

## 5. The Samples Arrive.

Jake woke. He pretended to be dead but nobody was complaining. There was no wailing nor intimate examination of body parts. He opened them. All quiet. Herself had gone. But where? It was surely the last half-bottle to blame, had she put something in it that shouldn't be there? You could never tell nowadays. Up, then. Shirt and boots and the 'poon good and handy in case of anything. The fire was black. He belted the ashes from the window, a man at peace in his own good house.

The paper there was all full of the riots down Oban way, they were showing signs of spreading elsewhere too. People didn't like the way things were working-out in far Hussaria, where the trouble - to tell the truth - was going from bad to worse. So they were rioting now, a lot of the people down Oban way, and saying things like Hussaria had every right to do what it wanted. Well, the neighbouring great power didn't like this sort of agitation, of course, especially when it was the rights of small nations like Hussaria that were involved. Even if it was far away: you never could be sure, but that sort of agitation could come a lot closer to home before you knew it.

So a new battalion of volunteers had come up by sea to help keep the agitation within the bounds of proper constitutional debate, and reinforcements were on the way up the motorway, the governing authorities were going to let them through in case stopping them would cause any trouble and they didn't have anything to stop them with anyway. Indeed, that was what started the riots. The people were agitating and had started to riot, so the governing authorities just started a rising of their own: a perfectly constitutional affair, in full support of the constitutional authority. There was the rising in

Hussaria as well, of course, though it wasn't the same sort of rising there at all. There, it was a rising against the neighbouring great power. But here, it was a rising in support of the neighbouring great power! Yes, it was all very confusing.

Jake made a wigwam and put her going, then he sat there for a while till the heat got into him, but there was nothing to do. Where had Herself gone? Was she away for a spin on the bike? She was keener than ever on it, these past few days, the bike. Up and down the road all day long, while scarf hurled wild in the breeze, and the goggles glinted in a way that would make you uneasy. Was she going in for the Six Days or something, didn't just madness get hold of them all after a certain age? The ashes whirled away on the morning gale. Jake put on some more clothes. He thought of Barnacle, a stab at the heart. He would maybe have a look later. But there wasn't much hope now.

In the laboratory, Finnegan's bucket was still in its place, and all the instruments around the pot. Jake secured the door and took up position at the boy's belvedere. He studied the countryside for a long time. It would be a bad day when the great plant came, but that was progress for you! Surely the old cabin wouldn't get in the way? He felt sad. The place just wasn't the same with nobody there but himself.

Yes, it was a sad way the world was going, nobody in the same place now for more than a few days at a time. And there hadn't been anything in the post for a few days either.

Was it time for a taste yet? Maybe not. A walk down by the shore first, then, there might be a vessel in distress. The gale was howling bad now, the trees bent over and flapping and the rain coming sideways. He put the flaps down and took a good turn, and carried on. Black skid-marks stained the road though whatever it was, it

surely wasn't the sheep. A set of evil goggles came up in the thoughts and went away at high speed. The road stopped, now it was just a path. Some grass and then the sand. Beyond that, black wrack was scattered and torn, and beyond that again the fearful ocean.

He went away into the rocks and sat for a while watching it. Far out, the three masts of a vessel were staggering, all at the same time though, it wasn't so serious. A fore-topsail was backed, a few hands could be spotted on the yards at the reefs, they would heave her to any minute now. One of them big yachts that went about in the summer, it was late in the year for her. A big wave rose and broke with a terrible noise and galloped up the rocks, and firing a timber barrel far onto the beach. Jake took a look at it, just for old times sake. It was empty. He checked the turbulent sky: but of angels, it also was empty.

He went back to the laboratory. The old raven was perched on top of it. It just watched him coming and then went away with a bark. It was a gloomy moment. He took a taste, and then another good belter of the stuff. Well, that was it done. No going back now. We'll just sit in the quiet and wait for the coming.

Finnegan's hide, the boy had taken up astronomy in the days of his infancy, was up there at the back of the potatoes. Jake went into it. He looked down on the old cabin. Yes, it was sinking right enough, foundations were never securely built on a bog. It was getting harder and harder to get in at the door, unless on your knees, any day now the thatch would be down at the level of the grass.

He wondered about the poor hands on the fore-top, out there on the stormy ocean. Maybe they were down below now, a responsible tumbler or two in the focsle, but a man aloft and a boat in the davits for fear of a blow and an all-hands cry for the last kill of the season

and the rum-crazed captain bawling into the teeth of it, haul her up boys, three years of this is enough, and it's away bound for our loving and distant homes that we are, not counting the party that we're going to have for a few months somewhere before we get there!

Was the stuff coming in? Had he taken enough? Had he taken far too much? It couldn't be long now, was the time beginning to slip and to slide? Oh yes, there was something going on here all right!

The potatoes were arranged in a regular patch, just the way they usually are, no need for fancy patterns, just ordinary rows in a long square. But there was movement, now, and strange lights in the shade of the shaws. The sky was filled with angels, making music. The potatoes began to dance. They formed circles and whirled round with wild cries. Pipers and lesser musicians on the rim of the patch added their great sounds to the brass from above, and then the angels were gone and a perfectly normal stretch of potatoes was going about its normal business. By Jove, thought Jake to himself. That didn't take long!

In some distance, not very far from the infinite, a strange fluting was to be heard, a series of harsh, high notes, repeated twice, and then silence. It wasn't fluting though, it was bugling. For a second Jake thought - but no! There was no more bugling to be heard. Instead, there was a motorbike, going hard and revved to the limit. The timing was sharp, maybe just a fraction too sharp, and someone had been at the baffles. Perhaps it was Herself back. Oh yes, it was maybe time to get inside, and take good care to make sure that she didn't guess there was anything going on. When he came down a bit, he would maybe take a walk to the post-office, maybe there would be a letter or something there for him. But he would need an excuse first, and he couldn't think of one. Maybe she would send him for a half-

bottle, there was an idea now - though not a very good one, when you thought about it.

He stayed in the hide, just to be sure. And it wasn't Herself at the throttles either. There were two of them, big white jobs with fairings. And blue lights and all. Leather coats too, and flying helmets, with badges. The coats went straight to the laboratory and banged. Nothing doing, no reply at all. In they went. The blue lights were whirling.

More rushing now, and a black car with smoked windows came to a stylish pause in a wide handbrake turn, the death's head pennant near broke its neck up on the bonnet with surprise. Evil guards sprang from the running boards and adopted a defensive posture around the gleaming machine. A door opened, one of them ones that open backwards, and out came a figure in tailored breeches and black knee-boots, and up the top end a flying jacket and silken scarf, and what looked like a shiny military medal at gentle throat. The black boots surveyed the still and silent scene in an imperious way, and then they swept aside their black peaked cap with silver badge.

Oh Gracious! wasn't there a cascade of golden curls - and freckles too! It couldn't be! It was! It was!! Yes, it was Wee Alex - and her in the cops all the time and never the nursing at all!

Wee Alex had a wee whip, one of them ones you just show the prisoners at the last jump maybe, and she was flicking it in a testy way on the side of her boot. The blue lights were still flash-flash-flashing, but the death's head pennant had gone quiet and still, maybe for fear of what was going to happen next.

Then the two motorcyclists made their way from the laboratory. They were looking extremely serious.

Says one of them, 'They've gone'.

Says the second, 'That was Herself on the bike we passed earlier on the Oban road'.

Says the first, 'Will we take the evidence now'?

But Wee Alex says no, boys, just leave it as it is, there will be a lot more evidence when we come back next.

And she adds, 'I think we better have some more close surveillance first of all, I'll take charge of it myself'.

Oh Finnegan boy, Jake was thinking, how are you going to get out of this now? He melted away backwards into the trees at the back of the hide, and soon was away out of it and gone. The boys in the leather coats were still at the back of the old cabin, and Wee Alex and guards too.

In a tone of authority, you could hear Wee Alex roaring, 'Mr Jacob, come out at once with your family and valuables and you will not be harmed!'

But there was just a terrible silence in reply. Then Wee Alex and the guards and the coats on the bikes revved up, and went away, the lot of them. It was all quiet once more. Quite soon afterwards, the potatoes began to dance again. Or maybe, of course, it was just the wind.

Finnegan, meanwhile, was arriving in the Capital itself, and just as soon as he had given a wee message to Major Gweene's brother in Customs from the insides of old Jake's old seabag, and got out into the front and got the money into the hole, he cried in an impatient tone to the lass at the far end: 'Get me Peter at once or we'll soon teach you the meaning of enterprise culture!'

But the girl's job was safe for the meantime, for almost at once Peter was purring, 'My dear Finnegan! The big black car's on the way and did you get the samples through?'

Finnegan said that he had, and plenty of the stuff too, there would maybe be some to spare and not for wasting all of it on the Boards.

‘And how’s yourself anyway and George too? Are you both well up to the fore?’, shouts the boy.

They were well up, Peter said, and everything was go. The Boards would meet on the morrow, it would all be through on the nod, just as soon as they had tested the stuff themselves, of course.

‘And in view of the major significance of the investment’, said Peter, ‘in respect of its cultural, social and economic dimensions, there is to be a dinner party tomorrow night in your honour with the governing authorities, they’ll be putting up half the money and taking all the risk’.

‘That’s fine by me’, said the boy. ‘We’re having the dinner parties at home all the time. Herself’s got a fearful collection of plates that she keeps for the visitors. Tell me this now, was there anything in the post for me?’

‘A package’, said Peter, ‘marked personal’.

‘It was lucky to get out’, says the boy, ‘the way the riots is spreading, just you keep it the now and we’ll have some fun later on’.

It took the boy and the seabag a while to get out of the box, it was one of them ones with the funny doors that come in the way and not out the way, you wouldn’t want to be in there and a fire going on, unless you were wearing the right gear and a good oxygen-job before you went in.

The motor car was a long sort of a one and Finnegan just left the driving to the driver.

‘What time do the bars shut down here?’, shouted the boy, sliding the glass.

‘Is it just the drink you’re into pal?’, said the driver in his shiny skip and wraparound shades, twisting himself round. A perambulator went flying over the distinguished bonnet. It was a yellow one. The driver said a bad word. There was a knowing sort of look on him.

Finnegan was thoughtful. There was more to this banking than you might think. ‘I’ll maybe give you a shout later on’, said he: and with that they had arrived at the headquarters.

Where was Peter? The big office was empty. There was a bicycle without wheels in the corner, maybe he was mending it. A tremendous table and good-size press at the end, but no drink to be seen. There was a report on the table, from the research department it said, it was on the projected demand for fortified recreational snacks. And then there was another one too, it was on the Asiatic hard-currency market for dried fish. A gigantic telescope on a timber tripod stood at the window. This was more like it, thought the boy, remembering the astronomy days. He took a look. What a magnification! Three young ladies in red and white ties sprang into close and intimate view. They were lunching in the gardens below, and disporting themselves in the sunshine, maybe a good half-mile away, though you would think they were just next door, they looked that close. Wasn’t it a fine thing to observe one’s fellow creatures in their natural environment! It quite put Finnegan in mind of the old astronomy days, right enough.

A man came in and had a quick go on the bike. Then he was starting to have a good look down the gardens with the ‘scope when he remembered seeing Finnegan there, in the big seat at the end of the table with the best trials boots up on the top of it.

'Finnegan my boy', cried he, 'it's Peter. Where are the samples? We'll need them for the Boards in the morning, just before we get the green light for the go'.

Finnegan opened the seabag and showed the samples to Peter, and the men had a quick taste themselves, just to make sure that everything was fine. But where was George?

'He'll be down the pub', said Peter having another burst on the bike, very fast this time. 'We'd better get down there now before he gets too far ahead of us'.

They found themselves walking through mean streets, it was a short way. Peter stooped for a coin and spat. Copper, but still. Finnegan felt thirsty.

'Look after the pennies', said Peter, 'my boy', pocketing, 'and the shareholders can look after themselves'.

My, my, thought Finnegan.

They strode onwards, purposeful. But a bearded ancient with a glittering eye lay across the pavement with an air of supreme insolence. He had, it could be observed, been juggling most recently with three bottles of whisky, from which the caps were quite clearly missing.

Spoke the ancient, 'Give us a pound you bastards or I will put a curse on you'.

'Now look here professor', said Peter, 'there is no need for that sort of language and your last predictions were all wrong anyway'.

'What's he a professor of?', wondered the boy.

'Mathematics', said the banker primly with a sniff, 'but not so good at the counting'.

Finnegan stiffened. 'What kind of mathematics?', demanded he.

‘Pure’, said the insolent old man, ‘and do you expect me to lie here and die of thirst?’

‘How pure?’, snapped the boy.

‘Best of stuff’, snivelled the old man.

‘And this is what is has brought you to’, observed Finnegan in a caring tone.

‘Yes, I wish I had done welding’, the old man said, beginning to weep into his beard.

‘Have this shiny new copper’, Peter said tenderly, ‘and if you invest it wisely it may bring a reversal in your fortunes’.

‘My fortune is one that you will never begin to match’, the old man said with dignity, and not in any way grateful, no, nor deferential either.

But onwards they strode, sweeping populace apart. ‘Responsible charity becomes us all’, said Peter sadly, ‘though it is not good business. I will put it on expenses’.

George was in the bar, with a barmaid on each knee, and singing. But he stopped when the boys came in and came over. A long period passed and Finnegan wondered if maybe it was up to him to buy the drinks. But luckily, who should come in at that moment but the old professor, who summoned a round of tumblers on credit: whereupon the bankers fell to a theoretical discussion, in which the bearded old mathematician and Finnegan joined with enthusiasm.

‘So it’s the green light the morn’, George was saying after a while. ‘Peter and me will go twenty-five apiece, and the governing authorities will underwrite us and go the other half themselves. Co-operation is a grand thing when you can’t lose and there’s a lot to win’.

‘He’s one of the top men in the job apart from me’, said Peter to Finnegan in a private moment. ‘And you should hear him singing too’.

Much time passed. Gas lamps flickered in each of the dens to which their discussions led them. In each den, the old professor told fortunes and sold, to those he importuned, their hearts' desires: and on each occasion returned with the price of a handsome round. As this drink went down, the dens became meaner and meaner in aspect. In dark corners, rough elements in need of a wash presumed to discuss the finer points of national literature in a tone that was quite clearly irresponsible. Vicious and truculent creatures - for whom no sensible constitutional settlement would ever be enough - discussed national history in a clear spirit of small-minded and obsessive spite.

But who was caring? The old professor was enthused by possibilities. What about a retraining grant and an offshore job onshore in Kazakhstan? George wasn't sure about this, no nor Peter, state intervention in these things had a bad record. What about a loan instead? The old professor agreed heartily, there was nothing like shaking about outdated structures and freeing everything up in a new age of labour mobility. Nobody deserved a job for life any more.

Peter and George looked worried for a moment. But it was all right, they had just remembered the severance contracts and all.

Said George in a confidential tone to the boy, 'Did you get the samples all right?'

Finnegan said that he had got them.

'Have you got some on you?', wondered George.

'Get another round in if you have any money left', cried Peter to the professor, and the three men and Jake's old seabag went to the toilet.

It was small, but adequate to their purposes, though it wasn't so easy to close the door. For a brief moment, Finnegan felt awfully sad and thought of poor Barnacle. And how was Jake? It seemed a long

way from the fireside now. But this was modern times, and he was in at the top.. with the top men too. Peter dabbled and fingered the gums, then George too in case there was any cheating going on, you can't be too careful at the top end in business. For a moment, they were going to argue about something, but someone came in with a crash and noisily tried their door. The someone said something muffled and rattled the door again. Finnegan raised himself on the pan for a peek. Jeez, a cap with checks was to be seen: and very close! And there was another one too, with its back turned and hunched. A dog snarled and snuffled at the foot of the door. Peter and George were breathless with excitement, and perfectly motionless.

The someone said, 'Are you going to be in there all night?'

'No, we'll all be out in a wee minute or two', Finnegan said.

There was a gloomy but thoroughly modern silence and the two checked caps went away with their snuffling hound. Finnegan stretched for a look: yes, they had taken their dog, that was a lucky move. You would hope it was just a co-incidence.

Refreshed, the gentlemen returned to their drinks. Finnegan thought again of Barnacle. There was a picture-box in the corner, high up, at the back of a protective grille which wasn't much more than a waste of money, the way the seats and the tables were bolted to the floor.

But what was this?! Oh, oh, Gracious me, it was Barnacle! A high general view panned across a field of multitudes. Dancers leapt on stages and away behind them was a piping platform. Yes, there he was, bold and forlorn at the same time, with that comforting old style of grim malevolence. It was Barnacle, all right, a black spot in the grass, but perfectly discernible. A young person, with an ice

cream and limbs, was stretched somewhat improperly in the close vicinity. Oh Adeline! Then she was gone. But it got worse now. The one with the elbows was talking right at the bar, it was lucky nobody could hear her. Yes, it was the one they called Vanessa. And then, Heavens, who was this but Jake himself, holding on to the 'poon for balance. He was on something too, by the look of him, and not just the drink.

'Who is that old cove with the harpoon?', George asked.

Finnegan thought with tremendous speed. 'That'll be an indolent native of the sort that Major Gweene and ourselves want to improve whether they like it or not', he said.

Peter was grinding his teeth in thought, but stopped for a moment.

'Where is Gweene anyway?'

'On remand', said George in a private aside, 'but I can tell you in confidence that they're letting him out to head-up the Constitutional Rising'.

'What rising?', says Peter, 'nobody told me about it'.

George says, 'Our neighbouring great power is very worried that all this agitation and rioting about the rights of Hussaria might get out of hand. So they are going to set-up a Constitutional Rising to keep things in order. As you know, the rights of small nations are quite properly limited to small things'.

'And what', says Peter, 'are our own governing authorities going to say to this?'

'It has nothing to do with them', says George sternly, 'and they will do what they're told. Foreign and military affairs are reserved matters. If our neighbouring great power wants to organise a

Constitutional Rising here, in defence of arrangements that are settled for all time, then it is perfectly within its rights to do so'.

'Well', says Peter, 'I hope it doesn't get in the way of the plant'.

Finnegan listened to all this in amazement, but thought it better to say not very much, so he said nothing at all, just to be on the safe side. The men then spoke for several hours. Then they were brutally thrown out.

Yes, they had reached the fabled middle of the night. It was at last throwing-out time, so they left the old professor where he had been thrown, it would save him having to walk all the way back to his usual bit of pavement anyway. It was time to do something else. Or perhaps some more of the samples if there was any left? What about taunting a beggar into a fight, and then summoning the constabulary? But there were no beggars to be found, it was no wonder all the five-stars were booked-out nowadays and keeping the business delegations out of their beds.

Then George had an idea. Says he, 'We will go down to my office and do some more testing of the stuff'.

Peter and George said at the same time, 'You better phone your wife first of all': and the three men proceeded at once to George's office. It looked out onto a big square, with lots of men with swords, sitting on top of lots of horses, that's just the way it is in the Capital, one man, one horse, though they don't always have a sword, of course.

'Where are you supposed to be tonight anyway?', says George to the boy.

'With a bird called Adeline', says Finnegan, easing back the 'garry and feathers, 'but I'll see her tomorrow after the big dinner party unless there's anything better going on'.

The bankers then phoned their wives and argued for a while, even though they were entertaining an important client: and then they got on with testing the samples that was meant for the Boards in the morning.

And after a while, there was just one question left: how much of the samples, if any at all of the samples, would be left for the Boards in that morning so shortly to come?