

9. The Laying of the First Stone.

It was the day for the laying of the stone, and it would be true to say that the morning was of auspicious aspect. Helena - for it was she who had assumed the role of personal assistant to the old gentleman Jacob and the younger gentleman Finnegan - was up and going at the very crack, washing and dusting and dragging the linoleum up the chimney, it turned out to be the easy way, and then giving the boys a good shake, it was time to be up and about, the visitors would be here soon and it wouldn't do to be loafing about in the sack looking lazy or anything. So after she got the lino up, she got smoke in the fire, there was a good blaze on her when Jake got a hold of the 'poon and eased himself, just in the old way, into the boots and his morning vestments.

There was no need of this for Finnegan, of course, he took after his natural mother in this respect if no others, he just kept the clothes on during the dark hours in case of a sudden stand-to. But all this sloth was due for a bad shake-up, that biker woman had let them off with anything but Helena had other plans, she had had plenty of experience of domesticity in the bush away back, and she knew fine that if you let things slide in a household, onwards they will go sliding until the place is no better than a bothy suitable for the lowest class of ploughman or itinerant friar. Even though it was a fine, bonny morning, you could tell - somebody was going to regret something here!

The boys came through and she drove them out into the potatoes for to relieve themselves, none of this handy doing it through the window any more, especially now that there was curtains on them. That was the first bad sign of things to come. Quick as

they could - there was a refreshing chill on the morning air - the men got themselves back inside, and cowered round and about the roaring blaze to get the circulation going and the confidence up. Jake had a quick look in the scuttle, but there was nothing there of course, all drink was kept in the place of the pots now, and sternly under lock and key.

Helena came through and, after some moments' thought, made an amazing suggestion. Wasn't it time, says she, that the men had a wash, she had put a barrel out at the back of the laboratory, and there wasn't anything better than a good cold scrub first thing in the morning.

The poor men didn't like to hurt her feelings and out they went, making bracing noises and exclamations of enthusiasm, and rubbing their hands like they couldn't wait to get at the stuff.

'By Jove, yes', says Jake in a loud voice, 'there's nothing like a good scrub first thing, it's a good habit to get into in early childhood and it is one that I have never abandoned, no nor will I'.

They dodged into the laboratory and after some consideration had a sensation, Finnegan complimented Jake on the quality of the stuff he had sent down to the Capital, and told Jake all about going the clubbing and the marvellous things he had seen there. Then Jake told Finnegan more about the police raid in the leather coats and the bonnets tied-down like a bad gale was expected, and the sad discovery that Herself had done a runner.

Finnegan sorrowed for a moment. But then he began to feel a bit better and he tried a few bars of the new personal assistant's old song about Valparaiso, perhaps by way of requiem; and then the two of them went back to the cabin, making noises appropriate to the bracing thrash they had each of them just had in the water. Helena

was outside by now, she had got hold of a good-sized table from somewhere, even a tablecloth, and was laying out her predecessor's selection of glasses, and the store of drink that she herself had been keeping under lock and key.

'Oh Jacob', says she, 'I know you won't interfere with it and spoil all the arrangements for the launch of the First Stone'. Away back in the window she went, singing an old song about love.

'She is a trusting soul', Jake observed, and looking sharp at the boy. They demolished a bottle each quick, and refilled them from the pot in the laboratory: she would notice nothing, the personal assistant, and it would anyway be meet and proper to give everyone a sensation and a good day out in general.

The men strolled forth and studied the calm morning scene. Already the construction crews had their machinery in position, great ranks of diggers and dozers to the fore, and then the wheeled drill-rigs in line abreast, their drill-bits poised like poison pens: all silent now, but ready shortly for the off.

Even as Jake and Finnegan watched, some of the diggers lifted up their dinky dozer blades, flashed their orange safety-lamps, raised aloft their peckered jibs, and broke into tumultuous dance.

There was just time for Jake to cry, 'Stand well clear of the swing radius!': dozers and drill-rigs rushed to join the merry scene: and the major's concubines (who had been sent up in advance) began joyfully to sing:

One step forward, two steps back

Whirl your bucket, throw your track

Pecker up, pecker down

Fold your jib and turn around!

In, out, set to your partner

Bucket down and up en point

Drip, trip, strip a sprocket

Ohmigod hydraulic leak!

Two steps forward, one step back

Break a ram and burst a seal

Down, down, crawler ratio

Round we go in a four-hand reel!

As the concubines continued merrily to sing, it could be observed that a low platform had been erected, for the speeches, while the First Stone - modestly covered with a velveteen cape - reposed on a conveniently nearby mound. Then lay a brief area cordoned with bunting; and at the ceremonial depression itself, reclined a crimson ribbon and silver shears.

The guests of the morning began to arrive. The Pantishah arrived first, along with his new media adviser, in a grand black motor car with motorcycle outriders; Jake and Finnegan could not help but cock their ears, but the timing was spot-on, down at the low end anyway. The whirling blue lights went flash flash flash, and they made Jake quite nervous; but the Pantishah soon put everyone at their ease and helped to raise a glass to keep the morning chill at bay. Finnegan hardly knew the man out of his ceremonial robes, you would think he was maybe a lower sort of lawyer accustomed to the lesser criminal courts, though he could certainly sink a drink which was good proof of something. Finnegan wondered how he would do on the stuff from the pot, but there would be time for that later.

‘How are the wee cousins?’, cried the Pantishah when he saw Finnegan, ‘I was thinking I could send them a leaflet or maybe have a private word on a legal career’.

Says Finnegan, fine, ‘I’ll be sure to tell them next time I am sending the birthday presents’.

Then it was Peter and George, they came in the one big car, and then the pipe band and all the people from the mediums of information. Then Vanessa spots Finnegan, and over she comes, right away.

‘Hello Finnegan’, says she, in sprightly tone, ‘did they bury your friend yet?’

‘Come on away you into the laboratory’, says the boy, ‘and we can talk about it there’: and quite soon there was a great party going on outside, and the personal assistant Helena was introducing herself to everybody in her fresh ribbons and party frock, you would think she was used to it: or maybe, of course, there was more to life in the bush than she had ever let on.

But where was Major Gweene? Then he arrived, standing up to receive the acclamation of the crowd from the back of an open and quite-heavily armoured high-speed half-track, and arrayed in his full-dress uniform too. He wasn’t entirely sober, Jake noticed, but that was the victor’s spoils, the constitutional rising was going great all over the country, and he didn’t have much time to spare except for major investments such as this one, which would drag the old ways into the new ways and make a pound for everyone concerned: which is what life is all about when it comes down to it anyway, doesn’t everybody know that?

Finnegan and Vanessa came out of the laboratory after a while, Vanessa tossing the mane like a yearling that would maybe start

galloping any moment now, in circles; and the boy looked fine too, the 'garry eased back and the eagles standing up proud and gallant. Vanessa unfolded her elbows, and extended her generous claws.

'Will I see you again?', says she, meek.

'I'll be busy with the responsibilities', says the boy, earnest like, 'but you could always try'.

Then Vanessa went away. Finnegan turned round and Jake was there. They could hear the Major, it was never difficult not too.

The Major says, 'My dear Mrs Jacob', with a gush, and embracing the personal assistant with operatic passion.

'Jeez but you didn't?', Finnegan says to Jake, amazed.

'No way', says Jake, 'she won't catch me that easy, but with the toffs it's best to be respectable'.

Helena was embracing the Major now, for a corrosive moment you would maybe wonder about her loyalties, hadn't she run away with a sailor in the days of her youth? Finnegan observed this and determined that he would keep a good eye on her for as long as he was sober, she was handy enough around the place, and they would soon have her trained up in the old ways. But still - there were surely limits.

Then Major Gweene had a private word with Peter and George, they went into a huddle for a bit, and then the three of them went into the laboratory, maybe for an early sensation. But no, the Major was showing them a new three-card trick, and there was a small pile of notes on top of the upturned fire-bucket. Most of them were old notes, not much use except in musuems, but what with the good glow on him the Major didn't notice anything, and pocketed the lot with a trusting old chuckle. Peter suggested double or quits, George

could underwrite him, but George wasn't keen, and the Major wasn't keen at even odds.

Then they were back out, and the three of them had a good glow on by now. Peter and George came over to have a word with Finnegan. The two bankers asked at the same time about the three wee cousins, you could easily tell they were well suited to a career in finance. Peter said it was a pity they got split up at the first club that night, after the Pantishah's tea.

George adds, 'Yes, they just borrowed all the money we had on us, they were going to go and get some stuff - and the next thing, they had disappeared'.

Says Finnegan yes, 'That is what happens to people of temporarily reduced stature, maybe you just couldn't see them'.

'No', says Peter, 'they had taken us away to the hospital before we had any chance of seeing them again'.

Said Finnegan, in an encouraging tone, 'Wait you till they grow up! Would you like to send them a leaflet on the careers, or have a private word sometime?'

Now it was the time for the speeches, the drink was all finished and people were at the start of complaining but Finnegan took a good basin's worth of stuff out of the pot in the laboratory and tipped it into the bottles and the glasses that were standing around, people were free to dip their glasses into the basin for a lucky shot too, which everyone was soon doing.

The Pantishah made the first speech himself, and it was a good one, all about hope and progress and national unity and investment spread and educational opportunity with particular emphasis on useful vocational skills. Here he emphasised, by way of example, welding and digger-driving, two good sturdy careers, but he

did not exclude occupations such as the law or banking, or above all public administration, which were by their very nature somewhat more cerebral in content. He had, he divulged, in a personal reminiscence from his youth, always wanted to be a welder, but his mother would not allow him to wear the boots with the steel toe-caps around the house, no nor the mitts and the mask either, so it had to be the law and public service for him! And now a brief word on administrative matters, or more precisely domestic administrative matters, for there was nothing that need concern anybody in the realms of international affairs, which was something quite properly left to those who were by right of natural suitability, experience and constitution best suited to deal with it. All small nations had an entirely proper awareness of their smallness, and had no right at all to concern themselves with what the Pantishah called the bigger issues. Some small nations, he said, were lucky enough - he wasn't going to name names! - but were lucky enough to have a brotherly neighbour of the larger sort to look after these matters on its behalf. This was a tremendous blessing for small-nation administrators, such as himself.

But still, in the varied fields of small-nation responsibilities, there was much to be done: not least the bringing of hope where once there had been none, and of work where there was less. And so - he was sprinting into his peroration now - this magnificent investment would surely meet these noble aspirations: and might even help stamp out lingering resentments of a small-nation type, which he wasn't going to specify because that would only give them a currency they most certainly did not deserve! But everyone, he said, knew just what he meant - and though it was somewhat irregular in constitutional terms, the present rising in proactive aid of the civil

power, with the full and proper support of their great brotherly neighbour, was a wonderful thing, with a wonderful man in command: Major Rupert Lancette Gweene!

The Pantishah - he looked grand in his ceremonial chain of office - was helped down from the platform and the Major helped up to his place. An immense cheer rose from the massed driver-crews of the digger and dozer fleet. During the Pantishah's speech, they had been formation-dancing in silence, the tunic of every man (some of them, even, were women), colour-coded and bearing other understated insignia such as pocket-size, number and type, by which the rank and unit of the wearer, for good purposes of labour discipline, status aspiration and target practice, could be readily identified.

The Major, with a military arm, hushed the roar. He was no more than a plain soldier, he said, and he would speak plainly. Moral authority was a great thing. So too was a temperate nature. Integrity and industry went hand in hand. Remember the example of big Stilson, old friend from the other ranks, and world chairman now of BDDI? An example to all! The Major often recalled - if the audience would allow him the slight indulgence of reminiscence - the days of his youth. Drink was a curse, though it was possible to be responsible. Demented ferrets all very well, but no sound basis for an enduring union of the old man unto woman sort! God save the late Lady Gweene, might she rest at last in peace. These were the watchwords by which he had lived his own life! They had stood-by him throughout his personal, military and business careers. He recalled an incident from that military career. The old war-wound story. That dreadful night when the enemy was driven back by diligent sobriety and clean-living men under the command of the

officer class. The principle had a wider application. There was at present in a small country - he did not need to name it - a disgraceful agitation, often among those sorts who should know better - in the cause of interfering in the affairs of another small nation. Were this to be allowed, then the consequences could be naught but catastrophic. They might even be abolished. And that was why he was proud - proud! - to lead a just and proper rising of concerned citizens in the cause of public order and the greater public good in general. True, they were very few in number. But they had the support of a neighbouring nation. And they would prevail. Thank goodness for them, then! For otherwise there would be no great investments such as this. Hope and work and prosperity! Every good man's shoulder to the wheel! He dearly loved the hinterlands, and dearly loved their indigent inhabitants. Governess and nursing breast! Great regret he could not live there permanently. So in a moment the launch of the First Stone and the ceremonial charge. But first a song.

And the Major - it is true that he had an enormous shot aboard him by now - began to sing, and his great words, amplified mightily for the benefit of the great crowd, boomed across the the great bog and rolled away into the great surrounding hills.

My name is Rupert Lancette Gweene

I own or buy all I have seen

But stand me up I'll cut you down

You're just a bloody native!

I own this land, I own these hills

And don't forget who pays the bills

I'll make you dance I'll make you sing

And don't forget the rent-oh.

You're keen on drink and older ways

We'll teach you now the modern ways

I'll hold the party you can come

To entertain my guests-oh.

But don't forget we see you through

You need improved and we can do

You don't love us but we love you

There must be something wrong-oh

My name is Rupert Lancette Gweene

I own or buy all I have seen

But stand me up I'll cut you down

You're just a bloody native

You're just a bloody native.

The Major, in a profound silence, advanced to the designated depression. The bunting - which was naturally in appropriate colours - was thrashing with obvious and patriotic excitement in the breeze. Helena was happy to carry the First Stone. The Major briskly cut the scarlet ribbon, and Helena passed the Stone to the Major. The Major placed it securely in place, tamped it with his cavalry bottine, and bowed to the audience. Out of obvious respect for the historic nature of the proceedings, the profound silence went on and on.

The Major's senior dozer had already been drawn-up ahead of the great fleet of lesser machines. Their crews were already mounted and ready. The Major, surrounded by concubines, rose in

his stirrups and cried to his men. With a gigantic roar hundreds of engines poured thick black smoke. In the distance, thanks to the morning sun, a few indigents could be seen in the vicinity of those huts which had survived the amphibious landings. The indigents could quite clearly be seen shading their eyes and watching the great spectacle unrolling before them. Little did they know, in their quaint superstitions, that they would no longer stand in the ways of progress and improvement!

Once more the Major in his stirrups, majestic now in his authority. After a moment's shuffling, the troops were ready: half-tracks taking the centre and the wheeled boys out on the flanks where the ground was easier; the dozers to flatten and the diggers to tear apart beyond repair, and the courtesy ATVs for the mediums of information to be recording it all for all posterity.

'Forward men', roared the Major, 'for the prosperity of the hinterlands, Forward!'

With another terrible roar, hundreds of throttles went down, the half-tracks raced for a grip, and then they were off: a mighty battle-fleet storming across the bog and scattering hamlets as it went. You could see the indigents standing there, still no idea of what was coming, till the last minute, when they started to run. But for many it was too late, and what the dozers missed (not being so easy to steer) the wheeled light diggers, in the role of scouts, quickly picked-off, and sad aprons and bonnets were tumbling in the breeze. The fleet did not stop until it reached the sea, where it wheeled and paused, steaming and pawing the ground, and eager for further work.

Finnegan and Jake had watched this mighty performance from the ridge of the cabin, that was where the best view was from, as

usual. Jake was silent for a long time, just pulling the bonnet a bit tighter on his head.

He says, 'There will be a lot of blasting when they start building'.

'By Jove', says Finnegan, 'I hope so'.

And with that the two men slid down and went away into the laboratory for another sensation. They never bothered talking about the disaster which had just unfolded itself before them.

What would the point be?