

## 11. A Brown Bear Dances.

In the wider world of public affairs, the deteriorating situation in Hussaria continued to draw attention and divert energy from matters of - let us be frank - greater importance. But the public, so well meaning and yet so often ill-informed, insisted on making its voice heard, despite the quite properly responsible refusal of the governing authorities to issue any sort of statement on that sad, small and distant place which was - again, let us be frank - the author of so much of its own misfortune.

Throughout the land, therefore, crowds appropriate to the size of the settlement in which they congregated massed and marched and cried for that statement. In the Capital and City Two, huge demonstrations thronged the streets and avenues, waving overhead the keys of their cars and homes; happy, peaceful multitudes in spirit - but urged on from the rear by dangerous agitators bent on an improper extension of the responsibilities of the governing authorities into the realms of foreign affairs. All thoughtful people knew where this might lead - and did they not have the very example of Hussaria to remind them on a daily basis?

But still, in greater and greater numbers, the masses marched, crying their slogans: and when their attentions came at length to focus on the person of the Pantishah himself, the very security of devolved small-nation authority came under implicit attack.

First they cried in fatuous amity 'Pantishah, Pantishah, who on earth do you think you are?': and though some rougher elements of the crowds somewhat adapted those words, this practice did not become universal.

They cried too - indeed, this was for a time their favourite slogan -

Ho Ha

Pantishah

Free Free

Hussaria -

- a million voices at a time, each syllable of the first two lines hurled from one section of the multitude to the next, and the remaining lines roared together, time and time and time again.

There were many such others, and in time the governing authorities and their influential friends began to worry as to where matters might soon lead. Major Gweene's rising was therefore extended across the land and, though it did not yet take the major cities, it surrounded them with its peace-keeping forces and the advisory resources of personnel and material assigned to it by the neighbouring great power.

Crisis was reached when the rumour flew around the land that the nerve of the Pantishah and his advisers had cracked, and that a statement on Hussaria was at last imminent. Almost at once, exercises began on the coast of amphibious forces, and fleets of fighter-bombers swooped and swept the urban skies. It was even rumoured - though the suggestion was denied and no independent evidence confirmed the rumour, which may have been circulated by agitators and political enemies - that at one point the Pantishah and his councillors were summoned to the nearest airport, while the representatives of the neighbouring great power awaited their coming from the giant bomber that circled overhead.

It will never now be known what was said at that meeting, should it, indeed, have taken place: but within an hour civil-

disturbance forces had cleared the streets with water cannon. That same night, the Pantishah formally asked a neighbouring great power for troops in aid of the civil power he represented: and after some consideration the assistance of those troops was granted, on the understanding - quite properly - that they remained under the control of that neighbouring power. It was, everyone agreed, an additional convenience that they were in any case so close at hand.

But in the hinterlands, where there were less people to demonstrate, and where almost all areas were by now subject to the martial law that Major Gweene had already declared, there were more important matters to hand than Hussaria.

For the plant, that huge investment, that great partnership of private enterprise and public risk, was from the outset an astonishing success.

All day, every day, the production lines rolled at the highest speeds and management urged on the workers and demanded greater effort, greater pace, greater profit. All of these workers, or nearly all of these workers, had been recruited from the construction gangs which had so briskly built the mighty edifice. And though their wages - naturally - had been very significantly reduced for the duration of their prolonged period of re-training, they were happy to have the work: which happy position allowed management to encourage them some more.

At the furnaces then, semi-naked stokers glistened before the desperate fires from which at times tongues of flame would dart to engulf an unfortunate. Another of his fellows - piecework was the watchword here - would step at once across the fallen, and heft the shovel once again. In cases such as these - and there were many -

management made available to next of kin an illuminated parchment of appreciation and a presentation box of company biscuits.

But the great work went on. From all the appropriate quarters of the world, the fastest of ships would unload their cargoes round-the-clock in the deep-water harbour for immediate storage in the tanks and vaults of the high-security zone. After primary process, a volcanic slurry would pour in a boiling river from the gaping mouth of the conveyor stream: and thence to each production line for intermediate and final process, and on to packaging and despatch. Some semi-processed product, in bulk naturally, was sent to the refrigerated seawater tanks for storage, from which it could be pumped directly to tankers for onward shipment to an end-use buyer. Other product was blast frozen and destined for long-life cold-store; yet more freeze-dried, or canned or - the bulk of the output - directed to the immediate-consumption markets of the household world.

And there was so much of it! So much to know about it! The different markets, segmented by age and social group and occupation and race and nationality. The impulse buyer, the aspirational buyer, the buyer of gifts, the seasonal buyer, the price-elastic buyer, the price-sensitive buyer, the rich, the poor, the black, the white, the fat, the thin, the old, the young, the sick and the well! And how sensitive those buyers were too, to the physical presentation of the product itself - and its packaging! Was it a pastille, a powder, a cube, a block or a slab? What was the size, what was the colour, what was the texture, what was the taste? How did they look - these tins, tubs, tubes, packets, bags, tubettes and sachets? What was their shape and what was their weight? In what materials were they packaged - and in what colours? And - perhaps

above all - what were they called (for the purchasing public is wonderfully sensitive to the power of the printed word).

And so, as demand grew, so the vision of management, and the organisation of the plant, became steadily more complex. In the early days, production had concerned itself with household staples - fortified sugars, cookies, gravies, and so forth. The fortified condiments division came next, though at first it was under the control of the staples management team. (Later, condiments and staples were demerged). Fortified breakfast cereals - in an extremely competitive sector - boomed at once. So too did fortified beverages and soft drinks. The fortified confectionary division was very quickly split in two, such was the pace of development: for demand was immediate and extraordinary for the products of confectionary (snacks), with their evocative and stylish names - buzz, zing, rush, wow!, speed and flash (‘the welder’s joy’) among them. (Sensation, which was an idea of Jake’s, market-tested badly, and was withdrawn. Along with libation, another of Jake’s ideas, it was reserved for the launch of the home pharmaceuticals range).

And the confectionary (novelty) division made from the start enormous demand on plant capacity, on account of its huge success with chocolate soldiers, Easter cribs in fortified marzipan, and iced Father Christmases (though these last two were, of course, subject to considerable seasonal variation in demand: though not as much as might have been expected). Fortified lollipops and sherbets were another hit with the junior market, although it took some intensive - and expensive - promotional effort to break in. Thereafter, it was a short and logical step to the lo-calorie division, the pet foods division, and (an idea from Finnegan) the baby-foods division. Each was a magnificent success.

Only once was the even tenor of this carefree and happy time disturbed: and the disturbance did not last long. For some days, Security had been reporting the formation in the camp, unlikely as it sounded, of a Secret Military Organisation, dedicated to the overthrow of management: but enquiries failed to establish with certainty its existence, and the matter was soon dropped. There was some fighting too, involving a number of the new dockers and some of the retrained welders, on the Charlie production line: but rather than fall prisoner to Security, those involved killed themselves at once in the mighty furnaces.

Then, just as all seemed calm again, a peacock disappeared from the top of the jack-up. This, involving as it did the integrity of the management platform, was a serious matter. A search was conducted throughout the plant, but nothing was found. The search then was extended to the camp. And that was when the trouble started in earnest.

Since the early days, there had been some changes in the camp. The anglers still fished, as in those early days, and the established clubs and societies (management made small grants available to those of whose constitutions it approved) went about their improving activities with zest and zeal. The netball court, the chapel, the gymnasium and the library and reading room were always busy too. But a rougher element had, with the great expansion of the plant, crept in: and these elements had brought dangerous and expensive tastes in the way of leisure. They congregated, these elements, of an evening, in the vicinity of the combined truck-shop, investment clinic and one-stop credit store, which had been formed in the very early days on the suggestion of Major Gweene. And it was here, to the amazement and horror of all

concerned, that the search discovered some feathers. Comparisons were made with the surviving peacocks, and the conclusion was reached that these feathers had, without any doubt whatsoever, come from a management peacock. This was a challenge that could not go unanswered.

The heads of Security met in private session and soon came to the decision that their men would storm the camp the following morning, just before dawn, and in full peacekeeping kit. The watchtower teams would be, in secret, reinforced the previous evening. At the signal, they would operate the searchlights, with which the towers had recently been equipped. All dogs and low-intensity disturbance-control artefacts would be withdrawn from the camp that evening too, in the cause of encouraging the workforce to believe that the matter of the peacock had been forgotten and forgiven.

At first, it was intended that once Security had stormed the camp, the inclined box-girder section that led to it would be raised on the cantilevered arms, thus ensuring that there would be no escapees during the course of the full-scale search for evidence related to the peacock and consequent interrogations. (As the entire plant had a strict policy on substance abuse, excepting alcohol on which duty had been paid, Security would seek to root-out any evidence to that effect also). But a wise head - perhaps on one of the older chaps - argued that the bridge be left in place, lest things get out of hand and Security (on this occasion) be overpowered. The bridge, this older chap argued, would then allow an emergency egress that would otherwise be denied them.

After some heated discussion - for the younger lads took the view that a good lesson ought to be taught and ought to be taught

now - this proposal was adopted. In the event, it would come to be seen as a proposal of some considerable wisdom: but at first, everything went well.

As dawn approached the camp was silent and still, though the surviving peacocks called insolently from the summit of the management platform: and these calls may have helped enrage the forces of Security as they massed for the attack. Later, certainly, this was cited in the report of the official enquiry as a contributory factor to the violence of that morning and the following day.

A soft whistle blew, the searchlights from the towers softly swept the camp: and in Security went with a roar, the truncheons and electric batons beat beat beat on the plastic shields and polycarbon greaves. There was no resistance in the early compounds and the work was easy. The inter-compound gates had been carefully locked earlier, in accordance with the plan of assault, and when one compound came under attack, there was no chance for its neighbour to render any sort of aid. But still, the work was bloody, for men were smashed where they lay, and those who were arrested were dragged off - as the official enquiry would later concede - with some considerable brutality.

The first sign of resistance was at the women's compound, and the fighting there was so savage that Security backed off, the thrust of its attack veering at once for the recreational zones. The chapel was empty and - briefly - it became a forwards operations centre for the dawn's great work. Those few scholars still in the library were beaten senseless, though as no more than a precautionary measure, and with absolutely no intention of signalling ill-will to the pursuit of proper knowledge. At the all-night gaming school (the enquiry recommended that it be closed forthwith) there was further

resistance: and this time a member of Security unfortunately lost his life. Naturally, his fellow officers - already angered by their setback at the women's compound - were upset at this disgraceful murder: and understandably over-reacted. Afterwards, it was determined that twenty seven welders and a professional croupier (who had no right to be in the camp anyway), died of wounds later that day. The croupier was identifiable by no more than his bow tie.

But the real trouble started at the gymnasium. It had, without the knowledge or permission of management, been extended enormously - perhaps to twenty times its original size - and converted to nothing more than a common public house! And thus, what dreadful scenes did meet their eyes! What riot, what carnage, what shameless abandon! Three thousand welders, dockers, truckers, stokers and diggermen of whatever gender, and each class clearly identifiable by the boots it wore, were roaring and fighting drunk, while among them were to be seen members of the clerical staffs: some, even, from the lower grades of the plant's small but influential professional elite.

At the far end of the mighty hall, on a temporary platform erected on the sort of axles associated with large-scale mobile machinery, an evil band was playing savage music of a type which was quite clearly drug-crazed. To the side of the stage, watched by three young ladies who had come with the band and who were dressed, somewhat improbably, as schoolgirls, fourteen oriental seamen were folk dancing. Sweating and exhausted barmen hurled drinks at bawling mobs. Busty maids, all dressed to the waist, with seams, staggered under the weight of tall and tottering columns of trays.

In a corner a docker was break-dancing with a brown bear, surrounded by an angry mob crying encouragement to the bear and placing bets. Numerous fights were under way also, though clearly under the conventions of bare-knuckle combat, perhaps with the addition of boot and stake. Violent squalling mobs meantime crowded round the fighting cocks, screaming with excitement and demanding better odds. Others played Russian roulette with a firearm quite obviously stolen from Security. One party, recent photographs of its sweethearts taped to an oil-drum, was selling futures options to each other. A pair of lady diggermen, already well known to Security as trouble-makers, fought with trident and mail. A giant docker and an equally enormous lady welder, each stripped to the waist, fought it out with sharpened crowbars. The docker fell and the welder held the great point of her bar in triumph at the docker's throat. Should he live or die?

He lived (though just a week later he was blown off the top of a furnace and badly smashed): for at that very moment the commander of the Security forces announced, through his loudhailer, that he was going to order the closure of the bar.

Afterwards, this was considered to have been something of a mistake.

People said later that during the hour of violence which followed, the band (which had played in the district before) did not miss a note, and that the folk-dancing oriental seamen (whose sexual orientation had earlier been under some suspicion, in particular among the diggermen) never missed a step.

But the violence was indeed extreme, even by the standards of hitherto existing camps of a similar nature. For quite some time it was unclear who would prevail, and though the floors soon ran freely

with blood and beer, neither side would concede one inch of concrete. For a time, indeed, it looked as if the battle would be fought out to the last heroic combatant, so stubborn, so valiant, were the fighters on either side.

But by now it was daylight. At any moment the night-shifts would return. But from which of the great production lines? Beta and Echo (Delta, though recently completed, was still to be commissioned) were known throughout the plant for their passivity. But the men and women on the Charlie line were a different breed - and when it became known, as it quickly did, that it was the workers on this last-named line who were even now on their way back to the camp, the issue was settled.

With a dreadful roar, thousands of very thirsty men hurled themselves at Security: and Security moved back. A toe, a foot, a step at first: and then the desperate officers began to retreat, albeit in good order, back through the camp. At the Dollman-trussed bridge, Security planned a stand - but by now the weight of numbers was too great, for the women's compound had joined the fray: and by breakfast time they had ceded the camp, and indeed the plant, to those who worked it. All that day, the roar of drunken riot from the camp could be heard at the plant's furthest ends.

For Security, naturally, this had been something of a failure, and something of a jolt too to its perfectly reasonable sense of amour propre. No evidence relating to the disappearance of the peacock had been found, for example. Neither had there been any sign of any sort of illicit substances in the camp. And the idea of a Secret Military Organisation had clearly been shown to have been a ridiculous one. True, the mouths of some tunnels and bunker-entrances had been found, and though they had not been explored

as yet, there had certainly been no provision made for tunnels and bunkers such as these in the original plans for the island.

But there had, however, been compensations of a significant nature too.

Intelligence work carried out in the rear of the invasion, for instance, had indicated that (but for the effect of alcohol) a spirit of passivity was now to be found in the workforce which, when not drinking, or working, spent much of its free time sleeping on the island's heavily reinforced sides. The once-popular Classics Society had fallen into desuetude, as had the Angling Alliance, and there was no sign of the All Site Temperance Union: while it was a long time since anybody had heard anything at all from the mallets of the Boat Club. The medievalists had split into Early and Later on a point of principle and almost immediately disbanded, the Formation Pole Vaulters had folded its wings for want of members, and the Tunnelling League had simply disappeared into thin air. As a result, then, any reference to these clubs and societies, their aims, constitutions, entitlements to financial assistance and membership lists, was expunged from the registry compiled by Security and kept carefully by management in a double-locked safe at the top of the jack-up management tower.

And so management could congratulate itself - as it did - that the situation was still entirely manageable. Finnegan and his team of senior chaps had watched the struggle in the camp from the lofty comfort of their platform and resolved, at some suitable point in the future, to call upon the services of an industrial sociologist, who might be in a position to throw useful light on episodes such as the one they had just witnessed. Of course, some hotheads wanted to call on the support of Major Gweene's Constitutional Forces and the

advisory land, sea and air units attached thereto: but this was, at length, considered un-necessary. As an ameliorative concession, however, it was agreed that Security could double the number of informants it employed throughout the camp, and on every shift on each of the great production lines: with special attention paid to Alpha and Charlie, where there had been, in recent weeks, significant stock and equipment losses due to pilferage.

But it was important not to let things get out of proportion. After all, production in the plant had not been affected during the day and that evening, the night shifts returned to the lines singing harmless anthems of what had once been known as the labour movement. Once more, then, the lines roared and hummed, and the great work went forward.

Later that night, Finnegan - who recently had hardly left the management tower - made his way to the old cabin, for it is easy to overlook familial ties and responsibilities in the rush of modern enterprise.

Jake wasn't there, he was in the old laboratory, just having a think about things, and Helena and Big Stilson had gone for a walk in the dusk. Nobody bothered with the old laboratory much any more now, they just sat at the fire in the cabin, testing product and devising exciting new product names that might catch the passing spirit of the hour. Everyone had put on a good bit of weight too, that was how the idea for the lo-calorie slimmers' range had come about.

But still, Jake was just wanting a good think about things, that was why he was there in the laboratory, just sitting there on his old bucket. So the boy sits down on the other bucket and says, just for the sake of conversation, 'Have you been down to the post office at all?'

‘They closed it last week’, Jake says, ‘there isn’t the demand any more since Security opened its own one’.

After a while, the boy says, ‘Well, do you fancy a sensation?’

‘When about?’, says Jake from the gloom.

‘There’s not much wrong with the now’, says the boy.

‘Oh well’, says Jake, thoughtful-like.

But there wasn’t a sensation to be had in the laboratory, the black pot was dusty and dry, so they went into the old cabin and sat at the fire. She hadn’t settled much more, the cabin, but she was settling unevenly, and there was a good tilt on the floor, it made it handy for shifting things as long as it was the one way only.

They tested some product, some of the high-strength stuff from the management-grade powder-vault that wasn’t put on general sale but kept for research purposes for main board directors and their friends and young personal assistants on secondment from overseas subsidiaries.

The old cabin seemed empty and full of shadows, both at the same time. Nobody wanted to mention Barnacle, far less anybody else, that was in the past and it looked like the past had gone for good now.

‘Where is that fellow Gweene?’, Jake wondered.

‘With the rising’, Finnegan says.

‘I wouldn’t trust that man as far as the neck of a bottle’, Jake says.

Finnegan says nothing, but it was true that each new generation has to make its own mistakes.

After a while Jake changes the subject, if there was one, and says, ‘We don’t hear so much about the rising in Hussaria nowadays either’.

‘No we don’t’, says the boy, ‘maybe it’s finished’.

Then Jake says, as if he wasn’t talking to anybody in particular, ‘I don’t think a personal assistant is as good an idea as it seemed at first’.

Finnegan says nothing, right enough, it’s not just the young that can make fools of themselves, no. They tested some more of the high-strength product. Then they sat for hours in silence, evaluating, until the old fire was cold and dead. And after it, they just turned in for a toes up all standing, it would soon be time to be up and doing at the interface.

So in she came then the morning, a sour yolk in a saucer of diesel and all around a lazy decky had showed her a swipe with the dirty mop: and two black birds gliding, gliding. Nobody noticed that Helena and Stilson had failed to return from their walk in the deceitful dusk.

Later that day, right enough, one of the dockers who had helped clear away an outward bound vessel during the night would confess what he knew of the matter, under some fairly brisk persuasion from Security.

But by then, it was all too late.