

16. The Battle of the Bog: Part One.

Until this point in the battle, no attention had been granted to the five-legged semi-sub that lay in a rusting tilt on the beach beyond the bog. But now, Staff headquarters in the furnace hall began to receive alarming reports from the heroic signalling staff stationed above: and observation teams were despatched at once to the vicinity of the rig. One member of these teams survived long enough for his astonishing message to be flashed and flagged back to the furnace hall. In a cowardly flanking move, a whole battalion of Gweene's Constitutionalists had - quite un-noticed - contrived to find itself in full possession of that noble structure: and was even now to be seen on the drill-floor preparing to launch a surprise attack on the rear of the workers' forces arrayed below.

This was a challenge - a deadly threat - that no command staff could tolerate: and instantly a hitherto-secret unit of under-employed orchestral musicians, sporting battle horns of unknown design, was called forth to go about its work. Almost at once, the horns' mighty cries made themselves audible to Old Jacob's marine commando division, which was stationed, not un-naturally, by the seashore, and whose existence had until then been unknown to either army.

At this point in the morning, the rig was afloat, albeit in shallow water, and was tethered by giant chains to the sub-sea surface, just in the normal way. But soon after high water (except at spring tides) the landward legs of the rig found the bottom, and by half-tide, all five legs were standing securely on the sand below. For an invader, therefore, it was necessary to time any assault for the very moment of high water, so that the invasion fleet could be got off the beaches

as quickly as possible, and exposed as little as possible to any enemy fire that might be brought to bear on it from above.

And so it proved to be that morning. In accordance with a master plan agreed at conference in the remains of the accommodation-island library during the early hours of the previous night, the cry of the battle-horns signalled both the precise moment of high water, according to lunar calculation and visual observation, and also the order for immediate, ruthless and - if necessary - suicidal attack on the rig.

Moments later, then, the marine commandos set sail in majestic fashion: and it soon became evident that the Boat Club, like all the other clubs and societies throughout the plant, had not been idle (for a breakout by sea had, in any case, long been planned).

Initially, their handiwork took the form of no more than modest and unmanned rafts, which drifted with the morning breeze (luckily, the breeze was offshore that historic morning) in a lazy fashion towards the small fleet of Gweene's transport vessels which was tethered at sea level to each of the great legs. But very quickly it became apparent that these rafts were fire-ships: and almost at once cries of alarm and terror were to be heard from the drill floor far above. But already it was too late: and moments later explosions and fireballs indicated the sinking of these vessels. The last hope had now gone for the evacuation of Gweene's forces from the rig.

Almost at once six ROVs - extensively converted and quite obviously in the role of sub-surface attack craft - were rushed down the beach on one-time launch trolleys; and soon nothing was to be seen of them but their periscopes, cruising in ominous fashion straight out to sea - or so, at least, it seemed. At the very same moment, a strange surface craft was observed to be making its way

slowly towards the five-legger from the direction of the deep-water harbour: and soon it became clear that this was a self-powered barge, in the form of a twin-hull polynesian canoe with traditional crabclaw schooner rig, its extensive decking proudly bearing two pecker units mounted on chain-windlass turntables. Quickly, the schooner moved in under the protection of the overhanging drill floor far above: and soon, the peckers could be heard, smashing man sized openings into their chosen leg.

And then came the invasion fleet proper: and if it was small, then that was no discredit to the labours of those who had built it, under such trying circumstances! Off the beach then, slid two norsemen longships - swift, slim vessels, the squaresails of buttered silk proof positive of their criminal origin; and then three medieval vessels, their castles teeming with assault commandos - but for all that, unhandy downwind tubs at the best of times: for progress in naval architecture is not, and never was, a continuous art! But still, these chaps were battle-hardened, for they had fought in the worst of the action all morning, and each had been in receipt of generous quantities of proactive medical aid at the forward dressing stations.

So in the longships horned and bearded men and lasses, whose libertarian hair tumbled to their knees, teemed with fury round the timber liquor barrels, and brandished their axes towards the drill-floor above them with furious cries of the most bloodthirsty vengeance. And in the cog and carrack and galleon too all was earnest busyness: for though they were commanded by office-bearers of the Boat Club, the deck-hands and fighting-crews and archers in the nests and castles were drawn from the ordinary membership of both the early and later medievalists, who had been denied action in the introductory part of the day, and who were now

gasping, in the normal way of medievalists, early or late, for juvenile rape, easy-peasy plunder and theologically conservative murder!

The cog and carrack each carried a torsion-motor siege engine, and for some tense moments it was not clear what their role was to be, or could be. But then the engine on the cog hurled skyward a detachment of lightly-armed airborne assault chaps, who were observed to land, for the most part, in the vicinity of the derrick, and on the roof of the accommodation module: while the cog rolled dangerously, and dipped her rail. The carrack too fired off a detachment: but the elevation had been miscalculated, and these poor wretches were hurled in a high clear arc right over the crown-block casing, to plunge to their watery and untimely deaths on the far side of the rig.

But there was no time to grieve: for at this very moment a unit of formation pole vaulters tore down the beach and was to be observed, from time to time, drawing closer to the rig: while - to even greater cries of terror from Gweene's men aloft - the flagship of the invasion fleet, under the personal command of the three wee cousins, was also seen moving across the still waters.

This mighty ship was narrow and shallow and fast, and nearly two hundred oarsmen toiled below, to the beat of the drummers and the lash of the coxwain. But these naked prisoners were all very fresh (for they had been captured but recently) and progress was swift - as it had to be, lest a dis-service be done to impact theory and the ram fail to penetrate its target: the whole assault thus being most dreadfully compromised!

While a piper played stirring tunes appropriate to the spirit of the times and a mobile dressing station with backpack-casks toured the lower decks offering sensations and pledges of imminent liberty,

the three wee cousins could be observed on a platform towards the prow struggling to raise against the lashing breeze a mighty battle flag and pole: and just as they had done so, the trireme (for such it was), with one desperate heave, drove deep into the bowels of its chosen leg on the pentagon with a fearful scream of terror and rage.

Now was the critical moment! Now must the standard stand or fall!

For some moments, indeed, the fate of the three wee cousins' invasion force hung in the inscrutable balance of fate. But gigantic explosions signalled that the ROV fleet had attacked and destroyed one of the rig's legs: and moments later, it was clear that the peckers on the crabclaw raft had also smashed their way through another leg: for the mighty rig swayed and tilted, and from the screams on the drill-floor it was evident that at one point Gweene's forces had been swept in a mass most perilously close to the edge.

Suddenly, men of the All Site Temperance Union were swarming around the base of the derrick: for their colleagues in the Tunnelling League had driven - unbeknown to all - a narrow-section sub-sea shaft through on the mud-line to the base of one of the remaining legs, and forced an entry thereby to the decking structure high above.

In moments, the fighters from the vessels below had fought their way by cross brace and splash zone and spider deck onto the platform too: and for some time the contest surged through all parts of the giant utility - kitchens, pantries, pipe rack, crane jibs, generator houses, heli-deck, fuel tanks, control room with its dials and switches and impressive levers: and finally, up into the derrick itself, until all opposition was firmly extinguished.

The victorious fighters queued for sustenance and cheer at the mobile dressing stations: and only now did it become apparent that the rig had a secret function hitherto unsuspected by the labouring masses in the great plant that stretched on the bog beyond. It quite clearly was, in fact, a secret entertainment suite for Board-level management and selected business friends - and Oh! The luxury, the luxury!

Quickly, the three wee cousins ordered that those poor souls so recently recovered from the dungeons be brought forth: and so they were, that they might lead the awed warriors around this dreadful place. Soon, shrieks of horror - each worse than the last - echoed around the drill floor, and up into the derrick.

For what had appeared to constitute the accommodation module in truth contained an indoor/outdoor tennis court, an intimate casino, a vast cellar cradling the finest of wines and brandies, and a gently swinging golden cage in which an olive concubine plucked a horse-hair lute at the foot (there was but one foot) of a sad blue-mango tree. Then came the after-dinner smoking room, lined in Lebanese cedar and Baltic amber and furnished with a butler (a former mud-engineer), split logs, two Òfruit machinesÓ, numerous bound volumes of the Athenaeum, and a roaring, brassbound fire.

But worse were the tropical greenhouses, where gravid figs and nectarines (these were quite unknown to the younger warriors, and a silver-beard from the dungeons made a stern speech in consequence) lolled in a voluptuous sort of way, and humming birds whistled and sang while jasmine-scented marmosets tumbled themselves with distressingly robust salacity.

Then, more cries of disgust and amazement signalled the discovery of the bathing suite: the Roman baths where cool blue

water drifted on erotic tiles; the Turkish baths, which hid unknown but clearly vile, unspeakable horrors, and which were staffed by two oiled and heavily-armed Nubian lifeguards; and then the multinational typing pool, whose occupants - freed from their submarine shackles - declared at once for the army of labour: and cried that but in the blood of the enemy would their sins at last be cleansed away!

But only then did the shocking extent of management indulgence and waste become truly apparent.

For now, the silverbeards led their stunned followers into the private reception area of the great multi-leg semi-sub: an area clearly designed for entertainment on an epic scale, and accordingly housed in a series of linked atria, surrounded by hanging gardens and tinkling waterfalls which - the silver-beards said with authority - quite obviously ran with vintage champagne on special occasions such as the annual visit of the corporate auditors, surprise visits from corporate wives and special visits from corporate personal assistants on study-tours from overseas subsidiaries.

Here, in these linked atria, was to be found evidence of greed and expenditure on a stupendous scale: oracle bones with clearly-vicious calligraphic inscription; live deer dressed as shamans; resting deities dressed as tigers (with the face of Major Gweene); bones from the private parts of the walrus; a life-size leogryph in solid gold; lithe and masked dancers in private discourse, some heavily costumed and others perfectly naked; and - in a corner - a sheet-mica display-case of shrunken heads: some of which were recognised by the older warriors with repeated cries of horror and disgust.

On one side were mantles of the noblest of feathers, graciously curved knives, burial chariots carved from a single piece of

jasper, jewelled pouches, ritual jade trugs, conch-shell trumpets, gigantic turtle-shell battle drums: and tortoise-shell finger bowls chased with silver.

And on the other were Mycenaean shot glasses, trinkets in cornelian, obsidian and turquoise mined from Sinai, brooches, bracelets, winged and miraculous anklets, looking-glasses backed in lapis lazuli, servile collars, insolent crowns, bangles, beads, gold leaf bells, pendulous earrings, belts, sandals, fans, parasols, rattles, trunnioned cemetery urns, muffs, ivory gorgets, casks, thrones, paddles, breastplates, scimitars, amulets, mammoth tusks, ostrich eggs, and a full-size bison rendered in porcelain and full company colours.

Immediately beyond, meanwhile, was a gallery dedicated to the corporate collection of oriental and amerindian costumery: occult masks and cultic mirrors, richly-embroidered cloaks which clearly offered the full protection of the gods, funerary whisks and shrouds, sacrificial bridal wear along with military combat costume in a hundred styles; while at the far end of the gallery, in the company of a stately pair of handed palanquins, was a tasteful display of war banners from most of the principal early dynasties.

But worse - almost at once - was to come. For the three wee cousins had gone ahead in the role of scouts: and now they found a door bearing a sign marked Boardroom: and then below that sign, a smaller one, saying Gweene Offshore Enterprises, and then a third sign, saying Strictly No Admittance.

ÒWhat do you think this could be?Ó, said Remedios.

ÒIt's a doorÓ, said Soso.

But the third one cried, ÒAnd it leads to a secret investigations suite!Ó.

And so it proved to be. For once through the door, the three wee cousins - the remainder of their warriors now crushing behind them in terrified awe - found themselves in a full-service chamber of horrors, complete with compact spectators' gallery with free bar and custom rest-room, and a senior clergyman to read lessons from an ebony lectern during interrogations: and who was at this very moment studying a treatise on cosmological disorder and toasting his generous toes at a bucket of hot coals.

Here too was everything to hand for its due purpose: rakes, gouges, prods, scourges, drags, flensing knives, claws, tongs, tackety boots, crushing irons, branding irons, smashing irons, spiked chastity belts, racks, presses, breaking bars, cracking bars and choking bars: and Stake, Pit, Maiden and Gallows! While pious toads did grunt and fornicate in shady nooks, the progressive forces of humanity surveyed the deadly scene: roasting grids, screws, nips, hooks, leg-irons, a gilded-bronze cauldron with double coffle-stick attached, scoops, gimlets, crampons, probes, flails and wedges: and finally a sable-lined garotte with bowl of oranges in close proximity, by way of tribute to that enterprise culture so central to the economic and spiritual well-being of us all (or so, at least, the senior clergyman said, when asked).

At this point, a party of wounded fighters from the front was brought in on litters; and then some specially-courageous chaps, whose nerves had been badly damaged by their bravery and who had in consequence been sent on soothing furlough: and their presence in such a place enraged their fellows to such an extent that some talk began about allowing the clergyman to test the instruments he had so often shown to others.

But in that moment, the entire rig began to sway in an extremely alarming fashion and someone shouted that it now stood on just two legs, which was not a very stable configuration at all: and the entire warrior-force swarmed onto the drill-floor and at once moved into the sort of programme of evacuation procedures common, nowadays, on utilities such as these.

But suddenly there was a most dreadful explosion ashore near the deep-water harbour, at that point where the management-grade powder vault had been sited, and which - alone of its fellows - had not been emptied by the spur-line of the Tunnelling League. It was immediately obvious that Gweene's men had established an ammunition dump directly above it, which had now - for reasons still unknown - exploded violently. Afterwards, all those who had watched the event spoke of the searing light and then the air-blast and finally the stupendous roar that followed: a bright ball of flame growing ever-larger, at the sight of which the Nubians threw themselves face-first on the drill-floor, and even the clergyman fell to his knees and clasped his richly-ringed hands in an attitude of modest but earnest supplication.

And then, from the midst of this inferno, began to rise a frightful cloud of wintry dust: a column at first, boiling and roiling, but then at an immense height unfolding into a mighty mushroom shape, irresistably reminiscent of *amanita muscaria* (or possibly the species *virosa* of the same genus) and growing very, very quickly, as it spread across the sky and blocked the mighty sun.

At its foot, a whiteout appeared to rage in the vicinity of the grossly distended volva and an assault section of the Formation Pole Vaulters could now be sensed in the blizzard, death-white but for the desperate struggle in their eyes.

But at this very moment the rig shivered violently as yet another leg prepared to collapse below it (for the ROVs had not received the signal ordering them to desist from their work).

Remedios said, 'We're nearly down to the last leg, girls'.

Soso said, 'I think we better get out of here, girls'.

But the third wee cousin leapt to an eminence and cried to her army: 'Strip the lot, lads, it is no more than the product of our own alienated labour'!

And then all three wee cousins cried as one: 'To the ships men, at once, for the front is in need of us!'.

Some moments later, therefore, the entire army - having stripped the rig of its ill-gotten riches - swarmed below and set sail in their fleet for the second and final stage of the desperate battle of the bog.

The bi-legger, as now it was, creaked and swayed behind them, on its one good, healthy leg, and on its other poor, stunted limb: but it did not - as yet, at least - begin to fail, and fall.