

Glasgow Fair, 1963.

'Cum oan Bonethrone, gees yer five bob.'

It was the Friday before Glasgow fair Friday. Hughie, as the oldest apprentice in the Plumbers' Shop was making the most of his turn to organise the apprentices '*fur a wee bevi*' for Glasgow Fair Friday, the last working day before the holiday.

Hughie was already a hardened drinker and gambler and it was very doubtful if all of the money he was in the process of collecting from the other apprentices would be used to fund the '*kerry-in*'.

As the youngest '*boay in the shoap*' John was desperate to fit in, and even though five shillings was a lot of money, he intended to participate in this ritual and handed over the five shillings, straight from the brown wages envelope he had just received. And he knew that his tee-total Mum would be bitterly disappointed.

Hughie McConnell was a Hun, and a proud Hun, wearing his Rangers' scarf defiantly at all times.

'So sun, whit team dae yi support?'

His Dad had warned John: "steer well clear of religion and politics".

'Third Lanark.'

'Fuck aff! That's no' a fuckin' team! That's a fuckin' bunch o' fuckin' jessies.'

John had only been back in the Plumbers' Shop for only a week. His previous time in the actual Plumbers' Shop had been in February, after he had just completed a six months pre-apprenticeship course in the Shipyard Training Centre. That visit had been a traumatic few hours.

His mind slipped back.

That first day here had ended in ignominy with the command:

*'Sun staund right ther an pit yer hauns in yer poakits an' don't move a fuckin muscle!
Cos yoor in enuff fuckin' trouble as it is!'*

John had stood stock still, aware that people were now staring at him. He was trying hard to think what he had done or said to cause this raging outburst.

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Since starting with Jimmy Dunn as his journeyman a few hours before, John had been subjected to all the usual indignities visited on every new apprentice. Was this to be another, 'test', he wondered.

ooOoo

John's first test had been the usual one but he had been naive, fair game and, to the enjoyment of everyone watching, he went about his assignment politely and diligently, as his Mum had trained him from a child.

'Right noo, sun, go doon the shoap, right?'

'In try tae fund Big Wullie Geesit, right?'

'So whit's his name, sun?'

'Big Willie Geesit?'

'Good, right sun. No when ye fund Big Wullie Geesit, right, ask him fur a lang staun, for Jimmy Dunn, right?'

John reacted in his Boy's Brigade mode.

'Yes, sir.'

'Right, aff ye go sun, a nae runnin' jist saunter like, in show the fuckin' Bosses who runs this place, right? So, jist remind me, sun, whit huv ye tae dae?'

'I've to go and find Big Willie Geesit and ask him for a 'Long Stand', for Mr. Dunn.'

Jimmy swung his whole body round and looked behind, coughing and spluttering, his shoulders heaving up and down. Eventually he turned back to the boy.

'Fur fucks sake son ye fair hud me therr . Whin yi sayed 'Mr Dunn' ah thoait yi wur talkin' tae ma faither ahind me, an the auld buggers been deed thees five years past. So fur fuck's sake sun, jist ca me Jimmy like every uther cunt, right?'

'OK, Mr Dun...., err Jimmy'.

Jimmy's face was cracking up again as he said gruffly:

'So hurry up, sun ah need it right away, this side o' Christmas wid be guid.'

John had started to trot off and the man called out.

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'Stoap! Fur fucks sake son, don't start that fuckin runnin' again ur yill get us baith the fuckin jeyll.'

John stopped and turned, stunned by this abruptness in Jimmy's manner.

'Noo fuck aff an' hurry up but dae it slow, right?'

John marched off with his arms swinging in his BB 'quick march', watched by a few hundred smiling, expectant eyes.

He had asked everyone in sight.

'Naw son ah huvnae seen Big Wullie fur a bit.'

'Sun, try askin' Sambo the Jambo, that big poof ower there wi the riddish bunnet oan, hee's a grate pal o Big Wullie Gessit.'

John approached the tall smartly dressed man wearing the dark red bobble hat.

'Excuse me, please, are you Sambo the Jambo? I'm looking for Big Willie Gessit, please?'

On hearing John's request, the tall thin man turned slowly from his work.

'Who the fuck ur yoo callin' Sambo eh? Ye cheeky wee bastart, eh? Fuck aff, eh?'

This man had a different accent but, like all the others so far, although his words were harsh he had smiled.

'Oh, very sorry, eh, sorry.....'

John entered a screened off work area bedecked with a large Celtic team photograph. A small group of men who were cleaning slag off the welds they had just finished making. He asked his question.

'An' who the fuck wants Big Wullie, oniwaiy?'

'Mr. Dunn sent me to find him and ask.....'

*'An' who the fuck is **Mister** Dunn?'*

'Errrrr, Jimmy Dunn, at the pipe-bending machine'

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*'Aw hees cawin' himsel **Mister** Dunn noo, is he?'*

The man's voice hardened as his smile vanished.

*'Well fuck aff back tae **Mister** Dunn, an' tell him **Mister Joseph McPhellam** seys he kin stick his fuckin orange sash right up his fuckin hunnish arse. Gottit, sun?'*

John, frightened by this fury, moved quickly as the giant man turned back to his work, muttering angrily to himself.

Eventually John arrived at an older man, working quietly alone, in the far corner of the workshop.

John asked his question for the umpteenth time.

The man asked to be excused, and coughed into a pristine white handkerchief.

Then, smiling, he responded in an unexpectedly softly spoken cultured voice.

'Ah, James Dunn, Esquire, of this Parish. Our very own pipe-bender extraordinaire. Our Negotiator with the Upper Echelons, our Choirmaster on the Braes of Ibrox, and, rather intriguingly, a Sunday School Teacher and Flutist, it is also said, inducting his acolytes three nights a week and on a Sunday afternoon in Halls of the Orange Order, under the watchful eye of Good King William astride his white horse. .

The man smiled a secret smile to himself and then continued.

'Our James, aka Attila the Dunn, the Polyglot from Partick.'

In full flight now, enjoying a fresh audience, one that did not immediately interject invective, the elderly man perambulated pedantically.

'By my calculation this would be the fifty-third 'Long Stand' the said gentleman now seeks to add to his ever growing collection.

'But, Oh, please, do excuse my slightly soiled hands,' he added, removing both gloves and rubbing his already very clean hands on a bright yellow cloth before extending a hand.

'Ernest Whitelees, Master Plumber, at your service, and my very greatest pleasure.'

The man raised his eyebrows in query as they shook hands. John eventually twigged what was required.

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'Johnny err, John Bonthron, err, new apprentice, just started today, err check number 4013, err very pleased to meet you Mr. err, I'm err sorry, err very sorry, but I've forgotten your name.'

'Ernest Whitelees, but sadly in these hostile environs we must both deploy the local patois and so I suggest, nay implore that you simply call me 'Ernie'. I fear that the use of 'Mr. Whitelees' would cause our native colleagues certain difficulties, as I am sure they will explain during your sojourn with us, in most graphic and grossly inaccurate detail.'

Seeing the puzzled look on the boy's face he added:

'In summary, please use the reductive address of 'Ernie', for both our sakes.'

John was not really sure what this posh guy was on about but, instinctively, he felt he could trust him.

'Err, Ernie, this Message for Jimmy, its, err, they're all taking the mickey, right?'

'Ah, yes, indeed they are, John.

'It is one of our rather cruel traditions, part of your rite of passage.

'We are but a simple tribe here. Or rather we are a group of several simple tribes, often warring as you may have found from your unfortunate encounter with the belligerent Joseph of the Celtic persuasion while you, in your early innocence, are attached pro-tem as an apprentice to the Enemy Hun.'

John was struggling to follow this flow of words.

'Of course, during your period of innocence and initiation, you will face several further such humiliations. May I strongly suggest that you take them all in good part? By that approach I assure you they will cease the sooner. Resist and you will surely perish!

'Now, my dear John, if you don't mind taking a bit of advice, or rather, granting a request, would you please just take 'a Long Stand' over there, by the pipe rack?

'Please suffer the clock to tick onwards for a further while, and our veritable James will eventually tire of his teasing. No doubt he will have further humiliations he will wish to visit upon you before the hour of luncheon arrives.'

ooOoo

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John did as Ernie advised. Time passed.

Heads were down, back at work. He was no longer of interest.

Relaxing, he smiled at the fun enjoyed at his expense.

Jimmy swaggered up from the pipe-bending area of the Workshop.

'Right cum oan son, ye've hid a lang enough staund, right?'

'That's it, sun, roond wan is ower. Ah hear thit Big Wullie Geesits aff oan the sick the day.'

Jimmy Dunn winked at John and pulled at a long length of copper tubing, drawing it from the rack.

'Right Tarzan grab the end o' this bit o 2" an aff we go.'

'So, sun, whit school did yi say yi went tae?'

'Shawlands Academy'.

*'Oh, no Shawlinds **Academy**,*' Jimmy responded in a mocking tone.

'So yiv goat aw they fuckin' highers an aa that eh? Like Ernie the fuckin' professor!'

'Oh no, I left in June last year, you know, as soon as I was fifteen. My pals where I live said I should try for Stephens. They all work here.'

Jimmy was silent but then, when they arrived at his machine, he turned and stared. His face turned first white, then red as his lips started to move, but no words would come.

John thought that perhaps was Jimmy was ill and that perhaps he should use his BB first aid knowledge, and get the man to lie down in the 'recovery position'.

Then the fateful instruction was given to *'stand still with his hands in his pockets'* and although not shouted, it was full of cold anger.

Jimmy Dunn raced off in the direction of the Offices and John was left alone.

He was self-conscious in his new boots, a new brown polo-neck jumper his Mum had knitted and wearing new denims, realising everyone was staring at him.

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Everywhere he looked the faces were suspicious, angry, muttering.

The mood in the Plumber's Workshop had changed. Machines were switched off. The general background din fell away. All work stopped. John could hear mutterings getting louder, and now every face was glaring at him, as he stood alone, beside the pipe-bending machine. His face was flushed, beetroot. he had never felt so alone in his life.

In the new quietness he heard:

"Boay's name's Bonethrone ur somethin' "

and

"Fuckin' scab labur"

and

"Pullin a fuckin fast wan, they ur"

Jimmy Dunn swaggered past, ignoring him. In his wake was another man in overalls and then, a few paces behind, two men in suits. Nothing was said; they did not even look at him. The group headed out of the Plumber's Workshop and the big outer door clanged shut.

ooOoo

Time passed.

The angry mutterings continued.

Mr. Rice came from the Training School. As the Plumbing Instructor, this was man John knew best. He came right up close to John and put a protective arm around him.

'John, I'm sorry son, I've come to tell you that you can't become an Apprentice Plumber, at least not yet. You see you're still fifteen. Isn't that right? You're not sixteen until the end of June?'

'That's right, Mr. Rice.'

'Well son, let's go, come on. It's back to the Training Centre. There's nearly been a strike here because of you starting underage. Not your fault son, If anyone is to blame, I suppose it must be me, or so they say. OK?'

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'Come on John, let's get ourselves out of the lions' den and hope they all get back to work soon.'

The hoo-haa took a week to die down and then John had become a Store-boy in the Plumbers' Store, working under Billy Graham the day-shift Storeman, spending the next few months absorbing the folk lore of the *'Chanty Wrastlers' Shoap*.

ooOoo

Two weeks before on his sixteenth birthday John had been re-instated as a legitimate apprentice. They put him with Ernie, to serve as his apprentice.

And now, a week after Hughie had collected his contribution, his first Glasgow Fair Friday in the Yards had arrived at last. The whole place was buzzing. It was like the last day at school before the long school holidays. There would be no real work done today, just tidying, sweeping up.

ooOoo

On his first day back in the Plumbers' Shop, Wee Tommy Docherty, one of the Plumbers' Helpers, a small wiry, older man, famed for his great strength, his ability to lift, carry, twist and tighten, delivered the challenge, his chin jutting right up into John's face.

'Ah bet yi think yur strong, sun, eh? But ur yi?'

Wee Tommy Docherty was always given his full descriptor when spoken to or about. This was to identify him uniquely from the Tommys, such as Big Tommy the Plumbers' Welder, Tommy MacDonald the Maintenance Electrician, Tommy the Lorry and countless other Tommys from other Workshops, all men who inhabited the conversations that washed around John every day, men he was gradually he was getting to know, learning their stories. He had only actually spoken to a few such men so far, and although this was his first encounter with Wee Tommy Docherty, he already knew quite a bit about him.

This was 'Wee Tommy Docherty the Plumbers' helper, Wee Tommy wi the squint'. The squint was never to be mentioned in Wee Tommy's hearing or even hinted at, or sudden violence might be delivered upon the insulter. Or so John had been told. Since leaving school the daily round of physical labour was changing the John into a man but he was not a scrapper, like some of the other apprentices, like Hughie who regularly appeared on a Monday with a black eye, or a slash mark on his face. John was a conflict avoider, he had been once told by his form teacher at school.

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'I'm not bad', John replied.

John knew that Wee Tommy Docherty was a 'right kidder and joker', and so was wary of what might come next and stood back from him, just out of range, he hoped.

Wee Tommy smiled wistfully.

The boy sought to quell his fear of this small potentially violent man, and tried not to stare at his mesmerizing squint.

'OK son well away ower an see if yi kin lift that wee pipe up abuv yir heid. Yi no', like Charles Atlas, eh?'

John looked across, in the direction of the man's apparent gaze and saw a standard twelve foot length of small bore copper pipe. Surely it must be something else the small man meant, but there was nothing obvious in sight.

'Do you mean that 1/2" copper, Wee Tommy Docherty?'

'Naw, sun, a mean that fuckin great anchor frae the fuckin Queen Mary lyin ower there. Ah hope ur no' thinkin' o' tryin tae take the mickey, sun? But nae mind, ah fuckin knew yi were a fuckin mamby-pampy wee bastirt wi aw yer fuckin 'yes-in' an 'please-in' and 'thank you very muching-in. So jist fuckin leav it, OK?'

'No, sorry Wee Tommy Docherty, no, I mean.....'

John was already on the move, heading across for the pipe unaware that a much wider audience was now alerted by the man's loud outburst and was waiting in anticipation.

'Right sun, noo watch oot, an dae it the right waiy, noo. Don't dae yer fuckin back in noo. Take yir time an git ready, noo. That's it bend yir knees afore yi grab it, noo. Right, Ready. Snatch and Grab method.'

John had seen how the weightlifters did it on Pathe News at the pictures and so, to please Wee Tommy Docherty he bent his knees and tried to copy the 'snatch'.

This would be easy but well, so what, if that's what Wee Tommy Docherty wanted...

'Cumoan, sun, noo member, right up above yer heid wi' it, noo.'

'GO!'

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John got the pipe up to about waist height before the pain got to him. The pipe was roasting hot and his hands were *'loupin'*. The pipe bounced along the floor.

An expletive escaped from his lips but was not heard amidst the communal laughter.

Jimmy Dunn's voice shouted from the crowd:

'Wee Tommy Docherty strikes again

'They seek him heer they seek him thare they seek the bastart everywhere.'

'John, catch son!'

Ernie threw his yellow cloth dripping with clean, cold water.

John's hands cooled quickly and he fought back his tears, just. His hands throbbed but he did not utter a word of complaint.

Wee Tommy Docherty, eyes moist with laughter, sauntered over and punched John hard, a sharp right jab to his left side just below his ribcage which both hurt and winded him.

John sensed however that this was intended affectionately. They said Wee Tommy had sparred with Benny Lynch, adding, *'watch oot for him son, iyways staun clear o' him, gee him room like cos hees a right viscous wee bastart'*.

And John's father had explained later that this was the subconscious reflex of a natural street-fighter, striking out in an aggressive/defensive action to disable, just in case John might have been brave and stupid enough to retaliate for the prank.

'Fuckin goat yi a right wan sun, eh? But its aa part o yur educashun, OK?

'Ayewis spit on a pipe afore ye pick it up, jist in case, OK?

'Nae hard feelins sun right. Eye yi did aw right an no greetin. Ah fuckin hate it when yees greet on me. Ah mean, fur fuck sake its only fuckin pain in yer boady, no' somethin that really hurts, ye know whit ah mean?'

John made no reply. At that time he had no idea what Wee Tommy meant. But later he heard that Wee Tommy Docherty had lost his wife and four kids in the Clydebank blitz.

'Noo look son, an fuckin learn this an fuckin learn it well, right.'

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'Use yer fuckin' gloves right? It took us fuckin' years tae git these baystirts tae fuckin' gee us gloves so yoo fuckinwell use them, right'

Wee Tommy held up his gnarled and scarred old hands as evidence of a lifetime of hardship and pain. John could smell the man's whisky breath and saw that he was swaying slightly.

'Oh, I get it now. Thanks, Wee Tommy Docherty. I didn't even think about it, you know, it looked so light, so easy to lift.'

'Ah well that's the fuckin trubble wi it aa, right. It fuckin iways looks easy right.'

'Aye, "Life " yi know whit a mean? "Life". Yer work noo, that is fuckin easy, right. But its aa the rest that's hard, right? Its aa the rest o' the stuff thit yi cannae see comin', right? Like a fuckin' trolley bus cumin it ye oot o' the fuckin' fog!'

John's confusion must have been obvious. Wee Tommy changed tack, moved closer, whispered in his ear, swaying into him.

'Look son. Ah no ah shoodni tell yi, but huv ye goat a song ye kin sing? Fur yer Fair Turn, on Friday?'

'Yes thanks. Billy G in the Store warned me. And my Dad has taught me the words, so I should be OK. Thanks very much for warning me, though.'

'Aye but fuckin shut up wi a these thanks an keep yer fuckin voice doon right ur ah'll git ma fuckin' heid in ma hauns. It's apposed to be a secret, sprung oot on ye, right? Noo, duz it huv a good chorus? Yi no, the kind we kin aa jine in waiy?'

'Yes I'm going to sing.....'

'Fuck's sake son naw, naw. Fuck's sake dinnae tell me, naw. It's appost tae be a fuckin' secret ye no'. So as ah kin guess like, in the wee sweep amungst the men, ye no? Whit yer gonnae sing like. Ur if yer gonnae say "Naw, ah canna sing" like sum o' thim dae, right? Noo fuck aff, John sun, ye're daying fine.'

ooOoo

Glasgow Fair Friday loomed into focus. After the morning breakfast break all pretence of work ended. The older men gathered with their pieces and billy-cans of tea hiding

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surreptitious drams and sipping at concealed bottles of beer, talking quietly at first, becoming louder as the alcohol took hold.

The Bosses disappeared into the Office and were seen no more.

The apprentices gathered around the annealing furnace, using it to toast their pieces. Hughie was holding court, already well oiled, garrulous, the temptation of keeping the communal carry-out intact had proved too great.

'Right son yill hay a wee Lanliq, then.'

Hughie sloshed a generous measured into the John's billy-can.

John's Mum was very anti-drink and the nearest he had ever got to it was sneaking a taste of the dregs from a bottle of pale ale one New Year's morning when he was about eleven. The beer had tasted bitter and foul. Like his Mum John really preferred American Cream Soda.

He lifted the can to his lips with trepidation but the fortified wine tasted very sweet. He liked it and found that it slipped down, easily, and that his billy-can was soon empty. He began to relax and join in the banter that ricocheted around the furnace. All of the apprentices becoming quickly drunk, as Hughie became increasingly generous with their communal booze supply, dispensing first to himself and then forcing it on the others.

John was flushed and excited, laughing loudly, adding quips when he could get a word in and loving it when he got a laugh. A bottle of Tennent's Sweet Stout appeared in his hand. He gurgled some down. He liked this taste too. He was buzzing.

'Right Johnny Bonethrone fur a song!'

Hughie was standing on the big pipe bending table now, in front of the furnace.

Raucous cries added.

'Eye cum oan Bonethrone, gee-us a wee song, Johnny.'

John was jostled to his feet, shoved forwards then hauled up onto the big steel table by Hughie who then jumped down, leaving him alone, to perform, as required of the '*youngest boay in the shoap*'.

John felt his backside being roasting by the furnace, and his face was sweating from the drink. His father had rehearsed him until he was word perfect. He had sung it through,

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over and over, first just with his Dad, then to them all, with the whole family joining in the chorus.

Right yoos, shut yur fuckin geggies right. Gee the boay sum wheest right? Gee him a fair go it it.'

Wee Tommy Docherty had spoken and immediately it was silent, except for the roar of the gas burning in the furnace behind him.

John took a deep breath and, like his father had coached him to do, he looked past them, found a spot across at the far wall, focused on the broken window, saw the rain running down it.

He could hear his Mum's voice at breakfast time, when it had been bright and sunny:

'It's going to rain today, Johnny. I can feel it in my knees.'

His Mum's knees were better than the wireless, according to family folklore. And it always rained on Glasgow Fair Friday, it was a tradition, she had said.

A big smile came to John's face, he relaxed, and suddenly he had started.

Wan Hogmanay at the Glasgow Fair, there was me mase! and several mair,

We aa went aff tae hae a tear, and spend the day in Rothesay O.

We wandered doon the Broomielaw, through wind and rain and sleet and snaw,

And at forty meenits aifter twa we got the length o' Rothesay O.

It seemed to be easy, even though the last time he had sung like this was at Life Boys, all those years ago. When the chorus arrived they were with him, joining in. Hughie was thumping his big tackity boots and strutting around the table with a mock flute raised.

Durrrum a doo a durrrum a day, durrrum a doo a daddy O,

Durrrum a doo a durrrum a day, the day we went tae Rothesay O.

John could have stopped there and they would have been satisfied, but he had learned all the verses and so he started on the second.

"Remember Johnny, watch you don't speed up", his Dad had said.

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A sodger lad caa'd Ruglen Will, whau's regiment lies at Barrenhill,

Went off wi a tanner.....

John started to falter, singing too fast with excitement, forgetting to breathe, and, now unsure of the words, he panicked.

But help was at hand. From nearby he was supported by a fine baritone voice. It was Wee Tommy Docherty, who re-started the verse singing the words slower, at the right speed.

John took a breath and joined in.

Went off wi' a tanner to get a gill, in a public hoose in Rothesay O

As he got back on track Wee Tommy's voice dropped out and John was alone again.

The chorus came round and the others joined in again.

He carried on and sang out the remaining verses without any further help.

As they all sang the final chorus twice, Hughie jumped onto the pipe-bending table, doing a pretend highland jig, holding John's hand up as if his partner.

As John jumped down from the table, a voice said beside him.

'Fuckin brillyint, son fuckin brillyint

'That's the best fuckin turn wiv ever hud fae a boay.'

It was Jimmy Dunn, the Shop Steward. It was first time he had spoken to John since the debacle back in February. Jimmy strutted off, back to his pals.

John felt a sharp jab in his kidneys and winced.

'Well son tha wis jist grate! No jist a wee bit grate. Fuckin, fuckin grate. Ye dinnae say ye wur a fuckin singer ya sneaky big bastirt. Eye, that wis fuckin, fuckin great. Even tho Ah loast ma bet. Ah hid ye doon fur "Scots wha hae", so Ah did.'

John could tell that the small man was 'fleein' full of drink.

Wee Tommy jumped up on the steel table. A hush fell over the crowd; time for Wee Tommy Delaney's party piece.

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But now, as the little man sang in his fine baritone voice, his Glasgow idiom vanished completely. Now Wee Tommy Docherty **was** Kenneth McKellar.

I sing of a river I'm happy beside
The song that I sing is a song of the Clyde
Of all Scottish rivers it's dearest to me
It flows from Leadhills all the way to the sea
It borders the orchards of Lanark so fair
Meanders through meadows with sheep grazing there
But from Glasgow to Greenock, in towns on each side
The hammers ding-dong is the song of the Clyde

The focus had moved away from John.

Hughie was asleep, slumped beside the furnace.

Big Ian had put himself in charge of the remains of the *kerry-in*.

Lanliq sloshed into John's billy-can and a fresh bottle of sweet stout was shoved into his hand.

When John joined in the chorus, he was no longer an outsider. He sang lustily, with his friends. And at that moment, the words took on a real meaning for him.

*Oh the river Clyde, the wonderful Clyde
The name of it thrills me and fills me with pride
And I'm satisfied whate'er may betide
The sweetest of songs is the Song of the Clyde*

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