

8. Herself does a Runner.

Jake was near crying with relief, it had been a moment of embarrassment but the boy took the news fine. Jake had seen him come back in the big black car and go into the laboratory for a check, then he came out looking puzzled, and Jake gave a good whistle but kept in hiding just to be on the safe side. But after a while he just showed himself, he wasn't sure if he would be recognised, the boy had been away for a while and it sometimes changes people: but the boy knew him fine.

It must have been a bad trip up for the boy and Jake didn't want to bother him further, but the truth had to come out. The rising had spread over most of the country now, a spontaneous rising of responsible elements (true, there were very few of these elements, but that is the nature of responsibility) - responsible elements which had the support, in strict accordance with the constitutional arrangements prevailing, of the forces of a nearby great nation, which was concerned, as all decent citizens were, that stability and order would prevail and that proper debate would never unduly exceed the boundaries of constitutional reason. And anyway, that nearby great nation had every right to exercise its armed forces whenever it wanted to, over such territory as it was lawful for them to so do!

Jake and the boy went back into the laboratory, and Jake says in a shifty manner, 'The cops were here on bikes'.

Finnegan stiffened: but Jake says there was no need for worry, they just went away again after a while.

And then he adds, 'And Wee Alex too, she was with them, she must be in the cops and not at the nursing at all'.

A tender passion surged for a moment in the boy's breast, to be replaced by a very suspicious one: but what was wrong with Jake? He was acting shifty, no doubt about that. What was he holding back? They had a sensation. Then there was a silence.

And then Jake says, 'I have terrible news for you, boy'.

Finnegan says nothing, there's never any use rushing at bad news, and the sensation came in after a while, it was a small one, seen as how they wanted to keep most of it for the guests that would be up for the laying of the stone.

Jake says, 'The bad news is this. Your mother has gone away'.

'I know that fine', says the boy.

'And she's not coming back either', sighs Jake, 'she has run away with the Hussar'.

'Right enough', said the boy, 'I saw the two of them last night down Oban way, they've got a job on the new road there for the soldiers that are protecting the rising from any undue violence on the part of disaffected elements among the native population'.

At this point there was a desperate tumult outside and above in particular, and the laboratory shivered like she was back at the roaring deep and dodging into a big one. Jake and the boy went out quick and looked into the sky. It was dark with the fleets of bombers going over, there was maybe hundreds of them, it wasn't easy to count with the way the place was shaking and going. They were awful low too, the sheep never stood a chance, especially the old ones, you could see the pilots tilting over and waving, and even making, some of them, improper gestures at down below before they let the rockets away at the poor old sheep.

‘I wonder why they have got the bomb doors open?’, said Finnegan, who didn’t know much yet about things like that.

‘It’ll be an exercise’, Jake says, ‘isn’t that what they keep things like that for?’

But he was still looking shifty, and acting it too.

‘Is there any word of Barnacle yet?’, Finnegan shouted and wondered, though it wasn’t easy to shout and wonder at the same time, wondering was always better done in silence.

But there was no word of Barnacle. Jake said he had seen no sign of the poor creature in all the time since his disappearance, and it wasn’t for want of looking either. Once or twice he had heard in the distance a faint and plaintif bugling which could have been Barnacle or could not have been Barnacle, it was maybe the wind in the high tops where there was nothing but stones and old bones and maybe an eagle on the lookout for its dinner.

It was then that Finnegan noticed something unusual about the place. A running mooring had been laid between the gable of the cabin and the laboratory. It was all there, bends and knots and hitches, and a couple of good lignum vitae blocks wrapping themselves around well-greased sheaves. But there wasn’t a dinghy on it. No. It was clothes. Clothes, if you don’t mind, and not just the sort people would wear in the rain either, but the kind you would put on underneath, or maybe on a bed if you were that particular and couldn’t get to sleep without them - clothes were flying on the mooring like sails in the morning. What was this?

‘The womenfolk call it washing’, said Jake, looking away and trying to think of something else to say. ‘We used to do it at the whaling. Now and again’. But that was a weak sort of answer, and Jake was still acting shifty-like.

Finnegan was amazed, Jake would be at the dusting next if a stop wasn't put to this sort of behaviour. What would it be like in the cabin? And where was the dungheap anyway? It had been there minding its own business for ever, and now it was moved. Indeed, it was gone. Something was going on here and it was worrying. But there was no more time for wondering.

At that very moment there was another terrible roaring, from down the beach sort of way this time, and black spots trailing fire flew through the sky right above them. After a while the black spots fell down into the hills and quite soon the hills were in tatters, what had once been self-respecting cliffs and prestigious summits were not much more than boulders and dust, and a good chance for a quarry if you were doing any large-scale random rubble work, especially fank walls or replica cabins of the old sort before everyone was improved, and so on.

'Did you notice anything the now?', asked the boy.

'Oh yes', said Jake, quite relieved that they weren't going to talk about the washing. 'That will be the amphibious assault and civilian bombing exercise, it was in the paper there last week, people were warned to stay inside and not to talk to strangers'.

'By Jove', said the boy.

'Yes', says Jake, 'there's six of them all round the country and when they're finished they're just going to stay on for their holidays and in case the constitutional rising needs a hand or anything like that'.

The two men went up onto the top of the cabin, it was easy now that it had sunk so much, the two windows were near enough at the level of the ground now. There was still a good view from up there, though. They could see the flash of the battleships out over

the horizon, that would be the big naval guns getting warmed up. After a while, they could even see the upper portions of the great ships themselves, you could imagine the officers up there in the fighting tops with the signalmen dashing away at the flags, and then the turrets going round and about like they were loose and a big bone in the teeth when the hulls came up over the edge of the sea, dashing themselves in the old way onwards at the enemy.

‘They’re coming this way’, said Finnegan after a while.

‘This is where the exercise is’, says Jake, a bit more confident now.

And it was too. After a while the battleships eased themselves in, maybe there was even a kick astern to keep them on station: and then the landings began, first the marine bands, and then the marines and after that everyone else that you would expect in an ordinary amphibious exercise of the type. You could see the bands quite easily, in the quiet spells you could even hear them, the white hats quite clear, and the tunes all out of trumpets and not up to the standard of pipes but still, who had ever heard of marine bands with pipes, it didn’t make sense. Then some of the bandsmen stepped forward from the bands and played a tune on bugles - that was a melancholy moment for Finnegan and Jake - and up the beach raced the soldiers.

There wasn’t any opposition, of course, it was only an exercise and the governing authorities hadn’t been able to refuse permission even if they wanted to, not having any sort of permissive authority in this respect at all, and quite soon the spearhead commando forces had established a bridgehead, and heavier equipment was racing ashore too, diggers and dozers for the engineers, mobile bars and discos for the boys after the battle, canteens for a snack in a quiet

moment, and imposing artillery pieces with which to pound-pound the positions of the enemy, should there have been any, till the white flags were flying and another honour was all set to be painted onto the imperial colours.

Meanwhile, and overhead just in the normal way, squadrons of fighter-bombers raced back and fore, the wings tilting over so's the boys at the controls could have a good laugh at what was going on down below.

It was an animated view, though not without its upsets. One of the battleships had gone up on the rocks, near enough where the man-made accommodation island was going to be, and another one was giving her a tow off though it was taking a while. Closer, a battery of wheeled howitzers was axle-down at the proposed site of the cracking plant and rolling mill. Even as Jake and Finnegan watched, amazed and entranced by the busy panorama, an extra-large howitzer turned upsides down and disappeared in the bog. Further units of heavy armour raced to the scene; hoping, perhaps, to effect a rescue or at least secure a battlefield bonus. Quite soon, a whole corps was swallowed and gone. A fleet of diggers and dozers was rushing behind.

Says Jake, 'It was always a wet patch, that one, not even the sheep would go near it in the old days'.

'Is that where the man got drowned the other day?', Finnegan wondered; but Jake had more important things on his mind.

Away at the far end of the beach, round about the spot where the flare-boom would be, a squadron of lancers was rushing hither and yon, a bold and inspiring sight at any time, against the manly crackle of grape - there was a few old people living down there, they would be moved soon enough anyway - and the sharper rattle of

musket, as red-coated and pipe-clayed foot, shoulder to shoulder, stepped forth in their proud old way and boldly firing the indigent huts.

But what was this? The raging battle had come closer to the cabin. Fierce soldiers in CBW masks and bandoliers were already at the other end of the laboratory. They assumed a defensive posture, each of them, that would be the way they did it in the training manuals, no doubt. An officer had a good set of binoculars out, though it wasn't that far away at all, and was looking at the two men on their own roof. Jake and the boy just sat there, cool as you like, though they didn't feel all that comfortable.

The officer advanced bravely and removed the mask. It wasn't so intimidating now. A cascade of golden curls was to be seen. It was a lady officer. Gracious, but it was Wee Alex! She fairly liked the uniforms!

Says Jake, just to himself, 'Yes, that is the way of it nowadays'.

'Look here, you chaps', says Wee Alex.

Jake kept looking over towards the mopping-up operation but Finnegan, weak soul that he was, couldn't help turning round.

'Look here', says Wee Alex again, 'you people were asked that you must stay inside for the duration of the exercise'.

The officer was, Finnegan could not help noticing, breathing rather heavily, perhaps the combat-pack and battle-rations had been abandoned back down the beach and the bazookas and all. There was two bandoliers on her, mind you, so redolent of modesty: and that would be a consideration.

'We was just going in anyway', says the boy, 'do you fancy coming in yourself for a sensation?'

But Wee Alex, maybe in consideration of her territorial responsibilities, was all business-like, she says, come down out of there this instant and get into your cabin at once. So the two of them slid down right away, it wasn't far. Finnegan noticed she had more freckles than ever on her this time, maybe on account of all the outdoor activity.

'Well, well', says Jake, 'and it's me that thought you were in the police and not the army at all'.

'Perhaps you were seeing things, Mr Jacob', snapped Wee Alex, in a way that was not very friendly at all.

'Hullo, Wee Alex', says Finnegan, pretending that he had just recognised her.

But there was to be no response to this. Another fleet of heavy bombers was coming over, even lower than the last. Down went the curls, on one brave knee down, and looked bravely into the sky. Then the CBW mask was back on, a bold wave of the arm, and the soldiers moved on.

'Another sensation', says Jake, 'would not be a bad idea. Are you getting much of the last one yet?'

Then they went in at the window of the cabin, Finnegan wondered where the ashes had gone right enough, and took a look around in the dark till things got a bit brighter.

Gracious, what a change! The old linoleum was away, rolled up in a corner like it was all set to be thrown out and wasted. There were posters on the wall now, of a modern nature, Finnegan had seen some of them when he was at the clubbing in the Capital, and a big pile of books on household management and modern relationships, making it work was the name of one of them.

Says Jake, 'I have something to say to you, boy'.

Finnegan waited, polite like, it would never do to be forward at a time like this.

‘Did I tell you your mother ran away?’, Jake said.

‘You did that’, said the boy.

‘Oh well’, says Jake, ‘there’s another one here, she just moved herself in yesterday and I didn’t want to hurt her feelings’.

Finnegan was quite sure that at that very point he heard a low cry, joyous in tone: ‘Oh Jacob, it is us that was always meant to be together’.

Jake was looking very shifty now indeed. ‘She is just’, says he, ‘a personal assistant, I was thinking it was time we had one about the place’.

There was another cry from somewhere near. Finnegan whirled round in alarm. But in the gloom, there was nothing at all to be seen. Perhaps the voice had come from the place of the pots: but there was no rattling of pots, no, nor of anything else.

But it was no wonder that poor Barnacle wasn’t back yet, poor soul that he was, if he was still alive - and the way things were looking, he wouldn’t be alive for a long, long time yet.