

6. Three Wee Cousins.

Whizz was what bikes was all about, no whizz and you might as well be still at the pedals. An early start then, darkness still creeping about the place and putting you in fear of death, if that was the sort of thing you were normally afraid of. A quick look round, oh yes, the old cabin was sinking fast, the bottom edge of the window was right down now to the pile of ashes outside it. But all was safely still and the last half-bottle had a lot to be thanked for!

Quiet push for a while then, well-oiled chain purr purr purring on the sprocket: and then an old-style jump-start in second and off it was go - a slam down and full gun, then up and up and up, and down again, and down, right up on the red line, the exhaust roar shaking the morning sheep of their foundations, the sparks flying from the rests, the springs diving full-travel and back as Herself fired the weight from left to starboard and slam-wham-bammed the bike flat-out down through the first series of tight reverse-camber bends and onto the first straight that led away to freedom: and it always looked faster through the goggles, the way they closed-in the vision and dragged away at the sides of the eyes, till you slowed and you slowed by proper degrees, to a moderate sort of touring speed, and whizzed on for wherever at not much more than a hundred.

There were, if that was the sort of thing you cared to notice in general, or were an enthusiast for touring motorcycles in particular, a pair of saddlebags strung over the pillion, of the type carried by those youthful couples who eloped in the days before modernity, or by those who sometimes go sedately camping by motorcycle during the summer months, or even stay in the cheaper sort of hotel, if one can be found to take you in: for motor-cycling leathers and

saddlebags are not, to the commoner sort of establishment, or indeed any sort, always a recommendation.

Herself stopped for a fag and single-hand rolled it. It was a bright-bonny morning, the mist rising and the sun thinking of trying out a shine. Other sportsmen could be heard in the distance. They were coming closer. Two motorcyclists pelted past. They were white, the bikes, with flashing lights. The timing was certainly out on them, a fraction but still. The drivers wore leather coats and flying bonnets, the sides of them probably well tied-down. Behind, and rushing, came an ominous black car with smoked windows. At the upper end of its prestigious radiator grille was to be observed a death's head pennant, and guards were crouched on the running boards.

By Jove, that looked like trouble for someone! A tadge of paint seemed in order, so Herself had a dab from the souvenir cosmetics case, just for the general levels of confidence and esteem. Then she drove on. Quite soon she was approaching Oban. The first anti-riot road-block was easy seen, a few oil-drums had been lumbered into a baby's chicane, and she took it at well over the ton and climbing, and tumbling insurgents as she went through. The second one was faster, and nearly as easy.

The town looked quiet at first. But a warship was lying off the south end, at the moorings, and small barges were working back and forwards. The usual big ferry was well up the beach, they had maybe tried a ram and missed, they'd need a big tide now to get her off. At the far end of the town some smoke was to be observed, it was not apparent just what it was doing there. Then came the sound of commotion, perhaps even of small arms fire, a tumult of drums and voices anyway. Herself free-wheeled down to the

roundabout where armed men were stopping the traffic and asking questions.

‘I have come down to see my boyfriend’, said she, ‘he is thinking of jacking it in here and going offshore to work onshore in Kazakhstan, labour mobility is all the thing nowadays’.

‘Smart bike, mate’, a soldier said; and she was waved onwards, while the soldier cranked furiously at a field telephone.

She went in the front door, just the way you normally would, and asked at reception, where was her boyfriend, the one they called Adolpho that was thinking of going off to the onshore rigs. The girl at the desk said meekly that he was maybe up the stair in the upper garret where he stayed when he wasn’t in the lower kitchen sub-basement or over the road in the bar: but there was no sign of him up there.

But it was his hutch, all right, and he had been there very recently. A copy of his most recent translations lay open on the narrow cot. It was evident to a discerning eye that it had in the near past been most extensively drenched in salt, salt tears. The dress uniform was gone, except for a single plume from the bronze tricorn: perhaps there had been a struggle in which the noble feather had been cruelly broken? And on an upturned box, which bore the embossed warning that thieves would be prosecuted, was to be seen, before a small portion of mirror, a brass saucer engraved with jungle scenes, and in which the stump of a candle was struggling to remain alight. Even as Herself watched, it died and its spirit departed. She thought she heard a dreadful shriek close at hand: but it was not prolonged and was, indeed, gone in an instant.

She returned to reception. The girl there gave a terrible look at two men lounging in chairs at the far end of the desk. The girl

said in a whisper, 'I didn't like to tell you while there was still an appearance of hope. Your boyfriend has been purged and taken away by the constitutional forces. He made a speech on the old pier about the rights of small nations with particular reference to the small nation of Hussaria, but not excluding the rights of other small nations either. We don't know where he is now but the situation doesn't look grim, it looks worse'.

Said Herself, 'But isn't the rising surely one in defence of the rights of small nations against their oppressors, have you ever heard of any other kind?'

'No', said the girl in a whisper, 'and I did history at the university once, it was very handy for the job here. But this is a new sort of rising altogether, it is one for the rights of small nations that aren't grown up enough to look after themselves to be looked after by a neighbouring one that is'.

Herself unzipped the jerkin and fired it down, the way any biker would, and looked round in amazement.

'What neighbouring nation would that be now?'

But a terrible squeak came out of the girl and she fled into the kitchen. For a moment, you could hear the chef cursing the leeks and making a very lewd suggestion to the girl, who immediately began to weep in hysterical fashion. There was to be no answer from her. The two men in the corner were on their feet now. They approached Herself.

'What is this?', roared one, stooping down to study the front of her tee-shirt.

'Would you just look at this!', roared the second, peering at the back of it. 'A trouble-maker if ever I saw one. What else would you expect on a motor bike?'

‘We arrest you in the name of great nations for visual agitation’, cried the first one sternly, ‘and intend to hold you, like all other agitators, as a hostage without limit of time. Come away with us this minute or the consequences will be grave indeed’.

And Herself was dragged away at once. She didn’t even manage to get the jerkin back.

But Finnegan knew nothing of these tumultuous events, as he was still in the Capital on important business. First thing in the morning - when the early pubs were flinging wide their welcome doors - the gentlemen, after what had been a long night in George’s office, thought it proper to get in a quick one before the Boards arrived to sample the samples.

‘Would we take the last of the stuff to the pub with us?’, George wondered in a hopeful sort of way.

‘Christ no!’, cried Peter, ‘there’s hardly any left as it is and if the joint Boards cause any trouble, you’ll have to get us out of it’.

‘How?’, says George.

‘Blame somebody’, says Peter, quick as a flash.

Three hours of hard drinking followed. The chaps then returned to George’s office to collect Finnegan’s seabag and what was left of the samples: and then they directed their steps to Peter’s office, for which location the meeting of the joint Boards had been scheduled for later. Not much later, it is true; but there was another pub on the corner, and they all managed to get a swift one-two-three down in there, just to steady their nerves a bit more for the Boards.

Then the Boards themselves arrived, and the business in hand got under way, just as soon as Finnegan got into the old seabag and produced the samples. Peter’s members each had a taste of the stuff and gave the green to the go right away: and wondered if there

was any more left, just for good luck and old times' sake? Then it was the turn of George's members, and they were as keen as anything too, and they all wanted to know when the first ship would be coming in the with bulk, and wasn't it a pity there was no more left for the now?

That was a suspicious moment. All the Boards lifted their heads and looked hard at Peter, and then looked hard at George. Says one member, indeed, looking hard at Finnegan, this time, 'There's not so much as I expected'.

Says another, 'You haven't been at it yourselves, have you?'

But Finnegan said there was nothing left, except for a wee bit that he had saved for Major Gweene: and each Board was then happy to elect him a full and honoured member, in anticipation of his potential and out of regard for his designate status as the man who was to head-up the great investment: not to mention his charm, wit, intelligence and striking range of international contacts. Bravo, bravo!

Finnegan was free to go, for the Boards still had to discuss hard currency fluctuations in the Asiatic market for dried fish products, and discuss a report on international stability and affairs in Hussaria (where each bank had some exposure in the offshore energy industry): so Finnegan just grabbed the old seabag and went out to loaf on the front door of the great institution. Oh yes, Jake and the old sorts maybe didn't like the speed of things nowadays but that was the way it went, you needed to move quick or you wouldn't be moving at all!

When the Boards came out, there was Finnegan, loafing at the grand front door of the bank's mighty headquarters with a forty-ouncer of fortified wine, and using the old seabag as a handy pillow;

there was no use getting too warmed up early, it could be a long dinner-party later with the Pantishah and his courtiers, and it would be handy to keep in with them all.

Then Peter came out himself. Two or three girls - it was three, Peter saw at once - in red and white ties were giving Finnegan a hand with the wine but they ran away crying with derisive alarm when they saw Peter looking at them, though they still managed to shout to Finnegan that they would see him later down the gardens, and be sure to bring with him any stuff that he had.

‘Did you take a package that maybe came for me?’, Finnegan asked of the great banker.

Peter tossed a packet and the boy leapt for a grab, it maybe wasn't the sort of stuff you would want to be wasting and bringing sadness to the hearts of the girls in the ties before they went home for their teas and their homework. But there was plenty of time before that, which was just as well, the girls in the ties, when the boy got down to the gardens, had got another two forty-ouncers on credit or something somewhere, and had just begun to drink the stuff when they hailed Finnegan. It hadn't been that easy to spot them at all, he'd never have found them indeed, unless they had shouted, they had changed near enough completely, and all looked a good bit older.

But it was them, all right, and they split the wine, and one of them was wondering where they could get their hands on something better when Finnegan says, just to make conversation, ‘What do you do yourselves, girls?’

All together they cried, ‘Anything at all man, what have you got like?’

That gave the boy an idea. 'Do you know', says he, 'I've maybe got some stuff here'. He opened the parcel that had come in the post and it was a bottle. The label on it never said anything, but Finnegan saw a thumbprint there in the corner, and he knew fine what that meant, yes, and where it had come from.

They split the stuff at once, and after a while the girls were dancing in a provocative sort of way, and thinking about taking some more of their clothes off. There was nothing wrong with that as an idea, right enough; but then Finnegan remembered the evening's function. So he had another good idea too.

'Come on you girls', says he, 'there's a dinner party on the night and we are all invited. We'll just say you're my three wee cousins. You don't go in if they won't let me in and I won't go in if they won't let you in, it's an old trick and it always works'.

So away up they went to the old castle and Finnegan says to the man on the door, it's me and my three wee cousins have come for our tea with the Pantishah himself, and the courtiers and all.

'What's your father's name?', says the man on the door.

'It's just Jake', says Finnegan, 'though it wasn't him'.

'Away in you come then the lot of you', says the man on the door, 'they're just having cocktails to kick off with and then you'll be able to get down to your teas in peace'.

'Jee-zzusss'. said the three wee cousins all at once, 'this stuff just came in and there's plenty of it'; but Finnegan was staring in awe at the Pantishah and the courtiers that scurried around the great national leader. Yes, this was life at the top right enough, and him hardly started as an entrepreneur either!

A man came round with a tray of drinks and Finnegan and the cousins got four apiece, one by the outsides in the drinking hand

and three by the insides in the storing hand, it would save the man with the tray having to go back and fore all the time like a simile up on a shuttle on speed with spurs. Then the great Pantishah himself came over, just as soon as he saw his guests.

Over he comes and says, 'Finnegan, we are a small nation but a responsible one. I can tell you right now that the project is green for go. It will create employment where there was none and hope where there was less, not to mention stamping out national sentiment of an outdated sort. Who are the three wee girls that came in with you the now?'

The Pantishah went over to the wee cousins to engage them in a discussion on educational theory and social opportunity. He looked just the way you would expect him too, not in his ordinary day clothes, right enough, he was in his ceremonial state robes: high heels with buckles, silk stockings, velvet breeches, a heavy brocade cloak decorated with secondary emblems of state, and a towering wig, studded and plugged with glittering decorations. (The courtiers looked pretty good too, but they weren't as gorgeous, their wigs were smaller for a start).

A man all in black stamped a big pole on the deck and everyone went in to their teas, with another man to roar out their names as they went in at the door: 'Mr Finnegan Jake, industrial entrepreneur, and the wee Misses Jakes, his three wee cousins'.

Finnegan was sitting right beside the Pantishah, the way you would expect, seen as how it was a dinner in his honour anyway. The cousins were down the far end of the table, Peter was on one side of them and George was on the other, just to make sure they had someone to talk to, and maybe to offer a word of advice and

encouragement if any of the young ladies was planning to go into the financial services sector when they grew up.

The first course was brose, and Finnegan scooped the lot in one good go, just the same as at home, except of course they didn't get the brose in silver goblets there unless there was visitors in. His host was nearly as quick, and finished off the work with a searching and voluptuous sigh from deep within his goblet.

'It is a sustaining and yet economical meal', said the Pantishah, drawing breath.

'That it is', says Finnegan. And then he says, just for the sake of politeness as usual, 'Are you thinking about putting out a statement on the terrible situation in Hussaria?'

The Pantishah's state wig turned pale and swayed badly. But it stayed on with an effort.

'Bless you boy, but no', says he. 'We don't think at all. It's not constitutional. Hussaria is foreign affairs, which is a matter with which you and I must have no concern at all. We would be abolished'.

'Oh', says Finnegan, 'I thought we would be supporting them'.

'Only maybe', says the Pantishah, 'and then only with regard to the rights of small nations to a limited degree of autonomy. We are right hard against this sort of illegal rebellion against duly appointed, especially self-appointed, authority, we don't want it to spread anywhere else'.

'Like where?', says the boy.

'Like here', roars the Pantishah with the wig tilting over like a big load of hay in a bad gale.

'Why don't you bomb them then', said the boy, reasonably enough, 'everybody else gets bombed'.

The Pantishah gave Finnegan a very suspicious look, but spooned some haggis and just said, 'Go easy with the potatoes and the neaps will be here in a while'.

He delivered a generous mouthful, and took up the boy's reasonable question about bombing.

'That's an easy one to answer', says he with a style of triumphant relief. 'We don't have any bombs. We're not allowed them. And anyway we are strictly opposed to interfering in the affairs of a neighbouring nation'.

'It's an awful wee country', says the boy, 'you wouldn't need many bombs at all'.

'Wee countries in particular', says the Pantishah sternly.

'But they're only defending themselves against attack by a big neighbouring nation', Finnegan said.

Roared the Pantishah, the wig wobbling with very righteous indignation, 'We are utterly opposed to the concept of small nations having any right to defend themselves. Or the means! You never know who they might attack next! Have some neaps now, but leave plenty for me'.

And then, by means of one of those conversational conventions which signify that one topic is closed, and another opened, the Pantishah said, 'Are your cousins married or do any of them fancy being lawyers someday?'

Apples were handed round in a tureen, Finnegan saved the man a job and tossed a couple up to Peter and George, who put them away in their pockets for afterwards. He would have thrown a few to the girls too, but they were up dancing and not wearing very much at all now, it was the heat surely, though they kept the ties on, and the eyes of them were blasted right out of it.

The Pantishah cried in an avuncular sort of way, 'Don't you think you girls should be doing your homework?'

'No way grandad', they cried together, 'just as soon as we're right up there we're going clubbing'.

They danced on with intense concentration. After a bit, Peter and George got up and danced too, though they were both of them looking at their watches.

'And what about our own rising?', says Finnegan, 'it seems to be spreading all over the place'.

'That is a completely different sort of rising', said the Pantishah with passion, 'quite completely'.

'But you're doing nothing about it', said the boy.

'We can't', said the Pantishah, 'I've told you already. We have no arms, only big nations have arms and that is the way it should be. Of course we are completely in favour of the rights of small nations, just as long as they are limited to small things. Small nations, small things, big nations, big things - that is the guiding principle of our national autonomy'.

Suddenly the girls had gone. So had Peter and George. The evening was moving to its final, informal stage. The Pantishah said, 'You must meet my new media adviser before you go'.

A voice with long nails and elbows said, in a sweet tone, 'Hello, Finnegan'.

The boy turned right round. Yes, it was Vanessa. She didn't look bad either with her high shoes and jewels and long emerald dress, right enough it was cut up the side, maybe the two sides, an awful long sort of way, like she'd gone into the binder at an inner-city harvest festival.

‘Do you need somewhere to stay tonight?’ said Vanessa, after a solemn pause.

‘I am staying with my auntie’, Finnegan said, regretful like.

‘That will be very nice for you’, said Vanessa. And then, after another solemn pause, though this one was more sorrowing than solemn, she added, ‘It’s terribly sad news about your friend’.

‘What news is that?’, asked the boy, maybe it was something positive about Barnacle at last.

But no. It was Adeline.

‘Yes’, Vanessa said sadly, ‘the wedding is off’.

‘Off!’, said the boy, ‘is that right enough!’.

‘Maybe she forgot to tell you about it’, Vanessa said in a caring way. ‘The man she was getting married to, I think it was tomorrow, found letters from someone of a passionate nature. He hurled himself off the crags this morning. There was no hope at all’.

‘By Jove’, said the boy, ‘what a terrible shame. I had better go and comfort her’.

‘Oh, I don’t think so’, said Vanessa, wiping a tear. ‘I am afraid it is worse than that’.

‘How could it be worse than that?’, said the boy wondering.

Vanessa was sobbing now, though her good education ensured that it was in no way an unduly demonstrative sob.

‘Oh tell me’, cried Finnegan thinking about a sob himself, that was the way they seemed to go in for things in the Capital.

‘He took her with him’, cried Vanessa with barely controlled anguish. ‘They say the pain was terrible but it didn’t last long’.

‘Oh dear Adeline’, sighed Finnegan, ‘I suppose that was a mercy at least’.

‘Yes’, said Vanessa, a little more brightly. ‘Are you sure you still want to go to your auntie’s?’

‘No, I don’t think so’, Finnegan said. ‘I don’t feel very sleepy the now, after the shock. I think I will go clubbing just to get over the news and maybe to keep an eye on the wee cousins an all’.

He went into his seabag and got the martial glengarry out with the eagles on it, and put it onto his head at a good jaunt. He stroked the eagles a few times and blinked awfully quickly a few times too, just the way Barnacle used to when he was thinking: and with that, was he gone.