

3. Hatching the Plan.

Jake was telling a story. An angel with a trumpet filled that part of the evil sky which was not occupied at present by storm-tossed wrack. The broken-backed barque pitched her shattered spars among the jagged rocks. Crazy seamen fought like striped rats on the starveling beach for a barrel of rum. On the wave-lashed poop, a choir of women and children was singing lusty hymns.

'Fire that whisky over', said Finnegan, not wanting to divert the narrative with undue movement.

'Over what?', said Jake.

'Over here', said the boy.

Jake put the point of the 'poon on the bottle's base, and it handed slidily. Finnegan killed the inch in a go, and tried a bar or two. The ladies inclined, yes, the boy had the powers of the gift not granted to most. Soft Finnegan tried a softer key, and the ladies inclined some more.

The evening was long under way. The dance was longer finished. It had been a clear night on the walk down, but spits. A breeze was trying out the muscles too. There was wind on the way and the glass going down like a diver. But everyone had come and there they were, the feets of them dancing. Bus party of tourists at the back, and in front of them the boys from the band, along with a few pipers and Vanessa and her colleagues from the mediums. And then, flanked by piping judges, a radiant Adeline with stockings at ankle, as if she had recently enjoyed a bracing game of ladies' football. That was the background.

In the foreground, star-lit, was Finnegan, on form and warming: Major Gweene asleep in the principal chair; and centre-

framed Jake on the upturned scuttle, surround by bottles and not long from another sensation. The fire of the morning was blazing by now, and by some trick of its light the lady who had visited the Games earlier in ribbons and bunches was also to be observed, towards the right side of this canvas and comporting herself with a style of the most estimable serenity. There was, however, no sign of Herself, who had yet to return from the dance. Nor, indeed, had the Hussar come back from the dance either, despite a fulsome invitation from Finnegan to that effect; but as no one had as yet noticed their absence, there was, as yet, no question of that small-minded species of corrosive suspicion that is so often destructive of carelessly gallant trust.

‘Are you going to finish your story?’, said Finnegan.

‘It’s finished’, said Jake, ‘for the moment’.

‘How do you know’, wondered the boy.

‘You are not a story-teller’, said Jake, ‘and give us a song someone’.

At this Helena - for it was she - stepped forward; and when she had positioned herself exactly in the centre of the company, having first cautioned Jake to move some inches on his scuttle, and bowed all the way round the generous house, from pit to gallery, began to sing an old song about love; from which the following is a decorous extract -

- the pier light dance,
the light house glance,
and oh, but she is mine!
I’ll hold her tight
All through this night:

Until it's sailing time!

- and when she had finished, and despite the startlingly explicit detail of some of the later verses, the applause was tumultuous. Ignoring a furious look from Helena, Jake had risen on his scuttle at the start of the song, and conducted lustily with the 'poon; and by the last verse everyone was singing along with Helena, although terrible weeping was going on as well. An old piping judge dabbed at the ducts with a corner of tartan.

But there was no time to reminisce or grieve for there were more songs to come, that's just the way it was in the old days when drink was about. So Jake gave them a temperance shanty from his days at the whaling, and then one of the Hussarian ladies from the bus gave them a lament about mandolins and wild flowers, and even Major Gweene gave them a romantic ballad from his old army days, though he didn't finish it off all the way as some of the ladies were getting a little bit embarrassed at the way it seemed to be going.

And then that was enough songs, for the moment anyway, and Finnegan approached. He was showing a wee nurse with golden curls and a few freckles how to blow a tune across the neck of a bottle. Adeline and Vanessa, who were in opposite corners of the room, looked on furiously.

'So who's the wee bird?', asked Jake after a while.

'She's a wee bird called Alex', said the boy.

Piped the curls, 'It's short for Alexandrine, Mr. Jacob'.

Jake said, 'She's very pretty'.

'I never noticed', said the boy.

'She'll be with the band', says Jake.

‘I wouldn’t bet on that now’, says the boy.

Finnegan then announced that he was going to the laboratory for a moment or two. He took the boys in the band with him, and Wee Alex asked if she could go too. When he heard this, Major Gweene woke up at once and went as well. So did the pipers. None of them returned. Endless ages passed. Crazy piping was heard from the distance. Adeline and Vanessa fought in a spirit of girlish comradeship. Everyone moved back to give them space, they needed a good bit with all the rolling about.

Jake didn’t think it proper to take sides, but he noticed Adeline gave a good account of herself. When the girls had no more strength, they stopped and licked their wounds. Then they went to sleep; but each soon awoke and sprang to the firing step, for fear of night attack. Members of the bus party were dancing reels, arm and arm and heel and toe, round and round and round we go!

The day came in and the fire went back. When the music paused in the laboratory you could hear the storm howling. Suddenly, Herself was there. She had been tossed by the storm. But who was this that was with her?

‘Where do you think you have been?’, asked Jake.

‘Motorcycling into the stormy dawn’, said she, as cool as you like.

‘Who’s that fellow standing there beside you?’, said Jake.

‘This is Adolpho’, said she, quite breathless, ‘he is from Hussaria’.

‘You’re a long way from home’. said Jake, ‘you better come in to the fire’.

Herself went forthwith to her pots, and the Hussar picked his way through the fallen of the night. Jake drew the scuttle close to the hearth, and gave it to the stranger.

‘What do you think of Byron as a poet?’, said the Hussar as soon as he got his breath back.

‘We’ve all run away in our young days’, said Jake cautiously. ‘I nearly did it myself’.

A suspicious stranger came into the room. Jake felt uneasy, not for the first time that night either. Gracious, it couldn’t be! But it was. The boy Finnegan! But not the old one. No. Trials boots and buckles, yes. But a striped suit with waistcoat, and a flower in it. Feathers all gone. And a shirt. A tie, even. Major Gweene’s, from the old regiment.

‘Adieu, adieu!’, cried the boy; if the boy should it be.

‘Are you coming back at all?’ wondered Jake.

‘There is no further time to waste’, cried Finnegan. ‘I must seek out my fortune in the great universe of free enterprise. Peter and George are on standby in the Capital, and they won’t want to keep me waiting. Adieu, adieu!’

And with that, like his proud feathers, was he gone. And Major Gweene went with him.

And then everyone had gone. The day crept in, and the day ebbed out. It was getting dark again. It would be the evening by now. Jake and Herself sat at the coldening fire while it gathered. The cabin lurched gently, and settled an inch. But they were used to it, she had been settling for a good while now, and there was still a long way to go anyway.

‘So that’s just the two of us left’.

‘Yes’.

'What about your Hussar?'

'Gone'.

'Is he coming back?'

'Definitely not. And your singing friend?'

'Gone too'.

'Will she be coming back?'

'My heart lies with you alone'.

'She's not much of a singer anyway'.

'How do you know?'

'You can tell by the look of her'.

'I have a feeling they will all be back sooner or later'.

There was quite a long pause at this point, suspicion is a corrosive thing altogether.

'It's getting dark'.

'The mouth of it'.

'Where's the boy gone now?'

'To get samples of stuff'.

'What stuff?'

'It's best you don't know'.

'And who is this Peter and George anyway?'

'Friends of Gweene'.

'They're up to something'.

'A big plant on the bog'.

'How big?'

'Five big lines when they're up to speed'.

'Are you sure it's legal?'

'Enterprise knows no master, they tell me'.

Another pause now, it was getting darker by the moment, the black settling up there in the dust at the back of the clock, and you

could hear the gale's muscles stretching themselves up and down in the chimney.

- 'Yes, it will be big, all right', says Jake when the muscles goes quiet. 'They're talking about three ships a week, and that's just for the Charlie line. There will be other stuff made on-site, the same as the boy makes in the laboratory'.

'Will it make you see things?'

'That's what it's for anyway'.

'Well, it's a pity about the poor old sheep'.

'Yes, the old bog will never be the same again'.

'I suppose we must all move with the times'.

'Oh yes'.

Another pause now, the paws of the wind you could hear battering through the shaws and into the trees, the old raven would be up there himself, that is where he always was when the weather was poor, just thinking: and waiting and waiting and waiting.

'Have you come down yet?'

'Nearly, but a good drop of whisky would help'.

'There's a half-bottle in the cap of the dungheap'.

'I wondered where it went right enough'.

Another moment's peace. They crept in closer to the fire, it was just about dead and gone now. Jake gave it a rake with the 'poon, no more than a handful of glows left in her.

'Have you heard anything of Barnacle?'

'Not since yesterday, he was never very keen on strangers about the place'.

'So there's just the two of us left'.

'Yes'.

'Maybe we should get married'.

'Who would have us now?'

'Bed then'.

'Yes'.

'We never saw your police yet'.

'No, we didn't'.

'Not yet anyway'.

'Bed then'.

'Bed'

'And the half-bottle'.

And thus was the mighty plant conceived, and launched upon
its mighty bog.