

14. They Won't Spare Women Either.

Finnegan and Jake were in the laboratory for old times' sake, and they had a sensation too, just for the same sake of the old times. The plant and everything had maybe been a good idea at first, but it wasn't looking so good now at all! And it had been a terrible day for the boy too.

Just at the height of the workers' retreat from the plant, the message had come through. Finnegan and the rest of the senior management had been up in the suite, the platform was jacked up just as high as it would go in case of anything, and drink of a superior quality was flying as they watched the Constitutional Forces flow through the plant and isolate the workers on the island camp. But just about the time Major Gweene was settling into his forward command bunker, the message comes over on the management-only tannoy:

- you're fired, get out, we are your undisputed masters now, and if you don't go of your own accord Security will see you off the premises.

And right enough, when the boy turned round for support from the top managers they had disappeared and who was there but some of the nastiest Security chaps he had even seen.

Says one of the brutes, 'Right mate, down and out now or we'll put you down and out the quick way'.

So that was that, that was the end of Finnegan's heady time in management, but he didn't disapprove, oh no, he was maybe temperamentally suited more to the piratical spirit of launch and early development and less to the humdrum details of daily control, and anyway there was always a need for fresh blood in any

enterprise. Not to mention the stock options and rolling-contract severance deal that Major Gweene had set up for him in the first place!

The senior managers looked at him with scorn and hatred as he was bundled into the high-speed service lift. One raised a mocking glass of champagne in his direction and said something with a curl and sneer, but Finnegan didn't quite catch what was said: and the next moment Security was throwing him in among the dustbins, he was lucky to land on his face.

Jake broke into this sorrowing reverie. Says Jake, 'Yes, that'll teach you to get involved with them'.

Says the boy, not wanting to talk about that sort of thing, 'When did you mix up this stuff anyway?'

Jake says he had been making a batch pretty much every week since they started the camp but Finnegan didn't seem to care any more, what with his responsibilities in management; but Jake had been blasted every day since, and that wasn't counting what the boys in the camp had been giving him too.

'I hope that man Gweene doesn't come up here the night', says Jake, who was not a man often to express an opinion at all.

'It's strong stuff', says the boy, 'for a moment I thought I was seeing things'.

'That's the sort of thing it's meant for', Jake says, but the boy never said anything.

They went outside and stood in the dark. The poor old cabin now looked awful sad, every house needs a happy hand in it to keep it happy, otherwise it just goes down and down. From up on the summit of the management jack-up, the sounds of breaking glass and revelry were to be heard. There were women of some sort up

there too, which had been strictly forbidden in Finnegan's day, not counting special occasions. Now lights were flashing away too, and there was dancing going on.

Suddenly, Finnegan had a thought. Says he, 'How were you getting stuff from the boys in the camp?'

Jake says, 'I was just going in and asking for it'.

'Yes, yes', snapped the boy, forgetting for a moment that he was no longer at the top, 'but what I mean is, where were they getting it from?'

Jake says, 'The Tunnelling League has run a wee spur line from the camp underwater, right into the tanks and vaults, they can get as much as they like any time they like'.

'But how were you getting onto the island?', wondered Finnegan: for access was guarded at all times, and Security very strict about visitors.

'I was just going over the bridge like everybody else', says Jake, as cool as you like. 'The boys over there made me a pass, they've got a printing press, they were planning a mass breakout for a while and they can forge any documents you fancy, passports and all'.

'You are very friendly with the working classes', Finnegan said in a sad, reflective tone: for in his time in management he had forgotten some of those old imperatives of friendship that transcend all considerations of things like caste and class.

Jake gave Finnegan a very curious look, but the boy never saw it in the dark; and Jake said in a tone of curious emphasis, 'I am the president of the underground Classics Society, you know'.

Finnegan never paid any attention to this. Talk of the great enterprise had given him another moment of sadness, for the fate of

the poor men and women over on the island camp was sealed now; and tomorrow the slaughter, though unavoidable, would all the same be dreadful.

‘Would we take a walk over then’, he wonders, ‘and say our goodbyes to them?’

‘There’ll be some party over there the night’, says Jake cheerily, ‘if they have any sense among them at all’.

So the two of them took a stroll down towards the bridge. It was a solemn moment. From all across the occupied plant could be heard the sounds of drunken celebration, as Gweene’s soldiers crouched around makeshift fires in their foxholes and prepared for the slaughter to come. Along the shore glittered the picket-fires of the sentries who were posted there, and sometimes the harsh, dry cough of a soldier on duty was to be heard. Far in the distance, and for no more than a moment or two, was the sound of triumphant bugling: it was, no doubt, the changing of the guard somewhere in the furthest recesses of the plant.

Finnegan said, ‘Did that noise not come from the camp the now?’

But Jake said nothing. At the bridge, two sentries sprang from a foxhole and presented bayonets. Two senior Security staff were also present. Papers were demanded. But Jake had a word with Security, and was waved through like an old friend. And Finnegan, still respected on account of his great status, perhaps they had not yet heard of his demission, was also waved on his way.

‘One hour only’, snarled the sergeant in charge of the sentries, ‘and then the bridge is coming up. After that, anyone over there is dead’.

‘Don’t you worry about me’, says Jake, in the same curious tone he had used earlier: but nobody noticed this.

On the far side of the bridge, there was nothing at first to be observed but a scene of desolation, for there was no power from the plant to the camp any more, you would think somebody had got it down by the scruff into a bucket of tar till a silver bubble or two came up. Then they heard a low sobbing, and on examination it was found to come from a lady diggerman, crouched in a darkened corner. Jake tapped her on the shoulder with his Ópoon. The lass started and turned in a fright. But it was just her boyfriend, he had told her that he was married and he didn’t want to hurt the wife’s feelings even though he didn’t like her that much or anything. But still, the wife had feelings like everyone else, and that was why he didn’t want to go hurting them. So cheerio.

Finnegan made some comforting words, hadn’t he had some sad experiences with women and fate in recent times, yes, and Jake too: and himself and Jake moved deeper into the silent and tarry camp. The first light they saw came from a pyre of burning tyres: a fiery structure that brought a strange sadness to Finnegan’s heart, though he couldn’t quite identify the source of the sadness at first. Then he remembered. Maybe if Jake hadn’t been there he would have tried a sob himself; but Jake didn’t approve of that sort of thing, slide a sob and you might as well slide the noose there and then too!

Now, some more lights were to to seen, and noises began to be heard: and a thought came to the boy.

‘Where’, asked he, ‘are all the men from Security that were supposed to be in here keeping order?’

‘Dead’, says Jake, cool as you like.

‘Dead!’, says the boy, in tones of horror, and for a moment forgetting again that he was no longer in the management team.

‘Most of them’, says Jake: and Finnegan noticed a sudden tone of command, or at least a curious shadow of authority, that he hadn’t ever noticed before.

‘We’ve got a few down in the sewers, we’ll use them as hostages if it is necessary’, added Jake handily.

‘Who is we?’ says the boy.

‘I can tell you that now’, says Jake, relieved like, ‘it is the Secret Military Organisation’.

By Jove!, thought the boy. Says he, ‘So who were the Security men that have been here for the last week?’

‘That was us too’, says Jake, ‘we can make uniforms an all, wait you till the light breaks in the morning’.

But there was no time for talk of tomorrow. The men were now approaching the central area of the camp, and what an extraordinary view came before their four eyes! The place was a blaze of lights and activities of a sort not commonly associated with a camp of this type. Arc lights were strung from the roofs of the accommodation huts, and powered by every one of the emergency generators that had so recently gone missing from the plant. Elsewhere, in corners that would otherwise have been dark, great pyres of tyres, from which black columns of smoke were undoubtedly rising, were glowing in an evil sort of way. By the light of one of these pyres could be seen a lady in sandals, greaves and a loftily-feathered helm. She was dancing in the company of a research-chemist equipped with a magic wand, and which chemist appeared to enjoy a relationship of some considerably restorative intimacy with the lady. And in yet other spots, blacksmiths’ forges

were tended by welders in leather aprons and darkened industrial glasses: their light too helped illuminate the terrible scene.

And what had happened to the placid and law-abiding spirit of the workforce! To one side of the netball court, members of the Angling Alliance were advancing shoulder to shoulder in the style of grenadiers, under the command of a small but extremely angry pastry-cook in beavered helm and rullions, and who had been thought dead weeks ago at the furnace hall disaster. On the court itself two lancers in plumed mail hoods, and each astride a sporting ATV, were tilting at each other with bold elan, their ladies' favours astream at the gracious blade.

Members of the All Site Temperance Union were conducting advanced manoeuvres in military drill a little way beyond these lancers and grenadiers. The Formation Pole Vaulters were evidently on their break, for they lay around their mighty poles in a mode of relaxation, drinking in a rather insolent way from small bottles of fortified beer, and combing out each other's hair. Senior members of the Early and Later Medievalists were taking classes (not without considerable disagreement) in hand-to-hand combat with a range of weapons proper to the common foot soldier of the medieval period. A small tunnel led into the former women's compound, where members of the League associated with that craft were to be seen fraternising in a carefree manner. A vast mound of random rubble boulders, dug from the island's core, lay to one side: close by was a second mound of gabions, removed from the island-camp's reinforced and heavily weather-proofed sides. A stream of fork lift trucks - all stolen from the plant - carried away gabions and boulders to an unknown destination.

Everywhere was to be seen a great rushing, in whatever direction. A founder-member of the Classics Society ran towards them and made an old-fashioned sort of salute at Jake. They had some private words in a strange language and the founder-member, who had been notable in the plant for his discipline and calming influence on the wilder elements, dashed off again. Everywhere was earnest busyness.

At the forges, from which came the angry clang of hammer on steel and the desperate odour of burning leather, sweating welders were shaping steel plates with tremendous urgency, while others fashioned dreadful and cruelly-pointed darts from bars of iron. Yet more were hammering into shape greaves and breastplates and bucklers and manly shields and armoured codpieces. Teams of women - it was difficult to be sure, but they probably were women - were binding flights of peacock feathers to the mighty darts, and others were lashing together curious garments from huge sheets of close-mesh chain-mail. Yet more were furiously splicing the heavy-duty rigging wire stolen from the tented alloy roofs in the plant, while a mountain of welding helmets lay for the moment aside, but awaiting imminent attention.

In the gymnasium, a mighty drinking party and dance was under way: though it didn't take Finnegan long to realise that there was more than drinking going on here. Even the brown bear, its eyes like saucers, was up on the floor though it was hard to say, that was the modern way of things, just who it was dancing with. Jake kept a good grip on the Ôpoon, mind, just in case. But there was no more futures-trading in wives and sweethearts, no, nor cock-fighting either, which was something which would surely recommend itself to the new management! Not that it mattered anyway - for by the last

of the light tomorrow, all would be gone, all destroyed, the slaughter complete, and Major Gweene all set to march on the Capital!

Up on the stage the band was still playing its evil music, the boys all in shades like they had something to hide and looking not a bit tired one of them, just the way they were at the dance a while ago now, and down below a few oriental seamen were dancing away their own sort of dance, and nobody was causing them any trouble at all.

But it was to the side of the stage that Finnegan's eyes were drawn. For who was this? Three women were up there, the eyes just blasted right out of them, and they were doing an erotic dance. Then Finnegan saw the red and white ties on them, and knew fine it was the three wee cousins themselves, however they got there you would wonder!

'Hey man', says the girls after they'd had enough of the dancing and saw Finnegan down there, 'there's enough stuff here to last forever, we've run a spur line to the storage tanks and vaults, we'll maybe blast it all the night before the slaughter tomorrow'.

And the wee cousins just offered the boy whatever he wanted, and just as much of it as he wanted too. Or drink even, if that was his thing the night. But no, says the boy, he had a good sensation earlier on: and at that point a fatherly and selfless inclination came to him.

Says he, 'There isn't a chance tomorrow, girls, they won't spare women either, you could come over to the old cabin for a cup of tea and stay with myself the night or whatever, there's a good big one there in Jacob's room, she'd take the lot of us easy'.

But the cousins said it wasn't a problem, Finn, 'We're all going out the night with a new batch of Assault Chemists anyway'.

For some moments Finnegan marvelled that the cousins could find such inconsequential obligations as of more importance than their very lives. But time now was getting short, and there was no further opportunity to argue. He explained that he had to return by the bridge or all would be lost for him. The girls walked him through the camp where the scenes of desperate activity were even more pronounced than earlier.

At the bridge, he said a solemn adieu to the wee cousins, poor three wee things that they were, and if only they knew what was to come!

But the wee cousins weren't caring. They wished each other God Speed, then, and parted. On the far side of the bridge, the sentries were impatient and even ill-mannered. The cousins were erotic dancing again, and shouting some very vile suggestions at the sentries. A warning shot over the heads didn't make any difference. Finnegan saw the red and white ties and the girls waving; and then the bridge lifted and they were gone from sight. He turned sadly for home. Then he remembered Jake, still in the camp.

And it was at that very moment that the boy knew exactly what he was going to do next.