

A GIRL CALLED JAKE.

WELL THAT was that, things just went back to the old ways, there was an important story in the paper there, old sheep knocked off foundations, people were saying, what condition was the poor foundations in afterwards? - and the great plant was all tumbled and gone now though you could still see the top of the flare-boom and maybe a section or two of the old cogging-hall tented alloy roof. But that was all, that was all.

The constitutional bombardment hadn't helped things to start with, of course. And the broadband mines that the Tunnelling League had put in place made matters worse, though probably the tunnels they had build all under the place was the final nail, the dynamic stability of the place was all ruined. So it wasn't long after the great battle that some of the reconstruction engineers noticed that the articulated linkages were giving way, sometimes even as they watched. It was shortly afterwards that the first huge concrete barge slipped and began to capsize. For a week or so, this was a slow business, but in time it became clear that nothing could be done. One day, she slid over to the forty-five. By the next morning, she was right upside down, and quite soon she had sunk completely. That was the rolling mill section, which was probably the heaviest. After that, there wasn't much time left.

Final process and despatch had been lightly built, and was expected to last out: but it had been put right on top of a place where the bog was more water than bog and it sank plain and simple, just the way it sat there, down and down until it had gone entirely. The rest of the plant soon followed, and though the press hall went down with some considerable dignity, it went down all the

same. That was the end of the plant. For a while, the dried-fish factory that replaced it ticked over, but it took a bad knock when the Asiatic market collapsed on account of currency fluctuations. The grim malevolence of the few remaining locals that found work there didn't help, of course.

And after long and detailed debate, the legal authorities came to the view that it was best to let the whole thing be forgotten, and no charges were pursued. As the existence of Jake (who had unexpectedly survived the last moments of the great battle and for whose last words there was, therefore, no further call) was unknown to officialdom, and had been for many years, there was no question of his being summoned anyway. As for Finnegan: he had been fired before the end of the affair, and that was an important consideration. In any case, the evil plant had not only been destroyed - it had capsized and gone: and there were in consequence problems of an evidential nature to be taken into consideration. Even the tanks and vaults from the raw-product zone were empty, largely on account of the spur line which had channelled their contents to the workforce in the cause of their heroic defence of the plant: though the explosive destruction of the final powder vault in the later stages of the battle, now thought to have been initiated by a suicide unit of either the Formation Pole Vaulters or the Tunnelling League, should not be overlooked. And, if truth were to be told, nobody could prove to the satisfaction of any jury that it had been Finnegan's idea in the first place. The poor boy didn't even make any money out of the great adventure, well nobody ever heard if he did anyway, though there was plenty of talk at the time and there would be plenty more now if there was anyone left to talk; though he should have, after the

management performance points kicked in and before everything went downside up.

No, no, the long finger of judicial honour must point elsewhere: and that would surely be a matter of some embarrassment for the authorities. In any case, where else could it usefully point? Peter and George have retired to Belize where they now spend their declining years playing golf with the two wives, and they are all said to be getting better and better at it every day. Major Gweene's whereabouts were at first something of a mystery, however. Initially, it was supposed that he had perished when the Tunnelling League took out the management jack-up. But no trace of his remains was ever found, despite intensive forensic enquiries. Then it emerged that Gweene, seeing the battle turn against him, had left the jack-up early and had been observed to commandeer a fast half-track ambulance shortly before the dread explosion. When he was finally traced to his heavily-defended tropical compound, efforts at extradition failed, himself and the concubines said the old war wound was playing up a bit and they weren't able to get about so much any more, so they definitely couldn't make it back for the trial: and anyway they weren't very keen on the idea of a trial in the first place.

For a time, there was a plan to blame everything on that one-eyed welder brute in a bandana who had commanded the static torsion-motor gun at the furnace hall: but he had perished in the final moments of battle. And anyway the Pantishah himself was dead, and Pantishah II took the view that the whole thing was best forgotten. (Pantishah II made a statement on Hussaria, by the way. He said that as Hussaria no longer existed, and was not even to be

found on a modern map of any reputable consequence, there was no need for any further comment).

As for the rest. Big Stilson has settled in Valparaiso, he is said to have leased a size-16 digger and started out all over again. He has grown another beard too. The black and white ferry got off the beach fine on the next big spring at Oban, though you can still see the marks of her keel there in the sand at low water, if you look carefully enough. A good top room in one of the seafront hotels is probably the best place to start looking from, though you need a big low water down there, and that's just for a start.

Vanessa enjoyed the wastes of Kazakhstan at first, but the marriage didn't last and when Crawford died (of grief, sadly) she became an Orthodox nun, she's in charge now of the convent's electronic media relations. She sends a postcard now and again, just to Jake like, there's a good stack of them up there at the back of the clock. She's got some leave saved up, she says, she's coming over this summer if there's room, and it will surely be nice for everyone when she does.

As for Wee Alex, or Assistant Chief Constable Alexandrine as she is now: it should be obvious that those who supposed her to have perished in the Great Explosion were under something of a misapprehension. It is now thought that her death was staged for fear that her deep-cover role was under threat of imminent detection, and that those remnants of lace underwear discovered in the sorry carnage had been placed there by police agents whose identities have never been discovered. But all was quickly forgiven: and she comes up a lot for her holidays nowadays, the boy just sends the jet down, discreetly like, any time she wants it, and they have a happy time out there in her tent on the mighty bog.

Finnegan says he is teaching her how to play the bottle and she's coming on fine at it too, though it will be a good while yet before she is up to performance standard.

And the three wee cousins? Soso, Remedios and Brainy (they weren't really Finnegan's wee cousins at all, of course) didn't fall with their tesdudo at the strongpoint, and all survived the mighty battle of the bog. They returned to their desks and, as a result of careful management of sleepover obligations and family bereavements, there was no comment made on their absences. They all did very well in the next set of examinations too.

After the great battle, the workers' army marched on the Capital and would have taken it, but then the boys changed their minds and just disappeared from the face of the earth, though people say they are still around somewhere, maybe waiting for another chance. The Hussarian bus party got into the Capital fine, though, you can see them there dancing for the tourists in the hotels now, just about any day during the season, and they are all getting on fine. As for Adolpho and Herself, there has never been any word, any word at all.

But life managed to go on fine without them, just as it had in the old days. Barnacle is doing fine, the same as he always did. It is true that nothing is reliably known of his whereabouts during the construction phase of the island camp; but as soon as it was occupied, he set himself up on an all-comers basis in the licensed gymnasium, and there he quickly established himself as champion of the fighting ring. He killed everything sent against him, indeed, that is why the management peacocks had to be stolen: but he killed them too. It was Jake that rescued him from a dangerous corner, just towards the end of the battle. Indeed, he was with Jake during

those final moments on the crawler horse, and they were both lucky to survive. (Some people claimed afterwards, by the way, that at that critical moment of battle they had seen in the sky a gigantic angel with wings and trumpet; but on account of the great heat of that moment there was, of course, no independent confirmation of this).

As for Adeline. It didn't take her long to get her feet under the table, it was looking like for good too, she had joined the constitutionalists as a ruse and to avoid hanging. After a while she had twins, and if anybody wondered whether their conception was related to the reversal of her sentence to hang on a rebel gallows, they didn't say anything, what would the point be? The first one was a boy, they called it Finnegan, and the second one they called Virginia, or Jake for short.

Soon, the happy mother took to wearing an apron, which is always an important domestic statement, and when not busy with her duties in the scullery, spent her time usefully reading old magazines and writing things. She and Finnegan were married one day for the price of a sensation by an itinerant conjuror with an advanced education in the field of astronomical mathematics, and an old motorcycle. She was given away by her natural father, who managed to remain completely sober for much of the ceremony. Jake and Helena thought about getting married too but decided against it, it would only compromise their independence too much.

Soon, there was no sign left of the great battle at all. A few ornithologists come up to do things out on the bog, and they sometimes stand in wonder at a monument there. On one side, facing east, is a frieze depicting oriental seamen in the course of a stylised folk dance. On the opposite face is to be observed a parrot,

arising from the ashes of what is reliably said to be a post-industrial landscape. There is a rose athwart her tender beaks, and her wings - which flaunt a maritime spear, or lance, of unidentified purpose - are clasped above in a clear gesture of victory. Atop the column is the figure of a mortally-wounded bear, in an attitude of crazed defiance. But there is no plaque, and the watchers soon move on.

Sometimes, there is talk of a Games again, maybe even a dance like in the old days, but there isn't the people left now, even the bus parties stopped coming ages ago. They put the post office back, right enough, in place of the old plant, and that would always be a consideration.

Jake doesn't come out much nowadays except on public holidays, he is getting on, and it's not so easy to get up the chimney any more, even though it has been extended and modernised a good bit. But every Saturday, Finnegan mixes up a batch in the old laboratory and takes him in a sensation to keep him going for the week. The only hint of Helena's presence is sometimes a few sad verses from an old song about Valparaiso that you can hear drifting up the chimney round about teatime. But she is never seen. And Adeline and the children are never seen at all either.

It's easy enough for Barnacle to get up though, you can see him up there on the rim of the pot most days with that old style of moderate melancholy on the one hand, and comforting old grim malevolence on the other. He takes a sensation every morning, they're getting stronger all the time now, he would maybe need to be thinking about starting to be cutting back one of these days soon. But not yet, no.

The boy himself is doing fine too, he's done away with the suits long ago and is back to the old plus-twos and the Ôgarry with

eagles an all. In the summer he leads tours of the bog, there's more and more of the archeo-chemists coming up every year now, and they have a merry time out there among the myrtle and the celandine. In the winter, he just practises his tunes over the neck of a handy bottle, the archeo-chemists, especially the lady ones, are awful keen on the tunes as you would expect.

The old cabin is well down on her marks now too. At the beginning she was tilting as well as settling, but by the time she was down to the eaves, she had levelled off a good bit. That was a hopeful moment: but it did not last. She just kept on sinking, and when she went past the eaves, everyone knew there was no hope of a stop. You can still see signs of the ridge Finnegan and Jake used to sit up on, but only in fine, dry weather, and only if you look closely enough. Apart from that, it's just the chimney now.

You can see it there no bother against the sky, every night as the mouth of it closes in. There may be a few bars from the boy down below, maybe not. Barnacle could be up there on the pot, maybe not too. There is in any case a great sense of peace. Then it gets dark altogether. There is a great peace. There is even peace in Hussaria.

And up on the tree there at the back of the old potato patch, the old raven - he never had a name, he never needed a name - he just sits there: waiting, and waiting, and waiting.