

7. A Girl with Round Specs.

The situation in Hussaria took a turn for the worse. These events were everywhere, or nearly everywhere, described as an offence to dignity and the rights of small nations, as well as an insult to peace, stability and the concept of a just international order. Certainly, the little nation's devolved all-parishes council went about its lawful work in strict accordance with the constitution. The streets were watered and swept, teeth were wrestled and pulled, and infants laughed hand in hand to school: but these were innocent of the great passions which surged in the land.

In short, the all-parishes council, though it had taken many years of agitation and effort to win its existence, was not - ultimately - enough. The people of Hussaria wanted more.

The people therefore rose in peaceful protest, parading through the streets with careful hand-painted banners, singing old songs of their land, and crying their demands in many million voices. But Hussaria was a small nation, and had not yet demonstrated that it was capable of managing its own interests in the realms of larger affairs. Her natural resources were carried away; what could her people do about it, given the prevailing circumstances? They had no voice in the great community of nations: for the expression of an opinion on foreign affairs was denied them - even if it was only to agree with the opinions, of which there were many, of their great neighbour. And they could not fight (though they were, naturally, allowed to provide soldiers for the service of that same great neighbour): for the guns were held elsewhere. And thus even the defence, as it was called, of Hussaria was a responsibility denied her people.

What then could they do but parade in their own streets, and jangle their car-keys and their house-keys in pale imitation of many million distant bells: those bells which, in their culture and the cultures of the surrounding lands, signified the end of every fairy tale?

But this popular conduct, peaceful though it was, rang other, urgent, bells of alarm in that great neighbouring nation which had taken upon itself the care of Hussaria's interests in the realms of military, foreign and economic affairs. The final insolence of the people was to demand of their all-parishes council that it express an opinion on these matters: whether it was constitutional to do so or not! Such an expression, after all, could hardly constitute any imaginable threat to the security of that great neighbouring nation which administered, on behalf of Hussaria, those matters that she was not yet mature enough to administer for herself.

In this, however, the people of Hussaria could hardly have been more wrong. Their demand was viewed as a deadly threat by her great neighbour; and as a result a decision was taken at the highest level to teach the Hussarian population a lesson, in the cause of their dependency and proper place in the order of things.

The bombing and the aerial machine-gunning of schools and hospitals (these were favoured targets in the early stage of the pacification campaign) went on for weeks; and then civilian centres were further bombed with poison-gas and incendiary devices, first by aeroplane and then, in the cause of extending active-service experience to as many branches of the armed services as possible, by artillery shell and long-range rocket. Food supplies, naturally, were also cut-off, along with those of drinking water: and thus, in a short space of time, was the once-insurgent population reduced to a

condition of diseased and desperate starvation. The great neighbouring power further announced that as a stabilising measure, the all-parishes council, which it had so recently been pleased to establish, was forthwith prorogued, as a temporary measure prior to its abolition altogether.

Thus driven beyond the point of despair, the people of Hussaria rose in desperate rebellion: and the murderous repression doubled and re-doubled in intensity.

The resolutions of horror and amazement at these dreadful events were, in the international community, almost universal. But not absolutely every country was happy to join in this condemnation.

In one country in particular, though the mood of the populace was firmly in favour of Hussaria, there was to be no expression of opinion: for the governing authorities there firmly rejected any claim to a voice on overseas affairs, and were pleased to leave that responsibility to another nation, which was a contiguous one, and a great one too. The watchword, then, of these authorities was:

- there shall be no statement on Hussaria!

This position, which may be thought to make up in caution what it lacks in nobility, was one that recommended itself strongly to the neighbouring great nation in question. There was no need for any overt pressure: and though that great neighbour in constitutional law thought itself empowered to abolish these governing authorities at any time it felt appropriate, it did not do so. It did not send its political leadership to circle the skies above the capital city and summon the senior members of the governing authorities to the airport for consultation, on pain of torture and death. It did not increase its garrisons, double their wages, treble their alcohol rations, and stand them by for immediate offensive action against an

unarmed civilian population. It did not (so far as is known) vastly increase the budget of its small but influential network of traitors and spies: taking the view, perhaps, that that network was perfectly adequate as it was. Nor did it send bomber fleets to thunder in the skies at low altitude above the major population centres, their bomb doors gaping low, on fraternal exercises. And it did not mobilise its amphibious forces, reinforced with assault marine brigades, to storm the beaches under fighter-bomber and offshore battle-fleet cover as a gentle reminder of what lay in wait, should its will not be met on the delicate matter of a statement, or the absence of a statement, on affairs in Hussaria: such statements being a power and a right reserved for all time and without question to that great neighbouring power which commanded such admirable forces of war and coercion.

No, it did none of these things (at first), for it was a great power which thought itself, though recently somewhat reduced, still skilled in the management of small nations. And so, in strict accordance with the spirit if not the letter of the constitutional arrangements it had been pleased to allow in place, it devised its own sort of rising to ensure that its will prevailed.

This, after all, was nothing new in its long experience of these things. A local elite was quickly recruited to the cause of the neighbouring great power; 'volunteer' forces were mobilised by it and armed and despatched to the north; its regular war formations were stood-by for imminent action; expeditionary commado forces were infiltrated by air and (notably) by sea; and the governing authorities, having no arms of their own, were entirely powerless to prevent it. In any case - and in this respect was to be found the

chief genius of the Constitutional Rising - it was not in any way illegal.

And thus, while popular pressure for a statement on Hussaria grew and grew, so too did pressure grow on the governing authorities, in the person of the Pantishah (as their presiding officer was known) that there would be no statement on Hussaria. The situation grew ever more tense, the populace ever more troublesome: and then, in a masterly stroke, a leader of the Constitutional Rising was appointed - a leader who might yet broker an agreement that would leave the honour of the great neighbour still unstained, and the administration of the Pantishah yet in power: or would, if it proved to be absolutely necessary, drown in blood the troublesome populace.

A former publisher, diplomat and substantial landowning proprietor (absentee) with significant interests in the fields of financial planning and general entrepreneurial endeavour relating in particular to the oil exploration industry, and appointed on account of his self-evident probity, extensive military experience and high standing in the community in general, his name was Major R. L. Gweene.

Major Gweene took up residency in his commandant's bunker at a location which was unspecified, but believed to be in the vicinity of Oban, on the morning that a black and white ferry tried but failed to ram and sink a warship associated with the rising in the bay which lies immediately to the western side of that town. His first order of the day was issued that afternoon. It related to the arrest of a fully-loaded coach of 'tourists', who were subsequently detained for interrogation on account of their suspicious, and quite possibly Hussarian, surnames.

Elsewhere, meanwhile, events rushed forward and the three wee cousins took Finnegan to the railway station before putting their red and white ties back on (for they were proceeding directly to their desks), and Finnegan said, 'come on up girls to the cabin, any time you like at all', and the girls said, 'we might at that, Finn', and then the boy had a grand time altogether rushing through the countryside, with a bar aboard an all and himself thinking of the great days that are lying ahead of him.

But first there was a busy day right there ahead of him now: and him not with any stimulants either (for the cousins in the ties had done-away at the clubbing with the bit Finnegan had saved from the Boards for Major Gweene, except for a wee bit they had saved up to help them through the day at the desks, and the boy hadn't the heart to try to keep it from them, the poor wee souls that they were).

Still, he wouldn't be needing anything himself yet for a good while, there was a two-legged horse in a patch of grass, bold as you like, right there in the middle of City Two, and Finnegan took a long and careful look at it, but it never moved yet. There was two cowboys up on the back of it too, and if that wouldn't make you suspicious what would?

The architects and the design engineers were all in a bar just down the road from the horse and they were a fine bunch of boys, they said structural and material scientists always worked better in bars than offices, and that was fine by Finnegan, though he didn't like the look of a big animal with its head stuck through the wall and looking down at them all, you wouldn't want it to come through that wall and start causing trouble, what with the big horns on it or anything. But the scientist boys just laughed, they knew fine Finnegan was from the hinterlands and wasn't used to that sort of

thing: and after a good few drinks to get the ideas warmed up, and themselves too, it was quite a nippy day considering, they got the pencils out and got on with the planning the plant.

So where would the construction crews be living when they weren't working two or three day back to back shifts, somebody wondered? That wasn't any problem, said one of the engineers.

'Major Gweene will mothball one of his pentagon semi-sub at high water', he said, 'they can live on that till they have built the permanent accommodation facility, and then they can built the plant'.

'What will happen to the five-legger afterwards?', Finnegan wondered in an aside.

'It is to be reserved as a private function-suite for Major Gweene and his senior guests', snapped the engineer, 'but that has nothing to do with you'.

And with that they all proceeded to more important matters. Obviously, there had to be a discreet airstrip, and a deep-water harbour too, every project quite properly lays claim to a modicum of self-respect; so they made the harbour good and big, it could easily have accommodated a few battle-fleets, but as the scientist boys pointed out, it was the governing authorities who were paying for the thing mainly, so it was as well to build-in provision for expansion: and in the most unlikely event of business recession or worse it could always become a dried-fish terminal for the Asiatic market, where demand was at present very strong.

Then there were piers and quays, there wasn't a dry-dock at first but they put one in after a few more drinks, in case of accidents, it would save taking vessels out of the tight delivery and turnaround

schedules, especially at a time of soaring demand, just the way the business plan anticipated.

‘We’ll bring in a high-speed bucket-wheel excavator for the deep-water harbour and the dry-dock’, a senior engineer said in a moment of inspiration, ‘there won’t be a moment to lose’.

Round the back of the dry-dock, meanwhile, was to be the permanent accommodation module for the labour forces that would be on-site during the construction and operation phases of the project.

‘They could be a rough bunch’, said the senior scientist in a kindly tone, ‘we had better have them on a high-security man-made island’.

With that he took his pencil and made a square, that was the island, swiftly sketched in arc-lights and barbed-wire entanglements, and finished off this portion of the planning with an inclined single-span Dolman-trussed box-girder bridge, suspended at its onshore end by a pair of gigantic cantilevered suspension struts.

Said the scientist proudly, ‘It is a drawbridge section, if there’s any trouble on the island, just press the button and up she comes’.

His colleagues burst into applause, as he was the senior man in the company, and there is no shame in due recognition of professional expertise, or indeed genius, in any field.

Finnegan looked at the drawing with admiration, but he was really wondering if the boys had any stimulants about them, twelve pints of beer was maybe fine for an engineer but he was from the hinterlands and needed a bit more than that before he got going, and he couldn’t help noticing that while drink did fine for the engineering element, the architects, more creative and less

trammelled by petty detail, were spending a lot of time in the bathroom.

‘Will they be staying in tents on the wee square island?’, Finnegan wondered.

‘Goodness no’, said the second-most senior scientist (for the principal had excused himself in the cause of freshening-up), ‘they’ll have huts in compounds, you can’t have men staying in tents nowadays, there could be women around too’.

At that the scientist quickly sketched in the facilities on the island, starting with a gigantic all-day bar in which he proposed that there be 24-hour rock music (preferably crazed), supervised gambling, cock-fighting, bear-baiting and, of course, unlimited drinking. Some final strokes for the huts, in rows, with each compound separated from the next by electrified fences, and the work was finished.

A few more moments were needed to sketch the production plants, which were exquisite in their fusion of form and function and style. Overhead cranes in honeycomb titanium would move raw product from the transshipment quays to the tank-and-vault storage yards, with the fully armoured site Security force stationed directly above: and separate provision for an exclusive extra-high-grade management vault nearby. These raw materials would proceed by way of the underground conveyor stream, under the very worst part of the bog, to the cracking plant and furnace hall, and onwards to the rolling mill in carbon-strengthened foam; and so to the final process bays and despatching courts.

Sundry noble chimneys, and a flare-boom sheathed in a shimmering laminate of buttered silk, completed the mighty scene, though there was of course provision also made for ancillary

services, in the way of heavily-defended island sites for dispersed units of Security, the high-speed jack-up platform for senior management (such as Finnegan, for example), and sensitively protective provision for such indigenous population as was still in the district and choosing, as was its inalienable right, to pursue older patterns of cultural behaviour (such as, for example, Jake).

‘That’s it finished then’, said the senior engineer after a while, ‘we might as well start on lunch now, what are you for in the way of spirits?’

But Finnegan must go. He was thinking about that two-legged horse and the two cowboys up on the back of it in a very suspicious sort of way. He took a quick look to see if anything was going on, but the horse hadn’t moved, no nor the cowboys either.

The next bar was just down the road, that’s where the marketing boys were, quite a lot of them were girls with round specs, there was some general concept work to get out of the way and it didn’t take long.

Just as soon as Finnegan went in, they all cried together, ‘What’s the spend?’, before rushing to the bar in a pack and ordering trebles of everything going. That was creativity for you! The products were fine in principle, but there was some work to do on differentiation, and talk of trade and direct-sell markets, and segmentation by occupational group. After a while, it was agreed on a trades campaign for the hundred kilo pack, though the casual and clubbing market would have their own sachet product with a big mark-up and tailored aspirational full-colour spreads in the Sunday supplements. The master-stroke was the discreet colour coding for the high-strength product: like all marketing genius, a master-stroke of the greatest, and yet most elusive, simplicity!

‘Are you all right yourself?’, said one of the girls in round specs, looking very hard at Finnegan.

‘I was clubbing last night in the Capital’, says the boy, ‘and the pockets are fresh empty’.

‘I was thinking you were looking a bit twitchy’, says the specs.

‘Oh well, it’s maybe just the nerves’, says the boy, not wanting to be forward, ‘I have to make a speech later on and I don’t get much practice at home’.

‘Come away you with me’, says the girl, ‘and I’ll show you something that will make speeches for you’.

The lass led Finnegan to a secluded spot at the far end of the bar, and gave him a wee freshener.

‘By Jove!’, says the boy, ‘do you have any more of that stuff?’ And then a wee while afterwards he says, ‘Are you coming over for the media launch, there will be plenty of stuff there from what I have heard’.

On the way round, Finnegan and the girl in the specs shared some intimate moments in the door of a passing house, but a policemen told them to shift, they were lucky not to be arrested, and it was time Finnegan was away back to the hinterlands where he belonged!

The engineers were at the media launch already, they had just come over for the general interest and the drink, they were all up by now to around the twenty pint mark, but were all still perfectly sober as you would expect of engineers anyway.

The boy wondered was it a bar they were in, or would it be a club like he had been in last night?

‘Oh no’, says the girl with the round specs, ‘this is the Royal Moidart Yacht Squadron, it is very prestigious, you wouldn’t find a media launch anywhere else these days’.

It was a very old squadron, the girl in the specs said earnestly, there weren’t any ordinary members at all, every single one had a title and a uniform to go with it. Up on the promenade deck it was very busy, it was the day of the squadron’s all-day luncheon and full ceremonial-dress processional supper. Indeed, masked ladies were to be observed dancing quadrilles in the background to the sounds of string quintet, with saxophone.

‘Who are you?’, says the boy, emboldened by his recent experiences, to an admiral with a mace.

‘I am’, says the admiral, ‘the Squadron Bedalus’.

‘Where’s your warrant?’, says the boy.

‘Shut yer mouth’, says the Bedalus, making a very threatening gesture with the lowered mace.

But the media launch was up the stairs, on the match-racing bulkhead deck, and nobody here was making any distinction between drink and anything else (apart from the engineers). Finnegan made a speech, it was the first one he had ever made so far as he knew, Peter and George were the ones that were supposed to be doing the talking but they would still be in the hospital no doubt, after the clubbing, and then there was questions for a few minutes, before everyone got down to the main business in hand. There was no doubt that there would be extensive, and positive, coverage all day tomorrow.

But there would be no tomorrow for Finnegan in City Two, by now he could hardly remember today, and he was away north right

afterwards, well a while afterwards anyway, in the big black car that was waiting for him.

They sped north. The driver said the constitutional rising had spread and they could expect trouble on the way. But for the first while there was no trouble at all but then it got dark, the sky, and Finnegan began to feel that something was going to happen. It did too, not long afterwards, just the way he had been suspecting it.

Up ahead, lights were blazing. As they drew closer, they could see that fifty-gallon oil-drums filled with burning tar had been pressed into service as low-intensity arcs, by the illumination of which it could further be seen that chain-gangs and coffles of convicts in clogs were wielding picks and shovels with furious energy. Soldiers with bayonets stood around, shouting abuse at them.

Yes, it was the bus party of suspected Hussarians, so lately carefree and hurtling in dance, and now reduced, like their own poor nation, to a condition of servitude!

Two special prisoners worked apart, heavily chained and yoked in addition. The tall one, in whose every gesture was etched an infinity of despair and yet defiance, wore the remains of a bronze tricorn helmet decorated with a single feather of some former distinction. His companion too seemed close to the end. She was, it could be seen with difficulty, a woman: or had once been. She wore the tattered remains of a screen-printed tee-shirt with political slogans unwisely thereon. And she was sporting what had once been motor-cycling boots of the best sort of quality. But now the zips were burst and where there had been the finest of fleece was naught but mud and tears and blood.

For one terrible moment, Finnegan thought he recognised them, and their occupant too. But the cruel guards who manned the road-block roughly ordered the boy's big black car forward, and the thought soon passed. Maybe it was just someone else's boots after all.