. It was better to built anew, as usual. A team of welders was already on its knees, the big boots sticking out the backs of them, the torches shooting flames in the old way, the helmets on and the masks flipped down.

Suddenly one of the welders killed the torch and sat up. A gloved hand threw the mask back, it was a number eleven glass, and swept the helmet aside. But what was this? A cascade of golden curls. Yes, it was Wee Alex herself, if you didn't mind!

'Hullo Wee Alex', says Finnegan, 'what are you doing here and you'll never guess what I heard about you, people were saying you were in the cops and never the nursing and army at all!'

Says Wee Alex with a shy smile, 'Well Finnegan yes, I was, but to tell you the honest truth I have jacked the cops in for the welding, I just couldn't take the sexism any more'. But it was a sad smile too, Finnegan noticed.

Says the boy, 'Are you thinking about a complete break and going offshore onshore to Kazakhstan?'

Wee Alex looked awful serious now. 'No', she says, 'I am thinking about getting married'.

'Who to!?', says the boy, not bothering with the traditional subtleties required by decorum on occasions such as these.

Sighed the curls, 'Whoever will have me. My reputation took a bad knock when I lived with the band'.

'Gracious', said the boy, 'which one of them was it?'

'All of them', sighed the curls.

'Oh gracious!'

'Yes', sobbed Wee Alex, 'and there was a lot of substance abuse too. But I am still a decent lass at heart'.

Her large blue eyes floated in tears, which she wiped away with the welding mitt. Finnegan tried a sisterly pat. And Wee Alex, he couldn't help noticing, did not resist.

Bu there was something shifty about her too, though she was just as pretty as ever. The green boiler-suit was open at the neck a

good long way, not like your normal welder at all, you could see freckles going down there till they got to the lace, as well as on her face. But what was the shiftiness for?

Finnegan had an uneasy feeling of danger around somewhere, and not very far away either. But why on earth would that be? He did not know. But he decided to be careful anyway. So after the pat he knelt down beside Wee Alex and gave her curls a wee stroke.

Says he, 'Come on you up to the cabin for a cup of tea, Wee Alex, there's nobody there and you will get it in peace'.

Wee Alex did not say yes, and she did not say no: she just kept on sobbing, though maybe a bit less than when she had started: and after a while, between the sobs and the sighs, she agreed to take take tea with Finnegan, if he would but serve it in the old laboratory itself.

That afternoon the principal labour force for the construction of the mighty plant arrived, in three fifty-strong convoys of open-backed trucks. A fourth convoy, enraged by alcohol and national sentiment, had attacked with their shovels an entire regiment of Major Gweene's forces: and those few who had survived were promptly enslaved in the cause of teaching them, by force if necessary, a short and sharp shock and demonstrating to them something of the natural dignity of honest labour. As for those who did arrive on the site: every man appeared to be roaring and fighting drunk and singing insolently seditious songs of a folkist nature: but perhaps, of course, this was no more than the usual joie de vivre characteristic of the working man proceeding to his gainful place of lawful employment.

Construction began at dawn and while Helena and Stilson each enjoyed a long lie, Finnegan and Jake took a saunter down to see how things were getting on. Swarms of workers thronged the shore, many carrying an industrial-grade rubber knee-boot reinforced in the way of the toes, and of the sort common on major constructional sites. Each boot conveniently held a number of sticks of dynamite, which were fused and lit and hurled seawards with happy cries. Yes, the chaps were fishing, which is a healthy recreation for any man, and sure to keep him out of the sort of trouble so common in any major enterprise. Soon, doubtless, there would be a site angling club, and other societies of that sort.

But there was great work to be done, and after a rush from the site Security force, reinforced with dogs, prods and light whips, work got under way quickly: and very soon, the great arms of the deep-water harbour - dug non-stop by the mighty bucket-wheel - enveloped its bay. In a matter of three or four back-to-back seventy-two hour shifts, the dry-dock was excavated by navvies and lined in dressed granite by frogmen-brickies on generous bonus terms: and almost at the same time the great delivery piers and despatch quays were completed.

The exciting pace of events quickened some more. The passion for structures of integrity, functionality and style, which had from the very beginning informed the conceptual vision of architect and engineer, became a daily reality. Magnificent hi-buoyancy sections were built and floated onto the bog, for the full two-mile length of the production, package and despatch lines. Once there, they were united one to the next to form a lo-profile semi-float articulated platform: on which at once construction of the plant, and installation of its fixtures and fittings, began.

There were, naturally, small upsets in this early phase, requiring the netball court to be pressed into service as a dressing-station and field hospital, and the non-denominational cemetery to be extended twice. Seventeen men had as a result of the fishing expedition been blown into pieces which, though variable in size, were all easily identifiable with regard to their original function. These pieces, at no small cost to the company, were collected by one of the light wheeled dozers, and delivered to the service by wide-bucket digger, after which they were interred with appropriate ceremony.

The underwater bricklayers fared less well, however, and their bodies were assumed to have been carried away by the tide: for despite furious and round the clock dragging, nothing of their expensive frogmen (and frogwomen) equipment was recovered. An imprecise number of semi-skilled manuals was also buried, alive sadly, when one of the deeper cavities related to the tankage and vaultage yards collapsed, on account of the wet ground and a malfunction in the experimental laser shoring. The Great Explosion and subsequent flooding in the conveyor-stream tunnel is also thought to have cost the lives of perhaps a hundred welders: at least one of whom was almost certainly female. And many of those survivors who dug their way from the rubble and slime and twisted steel were so damaged as to be of no further use: and were, that same day, dismissed accordingly.

But still the work went on. The cracking plant and separation zone structures were hurled up in record time, and the rolling mill - though there was some delay in the supply of the carbon reinforced foam - quickly followed. At night, its reflective black-glass and stainless skin, in the shape of a viola perhaps, or certainly one of the

less-common stringed instruments, reflected the sky and made a grand sight altogether.

Meanwhile, the noble chimneys - their role was principally decorative, it is true, and their light plaster construction made them quick to build - rose as one watched. Desperate men of the sort who know no better than to define themselves by physical endeavour worked in frenzied fashion on the ever-rising rims: and when one fell shrieking to his end, which was often, another stepped forward at once from the line of replacements kept permanently at each chimney's noble foot.

Soon, the great work approached its end. The light overhead railway and hammerhead cranes were installed, and then the mighty flare-boom, all coated in panels of continuous weave heavy-duty silk, and all a-shimmer in the evening's glow. Finally, the jack-up arrived by sea in prefabricated sections and when its platform, complete with management suite, peacocks, and overnight business entertainment facilities was gently put in place, the great rig was erected to tumultuous cries of congratulation from the surviving members of the heroic labour force assembled below. Selected representatives even came to the topping-out cocktail party, hosted by Finnegan: and later, alone on his rooftop, he watched the sun set with a distant sizzle, and was aware, perhaps for the first time, of the great responsibilities now about to devolve upon him.

On the horizon, indeed, were to be seen the vessels of the first shipment, making their cautious way to the new deep-water harbour, seventeen days out from the coast and with no more than a precautionary dog-leg here and there to throw busy-bodies, customs narks and general business competitors off the scent. And below, the great plant stretched into the distance, the three great production

lines (with provision for another two at a later date) radiating like a hand from which the index finger and thumb had been blown in a minor industrial accident, and which were for the moment silent and most ominously still.

It was a solemn moment for the boy: one of those known only to our greatest captains of industry - and at that moment, and for the first time, Finnegan knew the true loneliness of command. A sudden great longing came over him, and he thought of poor, dead Adeline.

Had it been a pyre, perhaps? - but surely they had buried her! Someday, then, he would in a quiet and private moment pay tribute at her grave. Some flowers, perhaps, and a few moments of personal reflection. He imagined her naked - but in no improper way, of course - imagined those lost possibilities of an intimacy forever now beyond his reach. How smoothly numinous she looked in death: how luminous, how succulent! Two hands afold in everlasting piety, one nose of pointed righteousness, two knees - two knees together too, so close, so prim, so perfect in their spacing! They suggested - did they not? - an idea of some considerable restorative ingenuity. Out, out, vile thought! Begone, foul deed!

But would a private stroke be out of the question? He stroked; and stroked again. Did he detect the fleeting shadow of a flush, the faintest shadow of a dreamy smile? That monstrous thought (characterised, it is true, by great generosity of spirit) came again to him then: but he thrust it away. And he burst away too, choking with tears. All gone! All of them gone now! Even Wee Alex disappeared in the Great Explosion, with naught left of her but a few fragments of fragrant lace. And Vanessa married too, he'd heard, and off to Kazakhstan from spite. Oh my darling Adeline!

Weeping noisily, and yet in perfectly manly fashion, he staggered to the platform's rim and his tears fell away in precipitous descent below. Was it time to end it now? For some terrible moments he struggled with his conscience and his love. With Adeline for ever and ever!

But what then of these poor, dear and simple fellows in the camp - all dependent on his charity, his energy, his consummate vision and boundless talent? He could hear down by the distant seashore the happy cries of the Angling Alliance; the noble thud of beech on trenail as the members of the Boat Club went about their work; and closer, the faint singing of the All Site Temperance Union as its evening ceremony of religious faith drew to a close. He, indeed, was its honorary chaplain, elected on the day that he had suggested its formation. On the netball court beyond was to be seen the Formation Pole Faulting Club: fine, decent men who would dedicate their few spare moments from toil to the pursuit of a healthy body - that great temple of a healthy mind!

And beyond again, close to the razor-wire of the women's compound, was an open-air class of the Tunnelling League, formed by the survivors of the Great Explosion, and dedicated to advance and progress in those great arts to which its title so honestly alluded! There too were the Medievalists; and beyond once more the Classics Society, fresh from its studies of the aorist and middle voice. From the bog, with commendable enterprise, its members had at night recovered the crawler chassis and tracks of a doomed dozer, and upon which even now they were constructing the image of a giant horse. It was, Security had reported in one of their daily briefings, to be an extended literary conceit, and a whole squadron was to be ready in time for the plant's Spring Pageant.

Oh Culture! Oh Enterprise and Honest Labour!
Wept, but lightlier, the boy some more.
Yes. It was too late to turn back now.