

2. A Stranger Returns.

Barnacle, with stately pace, proceeded forth to the Games and on arrival took up position in the grass around the piping platform; which was as always, and quite properly, at an appropriate distance from the commoner events of the afternoon. This grass was long and Barnacle on account of his compact stature was required, in the cause of visibility, to stand rather than, as was his custom, recline; for as is well known there is no point in proceeding to a destination to observe what is going on, and then observing nothing but grass.

On every hand was to be observed commotion and busyness. Barnacle studied this busyness with grim malevolence: though tempered, of course, with a humility proper to his station. To and fro went the populace. Yes, there was no undue conviviality as yet. The young, as was no more than to be expected in these modern times of bother and rush, were flagrant in their disregard for old standards. But the grown-ups were showing signs that they had not forgotten the old ways and the old days: and that was a comfort at least!

Another great roar went out from the populace. The public address system announced the arrival of Major Gweene. An open machine of some vintage proceeded from the distance. A flag flew on a post on the front of the machine. Proudly. The roaring was continuous now. Yes, Major Gweene was receiving the acclaim of the populace. Portly he was, and upright. The machine stopped. The Major dismounted. Stout brogues. Green stockings with flashes. Tweed breeches in brown and jacket to match: was he expecting an ambush? Head too, of course. Polished and round and red. Out of breath, maybe. Gasp, gasp. Looks round, bolts

into tent for the important ones where they don't need to bother about putting an end to the drink even though it is free.

A lady passed. The hair was ribboned in bunches. Barnacle observed - to himself, of course - that ribbons, on a person of advanced years, seldom inspire any spirit of immediate confidence in that person's propriety: but one can, of course - and as Barnacle immediately reflected - always be wrong in such matters, and sometimes quite spectacularly so.

The lady was singing to herself, Barnacle caught some words about Far Valparaiso, but that was all. From the melody, however, a judicious ear might well have presumed to suppose that's it's theme was one of carnal - and of course romantic - love. She had a determined sort of look about her, this lady. Barnacle had seen women with this sort of look before. It unsettled him, always did. Never quite knew why, mind you.

The lady stopped, her head was cocked, she was watching the dancing with an expert's eye. And then the head swivelled and stared straight like a summons at poor Barnacle in his grass. It wasn't a nice look at all, no it wasn't, though goodness knows how it knew he was there. Barnacle didn't get any smaller, right enough; but he shrank all the same. The lady walked on. Then she was hull-down and over the horizon. Barnacle stood on one leg. Then on the other. Then on the two of them at the same time but it made no difference. He was still nervous. He wished the pipers would come out of the bar and give him some company. But there was no sign of that yet, no.

Barnacle swivelled his own head in the direction of the dancing. He observed that Herself was now on the stage. And she could dance all right! The feet were flying and so was she - was it a

yard off the boards or more, and growing by the minute - and the skirts were swirling in creative abandon. The old judges were all leaning forward in dangerous amazement. Had all weight left her? All reason? Was she on something she shouldn't be on? The crowd was roaring again, and some of it howling by now. Even the judges were helping each other onto their feets in salutes, the ones at each end of the line with the sticks for braces. Herself flew weightlessly to an amazing height and floated down. Best of the day! To the victor the prize!

Major Gweene struggled forth from the free bar with the champion's cup. He presented it to Herself. She curtsied, if you don't mind! Barnacle didn't like this. You could take collaboration too far. And by goodness, it better not go any further! Now the Major was admiring her wee tee-shirt, the one with the slogans on. Herself twirled for a better look, and the Major peered closer. Then he was even speaking to Herself. And Herself was speaking back! Surely there was nothing improper being planned here! Barnacle strained forward, urgently.

But no, the day was saved. Herself was slinging on her biker's jerkin and racing away home with cup under oxter. Slowly too: so much for the high-lift cams! But that was one of them away back to the old cabin anyway. Just Finnegan and Jake to get home now: the difficult two, mind you. Barnacle took his domestic responsibilities seriously, someone in the household had to.

A young person was approaching. Barnacle knew fine it was the one they called Adeline, hadn't he seen her that very morning striding past the cabin and crying virtuous greetings to Jake? Adeline stopped. She sat down in the grass. She had an ice-cream. She was very close to Barnacle but did not see him. No,

she was alone. Barnacle observed her. Was she sad? A modern youngster in search of her natural father, perhaps? All was possible. Or could it be first love - that first and passionate love that stands alone, like Adam's recollection of his fall? Barnacle understood love, he had often heard Jake talk about its dangers. But on this occasion, he doubted it. Too fresh, too fresh by far! He continued his observation.

At the top, a black beret. She removed this beret. Then she removed a silver clasp that held her hair primly in place. Now the hair was rich and black and sleek. And Oh! so much of it! Smooth neck with ornament, how pretty all! Waistcoat black with buttons, and all quite properly within. Bootees too, with buckles. Black stocking quite properly on pretty leg, one each. And then a modest skirt.

Barnacle observed the careful way in which she reduced the ice-cream to nothingness. It was a white one, most of them are of course. She did not eat the cone, crunch perhaps being less than ladylike. She laid the cone down and leaned forward. Barnacle extended himself to maximum height. He could see quite clearly. As she leaned, she drew her knees upwards. The edge of the skirt slipped back. The stockings stopped some few inches above the knees. Then were to be seen some inches quite uncovered. Undoubtedly smooth, and of tremendously innocent aspect. She put her hands together, and slid them between her legs. It was as well that she wore no rings! A gesture of despair? Was it grief? Or was she praying, perhaps? She sighed. Then she removed her hands and pulled her knees under her pretty chin, clasping hands around the lower legs. The skirt now was most awfully short! Ought

Barnacle to disapprove? He hoped nobody would come too quickly, lest disapproval become general.

But at that moment, Adeline inclined her head and raised both arms to her neck. Legs wide for balance, and clasp refastened in a moment. Oh, such gracious abandon! She sprang upwards, seized hem of skirt and adjusted. All was order thus restored. Beret back and tilted. Off she moved, with brisk precision. Gosh, thought Barnacle. Gosh.

But who was now approaching? Major Gweene, yes, and - no, yes, it was: it was the boy Finnegan. They were in close conversation, and animated. What could this be?

The Major lowered himself into the grass, you would think he was attached to a small crane. He had a hip-flask but not at the hip. Finnegan squatted on the big trials boots. You could see the steel toecaps if you looked hard enough. They whispered, they muttered. Finnegan looked round and about, something here was in confidence. Barnacle strained forward, he had never betrayed one yet and he wasn't going to start now. Unless the boy's best interests were threatened, of course. The men shared a glug. And another one for the luck.

'Give us the bog. The greatest investment ever in the hinterlands', the Major was saying. 'A mighty plant bringing work where there was none and hope where there was less. Give us the bog and we'll get started at once'.

'It would be a sad day for the old sheep', Finnegan said, in a sorrowing tone.

'Give us the bog', the Major was saying.

'Why?', says the boy, suspicious like.

'You'll get a first-class seat, best hotels and open expenses, when you pick up the samples', says the Major in his jovial old way.

'It's not much', says the boy, ungrateful wretch that he was.

But the Major just laughed and said there was more to come. 'How about stock options, a rolling consultancy contract, as much as you want for yourself and your friends, and an open pass to the jack-up management platform complete with sauna, disco and exclusive peacock lounge and executive diner?'

'Maybe', says the boy, 'maybe not, there's been poor old sheep out on that bog there for generations'.

'Well shift them', snaps the Major, 'or we'll shoot them'.

'What if we don't?', says the boy.

'I'll get you bust', says the Major in jovial style, 'don't think I don't know what you're making in that upturned boat'.

Says Finnegan, 'By Jove, it's not me they'll be busting when they find out what you're going to be doing with the plant!'

'The bog', says the Major.

'The poor old sheep', says the boy.

'Managing director emeritus', says the Major.

'What's emeritus?', says the boy.

'You get lots of money but you don't have to do any work for it', says the Major.

'I thought it was the other way round'. says the boy.

'Not nowadays', says the Major, 'that was in the old days'.

'That'll do me fine then', says Finnegan, 'the poor old sheep will just have to move with the times like everybody else'.

'The investment culture', says the Major.

'What about the law?', says the boy.

'Enterprise knows no master', cries the Major.

‘Give us a taste’, says Finnegan.

The gentlemen glugged, and twice-glugged for the luck. My Word! thought Barnacle: what can be going on here? Finnegan and the Major headed for the free bar.

The pipers approached, carrying the judges. Then a piper began to, and Barnacle eased back. Thought he: no finer thing is there than to quaff of a morning, and then recline in the presence of old tunes from the old days, and in the grass.

It was at that point that Barnacle spotted someone crouched nearby. He was writing in a black notebook too. Barnacle thought that was funny, right enough, but he never paid much attention to it. (Afterwards, of course, he knew fine it was an important moment: but by then it was all too late).

But first it was time for the dance - Barnacle didn't go to dances, of course, hadn't been to one for years - and already it was under way and sailing well. The band was all men as far as could be seen, long hair and sunglasses, and they had handily short names in case a lady dancer wanted to speak to one of them later, say, or just get them a drink or something, maybe as a wee token of appreciation, before that later came along. One was on the drums and two on fiddles and two on boxes or whatever, after a while it began to get a bit confused an all, and sometimes they would all have a go at other instruments anyway.

By now there was a threat of dancing going on, though the dancers weren't natives but probably just visitors. And they were too, every one of them; a bus party, in fact, on a seven-day tour of the hinterlands, and all its culture and solitude. All thirty of them, in painted clogs, which wasn't a bad start to the dance: after all, you couldn't expect locals to get on a floor until - well, any normal person

knows fine that there are certain preconditions to be met in any civilised society, prior to the commencement of crazed dancing. What, after all, can the point of crazed dancing otherwise be?

And so off it went, the bus, in the first dance of the evening. And what an affair that was! Clogs were quickly whirling, and the band - recognising sober dancers - kept the thing going far longer than necessary, just out of spite, till the dancers collapsed back into their seats, sweat spouting on the men the way it does, and even the ladies looking a little on the flushed side: though perfectly composed as always.

Then the dance really got going. Vanessa was dancing alone hard up against the stage, and Bubo and Crawford - you could see them quite easily down the far end of the hall - kept themselves to themselves in a corner, while Bubo sipped in a steady way from a bottle of something he had. Of course, Crawford didn't get a shot at it, it wasn't the sort of thing that you would expect the likes of him to need at a dance or whatever anyway. But that didn't stop him getting on the floor with whoever he could drag there, and whenever he took the chance to say something, which was often, he leaned forward and waved his arms and seemed to talk at enormous speed. The ladies of the bus - some people said these visitors were from Hussaria, a small and turbulent land which had been in the news recently: but no one was too sure - watched Crawford with earnest appreciation, and clamoured for his company as dancing-master.

Once, even, he suggested to Vanessa that she dance with him too; but Vanessa arched and hissed and flashed her claws and Crawford backed away quickly, waving the arms as usual. Vanessa continued to dance alone right up against the stage, quite oblivious to the boys in the band.

Then Finnegan wandered round the perimeter of the hall, and up at the stage Vanessa spoke to him.

‘I would like to speak with you’, said she.

‘I haven’t the time to sleep with you the now’, says the boy, ‘at all’.

Maybe when you do, thought Vanessa.

Maybe when I do too, thought Finnegan, though there’s plenty of it here.

‘But I have’, added the boy, ‘important discussions to conclude by the morrow’: and at that he went away to the other end of the hall, and got a good glug in a glass with Gweene.

At the first half-time the boys stopped playing and went to the band-room for a lemonade, maybe, but they must have noticed Vanessa by then, for one of them knelt on the edge of the stage and spoke to her quite urgently, and then Vanessa went away with them. Perhaps it was an pre-interview situation. After a while most of the band came back but Vanessa did not. No, and she wasn’t alone in that.

It was towards the end of the dance, when there was hardly room to move on the floor, that a stranger made his way into the hall: and Herself - as those in her proximity could attest afterwards if ever asked - shrieked with what, quite obviously, could only have been amazement and joy.

Certainly, this newcomer made a handsome entrance, no doubt about it. Looking at him from the bottom, he wore cavalry boots with prominent but perfectly respectable heels and spurs of the sort which jangle prettily in any sort of locomotion. These boots came to well above the knee, as is the way of such things. Into them were tucked breeches of brushed kid, gathered with a military

buckle and belt, and from which was suspended a short sword of the type that gentlemen wear to a certain class of society ball. Then came a tunic of the finest stuff, with ruffs, and above it a jacket of scarlet and gold. On this jacket were numerous medals; and on the head, above the moustaches (there was no beard) and dreadnought eyes, a tricorn helmet of polished bronze: with plumes.

‘Jesus’, thought Finnegan, ‘them’s no just eagles, I’ll have to start thinking about cutting back on the old black pot’.

Major Gweene leaned forward urgently. ‘Are you out of it?’, says he.

‘I’ll be okay in a minute’, says the boy, ‘it’s okay now’.

The military newcomer surveyed the still and silent scene (even the band had stopped, and the boys were open-mouthed in wonder). But then the newcomer espied Herself and marched upon her, all a-jangle: and Oh!, but Herself was all a-tremble at this!

He doffs at the hinge, flaunce plumes an all, and ever so low! And then in a sort of accent - it would be a good sort of accent, certainly, because he looked a well-spoken sort of man - cried, ‘My darling Herself, your Adolpho has returned. Players of the band! I command you: that gracious old air, Carlin of the Mill Dust’.

Herself stood up: after all these years, and he hadn’t forgotten! She had the bike boots on as usual, and to the waist the leathers. But the jerkin was off, you could see her tight wee tee-shirt, it’s no wonder people were never just quite sure about the age of her, no; nor the tastes and opinions either. On the front, it was all red and blue banners and the words - support great powers! But on the back, black flames leapt angry and curled - or we’ll burn your huts to fucken dust!

‘My darling Hussar’, gasped Herself, ‘has returned!’: and the whole place gasped as well, except Finnegan, who didn’t have the nerve for it. What was Jake going to make of this now?

With a gigantic flourish and even deeper bow, the Hussar dashed forth a handkerchief of hand-reared silk, and led his lady onto the empty floor: the silk - as was obvious to all people of taste there that night - to protect the perfection and innocence of her hand from the gore and stainful sin of his. And in his other hand, had he a magic wand.

At first they danced in careful circles, in and out, crossing and re-crossing, and changing and exchanging places, but when Adolpho flourished his wand over the head of Herself, she fell down as if dead at his feet. Adolpho - grieving for his dead carlin - danced slowly round her body, and then lifted her left hand and peered into its palm. He breathed into it, and stroked it with his wand, and the limp, dead hand at once came to life. Adolpho danced, rejoicing, round the figure on the floor, and with his wand restored to life the other limbs.

Then Adolpho knelt urgently and bent over Herself, breathing - in a spirit of passion that the dance did not, strictly speaking, require - into her mouth, very close indeed people couldn’t help noticing, and touching her heart with his hand, he never bothered with the wand, as he did so. Herself at once sprang to life, and leapt up to confront him: at which they both danced vigorously, as in the first part of the affair. The whole was repeated four times, each dancer taking the part of the inert figure in turn; and the lot was capped with a jig-time performance signifying particular and very especial joy.

When they had finished, Herself, quite flushed, asked, 'Are you again in exile from your native land?'

'My translations of Byron', said he. 'I am at present engaged as a kitchen-porter in Oban'.

'They say the riots are getting bad down there'.

'Yes, there is growing resistance to the naval invasion!'

And then the Hussar added, in a low and sudden tone, 'Are you married yet?'

Said she, 'I have a sort of partner, yes, I suppose'.

'And where is he now?'

'I was wondering that myself'.

'Open relationships are all the rage on the mainland of Europe'.

'I thought you were in Oban'.

'In Oban too'.

'Yes, it's much the same here, you better come down for a dram later'.

'Perhaps we can go somewhere else first of all'.

The band was finished playing and all the boys were in a circle with Vanessa at its centre, they'd put you in mind of stockbrokers with weekend farming interests at the trough. The bus party had gone or was going. It was time to go.

Outside the hall, some light was handily radiating, what else, round a corner. You could see Finnegan, the two feathers bold in the bonnet and the good trials boots with buckles, though it wasn't so easy to see what the plus-twos was up to at all. He had Adeline pinned down over the dyke. Her dress was pinned up over her waist. Those parts of her uncovered legs significantly above the knee and thereby visible to the naked eye were marvellously white.

She was crying in tones of decorous pity, 'Oh, leave me alone, I beg of you', and otherwise being sick.

Finnegan had a bottle of something in one hand, but the other was holding her courteously in place.

'We'll be having a good drink afterwards', he was saying smoothly, 'you'll maybe like that better'.

Adeline stopped squealing, and Finnegan took a grand swig. Yes, it was the end of the dance.