

13. A Treble Issue of Hot Rum.

The reduction of Hussaria provoked at once a storm of international protest and a torrent of declarations of support for the Hussarian people. Even the Pantishah felt obliged to make a statement on the terrible situation to which the Hussarian people had brought themselves. He announced, to responsible cries of responsible joy from his clique, that there would be no statement on Hussaria, as one nation had no right to interfere in the affairs of another nation, and that there were matters of constitutionality involved besides.

In the camp and on the production lines the mood of the men and women - once so happy, so industrious, so carefree - began to turn ugly. Though all leave had long been banned and visitors strictly forbidden, news of the great Hussarian agitation in the country reached the workforce. And it too took the view that a statement of support for Hussaria was imperative: and, in a small way at first, agitation began to grow in its ranks on what was now increasingly known as the Hussarian Question. Worse by far, this silly business - after all, the former Hussaria was a very long way away - inclined the men and women of the workforce to an agitation with regard to matters somewhat closer to home.

In the beginning, this latter agitation took as its focus the conditions prevailing in the camp and on the great production lines. With the huge and continuing boom in demand, the workforce had increased many times in size from the original. Though shifts had been reduced to sixteen hours a day as a humanitarian gesture, and in somewhat grudging recognition of the enhanced output in unit-cost terms, each cot in the compound huts was shared by three men

and one woman. Despite a strict order of rotation, enforced by the Security light-dog unit, this was a clear invitation to vice. Following a seminar dedicated to motivational symbolism, management had re-designated the on-site snacketerias and camp canteens as combat-ration stations, but the workers remained ungrateful, and began to demand changes. The truck-shop and one-stop credit stores were particular points of contention, as was the insistence of management that it keep wages in trust for an obligatory period of up to six months, or longer, dependent on global currency fluctuations.

Further, it was something of a plant tradition that when a worker was injured such that he (or she) could not at once continue with his work, he was dismissed the site, or buried, as appropriate. Now, some nonsense began to be heard about sickness-leave and benefits. There was also some loose talk about a reduction in the continuous seven-day week working pattern. And according to Security, who were now issuing a twice-daily intelligence briefing, wilder elements were even talking about holidays. Worse, these were to be paid holidays!

And, in a sad declension from the early days of heroic and selfless endeavour in the cause of the greater good, the question of safety began to be raised, initially by trouble-making elements in the puddling halls and cogging shops, whom Security had been watching for quite some time. Initially, this bacillus of reform was contained to these departments, but quite soon the plague had spread to the press rooms and rolling mills: wherein, and consequent on some briskly proactive raids by Security, it was for a time contained. But then it began to spread some more.

At length, these matters were raised at the all-site management-labour council, on which the workforce did enjoy one

third of the membership. Nevertheless, they were refused any sort of consideration. Worse, the representatives of labour had the insolence to raise the matter of Hussaria, which was promptly ruled entirely out of order, and the meeting closed. Another meeting would be held, management said later, when the representatives of the labour force were responsible enough to take part in one.

The consequences were predictable. Labour withdrew its representatives from the council. The council thus being redundant, it was at once abolished by management. Labour promptly established its own all-worker council. This was immediately banned, its members being arrested by Security and banished for ever from the site. Nevertheless, the all-labour council went underground and its alternate-members, who had already been elected, took up their clandestine duties at once. And from this stage, the agitation in the camp and plant began to assume a different and rather more serious complexion.

It began with the painting of slogans, at night, in selected areas of the plant. These were first spotted by Security in the final-process and packaging halls, which had hitherto been unaffected by militancy. Then they were seen at the seaward end of the Beta line, which similarly laid claim to a tradition of some passivity. And then - in the space of one night - they were to be found the length and breadth of the camp. Hand-painted posters were also pasted: one was even reported from the research chemistry lab and another from the production engineering experimental workshop: which wasn't the sort of thing you would expect from technical professionals like these!

Throughout the mighty enterprise, an urgent inventory of paint stocks was ordered: but no evidence of theft was forthcoming,

despite stern interrogation of suspects by Security. A number of Security's older hands were therefore infiltrated to the Beta line and to the final process bays in the cause of intelligence gathering, and the plant newspaper (the only one allowed) offered handsome rewards to such as might, in strictest confidence, make information available to Security.

Then, in a shocking development, singing began on the lines, and above the busy roar of the plant entire shifts could be heard singing once more those old and insolent songs of folkist nature. This sort of conduct was at once forbidden, and the baffles on all machinery removed to render song inaudible. But the plant and the camp swirled with dangerous rumours. Secret meetings were being held round the clock. Secret societies were being formed. And despite what had been determined in the wake of the trouble that followed the storming of the island accommodation camp by Security, there was indeed - some people now began to insist - a Secret Military Organisation in the plant.

Certainly, the all-labour council was in permanent session, though the locus of that session was moved often and without warning to thwart the spies and the increasingly frequent random raids of Security. There was talk of direct action next - an exciting prospect, though one to which the labour force was entirely an innocent stranger as yet.

Two days later, there were more rumours: there had been a demonstration on the Echo line. Normally passive off-shift members of a women's work unit had walked the length of the line with a hand-made banner on which was emblazoned the slogan: Statement on Hussaria Now. And they had chanted another slogan too:

Ho Ha
Pantishah
Free Free
Hussaria.

Within an hour, further demonstrations were under way on each of the other lines: and in an unprecedented move these shifts were cancelled, and the chanting workers driven by Security back to the camp: whereupon the entire island camp began to chant too, in one mighty voice.

Those had been day shifts, and the following night's shifts were allowed as usual to proceed to their production lines. That night, a lone member of Security disappeared in the furnace hall. When his fellows went to seek him out the next morning, they discovered clear evidence that during the night there had been acts of minor sabotage on every one of the lines, and numerous items of equipment had been stolen. Energetic enquiries established that the thefts had been taking place for weeks, and that a vast quantity of company material was missing. Though no conclusion could be reached as to the reason for the thefts, and no deduction drawn as to their purpose, it was certainly noticed that they included almost all of the light motorised units from despatch and considerable quantities of close-mesh security fencing, along with all types of bar and sheet steel. Gone too were all the fork-lifts from despatch, all the ATVs held at the dispersed island sites of Security, thousands of welding helmets from store, huge quantities of all grades of galvanised and bright-steel chain, and hundreds of feet of heavy-duty seven by seven rigging wire from the tented alloy roof of the cogging hall. Vast quantities of dynamite, in store since the construction phase of the camp and plant, had also disappeared.

There was no trace of the missing Security officer.

And then, without warning or reason, the plant and the camp went quiet - no singing, no posters, no painted slogans, no demonstrations, no casual insolence to supervisors on the lines, no truculence, no sabotage, no theft, no complaints about the food, the accommodation, the money, the truck-shop and one-stop credit-store, the hours, the dangerous nature of the work, the matter of holidays, or of sickness leave. Apart from the endless roar from the great machines on the production lines, all was silence, all was peace.

Two days later, the Strike started on the lines: and within an hour, as the off-shift workers poured in a great stream to join the strikers, the entire plant was occupied and a formal declaration of Occupation was posted. Management sent in Security, who were quickly rebuffed, with some losses. Suddenly, the plant itself closed down, the mighty machines fell deathly silent, and naught but the hum of generators and those ancillary engines which had not been stolen was to be heard. It was an ominous silence.

Then the singing started: on the Beta line at first, though it was quickly taken up by all the others. Then the singing stopped, and the silence - more ominous now than ever - started again.

Management demanded an apology. The workers refused to apologise. Management demanded a meeting. The workers at length, and after due discussion, agreed to a meeting. Management invited a delegation to come up to the corporate entertainment suite at the top of the management jack-up tower, where we could thrash all this out in man-to-man amity and where champagne would be served, or beer for those who preferred it. This offer was spurned. Management was invited into the plant, on condition that its

representatives were not escorted in any way by Security. Some tense negotiation then followed. At length it was agreed that Security would not be molested, but could come as far as the entrance to the cogging hall, in which the proposed meeting would take place. This was agreed. The managers of each production line then came in a group to meet the all-site labour-only council, in the additional company of the entire workforce.

Their spokesman said, 'What are your demands?'

The convenor of the labour-only council, a long-haired rascal on whom there was much documentation in Security's files, said, 'We want to send a delegation to the Capital to demand a statement on the situation in Hussaria'.

The managers burst out laughing.

Said one, 'You can't'.

'Why not?', said the convenor.

'Because the plant is surrounded', the manager said, 'Major Gweene's Constitutional Forces and the advisory support units attached to them have it encircled. There's even talk that they might attack and capture the plant, and put an end to all this agitation about Hussaria. As you know, any statement would be quite unconstitutional'.

The line managers and their Security escort were allowed to return whence they had come, without molestation. The all-site labour-only council went into emergency session. The workforce, nervous and doubtful, returned to the camp. The Occupation was at an end. There was no singing that night, in either camp or plant. When the lines restarted, the shifts went to their workplaces as normal.

That same night, the remaining peacocks were stolen from the management suite. By the time that the theft was discovered at dawn by a Security patrol, Major Gweene's constitutional and advisory forces could already be seen drawn up around the plant, their armour flashing in the morning sun.

At noon trumpets sounded from Major Gweene's lines, and the advance began, at first in the form of pioneers and infiltration commando units, and then in the shape of regular motorised and infantry formations. The artillery and armoured units were for the meantime kept in reserve, though throughout the attack they could be heard at practice in the safe areas behind the designated combat zone.

Success was swift in the early hours of the assault. The despatch bays, overhead railway terminus, and final process hangers were quickly taken by the rebels. The heavily protected Security zone surrendered without any fighting at all, and almost at once the uniforms of Security chaps were to be seen among Gweene's men as guides and experts on the layout of the plant. The empty Delta line fell at once. Quite soon the Echo line, where there had been less time for the development of a proletarian tradition, succumbed too: although here there had been the first signs of resistance. But this was very quickly crushed, and the agitators and saboteurs who had incited it were taken into protective custody by special auxiliary units operating behind the front-line troops.

The first serious trouble began around the base of the flare-boom, whose crew had hitherto stood aloof from the tempestuous passions with which the plant had so recently surged. Savage hand to hand fighting broke out, and though the workers there had little in

the way of weapons save for elementary hand tools and some chain saws, they put up - in the circumstance - a good account of themselves. Soon, the fighting had spread into the lattice steel of the flare-boom, and desperate one-on-one combat was to be observed there. From time to time, a tiny figure could be seen to fall screaming to its end on the dappled concrete far below: once, in fact, two tiny figures, entwined, whirled away from the boom, and fell to their deaths. Slowly, however, the defenders were driven back by weight of numbers and some, rather than surrender, were shortly engulfed in the roaring flare: and soon it became evident that the boom had fallen to Gweene.

In the normal course of events, this might have been counted as a victory for the invading forces. It had, however, an unfortunate consequence as at that moment the morning shifts were preparing to return to the camp, and the afternoon shifts were making their way to the production lines. Many of these workers, naturally enough, had stopped to watch the struggle on the flare boom: and, enraged by what they had witnessed there, began to resist with increasing desperation and, on many occasions, suicidal courage.

Fighting was fiercest on the Beta and Charlie production lines at first, but this spirit of resistance quickly spread to Alpha, where numbers had been reinforced by refugees fleeing in panic from the snatch-squads and auxiliary units in Echo. Their tales, and bloody and beaten condition, helped encourage their comrades: and quite soon all production had come to a halt in the plant, and even two of the line-managers and a number of supervisors had joined the ranks of the production line workforce.

On the overhead railway, there was determined resistance, though many combatants on either side quickly fell away to their

ends. On account of the railway's narrow guage, the invaders were at something of a disadvantage, and they were held back for a considerable time, until they fixed their bayonets and charged the mob that confronted them. Even this did not entirely remove the workers: and when the bayonet squads were withdrawn, the workers supposed that they had won the issue. But the train which the constitutionalists had seized at the terminus was sent down the line empty and at the highest speed possible: and that put an end to resistance there, for all were swept from the line and perished below.

For a time the cracking plant held out bravely, but one of the informants employed there by Security assisted Gweene's forces to attack from the rear, and most of the resitants were captured, while a number of them were shot after summary trial.

In the rolling mill, there was bloody resistance and reprisal. Here, some welders had ambushed a number of Gweene's men and hanged them from the stout H-section beams high above. When the constitutionalists saw these victims, they were enraged and advanced without reconnaissance: at which the welders opened fire with the arms they had taken from the hanged soldiers. As a result, there was a general order to use firearms without warning: and many hundreds of the workforce were gunned down.

Quickly, resistance began to collapse, with huge numbers retreating back through the plant in the direction of the island camp, and refuge there. There were still pockets of resistance, of course, and areas of the plant subject to guerilla occupation. In the puddling hall and cogging shops, compact groups of workers hurled themselves on the enemy in suicidal attacks. It was soon apparent that they were taking orders for these attacks from a crazed, one-

eyed welder: but despite determined efforts to at first apprehend him, and later shoot him down, he escaped deeper into the plant.

But by now what had begun as a retreat had become a rout: and the entire workforce was in flight, back through the furnace hall, the mighty press room, the moulding shops, heading in their thousands for the safety of the camp.

On the edge of the tankage and vaultage zone, Gweene's men halted briefly, and reformed: while organised groups of workers - this would become clear later - looted at very high speed as much as possible of the weaponry held in the Security armoury directly above these storage facilities. By the time Gweene's men advanced again, the workers in a tumultuous rabble had stormed over the bridge into their island camp: whereupon the rebels without further resistance took possession of the entire plant. There had not even been a struggle for control of the bridge: which, having been secured by troops and a gun pointed directly down its length, meant that the entire workforce was now trapped on the island camp, and a splendid target for the artillery and light armour which was even now being brought through the plant, to be positioned in accordance with the firing plan.

Shortly afterwards, Gweene arrived at the front in a high-speed half-track, and established his forward command bunker just behind the artillery pieces. He summoned his senior officers and prepared the next stage of the campaign. This did not take long. A number of prisoners were brought before him and interrogated in rather a rough manner: but what more could subversives expect, when great things were held in the balance as they were?

It quickly became clear that the plant was emptied of able-bodied workers, though there were, of course, many dead there: and

it was decided that any wounded would be left to lie overnight where they were, in the cause of teaching them a lesson. It was also evident that the remaining workers were now trapped utterly on the island camp.

The prisoners, under the personal questioning of Gweene, made it quite clear that there was no organisation among the workforce and, despite the presence of noisy and self-styled agitators, no established leadership or leaders. There was, of course, absolutely no truth in the rumours of a Secret Military Organisation in the camp. And in any case, the workforce was entirely without arms of any type whatsoever. The business of interrogation being concluded, a few of the prisoners were hanged forthwith, and the remainder sent to the pentagon semi-sub for what was called special treatment: a prospect which - at the time - made no sense to these remaining prisoners at all.

But the information they had so willingly volunteered resolved the matter. There was no air power available, as it was presently on urban exercises over the Capital and City Two. But of course it was not needed. First thing in the morning, after a hearty breakfast for all hands, the bridge would be lifted to ensure that no worker might escape across it. Then the guns could blast through the camp at zero elevation, and reduce it to a smoking ruin in an hour or so. The bridge would then be lowered, and Gweene's forces would advance across it in orderly fashion, to destroy such as still remained in any sewers or bunkers. There would then be trials and executions according to battlefield law, a general treble-issue of hot rum, speeches, a parade of any remaining prisoners, a declaration of magnanimity, more hot rum, a distribution of laurel wreaths, a victorious procession of standards, and generalised drunkenness

and exultation. There might even be a maiden or two for every warrior, and maybe even a few other spoils of war for every hero too.

It was all going to be that simple.