

17. The Battle of the Bog: Part Two.

In the final bombardment from the Constitutionals, the plant took terrible punishment. Almost at once the great flare boom, for so long the principal communications tower of the workers, tilted and fell, its buttered laminate skin shattered beyond repair and drifting away on the breeze. The cracking plant exploded with a mighty roar. Titanic pieces of machinery were hurled into the sky and some minutes later were seen to plunge towards the bog and disappear therein. Then the target of the guns became the rolling mill and the press room, and all was smashed asunder there, after which the guns turned their attention towards the cogging rooms and puddling hall. All, utterly, was destroyed. They left unscathed, however, the furnace hall; for Gweene had every intention of taking alive the workers' General Staff, in the cause of a victory parade through the Capital.

Gweene's guns in an instant went silent. The massed ranks of his soldiers rose from their trenches, bayonets fixed. On the command of Gweene, who was directing the battle from the peacock suite of the management jack-up, they moved in close order towards the gates of the furnace hall. At that exact moment, a tremendous explosion blew the centre of his troops a thousand feet into the air; and where a moment earlier there had been heavily-armed soldiers was now a mighty crater into which in slow motion portions of battle-dress and boots were gently falling. A stunned silence fell across the field of war; and then a second dreadful explosion from the far side of the bog hurled the jack-up command post into the sky too, and it was no longer seen. And then the sky darkened for a time, as

a flight of terrible missiles hissed across it and plunged into the flanks of Gweene's forces.

Suddenly, an awful screaming of terror broke upon the waiting armies: for now approaching the shore was the Boat Club battle-fleet, under the command of the three wee cousins. Close-reaching in a freshening breeze, the clabcraw schooner made fast work of the passage; but the norsemen longships took a long time to slide onto the sands and disgorge their screaming crews. The cog and carrack and galleon, meanwhile, tacked painfully back and fore, until they finally beached themselves well downwind: but the trireme, its complement screaming abuse at the sailors, raced straight into the eye of the wind, and would have rammed and sunk the schooner for sport had it been but a moment earlier.

The mushroom cloud was still boiling above the field of battle, mightier than ever, as the three wee cousins marshalled their force, which was now armed and arrayed in the righteous plunder of the rig: and then, to the cries of conch-trumpet and the desperate beat of turtle-shell drum, and with the full support of the multinational typing pool, Nubian lifeguards, butler and senior clergyman (who was, however, to be shot later for looting the wounded) - and then, the three wee cousins' army began to advance to war.

It was, therefore, at this point - the point, it might be thought, of maximum military surprise - that Jake (or Old Jacob, Senior Commander of the Secret Military Organisation as was now his proper military title), ordered his armoured and motorised formations, which had been assembled and bunkered in the conveyor stream, into the attack.

The razor-fanged bucket-wheel excavator led the dread assault. Long abandoned and forgotten at the far extremity of the

plant, it scooped Gweene's men and ordnance from the blood-drenched bog and tossed them in its carefree wake, while archers teemed in the heights of its mighty derricks and arms.

Then eight enormous and fully-mechanised horses, each plated in sheet steel and mounted on a dozer crawler chassis recovered from the bog, crept from their underground cavern. Each was painted black with a white star on its forehead, and each towered above the battlefield below. On the leading horse was to be seen Old Jacob in the company of the founding members of the Classics Society, and on the second was to be observed the principal office-bearers of the Early Medievalists. The remaining crawler horses, each commanded by a leading member of each of the other clubs and societies, swarmed with cheering men and women being carried through the constitutional lines, while others from trapdoors and portholes in the sides poured deadly fire on the enemy.

Close behind came the crawler and wheeled siege-engines, mounted on the wrecks of diggers though to have been lost for ever in the mighty bog. Those that were not self-propelled were towed by lesser utility vehicles from packaging and despatch. A unit of fork-lifts rushed between the furnaces and engines with hot ammunition, which was at once hurled into the enemy rear with devastating consequences.

The sky darkened again for a moment, as a deadly hail of poisoned scaffold-bar swept grandly overhead; and then the motorised wheel-lock crossbows, firing hardened-steel, armour-piercing crowbars and light-gauge anti-personnel T-bar, struggled to their firing positions, brought down their elevations to screams of constitutional terror: and engaged the enemy at point blank range.

Under the weight of this terrible onslaught, the lines of the Constitutionlists began to fall back, and some junior officers could be seen urging their men to stand firm and shooting down those that would not. For a time, indeed, Gweene's men did hold their place; but their resources were already depleted badly, and their nerve had gone completely, for they had not been trained in this sort of desperate combat and against such an extraordinary enemy.

Now Old Jacob hurled into the attack his final units. Medics, cooks, part-time bar staff, senior laundry personnel, research chemists and those medievalists for whom there had been no room on their designated crawler horse - all armed with blowpipes, spears, catapults, pikes and slingshots of the very best design - were thrown on the enemy with terrible losses to each side. It was in this action that the butler and the Nubians fell: and the bear too, though it was said afterwards that he had taken thirty-seven of the enemy with him, and with his bare hands alone.

At one desperate moment the Constitutional line recovered its nerve, and it seemed to the command staff of the Secret Military Organisation as if the outcome of the entire battle might hinge on this recovery. The whole workers' army watched in awe as Old Jacob waved a lazy harpoon (which was broken in half by now) back at the ruined plant: and an entire battalion of formation pole vaulters, fully and handsomely charged at the dressing stations, raced bounding towards the enemy. In a moment, and armed to the teeth, they were behind the rebels and carving into their rear with terrible losses once more.

The constitutional artillery was silent now, for at every point it had been overrun and destroyed; and each of the great mobile pieces mired and defenceless on the bog was surrounded by two or

three crawler peckers, going busily about their work. The bloody strongpoint at the mouth of the conveyor stream had been retaken too, though at the cost of hundreds of lives. The three wee cousins were last seen here, fighting valiantly at the head of the last testudo; but in an enemy counter-attack they went down and were seen no more.

Dreadful explosions were now to be heard from time to time across the battlefield, as the final mines of the Tunnelling League were detonated under the remaining Constitutional Forces. Cheering from the seaward end of the line indicated that the workers had retaken the distillate tanks and empty powder vaults, and soon also the dry-dock and deep-water harbour.

By now it was clear to the workers' command officers that Gweene's army had been reduced to a dispirited rabble of infantry, fighting on foot, and slowly giving ground back through the mighty bog.

One final push was needed: and in the rear areas, a volunteer battalion was assembled at once. Finnegan and his squad of lady diggermen were first to join; and then some hundreds of the remaining suicide grenadiers from the All Site Temperance Union. Badly injured crowbar warriors rushed from triage and dressing station to join at once, as did a goodly number of combat-trident evacuees still awaiting medical attention.

But in the very moment of victory, a crushing blow! Some of the constitutionalists in a rear area had salvaged one of their guns and in a lucky shot got Old Jacob's crawler horse right in the middle of the white star on its forehead. This tore off the head of the horse, and swept from its spinal areas all those that rode there: including Old Jacob and his entire general staff of classicists.

It was not immediately known what Old Jacob's last words were.

A terrible scream of rage went up from the workers' ranks: and while command authority at once devolved to officers at regimental level, the volunteer suicide battalion - with Finnegan's squad in the lead - hurled itself with furious rage on the enemy lines.

Old Jacob had not lived to see this destruction of Gweene's forces: nor the masterly means by which it was accomplished. For at that moment a hundred tricycle chariots, cannibalised from motor-cycles and drive-axles, stormed from the last of the bunkers in the shattered plant. Each was commanded by a bearded ruffian in shades and bandoliers charged with bottles of extra-strong lager, and each had terrible scythes attached to its wheels, while all teemed with murderous and heavily-armed workers.

Immediately behind them came a second wave of four and six wheel ATVs, and a few eight-wheel amphibians too, crammed with armoured fighters bearing longbows, pikes, halberds, lances, carved battle-clubs, and deadly spiked-ball flails.

On account of their light weight and generously proportioned tyres, these trikes and quads could carry their charioteers across the bog with perfect impunity: and this they did, cutting the enemy line to ribbons as they dashed through, and then wheeling to charge again from the rear.

By the time Finnegan's suicide battalion had fought its own bloody way across the bog, and had reformed to await further instructions, the battle was quite clearly over. Gweene's forces were running for their lives, often pursued by angry workers, who, having caught them, made short work of them. Soon, the Constitutionlists had gone from the field, and extempore bivouacs could be seen all

across the plain, as the victorious workers celebrated the day from combat hip-flasks, or streamed back to the dressing stations for refreshment and repair to their wounds.

Not all of the workers' General Staff had been destroyed when the command horse had fallen, however. These few survivors now made their way to that point at which Finnegan found himself, close to the site of the former jack-up platform and management suite, which lay in a tilting tangle of sad wreckage close at hand.

They stood around like one of them old military paintings called *After the Battle*, even though they didn't have ermine capes or polished bearskins or well-educated horses or anything like that. But still, that was the spirit of the thing. There was a long silence, as the gentlemen contemplated the sad scent of slaughter, the merry scent of victory.

After these solemn moments of contemplation, some talk began about a monument to Old Jacob, to be erected at the very point where he had fallen.

But stop! What was this?

A small, black frogperson wriggled from a muddy culvert mouth. Then a second, with a truncheon and black and white checks on the flippers. Finnegan saw at once that the second one was Bubo. He was fully awake on this occasion. And he didn't look very pleased about something either.

But who was the small one? It glistened forward, slap, slap, slap. A fast zip!, and the wet clinging tunic burst apart with generous elan. What charms! What freckles! What golden curls! Yes, it was Wee Alex: or Inspector Alexandrine, as now she was!

Cries she, 'Youse're all bust! We've been watching youse for months! You've been trafficking in disgraceful substances! Det. Sgt. Bubo, arrest the lot of them!'

Everyone gasped with amazement, some even fainted. Finnegan staggered too, but he got a hold of himself and managed not to go down. And yet another one approached! Surely not another police person. One of Gweene's soldiers, perhaps, beaten and broken and come to plead for clemency!

A tasteful figurine in tailored combat blouson and breeched pantalettes, the rebel was wearing a full CBW mask. Mask first, it hurled itself at Finnegan's feet. Despite the mask, everyone who hadn't fainted could quite easily hear copious weeping. Would it beg for mercy from the gallows?

In a piteous tone it cried, 'Oh Finnegan darling, did you get my many letters?'

'Not yet', says the boy caringly, 'but I know in my heart that I will'.

Knelt the boy comforting. Away tore he the insidious mask. His blouses leapt with joy. So did hers.

Yes. It was Adeline once more.