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ERIC C. WILLIAMS

The Desolators

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Editorial . . . . . Kyril Bonfiglioli

The other day a correspondent wrote to me bewailing the demise of the U.S. pulp magazine, that nursery of many promising writers. Rising wages and costs and circulations which, instead of increasing, remain at the same level are given as the reasons. There seems to me more in it, however, than economics.

American s.f. of the 30s bridged the gulf that many of us could feel was widening between our muddle-minded selves and the science world. We read Sir James Jeans and Sir Arthur Eddington. But this was not enough: we had to feel we were part of the new universe we could feel was being discovered. Cajoled or beaten about the brain by H. G. Wells, we were convinced of the possibility of a rational society. And the things in which we still believed were more important than the things we didn't believe.

It is doubtful whether many of us understood the background of the science world. The back-biting, the hunt for kudos, the dogged hard team-work had begun in some scientific disciplines but not in others. In rocketry the sensitive Professor Goddard and the individualistic Wenkel seemed to be busily proving at least one s.f. point, which was that an experimenter built his apparatus and then, if it worked, found out why it did. For design, a sketch on the back of an envelope would do; more potent still was "the formula", which was used in s.f. stories as a kind of amulet. The implication was, I think, that it was only by chance that *we* had not stumbled on the formula to destroy the world, travel through time or to Mars.

The charm of the 30s—to those s.f. fans who were teenagers at the time—was that we knew enough about science to appreciate the new possibilities, and too little to realise what a bore most real scientific research was. Since then the world seems to have grown small, and less full of surprises. We are fairly sure now that there is no lost civilisation in the Andes or the Matto Grosso; and Mars, a rolling stone, seems simply to have gathered moss and not to have nurtured a superior race. We shall not be building any space-ships in our back-gardens (with any hope of success, that is). The era of the amateur is over. It is very depressing, though there is a cheerful side.

Modern technology and science, limiting to speculation though it is in one direction, opens up new fields in another.

Biochemistry, sociology and psychology have become hunting grounds for new s.f. themes. Many of these themes are on the borderland between science and ordinary fiction. I disagree with Kingsley Amis, who says that s.f. writers are drifting into straight fiction—for me, the borders has never been well defined, for we human beings are a queer lot. Just twist the point of view ever so slightly, and you get something extremely bizarre.

But the s.f. of the 30s was not an inferior form of the art so much as something different altogether. No one took seriously the cardboard masks of the heroes and heroines of the space sagas. They were the masks behind which we became, in imagination, what we thought we should be. We felt our imperfection and we still had the idea that, somehow, perfection could be reached by striving, by will-power, by self-control. Such s.f. had something of the qualities of a myth or fairytale and became part of our experience. We participated in it and it changed us a little.

In a curious way, we have all grown up: even teenagers seem much more mature than they were. Perhaps the need for a myth has vanished. Anyhow, we have substituted illusions about ideals for illusions about ourselves being disillusioned, and get the kind of s.f. we deserve. Those brilliant images, those characters you can walk around and talk to, are all the result of taking a straight look into a mirror and having cold images of ourselves reflected back, our surfaces at this instant of time.

We may not like what we see, but I doubt whether we are stuck with this view. For one thing, man is a creature of time and environment, among other things, and changes with these, as Bergson pointed out. Man's subjective feelings are part of the total truth he understands. Bergson was thrown out because he introduced unmeasurable qualities into what was intended to be scientific speculation. But this is the very stuff of the best kinds of writing: our continuing selves.

We are, as far as we know, a form of life growing on a mote of dust in a bubble of air, the third nearest of several particles moving around a very ordinary star. But we do not know what life is, and we are very far from understanding stars. In addition, the possibility of there being life on other planets would seem, according to Hoyle, to be pretty strong throughout the universe. Infinite possibilities; infinite interpretations; infinite speculation—and infinite themes for s.f.

THE DESOLATOR

by Eric C. Williams

A door opened as carefully as badly oiled hinges allowed and from the base of the tall 'sleeping' block, a man stepped out and stood motionless in the dark. He held a bulging sack in one hand and a small square box cradled against his chest by the other arm. He stood listening to the few distant noises of the settlement, straining to detect any whisper of police gravity bubbles. There was no moon, and in a moment he set off directly away from the brick block, stepping silently over the hummocky grass, aiming towards the only light burning in this part of the settlement. He passed two more dormitories before he came near to the light, and then he knelt and intently studied the car park surrounding the rusty lamp standard. He did not move until he at last spotted a police guard seated half asleep in the shadow of one of the bubbles, then, confident of his movements, he silently crept to that part of the park to the rear of the guard and let himself into the cold transparent interior of a bubble. A few minute adjustments on the invisible control board, and the vessel lifted in absolute silence and crept vertically into the night. Hardly daring to breathe, the man watched the field of ghostly shapes below, knowing that if the guard lifted his eyes now he would see the reflected light from the floating bubble above him. On minimum power he allowed the bubble to ascend noting with relief that a slight drift of wind was moving him away from the park into the blackness around. He accelerated upwards, keeping watch now for police bubbles which might be returning to the park. All went well. He turned more power into the climb and the light below became a mere spot, well out of range of any slip stream whistle the bubble might make. He ventured a brief look at the navigation instruments, then clicked off the light and set the vessel on a northward course. Leaving the fringe of the settlement behind, he came lower and lower over the black land until he judged by the quiet pipping of the gravity

meter that he was no more than 30 feet above the ground. He opened the box he carried and turned a knob. Two luminous lines, slightly inclined towards each other, appeared on a small screen within the box. He operated the controls of the bubble, sending it first to one side and then the other of its northward course, and watched how the lines on the screen reacted. Satisfied, he made a final adjustment to his course, then sat back and kept watch on the sky. A half hour later, when the luminous lines in the box intersected in a cross, he brought the bubble to a halt and set down in the midst of a thick wood. Quickly he stepped out, carrying his sack and box, then, leaning back into the craft, snapped a switch and leapt back to allow the bubble to soar upwards and disappear into the night. He now moved another knob inside his box, and etrodyne whistle came from it. A few steps in several directions and he began feeling his way through the blackness towards his destination, guided by the rising note from the box.

Not until his outstretched hand felt the planks of the hut did he know that he had arrived. He found the door and let himself in. Carefully he closed the door. His fingers with long familiarity found the light switch.

"Ah!" he breathed, and sank shaking upon a roughly built chair. He wiped the sweat of fear from his face and looked around in a careful check. The simple Time Transporter he had so cunningly and fearfully filched piece by piece was untouched with the intruder threads unbroken. The activating batteries stood nearby. The shelf held its bottles of necessary preparations. He lifted a sod of trampled grass from the floor and extracted a wallet containing all the information gleaned from his Time scans. His hands began to shake as he moved to commence the adjustments which would at last send him back in Time away from this poverty stricken Present. If the Police came now . . . They must have discovered the theft of their bubble by now. The whole continent must be humming with them, frantic to catch the criminal. They must realise by now that they had another Time Thief on their hands. They wouldn't call for surrender. They would . . .

In a jitter of panic he swallowed the necessary potions, sat himself within the framework and made certain settings

on the vernier scales. He moaned with frustration as he counted off the seconds. Was that a whistle up above? Five, four, three, two, one. He closed the switch.

Monday, January 4th, 1965. Well, even if it was the first day after the weekend New Year celebrations and his colleagues in the shipping office showed it, at least Feeting felt it was the beginning of the last lap towards Summer. He turned over the import papers on his desk looking for something easy to begin the day with. There was a nice set of Bills of Lading with invoices attached covering 20 cases from a supplier in America. The vessel would dock in three days. Nice! The goods presented no Tariff headaches, and Feeting completed the Declaration of Goods liable to *Ad Valorem* duty, wrote a brief letter to the Shipping Agent, sent the Goods Receiving Department a notification of the goods due in, then sifted through the pile for something else of equal simplicity. He yawned, lit a cigarette. The phone rang. Somebody in the Commercial Department began chasing him up for some goods due in from South Africa. Oh Lord! here we go again. Laboriously he engaged all gears and buckled down to 1965.

That afternoon Buying Department rang him up about the American goods. Had he got his notification right to Goods Receiving? The stuff had been ordered only the day before, how could it be coming in so soon? Feeting turned up the job and read off the order number and description of the goods. Buying Department were baffled. "I'll cable them," they said. "Do that," agreed Feeting, without enthusiasm: he saw a mess-up in the offing.

The answer to the cable caused sufficient excitement in the Buying Department for them to bring the answer in person. "Your Order 15789 not received yet. We have not shipped any goods whatever to you on the 'American Chieftain'. Please send copy of invoice for examination."

Feeting was sure it was a mess-up, and was irritated. "Well, what do you want doing?" he demanded. "Everything's in order so far as I'm concerned. If you want the stuff turned round you'd better make your mind up."

"I'll let you know," said Buying.

Feeting heard nothing more. The goods were unloaded, cleared by Customs, and delivered to the Works.

The Works were an old established firm recently bought out and run by John Prince, who kept the reins wholly in his long white hands. The Head Buyer had mentioned the strange business of the impossible shipment to him over lunch. John Prince downed a glass of wine with enjoyment. "Well, Henry," he had said, "if they want to send us stuff three months ahead of schedule, we won't complain. And if they don't acknowledge ownership, then we won't pay. Get it in. I'm surprised you queried it."

"Well, it's queer, you must admit."

John Prince laughed round a cigar he had placed in his small mouth.

"You know what stupid things go on in any works, Henry; somebody packed the stuff up and shot it off without recording it. Anyway, I'm not going to worry about their mistakes."

"But they haven't even got our order yet," protested the Head Buyer.

"So *they* say," remarked John Prince carelessly.

Within two days the Head of Buying came to John Prince's office.

"We've had notification of two more lots coming in and we've not even typed out the orders yet!"

"Whose sending them?" asked Prince with mild interest.

"Materburg and Ferrier."

"Have you asked them what they're up to?"

The Head Buyer produced his trump card.

"Yes. They both say they haven't shipped anything." He worked hard to stir the complacent Prince. "What's more, America have looked into their end and find somebody sent a specification to their shipping agent on their official forms and delivered the 20 cases to the Docks in one of their own lorries—and yet the stuff hasn't even been on their stock shelves and they certainly haven't made it, and none of their lorries was available on the date the cases were delivered to the Docks. I can't understand it!"

John Prince refused to be excited. He looked at the Head Buyer with amusement.

"I don't know what you're steamed up about, Henry.

Somebody's made us a present of just what we want—good luck to them."

The Head Buyer rose from his chair and paced the office.

"Yes, I know," he floundered. "But what about the copy of their invoice we sent them ; they say the Sales Reference on it is non-existent, and yet it's one of their own invoice forms all right!"

"Somebody stole a few," commented Prince.

"Why? Why on earth why?"

"Oh, I don't know, Henry," said Prince impatiently. "The long and the short of it is that we've got the stuff and America did not send it. Therefore we take possession and sell it. Any more of the same kind, we do the same. It's good for business. Let it go, Henry, I don't want to hear any more about it."

1965 and 1966 were splendid years for the firm and Prince. Shipments came from all over the world—the exact materials needed to fulfil orders and not a penny was spent out for it. The firm gained an astounding reputation of being able to supply any equipment in which it specialised, the day after receipt of order. In one instance goods were actually on the high seas to a customer before his order was received. The only person who was not delighted was Feeting who had a nervous breakdown during 1966 brought on by overwork.

In January, 1967, John Prince sold out to the EPT Group and retired to South America with 17 million in gold.

In 1948, Richard P. Feynman, the American mathematician, administered a mind twisting shock to the quantum theorists of the day by showing that all the mysteries of 'virtual' photons, electrons, positrons and other particles could be explained by looking at the particles from a four-dimensional viewpoint and assuming that a collision between particles could not only alter their direction in Space but in Time, too. That is, particles which seemed to appear in free Space are, in fact, particles thrown back from some Future by collision. This idea, whilst extremely fruitful at the time as a means of handling the problems presented by the many strange particles being discovered, was not seen to have any *real* meaning until 1985 when the Cambridge

Laboratory were able to prove by computer analysis that the appearance of positrons on photographic plates taken on one date were the direct result of bombardments carried out a week later. It took 70 years continual investigation for some slight control of this phenomenon to be gained, and a further 300 years before the first Transporter was built.

The Transporter used by the man in the hut was a highly refined machine, although extremely simple, but it was still a one-way device. It could Transport articles or people to the Past, but it could not return to the Future other than by the ordinary passage of Time. It was possible, however, by use of what was known as the infinite photon chain, to see into the Past without going to it. The photon is only partially in the Present, and has a pale extension in the Past and Future. It was discovered that photon images going further and further back could be tapped in a leap-frogging process and any section of the infinite chain viewed depending on the strength of the shock pulse established. Using this aspect of the Transporter the man had spent ten years, in between labour periods, searching the Past for a manufacturing concern that would fulfil his needs. He built up an extremely detailed dossier of dates and locations arranged in a sequence progressing further and further into the Past, with the most recent being 700 years old.

The passage of the collision wave front through his body was like annihilation despite the drugs he had taken. The atoms forming the cage of the Transporter and his body recoiled instantly through Time to the year 1997.

He was in a well stocked engineering stores. Quickly, John Prince went about the laborious job of gathering together the items shown on a long list he extracted from his wallet. He piled everything in an open space on the floor until he had a small mountain of highly finished electrical equipment. He detached the 'collision-wave' projector from the Transporter and manoeuvred it to cover the mountain at a certain angle. He consulted his notes and set dials. When he pressed the switch, the mountain disappeared together with an oval of concrete flooring. It now existed in 1965 in a deserted warehouse in Paris waiting the eventual arrival of John Prince.

Anyone watching in the warehouse would have been stunned by the rapid appearance, one after another, of several hundred piles of machinery, as John Prince leap-frogged down the years, stripping the stores of various European manufacturers of the items he would require in 1965/66. In South Africa and America the same spectacle occurred in various empty warehouses carefully chosen for the purpose.

Finally, weary with his manual labours which had taken him over a month to finish, Prince, began the delicate task of shipping his accumulated loot to London, first from America then Europe, then Africa and Australia. He left no official loophole. His last act was to project himself back to 1963 and to dismantle the Transporter. He then booked into a small hotel in South London and slept for a whole day. Under his bed was a sack containing the remains of the food he had brought with him from the year 2387 and a few bars of platinum he had picked up from the safe of a firm he had raided in Johannesburg. During the next week he was able to sell the platinum at a price sufficient to permit an investment in stocks which the Time Scans had showed him to be due for sensational inflation in value. With the resultant gain he was able to buy control of the small engineering firm he had selected for his operations. John Prince sat in his office and waited for untold fortune to come to him from the future.

The view from the hotel skyscraper balcony overlooking Lima was beautiful. There was a pleasant drift of air from the air conditioned room behind John Prince and he stretched his legs with pleasure as he sipped a mid morning beverage and contrasted his present luxury with the grim poverty stricken future he had left. Europe was about six hours ahead of Lima, and in 2387 about now they would be hard at work in the fields or mines trying to resuscitate the plundered world they had inherited. The police would be flitting around in their bubbles watching or investigating; the workers would be dreaming of their second meal of the day due in an hour's time, and then the long trudge back to the dormitories and sleep. Prince chuckled as he recalled those sleep periods, and the furtive activity that commenced as soon as darkness fell; the dim figures slipping out intent

on the dangerous task of pilfering parts to build their own Time Transporter; the scuttling through the deserted countryside in search of a safe hideout and then the slip-back and exhausted sleep. Men would suffer it all, though, for the one chance of escape.

The peculiar thing about the situation, pondered Prince, was that the Police were convinced their efforts to prevent further Time plundering would be successful since there was no evidence in their own era to show that future generations were coming forward to 2387 to set up enterprises, and the would-be Time plunderers of 2387 were sure that there was a good chance of success to their efforts to slip away because their own era was a direct result of their own plundering of the Past. If the Police had any sense they would all jump on the bandwagon and get into the Past where wealth of easy living were for the taking. Of course, not all would be as clever as he had been and some would so tangle up their enterprises that the law of the day would clap them into prison as swindlers. Nevertheless, given a lengthy preparation by Time Scanning there was no real reason why an enterprise should fail. Prince wondered idly who the first man had been to conceive of Time plundering—maybe he had selected a later period than the 1960's, maybe he had been one of the fabulous financial barons of the 1920's—anyway, by 2380 it was a universally known possibility, and God bless him whoever he was!

"Excuse us," said a voice from the room behind.

Prince looked round in annoyance. He recognised the Police badges at once, and said, "Oh."

They came on to the balcony, one casually carrying a paragun in his right hand and the other with the nozzle of a portable Time Transporter cradled in the crook of one arm.

"Hallo, Prince," they greeted pleasantly. "Ready?"

Prince remained seated, incapable of movement. He had not dared scan his own future for fear of witnessing his own death at some time or other, but he had never conceived it possible for Police to trail a man through all the possible centuries and countless days of the Past, and never once had he thought about the possibility of this encounter.

"Oh, no!" he groaned.

The policemen looked amused.

"Oh, yes," the one with the gun said. He sat himself on the parapet of the balcony while his companion slipped off the shoulder straps of the Transporter on his back and laid it carefully on the concrete floor. "Headquarters said we'd find you in if we cared to call."

"How . . . ?" choked Prince.

"How did we trace you?" asked the gunman sympathetically. His companion was busy at the table pouring drinks. "It's difficult, I admit ; it takes Time. It really is staggering the permutations there are when you think of the billions of places in Space and Time a man might be, and when you've only got a view about the size of a room to spot him in, well, it really is hard luck if we find you." He accepted the glass his companion handed to him. "But what you fellows seem to forget is that we've spent a couple of thousand years scanning the Past and you can cover an era pretty thoroughly in that time."

"Two thousand years!" said Prince in bewilderment.

"Yes," said the gunman, giving him a sudden cold stare. "HQ is in 4020 AD. Harold and I were drafted in 3900. I tell you, you maniacs of the middle 2000's created such a chaos in history your descendants have to spend practically the whole of their resources trying to stamp it out. The Lord knows how many more of you there are setting up in business up and down the centuries! You got away with it —until now, that is."

"What are you going to do?" murmured Prince.

The policemen drained their glasses unhurriedly.

"First," said the spokesman, "we get rid of the gold."

John Prince writhed in his chair.

"I worked hard for that money . . ."

"A thousand guys a dozen years from now did, you mean," interrupted the gunman sternly. He stood up, with a little jerk of his gun. "Come on," he ordered, "take us to the gold."

The other policeman gathered up his apparatus and hoisted it on to his back like a rucksack. They looked at Prince. "Where is it?" demanded the man with the gun.

"It's in the Lima Bank," wailed Prince, "I won't . . ."

They ignored him. "I know it," said the man with the

Transporter. He carefully set dials on the grip of the nozzle-like projector. He took out a street map of Lima and drew a line upon it connecting the hotel to the bank, and another indicating east and west. Unhurriedly he measured the angle between the two lines, then briefly consulted a pocket book of tables. He set more knobs. "Five seconds back will do it," he remarked. The gunman gripped Prince's arm and pulled him close to the man with the projector so that they all stood in a tight group. They pitched through Time and materialised in a large windowless room lined with steel cabinets. Prince recognised it as the vault below Lima Bank in which his gold was stored.

The man with the projector walked along the row of cabinets examining the labels.

"Here we are," he announced, and taking out a tape measure from his pocket he proceeded to measure the width and height of the three cabinets containing Prince's treasure. He then measured a certain distance on the floor away from the cabinets and stationed himself at the apex of the triangle so formed.

"Have to be careful," he said, as he altered the setting of the dials on his projector, "don't want to rob some innocent party—though from what I've seen of this piece of Space and Time I begin to wonder if they aren't all plunderers in disguise." He looked up. "Right," he said. "We shoot loot back to an unspecified time and place—like this," and without looking at the knob his hand rested upon, he turned it many times. "Now," he said, "want to say goodbye to it?"

John Prince stood sobbing in helplessness.

There was a snap from the projector, and the three cabinets vanished.

"Oh!" cried Prince, "I worked *so* hard!" He covered his face with his hands.

The two policemen looked at each other and made facial signs of disgust. The projector-man silently reset his controls. The gunman stepped away from Prince. The projector-man gave the Time knob a couple more turns. His face hardened. He pulled the trigger. John Prince vanished.

The Incas found the gold.

John Prince founded the Incas.

—ERIC C. WILLIAMS

CHEMOTOPIA

by Ernest Hill

"Creeps," said the police sergeant, "debauched, debased, primitive young creeps. I'd flog the hide off of them if I had my way."

The constable sighed into the videophone mouthpiece. Six months to go. Blather and creeps. Retirement age 35 and Sergeant Collins still six months short of pension, fur hat, hush-puppies and an old folks flat in Bognor Regis New Town. It would be high time. High time already too. A modern Police Force could hardly operate whilst old world reactionaries like the sergeant were still on its pay roll. 500 dollars a week and not worth the half of it. No humanity. No tolerance. Not a glimmer of compassionate insight in the hostile eyes, cold beneath the curly brim of the regulation uniform hat. No nous.

"Dr. Bernstein, please!" He smiled at the ground glass image of the receptionist. She responded. As well she might. Liking what she saw and seeing what she liked. Constable John R. Caston had passed through the Peckham Rye police school in the forefront of the 'A' stream. He had graduated in Applied Psychology, Psychiatric medicine, Mental Law and Pharmacology. His final exam papers had included a special mention in cajolerie and psychopathic delinquent control. It was in a degradation of disillusionment that he had found himself assigned to the Cheyne Walk section of Chelsea, the least progressive of the London wards and directly under the orders of Sergeant Collins, a veteran of pre-enlightenment, a fogey of the old school.

"I have three patients in the station, doctor!"

To the oldies of Sergeant Collins' generation, the antidote for crime was retribution, a primitive belief in the right and duty of society to avenge itself. An attempt by the rule-conforming majority to coerce the minority by weight of numbers, cudgel, whip and freedom-depriving forms of state incarceration. Sergeant Collins was a survival from

the antetherapeutic age, antediluvian in his approach to crime. He and his contemporaries in thought, intent and deed behaved as though there were still the means of retribution at their disposal—as though prisons, gallows and monetary penances had not all gone the way of the whip, the cat-o'-nine-tails and the pillory. The oldies would never learn. They could, unappalled, walk through the museums at Brixton, Wormwood Scrubs and Broadmoor without an inward shudder at the barred windows, bolted doors and warders' keys and cudgels. Insensitive. Nostalgic. Gloating.

"Yes, sir. We were wondering if you could come around to the clinic. Yes, sir. Metropolitan Police, Cheyne Walk."

What had society ever achieved by vengeance? Had it integrated the criminal? Reformed and redirected his latent criminality? Transmogrified any single congenital psychopath into the well-adjustment of benevolent philanthropy? It had done none of these things. As a deterrent, vengeance had never succeeded even in deterring. The threat of six years' hard had had as little effect as the immanence of 2000 lashes. And why? Because of belief. Belief in the existence of something that had identity only in the mind of the believer. The criminal. There was no such thing as a criminal. A criminal was only a person who did not conform. Criminality was rule-rejection. And what of it and so what? Other non-conformists had been instrumental in the concatenation of history making. John Wycliffe, Luther, Schoenberg and Michael Tippett. What in fact was the basic difference between Crippen and George Bernard Shaw? Each personified aspects of the same basic individuality. Non-conformity. Jack the Ripper in every way the counter-equivalent of Epstein, Galileo, Akenhaton, Moses. Criminality, genius, asceticism, art. Are they not all deviations from the main stream to the unique?

"Their case-histories, Dr. Bernstein? Certainly, Dr. Bernstein. 5.30 p.m. all three were observed to proceed along Beaufort Street in the general direction of Battersea. Symptoms of boredom and frustration clearly exhibited by sporadic ringing of doorbells, overturning of dustbins and breaking of ground floor windows with stones, bricks and other offensive weapons. Arriving at the junction with Chelsea Park Gardens, they were seen to relax, leaning on

the automatic light standard, throwing occasional stones at passing buses and causing a No. 137 to swerve into a wholesale confectioners, injuring a number of passengers including the driver, a gentleman from Barbados. Evidence of xenophobic characteristics exhibited by shouts of 'Wog!' After this episode the constable reports that their spirits brightened visibly and, seeing a Mrs. Boothby, aged 89, in the garden of her house at number 26, they scaled the wall, overturned her deck chair and cut her face and neck with the jagged edge of a broken bottle and wantonly destroyed her dahlias. At this point the observing officer intervened and brought them to the clinic for treatment."

"Yes, doctor, ages 19, 18 and 17. Healthy, rather nice boys. You will—I beg your pardon, doctor? Yes, I believe they are boys, the hair is somewhat long and there are traces of cosmetic and eye shadow but—yes, doctor, the sergeant confirms that they are—well, yes—male.—Of sorts, sergeant? Well, it takes all sorts, doesn't it? We will expect you, doctor Bernstein."

"Creeps," the sergeant muttered, "flea-ridden, nauseating, weak-kneed creeps. I'd belt 'em."

The doctor's eyes travelled over his patients in kindly appraisal. Obviously out of place in the green-white antiseptic atmosphere of the clinic. Resentment of hygiene, order, the smell of bleach. Expectoration. Undirected through the mouth corner at no one in particular. Haphazard. Understandable. Retaliation of the sputum. Antipodal self-alignment. All a question of frontal lobes—a psycho-biochemical dyspepsia. An excitation of lobal emotion area. His finger tips met in the triangle of benediction.

"Well, now," he said, "we are here to help you."

The eldest of the three chewed on a cigar supplied by the desk constable from public funds. He considered the doctor with a distaste made verbal by a sound like a quickly deflating balloon.

"Get knotted!" he said.

The doctor turned to his nurse-assistant, writing rapidly in the ward case-book. She paused, pen-poised and smiled.

"You have all the points itemised?" he asked. "Expectoration—normal symbolic act of society rejection. Under-

developed articulation finding expression in the simulation of bodily gas emission and incoherent phraseology?"

The nurse noted 'G.K.' as a final point under the 'Patients' response' column. She had developed useful abbreviations for the more common epithets of incoherence. The doctor considered her with approbation and affection. She was the most promising member of his staff. Basic femininity accentuated by the close-fitting sweater and tights of her uniform. The wide-brimmed hat a crown to competence. Cool, tranquil and—in her own unassuming way—arch. Skill, humanitarian interest and curvilinear proportionment.—C.P. The verisimilitude of the dumb-bell. C.P. was often in its indefinable way more successful in bridging the gap between doctor and delinquent than all the verbal techniques since Freud, not excluding Karkoff. Something like animation appeared in the dull eyes of the delinquents.

"Cor!" They murmured in a rapture of almost reverence.

"What would you prescribe, nurse?" the doctor asked, somewhat condescendingly paternal in tone.

"Contraction of the lobes by local refrigerant?" She was abreast of her reading, well versed in the newer, less acceptable techniques. He shook his head. Nurses, students, even young doctors, they were all alike. Hankering after the new-fangled. Experimenting. The established methods were sure, tried, infallible, efficacious. Psycho-chemicals. Lobal manipulation. Irradiation by isotope. Segmental or total lobe amputation. Old fashioned perhaps, but proved. The titivation of the prosencephalon, physical seat of mental parvanimity. What had refrigerants to offer that isotopes could not duplicate?

"We will begin with mentatone," he said. "Aggression corrective. With some stimulation of the conciliatory factors and adjustment of the social integration level. It may also be necessary to inject some form of belief or group identification characteristics. We shall see." He addressed himself suddenly to the patients. "Why did you attack Mrs. Boothby?" he asked.

Their leader picked his nails with a sheath knife. Thought came slowly to him and words with monosyllabic infrequency. Lobal excitation of parvanimity was apparent

in the clouded, downcast eyes, the irises pink with the outward, capillary distension symtomatic of the inward turmoil.

"Dozy old bird sitting there all smug and liking herself. What she got to be smug about? Done her good to rough her up a bit."

"You see!" The doctor turned triumphantly to his nurse. "A perfectly straightforward case of society rejection. Nothing more drastic than mentatone. Remand them for treatment!"

"Where?" the constable asked.

"Reception centre, Pentonville."

"You are not, I suppose, interested in the case of Mrs. Boothby?" the sergeant asked. He leaned on the desk glowering in the dark irony of a pretherapeutic age, his knuckles white on the chrome edging.

"I imagine not. She is, I believe, a surgical case?"

"She's dead."

"A pity."

The white police car glided along the Thames in the shadow of the giant office blocks of Old Chelsea. There were lines of white mist on the river, the wake of the hovercrafts carrying tourists from Wapping Bridge to the Nuclear Power Station at Hampton Court. The sun glinted on the nose-to-tail queue of helicopters shuttling between Piccadilly and the airport, the air vibrant with the thrash of their wings, giant eagles, flap, flap, flapping. He held her hand, drinking in with pride the beauty of the capital's modernity. The hub of all the world. Smiling, she took from her handbag a dispenser of compatapan. They divided a tablet between them. Eyes meeting eyes, they swallowed. Hand closed tightly on hand. They were very good friends indeed.

* * * *

"Oily mouthed sugar-bellies," the patient grumbled, "I'll carve this joint into little pieces. Little bits of candyfloss I'll carve it into." He stabbed and hacked at the solid plastic walls of the delinquent ward. The polished surface was impervious to attack, the window scratch-proof in invulnerable perspex. There were straw-bellied dolls, wax-

work dummies, punch-balls and old lady effigies in papier-mâché and clay. They were there for destruction and distraction and were thus ignored by all the patients in the hostile contempt of society rejection.

"I want to show them," the leader protested, "I want to show this honey-bellied lot just what they're up against."

"No use cutting up," the second sighed, "they don't take no notice."

"Bastards!"

The junior trifled with an idea. A momentous idea. An idea so incontrovertibly right that he hesitated because of his years and his subservience to express it.

"Let's expose ourselves to the matron!" He blurted out suddenly unable longer to contain himself and his inspiration. The other two looked at him with open-mouthed, dull-eyed wonder.

"Out of the mouths of babes and whatsits," the leader murmured. "Let's get her in!" He pressed the button for attendance.

"Can I help you, gentlemen?"

"Yeah!" The leader addressed himself to the screen, "We're feeling a bit misunderstood. Despised. Rejected. Not loved. Lepers. Like we got spots and smell, see? We'd adjust double quick if we had a bird to talk to. You got a bird as'll love us?"

"Matron will come at once!"

They danced wildly, thumping each other in the mad delirium of their delight. They ripped at the buttons of their jean flaps. As the tap-tap of high-heeled shoes echoed down the corridor, they stood in line facing the door, hands at the ready.

"Altogether," he whispered, "when I counts, you rips." One-two-three. They dropped their flaps and mouthed ecstatically like fishes in the perplexity of spawning. The matron smiled.

"You have something you wish to show me?" she asked. "Some irritation, inflammation or maladjustment? All the resources of the centre are available for even the slightest suggestion of inhibition-provoking disfigurement." They covered themselves sadly, sullenly. Sheepishly fiddling with the securing buttons.

"You can't win," they groaned. "You just can't win." The matron sympathised. She was kindness itself.

"These things are very common," she explained. "They date from earliest childhood. First the chamber pot. Then proudly standing with the mother's hand guiding and then —suddenly—the separation, the agony of standing alone, ill-prepared, with only your own small inadequate hand to point the way. That feeling of parental betrayal and loneliness and insufficiency remains a permanent pin-point of resenting ulcer on the frontal lobe. Do not suffer embarrassment because of me. You have not been importunate. What you have done was a natural outcry against the barbarity of childhood emancipation, a too sudden withdrawal of the guiding hand. In its own way, a situation of such sudden remoteness is more trauma-engendering than a too precipitate weaning."

"Yeah," they said, "we guess it is."

Dr. Bernstein arrived with nurse, note-book, syringe and adequate supplies of mentatone in liquid form. Unprotesting, already obsequious, they rolled up their sleeves and stood with sagging knees, meekly awaiting the inevitable. Dr. Bernstein briskly inserted the needle and injected the prescribed dosage. A moment passed . . .

The leader smiled kindly at his number 3. Very young. A bright boy. Loyal, willing, even moderately intelligent. A flickering trace of intellectual fire and fervour smouldering deep down behind the opacity of his half-closed, sleepy, gentle blue eyes. He slipped an arm around his shoulders in avuncular compassion.

"You O.K., Sid?" he asked.

"Thank you," Sid replied gratefully, "I'm very well. It's kind of you to ask."

Dr. Bernstein, the matron and the nurse watched proudly as the patients tidied the ward, cleaned the windows and polished the chrome bolts of the security doors. They whistled happily at their chores.

"It is probably enough," Dr. Bernstein considered, loath to let well be. "We might try a trace of *esprit de corps* in the form of .01 milligramme personadine."

"I agree!" The nurse filled the syringe and held the

patients' arms as they knelt before the doctor, doe-eyed and appreciative, disciplined, dutiful and alert.

"I am against excision of the lobal zones," Dr. Bernstein lectured as his patients gathered around the wash-basin at their hair combing and ablutions, "except in extreme cases of bestiality and the more sadistic forms of aggression. Refrigerants, in my opinion are only sophisticated variants of the established radiation technique and even that was not necessary in this quite moderate case of high-spirited barbarity. As you see, in all moderate cases of high rejection factor, ordinary destruction and mutilation peccadilloes, psycho-chemical treatment is sufficient."

"It is a pity," the matron sighed, "we cannot keep them permanently under chemico-therapeutic subjection. Life would be easier for all of us." The doctor agreed.

"But the cost," he pointed out, "would be phenomenal. Mentatone is a very expensive and complex chemical. No health service could afford the three-hourly injections necessary for all its delinquents. Then of course there is the church. Still oddly advocating a return to the mental disciplines of the past. The peculiar notion that a mental state resulting from years of religious practice is in some strange way more laudable than the same state resulting from a two-second injection of ecstazone or religiolite. Philosophy, religion and even surgery have never really come to terms with chemistry."

"True," the nurse conceded, "but there is still the problem of re-integration. As we all know, our delinquents cannot be returned to their old haunts in the exalted state we have engendered. Our major problem is in calculating the precise degree of residual civic responsibility on discharge."

"Something always rubs off," the matron smiled.

"True. We can even estimate to a certain extent what the residual rubbing off will be. What is much more difficult is the calculation of how much is, in fact, desirable. Too much humanitarian fervour and the delinquent will become the victim of his former collaborators and quickly become a surgical rather than a mental patient. Too much sense of civic responsibility, and he will become an outcast

among his fellows and return to us for further adjustment and remedial treatment. We have to decide exactly what degree of delinquency aptitude we must return to him rather than what possible limits there may be to our curative chemico-psychiatry. An aggressive quotient adequate for retaliation and survival among his contemporaries but less intense than that likely to provoke assaults on elders and strangers. A residual savagery confining itself to limited areas of internecine gang warfare, but stopping short of actual attack on the weak, coloured or unprepared members of the senior classes."

"I will demonstrate," Dr. Bernstein reproved, "the degree of aggression, residual savagery and revolt is readily computable. We sublimate aggression into the area of high-spirited truculence, savagery into the pursuance of primitive sport watching, like fox-hunting, pheasant shooting and wrestling, whilst revolt can be channelled into verbal rather than physical activities. Bawling is to many a more satisfying form of revolt than brawling. Observe!"

He beckoned the three patients who lined themselves, attentive, upright and alert before him. He administered three capsules from a box marked 'Reintegrator.' They swallowed. A moment passed. The delinquents retreated to a corner, casting suspicious and hostile glances at their persecutors. They shuffled uncertainly.

"We'll give old slobberchops something to think about," the leader whispered. "When I gives the word, we'll all shout this." He scribbled the gleanings of a life-time's obscenities on the back of a cigar box. The spelling was as inaccurate as the true meaning obscure, but the implied message was inescapable—total rejection. Total repudiation. They chanted their anthem of affront.

"Excellent!" Dr. Bernstein beamed. "Exactly the right dosage. I think we have them safely on a mid-way course."

"You are," he asked the matron, "familiar with the Karkoff scale of aggression factors?" The matron nodded. She was nervous, paling, a nausea and revulsion overriding her normal equanimity and disciplined tolerance. Dr. Bernstein looked at his watch. The three-hour period. In his preoccupation with the delinquents he had forgotten his own staff. She proffered her arm, pleading, mute and

confused. He applied the syringe. .02 milligrammes Tolerantol. The matron smiled.

"Our patients," the doctor continued, "are evincing the characteristics of five Karkoffs. As you know, the scale divides aggression from dumb insolence at strength one to brutal attack at strength ten. Shouted obscenities are in the upper limits of the safety zone at strength five. They are ready for discharge."

The nurse entered "Cure effective—Re-integrated" on their case history cards for onward transmission to Cheyne Walk police clinic files. The delinquents were issued with the usual discharge ration of cigars, five dollars and a copy of Braithwaites "Cure Thyself." They would shortly tear it to shreds, but Braithwaite had himself recognised the curative value of treatise destruction in his work and had stipulated the use of rendable paper and fragile stitching in every edition.

"I will take you home," the doctor said. The nurse was grateful for the lift. Only police cars were allowed in the metropolitan area between 9.00 and 17.00 hours and the buses and underground were in consequence incredibly overcrowded.

The white car glided down Winston Churchill Street and branched into the South Eastern tunnel at Kings Cross. At Dartford they crossed to the centre lane, the non-stop highway to the coast.

"For your information," she said quietly, "I live in Canning New Town."

"I know," he said.

They parked in the top tier of the vast concrete autogarage on Beachy Head. The sun was setting and a light mist rose from a still sea where the moon hovered behind circling gulls.

"I love you," he said. She touched his face with slender white fingers and her eyes were sad.

"I'm sorry."

It was very quiet as the sun went down and the gulls settled, riding white on the water golden from the moon.

"I admire and respect you, but . . ."

"But I do not attract you physically?"

She nodded, turning her eyes to the sea where the wake

of a hovercraft set the sleeping gulls rocking on undulations of white wave. He smiled. Taking from his pocket a small dispenser, he proffered a tiny white tablet. She hesitated, searching his eyes in troubled perplexity, but, confident in his medical acuity, she swallowed.

"I love you," she said, "more than all the great and wonderful things in this, the most perfect of all possible worlds." He held her to him with one arm, whilst, with the other he returned the dispenser to his pocket. The latest and most complex of the psycho-chemicals. Amordine. He kissed her very tenderly.

— ERNEST HILL

The fact that Keith Roberts' novel is running in this issue does not, we feel, entitle us to disappoint Anita-fans although we must warn them that this may be the last of the series—for a while.

IDIOT'S LANTERN

by Keith Roberts

"An' wot, may I arsk," said Granny Thompson fiercely, "is *that*?"

Anita interposed herself hastily between her Granny and the men who were carrying in the big shiny box. She said, "Nothing, Gran . . . Well of course it is, actually. It's a sort of . . . thing I've bought. You'll like it when it's working, honestly——"

"Workin'?" snarled the old lady, trying ineffectually to get round her granddaughter. "Wot might it *do* then, when it's *workin'* . . ."

"It's a television set, Gran, don't interfere."

"Television?" The elder Thompson whooped and grabbed for her stick. "Well, yer kin jist television it straight orf *out* agin ter start with. Television . . . never 'eard the like. Bad enough with orl this 'lectric shootin' about orl uvver the place without that gret 'ulkin' thing set there blarin' an' mouthin' orl hours . . . An' wot's *'e* doin'?" Her gimlet gaze had caught the pair of feet ascending the ladder propped by the kitchen window. She was through the back door in a flash, apron flying in the speed of her passage. Somewhere en route her felt hat became attached to her head at a belligerent angle. Anita panted after her. "Gran, be reasonable! You can't——"

"Come down orf my *chimbley*," roared Granny Thompson in a voice that lifted a flock of pigeons two fields away. "Or by 'Im wot's down under, I'll *smite* yer——"

"Gran!"

"Come *orf* . . ." And Granny raised her stick, pointing it like a rifle at the surprised engineer above her. Anita saw the spell coming and whipped the weapon out of the

old lady's hand just in time. She simpered and called up. "Er . . . carry on, please. We were just wondering whether . . . whether the stack was strong enough."

"Safe as Gibraltar, ducks. Take two o' these, it would. All right, Fred, let's 'ave it . . ." And the aerial began to sway up the side of the house like a large and threatening insect.

Anita towed her Granny back to the kitchen by main force and shoved her down in a chair. She said firmly, "We're having a telly, Gran, and that's all there is to it. Winter's coming and we don't want another time like we had last year. Snow up to the roof and neither of us able to go outside for weeks. You know how difficult you got. Like a . . . a bear with a sore head."

"I didn't git like *nothink*," snarled the old lady. "It were you, yer young rapscallion. Fidgetin' an' frettin' orl uvver, tryin' out stuff wot you 'adn't got no right tamperin' with. Yer needn't 'ave done that thing on the cat, ter start with. Best familiar we ever 'ad an' woomph, splat, scrorch, that were *that* . . . It teks time ter mek 'em up as good as that one were, whether you knows it or whether you *dunt*. Dunt jist pick 'em orf the trees yer know, they 'as ter be *trained* . . . An' then that thing wi' the wood bloke. Turnin' 'is lorry wheels square jist acause yer didn't like 'im callin' yer missis. 'Aughty young cat. 'Ad the p'lice round 'ere that time didn't we, wantin' ter know 'oo'd bin muckin' about. If I 'adn't took thort an' turned everythink back orlright again while they was pokin' an' pryin' they'd be 'ere *still*. An' orl this *'lectric*. Done ter suit you that were, though 'Im wot's down under knows I dunt 'old with it . . . Stuff runnin' an' fidgetin' orl about under the floors an' ev'ry-wheer, it en't *nat'ral*. I never did 'old with it an' I wunt *now* . . ."

The house began to resound with knocks and bangs, the whirring of drills and loud and incomprehensible shouts to 'try 'er again' and 'Fire it a bit more, Fred.'

"Look at wot 'appened yisdey," foamed Granny. "When I were a-tryin' ter do the floors. Orl I did were turn that there vac thing on an' whoosh, sparks an' stuff ev'ry-wheer . . ."

Anita was being very patient. "I've told you before Gran, you mustn't plug it in to the light. It isn't safe."

"No, no more ent none on it. *Whoosh* it went, like one o' them firecrackers. I felt the bits 'it me 'at . . . Jist a lucky charnst I were wearin' it," moaned Granny, who generally wore the shapeless headgear morning, noon and night. "Might 'a singed me ears orf, it might. An' now this thing——"

One of the workmen poked his head round the door. He said, " 'Fraid you're not getting a very good picture, miss. You're a fringe area, see?"

Granny peered at him. "Does that mean we kent 'ev it?"

"Oh no, there's a picture all right. It's just a bit faint, that's all."

Anita squealed with delight. "Oo, Gran, it's on. Come an' see . . ." The old lady stumped after her. Anita knelt in front of the screen, cooing at the flickery picture. Figures showed dimly through a haze of spots. Granny bent, glasses rammed firmly on the end of her nose. She let out a most fearsome shout. "Out! Out with it! Look at that, gels wi' *legs* . . . I ent 'avin' none o' that, not in this 'ouse . . ."

"Oh, Gran, don't be so silly. It's only a ballet programme for schools . . ."

The men were already edging toward the door. One of them said hurriedly, "We might try a fringe set if this one ain't too good. Give it a try, we'll be back tomorrer . . ."

Granny Thompson raised her stick. "Not if I 'as anythink ter do with it you wunt. Fact is, you wunt even *leave* . . ." But the van had already started up and driven away.

The television had its trial run that evening. There was a certain tenseness in the air. Anita sat entranced, blue reflections dancing on her solemn face. The old lady sewed in the far corner of the room, back obstinately turned. Only occasionally did she look up from her work to glare at the offence over the rims of her glasses. In time the periods of sewing became less, the periods of screen-watching longer. Anita's ears twitched joyfully, detecting each tiny rasp as the material was laid in her Granny's lap. At nine an ice show came on. Anita had never seen anything like it. She watched dazzled as the tiny figures

swooped about, graceful and remote as birds. After a time there was a 'clump' next to her as Granny Thompson banged down her chair. Anita glanced sideways and raised an insolent eyebrow. "Dunt give me none o' yer *chelp* neither," snarled the old lady. "I s'pose if we gotta *ev* it, we might as well *wotch* it . . ." She settled down to viewing. As the programme went on Granny's face got nearer and nearer to the screen, her hooked nose and chin, that always threatened to meet, seemed to draw closer than ever in concentration. After half an hour she pronounced her verdict. "Skates," she said firmly. "I'm almos' prepared ter swear them there gals is on *skates* . . ."

The future of the set was assured.

Winter came, not so bitter as the previous year but hard enough. The television was a great boon. The fringe set duly arrived and night after night while the wind howled outside and the snow drove like bitter needles through the trees of the copse Anita and her Granny sated themselves with the little moving picture. Anita adored the dancing and the music, Shakespeare plays when available, current affairs programmes, travelogues and nature talks. Granny watched most things avidly but her greatest delight was the quiz. She saw every one that was screened and if the other side offered something better that was just too bad. Many evenings the witches sat in silence, lips compressed, while in front of them the channel switch clicked backward and forward as their wills contested possession of the set. In the end Anita gave up. It was something to humour her Granny at all, and the telly had certainly done that.

With the better weather Anita began to tire, but Granny Thompson remained a devout viewer. If Anita was out, walking in the woods with something improbable, she was sure to be regaled with a full description of the quizzes she had missed as soon as she got back. "There were this ole gel," her Granny would say, cackling at the memory. "An' that there bloke, that wot's-'is name, wavin' orl that there money, an' she didn't know wot ter do. A pitcher, 'er face were. You jist orter 'ave seen it . . ." And so on, seemingly for ever.

Anita soon discovered another drawback. The cottage was isolated, their television the only one for miles around.

The emissions from the set played havoc with her radar system, her sonar and all the rest of her mess of senses. The programmes got mixed and snarled up with the thoughtstreams of animals so that Anita could neither track nor talk to anything. The weasel took her favourite family of mice, she didn't hear him hating till it was far too late; three owls left the district in disgust, rats got to the moorhen eggs, every single thing went wrong. One night she followed a hunting fox for hours; he was close to his kill, and Anita was beaming in on him fast, when flick—"Uppen it, y'ole fool," roared Granny, distant in her mind. "Yer bound to git *summat*, the booby's *gorn* . . ." Anita spun round, retuning desperately, but it was too late; the fox had 'gorn' as well, and with him a month-old hare. Anita foamed, biting her lips and crooking her hands, and for a few moments it would have been very bad for anyone who got too close. Then she steadied down and went back home, giving up for yet another night. It was obvious something was going to have to be done.

For once the old lady played right into her hands. The elder Thompson broached the critical subject the next day, sitting peeling early carrots in front of the ever-flickering eye of the Idiot's Lantern. "Yer know I bin thinkin'," she said carelessly. "These 'ere ole gels on these quizzes. I dunt reckon 'arf on 'em knows wot they're at. I reckon I could jist about do as good as wot they do. Mebbe better."

Anita nodded tiredly. "You'll have to go on one of the programmes, then, Gran, and show them all up."

Granny Thompson nodded, laid down the bowl and began searching in the capacious pocket of her apron. She said, "Om a-gooin' to. Om orlready rit." She held up a large and impressive-looking envelope.

Anita felt a sudden little gleam of hope. There was no doubt her Granny was what society normally terms a 'character', but once or twice in the past she'd seen the results of people taking her over-lightly. She said silkily, "What a good idea, Gran. I'll post it for you."

Granny Thompson snatched the letter away. "Young varmint. You'll a-do summat to it, I kin see it in yer face. I'll tek it meself. That way I shall know it gits there."

Anita held her hand out. "Witches' honour, Gran. I'll post it."

Her Granny still looked suspicious. "By 'Im wot's down under?"

"Yes."

The old lady snorted but she relinquished the letter. "I still says yore up ter summat, my gel . . ."

Anita was too wise to disagree. "Yes, Gran, I am. But I will post it for you."

She took the letter to the village by hand, resisting the temptation to levitate it even the last twenty yards or so. She too wanted to be quite sure it arrived. She had slipped in with her Granny's quaint prose a recent picture of herself that she considered showed several of the best aspects of her personality; before resealing the envelope she did several mysterious things that would ensure its being well received. The last of the rites was a breathing inside the flap, the tiniest touch of her lips to the stiff paper. Then away the whole thing went, as loaded and deadly as a little white bomb.

The answer came within a week. Granny Thompson was appalled; it took her two changes of glasses and three lens polishings to resolve the message. Then she came plunging out to the kitchen to her granddaughter. "Look at this 'ere, gel," she said breathlessly. "We're a-gotta goo *up* . . !"

Anita nodded, hands busy with dishes and suds. "Well, that's what you wanted, isn't it, Gran?"

"I ent so sure," gloomed the old lady. "Ent never bin ter Lunnon, not in orl me days . . ."

"So what?" asked Anita scornfully, who hadn't been to London either. "All the more fun."

Granny shook her head. "Well, I dunt know. Orl them folk . . . I dunt know as 'ow I fancies it . . ."

Anita had seen a chance of liberation, and she wasn't letting it slip. "Granny," she said viciously, "don't tell me you're *afraid*! What, and you a witch?" She dropped into the vernacular. "I thort yer could do *anythink* . . ."

Whup!

That was the dishcloth across her ear. Anita ducked the backhand, the most dangerous swipe in the old lady's repertoire, fielded a pot that rose somewhat startlingly at her

head and rushed out the door giggling. Something else passed her as she ran between the first trees. The object resolved itself into the head of the yardbrush. It missed her, hung uncertainly in the air then returned the way it had come. That was boomerang levitation, a trick Anita was still trying to teach herself. When it became apparent the barrage had finished she headed off through the wood, hearing her Granny's cries of "Young *varmint* . . ." fading in the distance. The first thing to do was to find out about trains.

That was easy although it cost Titchford Halt a timetable. The stationmaster was never able to figure out the sudden gust of wind that sent the book hopping through the window and winging away like a big clumsy moth. He chased the fleeing railway property a moderate distance before returning, scratching his head and grumbling to himself. It was probably just as well he gave up; Anita was excited, and her moods could change very quickly at the best of times. A similar sortie against the local paper shop yielded a map of London, and that was that. Things were all set.

The trip was arranged for the following week. As it turned out, Anita had no difficulty finding where to go; she sensed the studio quite easily by all the radiations coming from it. There was a little trouble in the tube station when Granny caught her heel in one of the steps of what she was pleased to call a 'hexcavator' and almost took a dire revenge on the machine; Anita dragged her away hoping her threats to reverse it or turn all its treads flat were merely boasting. At the studio they had to wait what seemed an interminable length of time before they were interviewed. Anita viewed the compère of the coming programme with some distaste. It seemed to her he was probing their characters, searching for the little mannerisms he could bring out with humourous and telling effect later on. She had no doubt that they would be selected to appear; she was wearing her newest dress and her long hair was beautifully brushed, they couldn't miss. When she was asked what subject they would like to answer questions on she said, 'Folklore,' very firmly. That should cause the ruction if all else failed . . .

It was evening before they were due to perform, and by then the studio looked very different. An audience had

arrived and there were cameras everywhere and cables, and microphones on great long booms. Strange machinery clacked and hummed, coloured lights winked, everything was bustle and confusion. Men rushed about with sheafs of papers or stood and gave incomprehensible orders about grams and sound cues and veloscillators. By the time the show actually got under way, with blasts of organ music and much clapping from the audience, Granny's nerves had reached a fine pitch of tension. Anita could feel ideas churning in the old lady's mind. The iron was decidedly hot.

Their turn came at last and they walked out onto the stage. Banks of lights revolved to stare at them; the compère met them, nearly unrecognisable in his make-up, patted and touched till he had steered them into exactly the right position. Behind him a camera loomed like a Thing from Mars, the red light in its forehead glowing like an angry castemark. Anita gulped and her own composure began to sag a little. The quizmaster introduced them as "Mrs. and Miss Thompson, from Northamptonshire" and asked for "a big hand" for some obscure reason. Applause pattered like gunfire and Granny looked startled. She muttered to Anita, "We ent done nothink yit . . . "

The machines caught the words and flung them out on the air. The audience roared delightedly and Granny Thompson's lips set in a thin line. Anita began exultantly planning the best escape route. Everything was working out just as she'd thought it would. It was one thing to watch this show from an easy chair at home but quite another to be up on stage helping provide the kicks. That wasn't quite so damn funny . . .

The compère beamed. "But you will do something, Mrs. Thompson, you will. We're all quite sure of that. Now, this really most delightful girl, would you step forward a little, please, my dear, that's it, let all the folks have a good view. Now this is your granddaughter you tell me, Mrs. Thompson, that is correct is it not?"

Granny turned from glaring at a camera that was very obviously examining Anita's cleavage. She opened her mouth, considered, then closed it again like a rat trap. She said frostily, "No, has a matter hof fact . . . she *ent*. She

'eppens ter be the daughter hof a third cousin. Hon me mother's side . . ."

"But you have brought her up?"

"Yis . . ."

"And very charmingly too if I may say, yes very charmingly . . ." For the benefit of his audience the compère rolled his eyes and appeared about to drool. "Very nicely too . . . And you're going to answer questions on, let me see, on folklore, isn't it, that is correct, folklore?"

"Om orlready *tole* yer twice," muttered Granny fiercely. "You blokes do goo on, dunt yer?"

A gale of laughter. The compère rode above it. "And why . . . why this particular subject, Mrs. Thompson?"

"Ar, well," said Granny, settling onto more familiar ground. "Om a witch, see? Fact is, we both are. Only she ent 'ad much of a charnst ter practise, seein' as she ent no age."

The compère's eyebrows rose and fell; it was his most famous expression and the audience promptly became hysterical. Anita hung onto her Granny's arm, feeling the old lady buzzing with rage. The longer she could avert the explosion, the better it would be when it came. The compère cut the amusement short. "Very well, then could we have the first question please, on folklore? Thank you. Now, Mrs. Thompson, and you too, Anita, think very carefully, for one pound can you tell me . . . now think v-e-r-y carefully . . . Is a *leprechaun* . . . is a *leprechaun* a little man, or a complaint of the foot?"

Granny drew herself up. "As fur as I know, it ent *neither* . . ."

The quizmaster was anxious to help. "Now, Mrs. Thompson, this is only the first question. Now think carefully, when an Irishman . . ." He winked roguishly at the audience. "When an Irishman sees a little man on a shamrock leaf, what does he call him?"

"They ent nothink like little men," declared Granny stoutly. "Little skinned-rabbit tatty lookin' things they are, orl 'ead. If yer'd seen one yer wouldn't be so free gooin' on about 'em." When the laughter had died down again she shot her final barb. "I dunt b'leeve yer knows wot yer *on* about . . ."

The compère was delighted. He was certainly getting the company money's worth out of this pair. Beauty and character together, what a combo . . . He would have liked to milk them some more but the clock was ticking on. He put his next question. "Very well, Mrs. Thompson, we'll accept you as an expert. It does seem you know exactly what a leprechaun is. Now for two pounds, *two* pounds, can you tell me three old-time cures for rheumatism? Any three you can think of now, any three at all . . ."

Anita thought she was going to burst. This was it, this just had to be it . . .

"Toads," snarled Granny. "Round yer neckit usually though yer *can* stick 'em practic-ly *anywheer*. I dunt 'old with 'em though. Sheep jollop's best, that kent 'ardly be beat . . ."

The compère's face changed abruptly. Up above, someone began a frantic signalling. "Yer dries it," bellowed Granny inexorably. "Then rubs it uvver anythink wot 'urts. That gen'rally answers. But if it *dunt*, try dugs' wotsits . . ."

The quizmaster was aghast. The audience convulsed. "Only they ent so easy come by ner more," explained Granny. "They're the things though——"

"Mrs. Thompson, *please*——"

"You 'as ter spell 'em up," screeched the old lady. "Bile 'em. I kent tell yer the spells 'cos they're a trade secret but if yer teks my advice——"

The compère was trying to hustle them away from the mikes. He no longer looked suave. "I ent *finished*," fumed Granny. The great man spoke between his teeth. "You have, lady, by God you have . . ."

"Dunt you blaspheme in my presence," shrieked the elder Thompson. The stick was up at last, beating the air. Faint blue crackles emerged from its tip. "Tek yer 'ands *orf*," snarled Granny. She swung round. "An' stop pokin' that thing down our gel's *frock* . . ." The camera received a full charge from the spellstick, whistled backward and began making thunderous circuits of the stage. Hardboard flats flew apart; technicians removed themselves with more speed than elegance. "Whippersnappers," yelled Granny. "Shovin' an' pushin' young knows-it-orls. Never seen nothink like it, not in orl me days. Disbeleevin' lot . . . If

yer wants magic yer kin *ev it* . . ." She flourished the stick and trails of wire leaped in the air like snakes, lights flashed, machines jetted smoke before collapsing into fragments. The old lady became surrounded by an aura of malevolence, blue and flickering. Galumphing noises sounded as the audience took to its heels. "Give y'orl summat ter larf at," howled Granny. Huge winds rushed about the studio performing indignities on everything; the control room panel imploded with a mighty whooshing, Anita's skirt blew up round her ears. She ducked and part of a ground row passed over her head, followed by the compère. Both began doing falling-leaf stunts over the stalls. The runaway camera careered by again, its superstructure decorated with an odd variety of objects; pieces of lath and rope, loops of cable, the remains of a canvas-back chair; and a shoe, solitary and rather forlorn, hooked over the top of the lens turret. The machine straightened, accelerated and vanished with a huge crash through the side wall.

Granny was well into her stride now; circles of blue light were splashing from the end of her stick and the tinkling and screaming round about were continuous. Anita concentrated desperately, trying to shut out the din. Her mind groped along wires, through junction boxes, found the great main fuses far off in the intake room. She screwed up her face, strained; there was a bang and a sputtering and the building was in darkness. Emergency lamps flared on almost at once; she killed those as well, grabbed her Granny's elbow and scurried for the stage door, using her bat-sense to dodge Unidentified Flying Objects and the clutching hands of technicians. The doorkeeper nearly had her; Anita threw a quick spell and his hat rammed itself down over his eyes with a soft, powerful sound. He blundered on past into the auditorium, which by now sounded like level four in the Inferno. Anita set a bank of fire extinguishers gushing as a diversion and panted round the corner of the building, still hauling Granny. There was a taxi; they bundled into it, Anita sweating nearly as much as she was laughing and Granny still clutching the spell-stick and uttering horrible maledictions on everybody connected with television, hexcavators, quizzes, Lunnon and everything else she could think of. The hue and cry fell

behind them rapidly and at Saint Pancras there was a train already waiting, first stop Kettering. Within minutes they were clear of Town, and by nine o'clock they were home.

For the rest of the week the Thompson telly stayed silent. Granny did not deign either to mention it or glance in its direction; even her omnipresent duster passed it by with scarcely a flick. For Anita, it was bliss. She wandered about meeting old friends and making new ones. The nights were full of chattering again; she listened to foxes underground and badgers, the squeaks of mating newts miles off in the dewponds back of Brington Hill. She discovered an entirely new pipistrelle family and there were grass snakes in the copse now and a new boy at Debden's farm whose thought-patterns were very nice indeed. She could hear everything talking, owls and bats and insects, even the little creatures on the back of the moon. She collected a couple of newspapers and read about the odd technical accidents at a London television studio; the G.P.O. and the Electricity Authority were still investigating them. The police held the disturbance to be the work of practical jokers and were anxious to interview two people who had appeared on a certain quiz programme; but if there was a hunt it didn't reach as far as Anita and her Granny. Things returned almost to normal.

But not quite. A week later Anita sensed the old familiar tingling in the air and rushed home disappointed to find the telly on and her Granny settled in front of it as of old. But she need not have worried; the old lady's eyes were glittering ominously, her lips were compressed and she was gripping her stick in front of her. Round about were great books of magic, vats of odd liquids seethed and smoked and the cauldron was bubbling furiously with no fire beneath. Anita settled quietly in a corner. She could tell something remarkable was about to happen.

The quiz that had been Granny Thompson's favourite programme was announced. The compère appeared, urbane as ever, smiling and bowing as he introduced a fresh batch of victims. Granny sat stolidly until the questioning was under way. Then she leaned forward. As the quizmaster mouthed his second poser she raised her stick, pointed it at the screen and said slowly and distinctly "Stuff . . ."

Anita watched open-mouthed to see if there would be any effect. Behind her the cauldron splashed and gurgled; she could feel the power gathered in the room. On the screen the gentleman did seem to stiffen a little; then he rallied and carried on. Granny Thompson increased the pressure. Sparks poured from the end of her stick, enveloped the television set with blue fire. On the cottage roof the aerial began to hum with strain. *"Stuff,"* said Granny with even greater firmness.

The compère stopped at that, and stared round him as if dazed. The sparks were hissing and roaring now, nearly blotting out the picture on the tube; something erupted from the thatch overhead, fled squawking. "Orter be took *orf*," yelled the old lady triumphantly. "You ent wuth wotchin. Dunt know wot yer *at* . . ."

The quizmaster appeared to wrestle with an inner compulsion. Then he turned and walked rapidly into camera, face twisted with rage. "You wicked old bat," he hissed. "I'll find you; and when I do I'll ram that stick so far down your gullet——"

For a moment the television appeared to swell. Then there was a flash and a shattering roar. Anita was bowled backwards. She got up slowly, half stunned and with her face covered with smuts. At first she couldn't see anything for the coloured patches floating in front of her eyes. Then she made out the blast-marks on the walls, the crater in the ceiling. The end of her bed hung through it precariously. The television was completely smashed, a blackened hulk from which smoke was rising in a column; there was a rich smell of burning insulation. Anita coughed, put a hand to her head and stared about for her Granny. In the far corner of the room was a mess of furniture; protruding from it she saw a pair of shoes, sharp-pointed toes turned outwards. She rushed across terrified but before she had got Granny Thompson upright the old lady was cackling gleefully. " 'Ad 'im, gel," she shouted. "I 'ad 'im . . . I didn't reckon I could 'ardly, 'ad ter work out a brand noo spell fer it. But I 'ad 'im. Tek 'im orf now they will, they'll reckon 'e's gorn orf 'is 'ead . . ." She slowly became aware of the mess. "Lor'-a-daisy," she said, shocked into pro-

fanity. And then with quick panic, "Gel, *wheer's* me *glasses . . .*"

For Anita, victory was complete. The destruction of the telly was like the death of an old enemy. There were disadvantages of course; they had workmen in the house for a month, and it took her even longer than that to find her cat and persuade him he could with safety return home. But Granny Thompson always stoutly denied the spell had gone wrong. "It were the telly," she explained. "It jist wadn't man enough for it." Then, with a sniff that indicated the subject was finally and completely closed, "Ought to 'a bin a *twenty-one inch . . .*"

—KEITH ROBERTS

PARADISE FOR A PUNTER

by Clifford C. Reed

The big man reading the newspaper gave a loud snort of derision. Mr. Rogers looked up from his card with some irritation. If the man must read, surely he could do it quietly, and not disturb people who were trying to concentrate. In any case, why read the paper here? This was a racecourse, not a library.

There must have been some magnetic quality in his accusing glare for the offender turned. The eyes of the two men met. By rights, that was all that should have happened. But the big man's eyes, flickering over Mr. Rogers, narrowed. Then—he smiled. It was a sardonic smile, and again Mr. Rogers heard the mocking sound which had evoked his annoyance. But now it was directed at him personally, and he drew back, feeling uneasy.

The smile on the big man's thick lips deepened. "I used to be on the force," he rumbled. He nodded his grim head. "I can still pick them out."

Mr. Rogers sought to turn away, but his companion thrust the newspaper in front of him, blocking his path.

"A mug he was, and finished like one," the big man continued.

Mr. Rogers caught one glimpse of the headline; "ABSCONDING CASHIER WAS STABBED." He pushed the offending sheet away. "I didn't come here to read that," he objected.

His tormentor grinned. "Don't suppose you did," he agreed. "You wouldn't want to be reminded about that. Not here. No. But—*I* can't help noticing. Training. Habit. Even now—even—*here*! I can still spot 'em. You do see that, don't you? You must admit that, if you're a fair minded man."

Mr. Rogers, trapped in a corner, looking round for some way of escape, did not answer.

The big man was not deterred by this silence—ignored it.

Mr. Rogers might not want to discuss crime, particularly this crime, but the big man did. It was obvious that it was meat and drink to him.

"This mug," he growled, "he loses all his money, an' he still comes back. You can't teach him. He still reckons he can win. Except that now he hasn't got a stake. So—he does what they all do. He helps himself from the safe. He's going to put it back. Sure! That's what they all say. The fools! But—this one's different. He gets what's coming to him, before he starts for the course. He'll never put anything back, he won't."

Vainly Mr. Rogers tried to edge through a small gap. The big man was too quick for him. "Please," Mr. Rogers said in his shrill voice. "It's very interesting, I'm sure, but, if you'll excuse me—?"

He might as well have remained silent. His captor's harsh voice went on without pity. "It's not like a real case, though. Not being on the force any longer." Was there a note of sorrow in the tone? "But, like you can prove if anyone asks you, I can still pick them."

"Can you, Mr. Lewis?" a new voice enquired. A small, brisk looking person had come up unobserved. "And where does that get you, Mr. Lewis? In front of the committee again when I put in my report."

Mr. Rogers blinked in surprise. The big man was no longer frightening. He was shrinking into himself.

"Look—?" the big man faltered. Even his voice was changed. It was weak now, and thin. "Look, steward—?"

"No, Mr. Lewis." The official was adamant. "You've been warned often enough. You must not annoy the patrons."

The ex-policeman did not argue further. He slunk off, dejected and forlorn. But, as he lumbered away, a faint mutter came back to them, "—still pick 'em."

Mr. Rogers shivered.

A terrifying suggestion flared into his mind. In panic he jammed his hand into his coat pocket, groping for the wad of paper that might have been abstracted. His weak eyes looked misery at the steward. But the money was safe. He breathed again.

The official patted him on the arm. "You look a little

upset, Mr. Rogers. You needn't be. You won't be troubled again. You've got some time before the first race. Why don't you go and have a spot. You'll feel better then."

With another friendly pat on the other's arm he walked away, still smiling.

Mr. Rogers stared after him. Today was his first time on this course, yet—the steward knew him. He hunched his shoulders, peering round. Who else knew him?

But no one seemed to be watching him, and after a while his fear lay down again. The steward was right about a drink, though. He could do with one. He slid through the crowd towards the bar, ordered a large whiskey.

"It's getting on, Mr. Rogers," the barman said as he pushed the punter's change back to him. Mr. Rogers' hand jerked. This fellow knew him also! He backed away. The barman smiled at him. "The first race is nearly due," he said.

Mr. Rogers looked up at the clock. It was true. He hadn't much time. He swallowed, choked, and hurried out.

He must get on Firefly. Short odds they'd be, but, he had plenty today. He could bet like he'd always dreamed of betting. And this was safe. Firefly could break its leg, and still win.

He stopped at the first bookie. "What price Firefly?"

"Sixes," the man responded gloomily. There was an air of sad decay about him, of an undeserved burden carried too long.

"On the favourite!" Mr. Rogers shrilled.

The bookie glared. "What do you want?" he countered with fierce moodiness. "Tens? Why don't you try somebody else?"

Mr. Rogers fell back slightly. "It seems a lot on the favourite," he excused himself.

"It *is*," Ben Wilson agreed with obvious distress. "How much do you want?" he asked lugubriously.

Mr. Rogers passed over ten pounds. "Sixty to ten," he said.

He took his ticket, and moved over to the rails. Leaning against the barrier he mopped his face. The weather was oppressive, with no breeze to temper the dry heat of the day. The sky was dark and heavy, with flashes of light on

the horizon. There would be a storm later. But he forgot his discomfort when the starting bell rang.

When the horses went out of sight behind the trees on the far side he stared towards the point at which they would reappear. When they did, he gasped. He could see them clearly. As well as if he had glasses. A trick of light? He could see Firefly's jockey riding out in front. He was sitting easily. Was the boy taking the race too lightly? Mr. Rogers worried. But Firefly was moving away from the rest of the field, smoothly, tirelessly.

There was a roar of voices. Arms were waving. Mr. Rogers was beating on the rails before him. What a horse! What a wonder of a horse! "Firefly! Come on, Firefly!"

"FIREFLY WINS!"

He came back to earth feeling weak. He had won! On this one race he had won more than over the whole of the past year.

Was this his lucky day? It could be. If it were, and it looked like it, he would make the most of it. He had enough money. He could do what every punter dreamed of doing—make one big kill.

He pictured his home-coming after the meeting. He would walk in, not saying anything, and then he would begin to pull the notes from his pockets. And he would never set foot on a course again. He'd promised that before, often, but it would be different now. Because now his dream would have come true. He laughed, laughed out loud. He'd always known it would come true, if he persevered long enough.

He moved to collect his winnings. Wilson the bookie would have a good reason now for looking unhappy. Sixty crisp reasons. Seventy. Mr. Rogers gloated. The books had bled him often enough in the past. Today, their wounds would gush for him.

And there his dream vanished. What a fool he'd been, what a crazy, green, first-time-out innocent he'd proved himself. Wilson would never pay him his winnings. He'd have bolted long ago. Swamped by a sudden uprush of nausea Mr. Rogers gripped the rails to save himself from collapse.

"Aren't you feeling well, Mr. Rogers?" a familiar voice enquired. It was the steward.

Mr. Rogers stared at him. "Why do you allow him on the course?" he asked bitterly.

"Allow who?"

"Wilson. The bookie. He's mad. And I was mad to bet with him. He gave me sixes. I should have reported it."

The steward smiled. "It's all right, Mr. Rogers. Wilson's all right. He'll pay."

"He *will*?"

"Of course he will. Every bookmaker on *this* course pays. You'll never have to worry *here*, Mr. Rogers." Again he patted the punter on the arm. "You know what I suggest, Mr. Rogers? You go and collect your money, and then you go and have a little spot."

He gave Mr. Rogers's arm a final pat, and trotted off.

Later, the fortune he had collected showing as a satisfying bulge in one pocket, Mr. Rogers sipped his drink with satisfaction and self-esteem. Then he put down the glass, and beckoned the barman. "Do him a good turn," he thought. "If he hadn't reminded me of the time, I'd have been too late to lay that bet."

He slid a bank note across. "Just for pointing out that the clock doesn't stand still," he explained.

"Thank you, Mr. Rogers." The man beamed. "But—" he pushed the money back across the counter under one finger, "I can't take it."

"You can't!" A trifle belligerently Mr. Rogers stared back. "Why not?"

"I can take the money you pay for drinks." The barman hesitated in his answer.

"Naturally," Mr. Rogers snapped. "You've got to."

"That's it!" The barman smiled again. "I've got to. Like telling you that the race was nearly due to start. I've got to do that, too."

"You *have*!"

"Oh, yes, Mr. Rogers." The barman beamed wider than before. "I like doing it, of course, but it wouldn't matter if I didn't. It's part of my job." He looked round at the clock, and nodded. "It's nearly time now, Mr. Rogers."

Uneasily the little man obeyed the reminder. He felt

himself resentful, although he knew he should be grateful, for he had a certain winner in this race if he didn't delay to place his bet. But it was the queer way the barman had. Would that spoil his luck?

It shouldn't. He'd offered the fellow a percentage on what he'd won. It wasn't anything to do with him if the man wouldn't take it. It wasn't going to spoil his luck. All the same, he'd stay away from that barman for the rest of the afternoon.

Also, he'd try another bookie. Wilson was too miserable. That expression of his by itself was enough to put anyone off. Besides, he wanted to bet on the favourite again. Wilson wouldn't be such a fool with his odds a second time.

Not that he'd get much better than evens from anyone else. Almost buying money, this was. Still, doubling your stake wasn't so bad. Not if you had enough on.

He halted before an eager little man, hopping like a well-fed bird on his small stand. A cheerful, cheeky, bouncing figure, flanked by a clerk so torpid, so dull, as to appear the exact antithesis of his employer, except that his eyes betrayed the illusion, being as bright and as darting as those of the bookmaker himself.

"What odds Thunderer?" Mr. Rogers enquired. He extracted the amount he had made up his mind to adventure. To invest, rather.

The bookie drew in his breath. His lips moved as he wrestled with himself. "Tens," he said finally.

"Hey!" exclaimed Mr. Rogers.

The bookmaker threw out his arms. He smiled gloriously. "Twelves," he carolled. "Make it twelves, mister." He looked down at his clerk and received a wide grin, full of approval, justifying him in his madness.

"You can't *do* that?" Mr. Rogers screeched.

The fat little man performed a happy shuffle on his step, then blinked down at the irritated gambler. "Why can't I, mister?"

"On the favourite!"

"O-oh!" The bookie made a long, understanding sound of the word. "Like that, is it? Who did you bet with on the first race, mister?"

"Wilson."

"At six to one. I know." The little man snorted. One fat fist beat a tattoo on his satellite's shoulder, and the clerk nodded, wide awake now. "He's mean, Wilson is," the bookie continued. "But he'll learn, mister. He'll learn."

"Learn?" Mr. Rogers forced himself to ask. "Learn what?"

"Why," the bookie cried, "he'll learn he mustn't go on trying to skin blokes like you. He's got to make you happy. He can't do that without he gives. Stands to reason. If people are going to win, why, let 'em win handsome." He essayed a fresh variation of his merry jig, was pleased with the result, and tried it again. "Not but what I wasn't the same myself, once," he confided. "And Charlie boy here, too. Eh, Charlie?"

"Ah," the clerk agreed, leering at the money in the punter's fingers.

"While it lasts, let 'em feel they're on top," the bookmaker finished, and Charlie nodded his head solemnly, up and down, up and down, twirling his pencil around with darting fingers all the while.

Mr. Rogers choked. Wilson had been bad enough, but these two hypocrites! What did they think this was, his first time on a racecourse?

He sneered. "What odds do you give away on the rest?" he asked.

The bookie chuckled. "The rest?" he repeated. A look of conspiracy, of mutual, impertinent enjoyment flashed between him and his assistant. "We don't lay the rest, mister. Only the favourite."

The punter trembled. All the peculiar, unexplained happenings on this course piled up one on top of another. His confidence fled. Only his anger, mounting uncontrollably, gave him the desperation to probe deeper. He forced himself to ask the final question, his voice high, pealing across the hushed, sombre-canopied ground. "What happens when the favourite loses?" he called.

As his words died away in the dried air, overhead the lightning whipped in frenzied shapes, flailing the black clouds, that bellowed with their wounds.

The bookie and his clerk roared with a horrid mirth.

"Waiting for that, I was," the bookie howled. He dug his assistant in the ribs. "Eh, Charlie?"

Charlie, bent over double, beating his thighs with ecstasy, wailed a happy confirmation.

"We'll tell 'im, eh, Charlie boy?"

"Ah!" Charlie straightened, silent now, as the bookmaker was silent. Only their eyes danced, and their fingers moved, slowly, gently, caressing nothing. They leaned out, towards Mr. Rogers.

"The favourite don't lose here, mister," the bookie whispered. "Never!"

Collapsing, the punter heard Charlie's voice as if from far away. "Most of 'em takes it like that."

He came to with the steward supporting his head. Mr. Rogers clutched at him. "Do you know what he said?" he croaked. "He said the favourite always wins. That you can't lose."

"That's right, Mr. Rogers." The steward patted him comfortingly.

Mr. Rogers whimpered. "Am I mad?" he pleaded.

"You're not mad, Mr. Rogers," the steward soothed. "No, you're not mad. You're dead."

Mr. Rogers screamed. He remembered now. He remembered his wife's face as she stood holding his wallet from which the money had fallen. He remembered the way in which her hand had moved on the table, feeling, until it found the carver.

"No, Mr. Rogers," the steward answered. "She's not here. Only you." He helped the newest inmate to his feet. "And now you'd better lay your bet, Mr. Rogers. You've got plenty of money now."

"And I'll win?" Mr. Rogers choked.

"Yes, Mr. Rogers. You'll win. You'll always win while you're here, Mr. Rogers."

— CLIFFORD C. REED

A WAY WITH ANIMALS

by John Rackham

Superintendent Colby hitched his chair forward nearer to the desk, adjusted the still unfilled charge-sheet to a handy tilt, and prepared himself to be patient. Regarding the man opposite, he said,

"Now, sir, we'll have to do better than this, won't we?" His tone was gently urbane, unworried, tinged with a hint of curiosity. In the long years of struggling his way up through the many layers of the law, curiosity was the one emotion that had not atrophied. As he was fond of explaining to his more brusque colleagues, 'I'm fascinated by the wallopers they come out with, sometimes. Simple straightforward stories—never! There must be something about a police station that gives them delusions. What I mean, they'd never dream of spinning such yarns at home, or over a bar counter. Fascinating, that's what it is.' And the tallest yarns came from the least likely of people. This chap, now.

"All I have, so far," he said, "is your name, address, and the fact that you were hanging out of the window of your flat, shouting 'Fido', and not taking any notice of the fire in your own rooms. My sergeant reports that you wouldn't say anything except, 'This is what comes of being kind to animals.' Now, sir—Mr. Hillaby, is it?—that's not going to be much help. Do you think you could explain a bit?"

Hillaby sighed. There was about him the unmistakable air of the upper middle class, that vagueness and reticence which, allied with a discreet suit, a rolled umbrella, and pin-stripe trousers, indicates the man who is a safe 'something' in the city. He was smallish, his black hair carefully laid back from his forehead and his unremarkable face neatly bisected by a clipped moustache. Careful grooming persisted, even through the soot and scorch of the fire which had been the means of bringing him to this pass. He sighed again, and betrayed an unusual care for words.

"I can't explain, Superintendent. I doubt if anyone can.

I can tell you exactly what happened, but that's not the same thing at all. Not at all." Colby hitched his chair again and hid his rising expectancy. This had all the earmarks of a super walloper.

"You have a very good point there," he admitted. "Still, if you'll just tell me, in your own words, just what did happen, maybe we can figure out the explanations between us. If I may say so, I've had quite a bit of experience at that kind of thing. Now then, how did the fire start?"

"Oh no," Hillaby said, sadly. "It starts much further back than that. Much further back. It must, you see, to make sense. Not that you'll believe it. And I won't blame you. I can hardly believe it myself. That's partly what I meant by not being able to explain. You see?"

Colby didn't, at all, but he suppressed the thought, retained his urbanity with an effort, and nodded.

"In your own words, sir. There's no hurry." He eyed Hillaby a bit more carefully now. A man with a delicacy for words ought to tell a good, neat story, one worth listening to. And there was, indeed, no hurry. Outside the station-house, early winter had thrown a chill grip over the region. People, law-abiding or otherwise, were more likely to stay at home by their own firesides in such weather. There came a distant wail of wind and Colby wondered, with the fringe of his mind, why it was that only a cold wind wailed. You never heard that moaning sound with a summer breeze. But the thought of firesides brought his attention back to Hillaby, and the fact that he had somehow managed to set fire to a single flat right at the top of a concree block monstrosity only a few streets away. 'Why—' he thought, '—they don't even have fireplaces in those flats. Nothing but a bit of a radiant heater in the wall. What the devil could he have been doing?'

Hillaby was taking his time composing his thoughts. They seemed painful, to judge by the expression on his face. Colby, willing to be helpful, flipped open a box on his desk and nudged it across, hospitably.

"Cigarette, sir?"

Hillaby started, and cringed away from the box. "My God, no. Never again. I've been meaning to give up for months. If only I had—"

"Was that the cause of it, then?" Colby tried to mask his disappointment. "Just a fag-end?"

"No, no! Nothing so simple. I'm afraid I'm not doing this very well, Superintendent, am I?"

"Not exactly very crystal clear, no, sir. If it wasn't a cigarette, then what was it, sir? And, it's just occurred to me, if you're worried about Fido then set your mind at rest. The firemen will be on the look-out, and there are three of my own men checking round. We're doing everything we can."

Hillaby sighed again. "I don't know whether to hope that you find Fido or not, I don't really. Do you get on well with animals, Superintendent? I mean, do cats and dogs take to you on sight? They do to me. Not that I ever met very many, you know. I suppose I'm what you'd call a townie, not the open-air type. I'm a solicitor. I have a junior post with Moggeridge and Countervaile. Mostly deeds and trusts and property conveyancing. By that I wish to indicate that our offices are hardly a whirl of activity. Quite the reverse. One has plenty of time to spare. I read. All sorts of odd things. I have that kind of mind. Full of unlikely snippets of information. Very retentive. Very useful in my profession, too. I also have an aged aunt, Miss Winifred Blunt. She lives in reasonable luxury on her own estate in Cornwall. Very wild and remote. Almost like another world. All moors and tors and not a flat bit of road longer than half a mile anywhere."

"Aren't we getting a bit off the track, sir, in more ways than one?"

"Oh no. This is how it really began, as you'll see. I mean, Aunt Winifred's place would never be my choice for a holiday—but I'm not all that well off, you know, and she is, and she's my only relative and quite old—you see how it is? Anyway, I took my holidays late this year and went to stay with Aunt Winifred for the last two weeks in September."

"Caught the tail-end of a real nice bit of weather, as I recall," Colby nodded, remembering his own two weeks of rain in August. "You were the lucky one."

"You could say that, yes. And because of the splendid

weather, I spent quite a bit of time out in the open. I've said I'm a townie, but it's my firm belief that this outdoorsman mystique has been grossly overdone. What I mean is, there's nothing so very difficult about it. You fix your eye on a landmark or two and go on from there. When you've gone as far as you want you just turn round and come back. Really, there's nothing to it. It's as straightforward as finding your way about on the Underground. Had it not been for the fog."

"Ah!" Colby nodded, knowingly. "It can come down very quickly, up on the moors. I've had some. The best thing to do is keep still. Just sit and wait for it to blow away."

"You've read that too, have you?" Hillaby muttered. "I suppose we all have. I was half-way up the side of a monstrous great crag, intending to go over the top and down the other side. And down it came, in minutes, a great grey wet blanket. Cold. And no sound. Could hardly see my feet. But I was badly placed. I was standing in the bed of a stream of some kind, up to the tops of my shoes in soggy moss. It's all very well to say sit still and wait, but I could hardly stand, never mind sit. And I knew there were solid rocks on either side. So I pushed on a bit, very carefully, to find somewhere a bit handier. You know? And, somehow or other, I found my way into a blasted cave. Dark as a coal-hole, it was. I went in a few feet before I realised what it was. Could tell by the blackness in front and the grey glare at my back. And then I stopped. This, I thought, was as good a place to rest as any I would find. I groped about for a stone or ledge of some kind to sit on, and found a great knobbly bit, just right. I sat on it. And it moved!"

"Rolled over, you mean?"

"No. It shifted—along a bit—and then back. Gave me a hell of a turn. As if it was, you know, alive! I hopped up smartly and staggered off a yard or two. Hit my head. Felt scared. And then there was a noise. Can you picture a noise that is huge, and yet gentle, Superintendent? Like a sigh from a giant? It was like that. Then I noticed the cavern wasn't as dark as it had been. It got brighter. A kind of glow. It came from what looked like two large red lanterns

about three or four yards further in. Then I saw that they weren't lanterns at all, but eyes!"

"Eyes?" Colby echoed, suspiciously.

"Eyes. Each one as big as a saucer, and about a yard apart. Glowing clear red, like lamps. And I could see a head in between, and a long snout, ears, things like horns, a vague mass of a body, and front legs. The thing I had sat on was one foot. The other was several feet away, on the other side of the cave." Hillaby paused, a haunted look in his eyes. Colby firmed his lips to make a caustic comment, then thought better of it.

"Animal of some kind," he said, prosaically. "But it couldn't have been all *that* big, you know. I expect the dark exaggerated it a bit."

"And the fright," Hillaby volunteered. "Oh yes, I thought of that myself. In that detached way one does, I thought I was upset and distressed and imagining things. Then it spoke to me, and that confirmed it. 'Help me,' it said. Asked, rather. 'Help me. I am trapped under a large rock.' It was a queer moment." Hillaby paused again, shaking his head. "I knew I had suddenly gone mad, and the one thing which struck me the hardest was that no one would care very much when I was locked away in my little padded cell. I could just imagine the gossip in the office. 'Heard about Hillaby? Yes, they caught up with him at last. Mad as a hatter. You know the way he always used to talk to cats and dogs?' I do, you know." Hillaby ducked his head apologetically and managed an uncertain smile. "Whenever I pass a cat or a dog I always say 'Good morning, dog—or cat'—as the case may be. It's just a fancy of mine."

"Yes, sir." Colby couldn't think of anything else to say.

"Well, I wandered back to the cave mouth, dreadfully confused. I didn't know what to do. I could see quite well by this time. I saw that grey curtain of fog, and realised there was no point in blundering out there, mad or not. And I saw that foot, stretched out by the wall. Large and scaly, it was, with huge claws. And it moved again. Mad or not, it seemed real. It had been solid enough for me to sit on. It could have smashed me flat, you know, but it hadn't. So perhaps there wasn't anything to be frightened of, really.

I went back. It took five good steps to go from the foot to the tip of the snout, which will give you some idea of the size of the thing. The eyes were still shining. I said, 'Hello. Are you really trapped, by a rock?'

" 'See for yourself,' it offered, in that huge gentle voice. And then I saw that there was room for me to squeeze past that huge head and shoulders. The cave widened a bit, beyond. There was this enormous mass of body, all hard with scales, and a great slab of rock had cracked off from the roof and was resting in a slant across the small of the back and pressing down with an edge on a hind foot."

"Now just a minute." Colby was interested despite himself. "It must have been a hell of a big rock to trap and paralyse an animal as big as you reckon this was, so how could you help?"

"It wasn't the size, so much, but the way it was placed. I once saw a man caught in a very similar way. A decorator, he was, and he had set himself to lift and lower a door back on to its hinges. Caught his fingertips in the closure. And he was caught between the edge of the door and the jamb. To free his fingers he needed to shut the door, but he couldn't because he was in the way. And he couldn't open the door far enough to get clear because that would have pulped his fingertips altogether. Another chap had to come and lift the door off its hinges again, to get him free. And it was the same sort of thing, here. The beast couldn't pull its foot out, because that would have wedged the rock edge all the harder. And it couldn't lift up, because the stone was slanting between the roof and floor across its back. But I could lift the stone at the lower edge, quite easily. You see, I had a staff. You know the kind of thing boy scouts used to carry? Felt like a fool when I set away with it, but it had come in uncommonly useful in among the crags, and it was a godsend now. Marvellous what you can do with a bit of leverage."

"You managed to get it free?"

"Oh yes. It only wanted a few inches, so that it could get its foot clear. Then it was a simple matter to shove the rock back out of the way, and everything was plain sailing. Also, now, I had a chance to see just what it was I had helped. As near as I could make out, the body was about

fifteen feet long, and as much again was tail, with a dart end. Scales. Four lizard-like legs. Horns. And wings. Futile little things, to look at, but wings, nevertheless."

"Now just a minute!" Colby said, uneasily. "You don't mean—?"

"Oh yes. Definitely. A dragon." Hillaby smiled a rueful smile, as if relieved to have the word said and done with. "I didn't like it any more than you do. Gave me a devil of a turn, I can tell you. But, strangely enough, it helped, too. It was so damnably concrete and straightforward, you see. It was either stone-cold reality, or a total delusion of sight, sound, sensation—everything. I didn't have much choice between those two. All the same, I was a bit floored. I found a ledge and sat. I needed a cigarette very badly. I had been trying to give up the habit for a long while—to cut down, anyway—and I hadn't had one since breakfast. But I needed one now. And, perversely, my lighter wouldn't work. Sparks and clicks, but no flame. The dragon was intrigued by what I was doing, and when I explained my trouble, it—reminded me—that it could—breathe fire, to order. It did, too. Sheer good fortune that I wasn't fried to a crisp there and then."

Colby tried to imagine lighting a cigarette from a snoutful of dragon's breath, and shivered. "Something like a blow-lamp?" he wondered.

"Thirty feet of scorching flame," Hillaby declared. "Of course, the poor beast was apologetic. It hadn't done the flame-breathing thing in so long it had forgotten the knack of modifying—focusing the thing. The cigarette was hardly worth it, by the time I got it alight. You see, it had been there a hundred and fifty years!"

"You mean, it was a hundred and fifty years old? It told you?"

"No, no. It had been lying there trapped that long. Lord only knows how old it was—is. It remembers Romans, and Normans, and Saxons, all in a fearful muddle. It's not very bright, you know, apart from being able to talk. About as clever as a good dog, I'd say. But immensely grateful, of course. And dreadfully cut-up about its blunder with the fire-breathing. You know, that's what's worrying me more than anything. The poor beast is so sensitive, so easily hurt.

In its feelings, I mean. I spoke sharply to it—" He broke off and Colby made an effort to organise his whirling thoughts.

"I'm just getting it," he said. "This dragon—is Fido?"

"That was rather silly," Hillaby confessed. "The fog was still thick, you see, and I was anxious about getting back to the farmhouse. I couldn't see how even a dragon could help. It was strain enough just accepting a dragon. But the creature was anxious to make amends, and vowed it could fly through mist, fog, anything, quite easily—dispersing it with the flaming-breath thing. You know? It did, too. It all seems insane, now, but it's true. I actually rode on its back while it flew, spouting great gusts of fire, through the fog. Do you blame me for being slightly hysterical and thinking of the old war-time device—Fog, Instant Disposal Of—? Anyway, I call it Fido for that reason."

"I wonder your aunt didn't have a fit—"

"Oh no! I retained enough sense to realise that it would never do for Auntie to actually see Fido. No, I came down quite close enough for me to find my way. The real problem was to get food for the beast. After a century and a half it was quite hungry. That is still the problem."

"Oh, come now." Colby felt his tolerance was being stretched to its limit. "You're not telling me you brought it home to London with you? In a little modern flat?"

"What else could I do? The poor beast had taken a tremendous fancy to me. It was grateful, and lonely. And I didn't exactly bring it. It flew, by night, and settled on the roof. It is a high block of flats," Hillaby made the point unnecessarily, "and I live right at the top, on the end. The roof is flat, not overlooked. On quiet evenings, or when there's something rather good on TV, it comes down and in through the balcony window. It's a bit of a squeeze, but it's very well behaved. Fact is, I'm quite fond of it. If only it wasn't so hungry and such a big eater."

Colby sighed. This was going too far.

"I'm not rich, you know," Hillaby said. "It's been a devil of a task, these last few weeks, providing for it. My butcher is getting quite nasty about it. I have at least half a carcass of lamb, every day, with a pig's head occasionally, and a

whole side of beef for week-ends. I believe he suspects me of setting up competition, making sausages on the sly, or exporting the stuff to France. And it's costing me a small fortune. But what can I do? Imagine what might happen if I ordered Fido to provide for herself!"

"Herself?"

"Oh yes," Hillaby groaned. "Just to make it that bit more complicated, the beast is female. That, I suppose, is why she's so sensitive, so easily hurt. What with the need for secrecy, and the expense, and the sheer insanity of it all, I've been growing rather short-tempered lately. Can you blame me? And then, this very morning, there was the power-failure."

"Ah!" Colby began to see light, dimly and at last. "That's the big snag with those flats. If the electric fails, you've had it, haven't you?"

"The place was like an ice-box," Hillaby declared. "Fido didn't feel it, of course. She's been sleeping out on the roof quite happily all the time. But when she came down and pushed open the window, just as I'd managed to wrap up and create something of a fug—not warm, but bearable—well, I snapped at her, rather. Then she realised I was cold, that the whole room was chill. And she saw a chance to do her fire-trick. You see, Superintendent, the one thing that has bothered her, all along, is that she has been unable to do anything for me. Dragons aren't a great deal of practical use, these days. But now was her chance. And I was too cold to argue. She was quite good, at first. Just a small glow, like twin torches. Warmed the room up beautifully. But she got careless, or too excited, or something."

"So *that's* what started the fire?"

"My fault, really," Hillaby insisted. "I should have remembered—no fireplaces, no chimneys, nowhere for the combustion-products to escape. The heat built up, you see. Before I had realised it, the whole inside of the room was smouldering and charring. I lost my head. I swore at her. I smashed the windows open to let out the smoke and stench—and, of course, everything caught fire, at once. It was pandemonium for a while. I was scared stiff, and being burned, too. I said all sorts of things I shouldn't have, to

Fido, and she slunk off. Then, of course, came the fire-engines—and the police—and here I am."

"Yes," Colby said, slowly. At the back of his mind was the sinking certainty that he was never going to be able to write a rational report on this one. He foresaw all kinds of distasteful enquiries and awkward questions. "Very well, sir. You understand you'll have to stay here, that this will all have to be investigated."

"Of course," Hillaby mumbled. "I'm not bothered about that. I have to assume responsibility, I know that. What is troubling me now is Fido. The poor creature fled, you know. I'm worried that she will get herself into some kind of trouble, even that someone may be hurt. Superintendent, she's got to be found and comforted!"

Comfort, Colby thought, was the last thing to worry about. He couldn't see himself issuing instructions to keep an eye out for an upset dragon. A psychiatrist, more like. Before he could think of something to say to fill a lengthening hiatus, Hillaby made an odd sound, half-sigh, half-chuckle.

"Silly, isn't it? Me worrying about the safety of a dragon, an enormously powerful creature that could gobble me as a mouthful. And yet, you know, I've grown fond of her, and she of me, these past few months. She seems to depend on me, to cling to me, in a manner of speaking. That's why I feel so badly about losing my temper and shouting at her."

Colby smothered his own comment. A brisk ring from his telephone rescued him from the difficulty of making the proper responses. He reached and spoke.

"Station house. Colby. Yes?"

"Sarn't Wallace here, Superintendent. I've just come down off the roof of them flats. You know, where the fire is, or was? Hearing that chap shouting for Fido I just naturally thought he was calling a pet. You know?"

"Go on," Colby sighed. The shrill unsteadiness of the sergeant's voice was a plain warning of what was coming.

"There's something up there, sir. Something horrible. A bloody great thing like a kind of prehistoric monster. A lizard. Only—it's got horns. And wings. And—you're never

going to believe this, sir—but every time I try to get close to it, it spits flames at me."

"I believe you," Colby said, with magnificent calm. "Why shouldn't I? All in order, sergeant. It's only a dragon—" He removed the ear-piece and shook his head at it as it gave off spluttering sounds. To Hillaby, he said. "We've found your Fido, sir, safe and sound. She didn't go far. On the roof. I think I'd better take you along there, to handle things. Just a minute. What was that, sergeant?"

The voice at the other end had gained an overtone of sarcastic resignation, now.

"You had better get somebody who knows the magic words along here. I never learned any spells or incantations."

"Nothing like that will be needed, sergeant. Just kindness, and a way with animals. I'm bringing the owner along."

"Good luck to it. I thought maybe you has somebody there who'd know the trick to turn the thing into a beautiful princess or something."

Colby started, and stared at Hillaby. He relayed the idea, and it was Hillaby's turn to stare, and touch a quavering hand to his lip.

"Good Lord!" he gasped. "I never thought—Superintendent, I never even thought of it. But of course! That's why she—we must get along there at once. What a fool I've been!"

Colby had been a married man longer than he cared to remember. He eyed Hillaby now, as they both rose. Words trembled on his tongue, words of warning. 'Let well alone. You're in enough trouble already. There are worse things than dragons.' The phrases boiled up, but he pushed them back, remembering what he had been like as a young man.

"All right, sir," he said. "Come on, then. I expect you'll know what to do for the best. I hope you never have cause to regret it." But the last phrase he said so quietly that Hillaby never heard it.

— JOHN RACKHAM

GRINNEL

by Dikk Richardson

Shelley had never liked Granville. Now, he had been pushed too far.

Looking Granville straight in the eye, he said "Grinnel."

"I beg your pardon," said his boss, an outraged look on his face.

"Grinnel," repeated Shelley. "Grinnel. Grinnel."

"Are you swearing at me?" demanded Granville.

"Grinnel," said Shelley again, making it obvious that he was not. "Grinnel. Grinnel. Grinnel."

"Don't be a bloody fool."

"Grinnel."

"Shelley!—Damn it, man, stop!"

"Grinnel."

"This has gone too far, Shelley. For God's sake get out of my office!"

"Grinnel."

"Shelley!!"

"Grinnel. Grinnel. Grinnel. Grinnel."

"Oh, go to hell, man!"

"Grinnel."

Granville stood up, rather too quickly, stumbling against his desk.

"Shelley!!"

"Grinnel."

Tearing at his hair, Granville yelled—screamed, "Get out!!"

"Grinnel. Grinnel. Grinnel."

"Out!!"

"Grinnel."

Granville took a mighty swing, which Shelley nimbly dodged.

"Grinnel."

Another swing; a cigarette box fell to the floor, spilling its contents.

"Grinnel. Grinnel. Grinnel. Grinnel."

Granville hurled a blotting pad, several books and items

of stationery, all of which were so wild that Shelley hardly needed to dodge.

"Grinnel."

"Shelley!! You're driving me insane! In the name of God, shut up!!"

"Grinnel."

Granville began to sob.

"Shut up, Shelley. For God's sake, shut up."

"Grinnel."

There followed a brief period of lunacy. Granville sobbed, screamed, raged and frothed. He tore his hair, and hurled everything movable at Shelley, overturning his desk in the process. Shelley kept behind cover.

Finally, exhausted, Granville sank to the floor.

Shelley walked over to the limp form, and turned it over with his foot.

"Grinnel," he said.

No response.

Victim number twenty-three, Shelley thought.

Quietly, he opened the office door.

"Miss Jordan," he said, "call an ambulance. Mr. Granville's gone mad. I think he's had a heart attack . . . or something."

—DIKK RICHARDSON

THE FURIES

by Keith Roberts

Bill Sampson, a freelance artist, is living in the Wiltshire village of Brockledean. He forms a friendship with Jane, wealthy teenage daughter of a local family. This is the year of the Neptune Project, in which a five hundred megaton bomb is detonated on the bed of the Pacific. It is also the year of the Furies.

The Furies; four-foot long armoured beings, wasp-like in structure, they have already terrorized parts of the West Country. The first English nests are destroyed easily enough; then comes the day of the Neptune Test. The bomb produces unexpected effects; the ocean bed is cracked, and world-wide earthquakes devastate our planet. In the confusion, the Furies attack; Bill's house is besieged and destroyed. He escapes with Jane and joins forces with Neil Connor, an army lieutenant in charge of a platoon of armoured vehicles. Attacked again by the wasps, Bill loses contact with Neil but finally succeeds in reaching the Dorset coast. Jane escapes in a cabin cruiser; attempting to follow her, Bill is caught in a Channel gale and driven back to the mainland. Despairing, he reaches a deserted village and makes himself at home in the local pub. As dusk falls he hears a lorry engine and a sound of singing. He staggers out to the road; the truck pulls up for him and he is told the war is over. He is aboard before he realizes his mistake; on the cab top is a Fury, straddling the metal and staring down at its human load . . .

The second of three parts

CHAPTER EIGHT

I don't think there's anything more sobering than being pushed into the company of a group of people who are all a few shades drunker than you are yourself. Within minutes

of the lorry moving off my head had cleared and I was able to realize, icily, just what sort of a fool I'd been. I sat huddled in a corner of the truck, steadying myself as well as I could against the jolting and swaying; round me the merriment went on unchecked. Bottles were drained and bowled lustily over the sides of the lorry while a dozen voices bellowed the praises of the seemingly endless herd of zoological freaks to be found at the Wild West Show. I tried to talk to one of the girls again; she got out a couple of more or less coherent sentences then her eyes glazed interestingly and she slumped back against the fellow next to her, who promptly started to force-feed her something from a hip flask. A few minutes later I saw her being sick over the side of the truck. It didn't seem to bother anybody unduly. I moved forward on hands and knees, working my way over a litter of Crown corks, got to the little man in the collarless shirt, I yelled "What the Hell's got into them, they all crazy?"

He was watching the wasp on the cab top, grinning and blinking nervously at it. He muttered "Not just now, later. Eh, Mate? Not just now . . ." I left him and groped back to where I'd been sitting. He said "Not just now," a few more times, mumbling it like an incantation with his eyes fixed on the Fury.

The lorry ground along, stopping from time to time to collect stragglers drawn to the roadside, as I had been, by the sound of its engine. None of them offered any resistance when they saw the wasp, just got up in a stunned sort of way. We crossed a wide heathland, moving as near as I could judge north-east away from the coast, passed through a couple of villages and one smallish town, all as deserted as Burton Middlemarsh had been. Once I saw an old man standing at a cottage door, blinking at the lorry as it trundled past. It didn't stop, and the insect on the roof showed no interest in him. I realized why Mrs. Stilwell had had such a remarkable escape. For reasons of their own, the Furies were fetching in able-bodied survivors only.

The ride seemed endless. The knowledge that I was being dragged farther and farther from the coast and any chance of finding Jane was nearly unbearable. I was nursing some

hope of dropping over the side and making a run for it but toward nightfall the idea was scotched by the arrival of a further guard of some dozen wasps. They formed a cordon, circling the lorry a hundred yards or so away. A short time later we pulled into the side of the road and stopped. There was some desultory talk among those who weren't too far gone to care. There was no apparent reason for the halt; we were out on the heath again, it was getting dark and there were no buildings in sight.

One of the airborne Furies came in low, circled and landed clumsily on the cab top. It nearly pitched over on top of us. The guard faced it and for a minute or more there was an industrious tapping of antennae. Then the newcomer took over, straddling its legs as the other had done and staring down at us. The first wasp flew off, heading east. A few minutes later I saw lights on the road behind us and soon another truck came into sight. Our driver stared up and moved away and it fell in behind, convoying us a couple of lengths back. I could just see the pale blur of the driver's face. Beside him was something I took at first to be a doll or the head of a dog; then I saw it was a Fury, mask pressed close against the windshield. That cleared up one of the things that had been puzzling me at least; presumably our driver was carrying a mate as well.

A few miles farther on we halted at a filling station. It was a little place, set out in the wilds with no houses near. By that time I was desperate. Maybe I could slip off and get out of sight while the tank was being filled. Our driving door opened and a man swung down onto the apron, a tall, saturnine-looking fellow, bearded and dressed in black tee shirt and jeans. The cordon had drawn off; I could hear the wasps but they were barely visible. It seemed as good a chance as I'd get; I called out "Want any help?" and swung my feet over the side of the truck.

Instantly there was a booming. I looked back; the guard on the cab had lifted its body angrily and the mask was staring straight at me. I pulled my legs in sharply and the brute relaxed. They were taking no chances; only the drivers were allowed on the forecourt, the rest of us sat silently till the refuelling was finished. Soon after we moved

off another truck joined us, then another, and by the time we'd reached our destination we were leading a column of seven or eight.

I'd been watching the skyline ahead and for some time I'd been harbouring a nasty thought. My fears were confirmed soon enough; the lorries drove into the outskirts of Swyreford, passing row after row of the oddly bleak terrace houses the Army seems to favour everywhere. They were deserted, their windows dark. Our driver was using his headlights now; I saw some of the flying guards had bunched ahead of the column. They were dipping in and out of the beams as they circled, sending long shadows flicking down the road. We turned in between a pair of white-painted gateposts, drove by a low building that looked like a guardhouse. There were more Furies on its roof. Ahead I saw a scatter of huts, made out the shape of a water tower against the sky. It looked as if after all my efforts I'd finally reached Neil's camp.

The lorry juddered to a halt and the rest of the fleet pulled in behind. Half a dozen of the wasps dropped to the ground in a rough circle round us. It was so obvious what they wanted there was no hesitation. Somebody dropped the tailboard and we got down, half-lifting one or two of the revellers who'd gone beyond the stage of helping themselves. When we were assembled the insects moved forward exactly like dogs herding sheep. We walked uncertainly, afraid of attack. Nobody spoke. We joined other groups from the rest of the trucks but in the dark it was impossible to tell how many people had been rounded up. I was half-carrying one of the girls; the bearded man who'd been our driver had her other arm. We were crowded toward the nearest of the huts; I found myself jostled up against the door and tried the catch. It was open. I walked in towing the victim of Bacchus. The others pushed after me, hurried by impatient buzzes from behind. When about twenty of us were inside the wasps cut the rest off neatly and jockeyed them toward the next hut in line.

There were no lights; I groped forward, touched the end of a bed, swung round and deposited my burden on it. Then I sat down on the next one. I was trembling from

sheer anticlimax. About the last thing I'd expected was to find myself in an Army Barracks again.

And still nobody spoke. There were sighs and grunts as people found beds and settled themselves onto them but that was all; I think we were too dazed and shocked to talk. After a time I swung my feet up and lay back, pillowing my head on the stack of blankets at the top of the bed. I lay till the moon rose and touched the end of the hut with a pale, colourless patch. I heard doors slamming and feet, the booming of Furies, once the noise of an engine as some late arrival drove past outside. After a while the misty square of light started to advance and recede in front of my face. Then it seemed the brick surface had dissolved and I was looking at the moonlit Channel, the dim shape of the Island on the skyline. Jane was out there somewhere, over the water. That was where I would have been if I hadn't let myself get caught by the wasps.

I dug my nails into my palms. I wanted to get up, yell, run about, anything but just lie there. I felt a thick rage at the creatures that had herded me and shoved me about like an animal. When the fit passed I felt weak and sick. I lay trying to rest.

The moonlight vanished, leaving the hut as dark as the Pit. There were footsteps, penetrating the fabric of a dream. I sat up. It seemed I could hear with clinical sharpness. The noise passed. There was a sort of desperate urgency about it. Then there was a booming, a gasp and a thud, a shriek that rose on a sharp note of terror and cut off dead. For a while after there were indescribable sounds, an unholy slavering and groaning mixed with shufflings and buzzes. Then booming again, and quietness.

Nearer to me, inside the hut, a sobbing started. It went on steadily, dry and racked, the sound of someone at the end of their tether. My head was still spinning, whirling with images of Jane, but I knew somehow I had to stop that row before the panic spread and the whole hutful of us started screaming. I said sharply "The girl who's crying. Cut it out, you're not doing any good."

She ignored me and simultaneously there was a drumming on the door, followed by scrapings and tappings. The

sobbing stopped abruptly. I waited until the other noise had died away. Then I said "Unless you want the wasps in here with us you'll keep quiet. Now, who are you?"

"W-what?"

"Your name. What's your name?"

The darkness said uncertainly "J-Jill Sanders . . ." Then in a rising shout, "I want to go home . . ." She started to whimper again. There was a scuffle, a noise that sounded like a slap. A deep voice said "All right then . . ." And after a pause, "In the corner there, who are you?"

I said "Bill Sampson." Then a little louder, "Can't we sort ourselves out a bit, we're lying here like clowns. Who's the truck driver? I know he came in with us."

"Does it matter, mate?" That from the far end of the hut.

The deep voice said instantly "Belt up, it matters a lot. Greg Douglas here, from Bristol. Come on the rest of you, sound off. Who's on the bed next to Bill?"

Silence. Then from across the hut, "Julie McGifford. Only I reckon she's passed it, like." The man spoke with a north country flatness. "Len Dilks here. From Bradford, if it matters. I drove t'truck."

"Fine," said Greg. "Go on, next bed up."

"Owen Jones, from b-bloody Merioneth. How about g-gettin' out o' this dump?"

Instantly, a hubbub. And the drumming at the door, louder than before. Greg yelled us down. "They've got sentries each end of the bloody hut, now stow it the lot of you. Nobody's getting out tonight . . ."

Another voice spoke, from farther down the barrack-room. "Get on with it, mates. Freddy Mitchell, from Weston."

"John Castleton, from Dorchester." Then in a heavy-handed attempt at humour, "Bricklayer's mate . . ."

"Harry West, from Bristol." That voice I could place. The little man who'd been too scared to talk.

"Margaret Ellis. No fixed abode . . ."

"Dake Kemp. Block chord guitarist. Mood music supplied, wakes a speciality . . ."

Once the process had started it gathered pace rapidly. Even the collapsed Julie woke up, demanding blurrily what

was going on. And more important, did anyone have a bottle . . . When we'd named ourselves, Greg and the man called Dilks produced packs of cigarettes, shared them out among those who had none. We lit up cautiously, shielding the glows from the windows, and started swapping stories.

Most of our experiences were similar. Greg was an art teacher from a private school near Sherborne; he and a friend had been on a walking tour of the Mendips when they'd been overtaken simultaneously by earthquakes and the Furies. The other man had been killed; Greg, an amateur speleologist, had used his local knowledge and taken refuge in a cave. He'd holed up there, living on the stuff he'd been carrying with him, until hunger forced him out. Even then he was careful; he saw a lorry in the distance and took cover but he was flushed by a pair of Furies that dived unexpectedly behind him. He'd been in the second truck, the one that had pulled in with us at the filling station. Jill, the girl who'd been crying was a Midlander who'd been on holiday with her parents. They had been in a cinema in Bristol when the 'quakes started, she'd been separated from them in the panic and hadn't seen them since.

Most of the first lorryload had in fact been hauled from Bristol; Harry West was a piano tuner who'd survived a wasp attack on one of the suburbs, Freddy Mitchell a scaffolding erector who'd been working on the redecoration of a ballroom. Owen, the Welshman, was a chef from one of the big hotels there. Len Dilks, the two girls Julie and Margaret, Dave the guitarist and some three or four more were the remnants of a Beatnik colony. Together they'd formed a jazz combo that they referred to somewhat diffidently as the Atlantic Eight. They'd been living in a couple of tents and an old bus, earning their food by odd-jobbing and playing nights in three or four dives in Bristol. They had weathered the earthquakes in the cellar of a big pub just off the city centre. When their audience scattered the Eight, showing a sharper instinct for self-preservation, had stayed put, huddled under one of the arches that supported the place. The building had come down on top of them but their only casualty had been the bull fiddle, which was stove in by a couple of hundred

pounds of masonry. Len was still grieving over it; apparently he'd loved the thing like a brother.

They had been trapped for a time before they managed to clear a way out. When they'd seen the chaos round them they'd promptly gone back to ground to wait for rescue teams. They'd existed mainly on the liquid resources of the place, playing bad jazz from time to time to keep up the spirits. Several big fires had started in the city, none at first close to the maimed centre. But by the third morning the flames had spread despite heavy rain until they were threatening the hideout. The colony sallied forth, more than a little pot-valiant, and repossessed their bus, which they'd left parked some quarter of a mile away. Then they'd tried to drive out. They gave a fragmentary but grim description of the burning city; the smashed shops, streets blocked with rubble, the bodies sprawled everywhere. What they had seen sobered them for a time. They had made the best speed they could, heading south-east in a more or less woolly attempt to reach the wilder country of the Mendip plateau, get away from the big centres that were still being scourged by the Furies. A few miles out of Bristol the bus had broken down irreparably and they'd walked for a time before hi-jacking the lorry. They made good speed with that until they were waylaid by the wasps. Then it was a case of every man for himself. The Eight had scattered, only to be rounded up by the horrors and driven back to the truck. After that they'd picked up one or two walking survivors, Mitchell and Harry West among them.

They had driven most of the day, with stops for meals and refuelling. Seemingly the Furies had been in no great hurry. The Eight, philosophers all at heart, had set themselves to make the best of things, forgetting their troubles with the help of the hooch they'd brought along with them. That explained the circus that had finally caught up with me in Dorset.

The talking had taken my mind off Jane, temporarily at least. I asked Len how the devil the wasps managed to direct the trucks. He laughed shortly. "Hit and bloody miss, mainly. If they wants yer to turn off like, or stop, they buzzes. If yer gets it wrong they buzzes harder, see?

Don't know what'd happen if yer just carried on. Like as not yer'd get yer ruddy head cut off . . ."

Greg said intently "They know about the trucks though, Len. They know they need fuel, they stopped you at garages . . ."

He sneered in the dark. "They don't know a bloody thing. They know cars pause at petrol pumps but they don't ruddy know why." Apparently the halts had been enforced every twenty miles or so. At the first one the pumps had been dry. In spite of that the Furies had boomed threateningly until Len went through the charade of filling the tank. A few miles farther on he'd run out of juice. "I thought I were goin' ter be done on't spot" he said lugubriously. "But two o' the bastards played footsie for ten minutes or so an' happen they worked out what were up. They let us off with a can anyhow. But I thought for a while I were goin' ter be done . . ."

I told them part of what had happened to me. I didn't say much about Jane. After I'd finished we tried to make some sense out of the situation. It was obvious the invaders had got a strong grip on the South-west; just how strong we had no means of realizing at the time. They'd played it pretty cleverly all the way along, for creatures struggling with totally alien concepts they'd done remarkably well. Their first strikes, delivered for the most part during the confusion of the 'quakes, had all been directed at key installations; power houses, telephone exchanges, broadcasting studios, military camps. In Portsmouth for example a score of the brutes attacked the power station, causing total confusion. The Navy moved in under cover of smoke and teargas but evicting the wasps from the great masses of machinery was like trying to drive out ghosts. They hid in the shadows and the din, attacking the emergency crews sent in to run the place; despite the guns and grenades it was more than anybody's life was worth to go inside the doors. Then the collier *Pompey Queen* ran aground off Spithead, her crew victims of the first attacks the wasps ever mounted over sea, and within forty-eight hours Portsea Island, the great residential areas round Fareham and most of south Hampshire were without main electricity. Portland, Weymouth and most of the

South Coast towns suffered similarly while inland the limits of the captured territory were marked by London, Exmoor and the Welsh Marches.

Within that huge area the Furies turned their attention to breeding programmes and the organisation of what human labour their so-called central command thought would be necessary. Sporadic resistance went on for a time; in Dorset alone, independent units of the Territorial Army knocked out twenty or thirty nests. But as early as the third day the lack of any real communication and supply lines was making itself felt with vehicle after vehicle going out of action through mechanical failure or lack of petrol. By the time we were pushed into the hut at Swyreford organised operations were already, in the south at least, a thing of the past.

I slept toward dawn, woke with a thick head and a sour taste in my mouth. I'd been dreaming of Jane again, reality was nearly too much to take. I muttered and rolled over, realized somebody was shaking my shoulder. I opened my eyes. Sunlight was slanting through the hut windows onto rows of tangled beds, for the most part empty; leaning over me was a blond, bearded man, broad-shouldered and burly without being fat. He said "How're you feeling, Bill?" I knew the voice at least. This was Greg Douglas.

I sat up trying to get things more into focus. "Dead and alive . . . What's going on?"

"Don't know yet. The wasps let us out anyway. Reckon on going to have a look?"

I stood up uncertainly. I was feeling the strain of the last few days, my legs were wobbly and I had a raging thirst. I followed him into the open air.

There were in fact some half dozen separate camps at Swyreford. We were penned in one of the smallest. Looking back, I think the wasps must have chosen it because it still had mains water. From where we stood outside the hut we could see a stretch of the perimeter; it was guarded by Furies stationed every fifteen or twenty yards. They were clustered round the lorries too and across at what was evidently the m/t section, where half a dozen Champs and three-tonners stood otherwise unattended. There was no sign of any Army personnel; I realized there had been

no uniformed men in the trucks either though there had been enough in the area. Maybe the wasps were killing soldiers on sight.

I felt at a loss. There seemed to be a couple of hundred civilians wandering about aimlessly, watched by Furies perched on the gables of the huts. There had evidently been no attempt at organisation. Greg scratched his head. "Well, somebody's got to start somewhere . . ." Beside our hut was a pile of empty crates and boxes, he walked over and climbed onto it, started shouting to get people round him. Two Furies took off almost at once from the top of one of the lorries; they howled round his head until it was quite plain the new regime was opposed to anything in the way of public meetings. He got down, shrugging. A few people had turned to stare; they looked away quickly as if scared of reprisals. We moved off in the direction of the cookhouse. "Somebody's got to feed us," muttered Greg, hunching his shoulders. "Even if we're only here as spare meat rations we've got to eat."

The canteen area was a shambles. Sacks of flour and potatoes had been ripped apart and spilled, vast tins of meat opened and their contents half eaten. A few people were wandering about, touching this and that in a disconsolate way. In the middle of the cookhouse, feet apart and a tally in his hands, stood a small dark man. He was muttering, glancing out the windows from time to time as if to assess the numbers present, licking a pencil and making quick calculations on the pad. He rolled his eyes when he saw us. "B-bloody state to find a place," he said in a singsong voice. "Feed 'em for a week see, with a bit o' c-craft an' guile, but it needs a workin' party." This then was Owen Jones. I remembered he'd claimed he was a chef.

Greg said quickly "Could you cope with the catering, Taffy?"

He flicked a pointed, catty tongue across his lips, smoothed his already brushed hair. "If seven years in the c-Caterin' Corps can't sort this lot out . . . But needs a party, see? I t-tried to get things movin' b-but but t'wasn't any go. Can't g-get bloody through to 'em . . ."

Greg took my arm. "Bill, try and round up that gang of wandering minstrels or whatever they call themselves, God

knows they're a shower but they could be useful . . . See if you can get 'em along, I'll make a start here . . ." He suited action to words; in one corner of the cookhouse, lying asleep on a pile of sacking, was what must be a missing member of the Atlantic Eight. He was breathing stertorously, empty bottle gripped in his hand. Greg took him by the scruff, and threw him through the door.

I found the beats sitting in line, backs against the side of one of the huts. They were amusing themselves by flicking little pebbles at a grounded Fury that crouched watching them about twenty feet away. With each missile the wasp clicked its jaws angrily and raised its wings above its back. I relayed Greg's message. They took it in stony silence, then Dave Kemp, enthroned on a box with the guitar slung round his neck, struck a few chords. "Want us to go," he extemporised, "To cook an' mend . . . Want us to go . . . To scrape and sew . . ." I turned and walked off. I thought they were going to stay where they were but they hauled themselves to their feet one by one and ambled after me.

When they put their minds to it they were first rate workers. Within an hour we'd got the cookhouse more or less in order and two of the stoves were alight. Len Dilks sat on a table, a bucket at his side, peeling potatoes in a melancholy sort of way. He inspected each one he picked up as if it had done him some personal injury. The girls were setting out huge pans and dishes while Owen Jones—Jones Kitchen they called him, and the name stuck—was rushing about with some of the restless energy of an ant. By mid-morning we were cooking and people were starting to drift over to the canteen in a surprised sort of way. Three or four wasps clattered in and took up positions at strategic points but they didn't interfere. Most of our hut were present by then; Mitchell and Castleton, Jill Sanders and Harry West, twitching as ever when the wasps were in sight but outwardly cheerful. "Gotta make the best o' things" he said to me. "Eh, Bill? Make the best o' things." Sniff. "Won't be too bad if we make the best o' things . . ." Greg raised his eyebrows and sent him out with Mitchell to scour the place for knives, forks, plates. It seemed few of the prospective diners had had the wit to forage for

themselves. When it was finally dished up the meal was surprisingly good; the ex-chef had worked wonders with corn beef, tomatoes and spuds. I for one was badly in need of food anyway, I hadn't eaten for over forty-eight hours.

The rest of the day we were left to ourselves. The wasps ignored us unless we strayed too near the lorries or the camp perimeter. I stayed on in the cookhouse helping tidy up. The afternoon was hot and completely quiet. Normally there would have been at least a background of traffic noise, now there was nothing. The odd boom of a Fury, the scrape of feet on gravel seemed to echo in the stillness. About four o'clock I saw Len Dilks being chivvied to one of the lorries by a pair of wasps. He came back in the evening bringing another dozen mouths to feed.

At nightfall we were driven indoors again. The guards knew exactly who belonged in each hut; some stray members of the Atlantic Eight tried to dodge in with their pals but the insects cut them out and drove them away. Events repeated themselves on the following day, and again after that. By the fifth day we numbered about two hundred and fifty and the food was running short. Greg brooded over what might happen when the camp stocks were exhausted. By a sort of natural selection he'd become the leader of our hut; in fact nobody on the camp had bothered to question his authority. He talked the situation over with me. In most of their operations the wasps had shown a high degree of intelligence, they must realize whatever their reasons for penning us we still had to eat. Greg thought there might be a chance of communicating with them, but one look at the expressionless masks convinced me at least that the idea was absurd.

Jones Kitchen was more hopeful. "They're no f-fools," he said. "Was one in the cookhouse this mornin', messing about pokin' its b-bloody feelers into everything. I reckon they already know . . ."

He turned out to be right. Later that day Greg, Len and myself were rounded up by a pair of Furies and shoved toward one of the lorries. Being hustled by the brutes was still unnerving though by now it was obvious there was no immediate danger. The truck they'd selected was a big, nearly new diesel, a much better job than the

one we'd brought in. We climbed into the cab and Len started up and headed for the gates. Mercifully, the brutes decided it wasn't worth getting in with us; one perched on the roof, the other flew ahead circling as if to show us the road to take. We drove through Swyreford; I felt a terrific relief as the camp dropped behind us. Greg said quickly "You've been with 'em enough Len, any chance of shaking the bastards?"

Dilks grinned sardonically and shook his head. "Not a prayer. If yer tries owt, one in front comes back at yer see?" He gestured upward with his thumb. "If yer so much as speeds up, beggar on top starts knockin' on't ceiling." He throttled experimentally; almost at once we heard the deep noise of the Fury's wings. The wasp ahead turned and flew at the windscreen. For a moment I thought it was coming through; Len braked sharply and it zoomed clear. It was a pretty straight warning; after that he kept our speed down to thirty.

A few miles on we reached a village. It wasn't much of a place but it boasted a big self-service store halfway along the High Street. Outside it the Fury hung hovering. So they did intend us to scrounge for food. Len brought the lorry to the kerb and stopped. We got down.

One of the street windows had fallen out entirely and another had had a hole smashed through it, presumably by looters. We climbed through. The place was buzzing with flies. The counter fridges had failed, the meat behind their long glass panels writhed with maggots. I tried not to look too closely.

One of the Furies had stayed with the truck, the other was out of sight but we could hear it booming faintly. I guessed it was circling above the place. There was no chance of running, whichever way we bolted we were sure to be spotted. We walked through to the back of the premises, found a storeroom packed nearly to the roof with cartons. We started loading the lorry. Greg did the selecting, I carried the stuff through the shop and passed it out to Len. It would have been handier to bring the truck round to the loading area at the back but we weren't sure we could get the idea across to the wasps and misunderstandings could obviously be fatal. After an hour

or so the storeroom was looking decidely bare and the lorry was piled high, the pavement round it littered with stuff. We pitched in helping Len stow the load. He'd kept a rough tally of the supplies as they came aboard; we checked through it, added one or two forgotten essentials like matches and salt. The guards seemed satisfied; we got in and headed back the way we'd come.

A mile or more up the road three Furies matched speed with us and landed on the load, then another one, then a couple more. By the time we reached camp we were carrying a dozen non-paying passengers. We drove straight to the cookhouse and the wasps organised a fatigue party. That was easily done, they simply cut out a dozen of the people who were strolling about and drove them across to us. We were through unloading by curfew time and walked back to the huts. There was less booming and snapping by the wasps now. It wasn't necessary, we all knew what was expected of us.

After that the lorry went out regularly. Our storerooms started to fill; it looked as though the Furies meant to stock up with as much as possible while it was available. I couldn't help wondering what would happen when current food supplies ran out; it was obvious we couldn't live off the towns indefinitely. Len was always the driver on the provision trips though the wasps never allowed the same people to go with him twice. He told me on a couple of occasions he saw other foraging teams, also directed by Furies, but he was never allowed close enough to talk to them.

About a week after our initial trip the lorry came back later than usual and instead of driving to the canteen it stopped outside our hut. Greg and I were the only two inside, we were lying on our bunks smoking cigarettes Len had smuggled in a day or so before. I didn't pay much attention till I heard raised voices. Dave and Harry West had been seconded for that trip, and they were arguing furiously. I heard Dave say "Well do the other bloody thing then, I'm sick and tired hearing you . . ." Then came a kick at the door. I opened it. "What the Hell—— Christ, what happened?"

Dave said "*Squirt* was what I called you mate, a ruddy

little *squirt* . . ." He was encumbered by having a girl in his arms. He was trying to carry the first aid kit from the lorry as well. West was bouncing about behind him, face screwed up with anxiety. Dave said "Give us a hand for God's sake, take that bloody box before I drop it . . ."

The lorry moved away. I was trying to help Dave through the door. He dropped his burden on my bed and turned furiously on Harry West. The little man bolted. Suddenly there was silence. Greg had walked over to the bed and was standing looking down. "Where the Hell d'you find this, Dave?"

He was breathing hard. "Westrincham. Little place about ten miles out. Whole family killed. We heard this dog . . . Couldn't leave her like that."

The casualty was a slim blonde in scruffy blue jeans and check shirt. She was unconscious; her head lolled to one side, long lashes brushing her cheek. Half her face was covered by a crude dressing; that, her hair and the front of her shirt were caked with dried blood. Greg eased up the bandage, stood for a long moment looking beneath it. Then he said "Why'd you bring her here, what the Hell do you think we can do?"

Dave collapsed on the end of the bed and glared at him, eyes bright blue and angry over a black stubble of beard. He said "God, not you as well. I've had that little bastard yelling in my ear the last hour . . . All right I'll take her back where I found her and chuck her off the truck. OK?"

Greg set his lips and picked up the first aid box. "Bill, heat some water up will you? You'll probably have to go to the cookhouse for it. And get some disinfectant, Dettol, anything you can find . . ."

When I got back there was a crowd round the bed. He'd coaxed the dressing off. I craned over his shoulder and wished I hadn't. The girl's face had been ripped open in a curve from the left corner of her mouth to the hair. Bone was showing at her temple but that wasn't the worst thing. The wound was flyblown.

Greg spoke without turning round. "Try and find the girls, Bill. Julie, Maggie. See if they have a needle and thread between them."

I could feel the sickness welling up in my throat. "Christ, you can't stitch that——"

He said "It can't stay like this either. Go on, do it and don't argue for God's sake . . ."

It was dusk before he'd finished. The wasps hadn't let me go near the m/o's office, most of the camp admin. area was still out of bounds to us. Greg had to make do with what we had to hand. I'd found a little camp stove, we sterilized a darning needle and some lengths of thread over it, boiling them in a saucepan. Most of us with the exception of Harry West gathered round to watch. I don't think anybody wanted to but there was a sort of ghastly fascination about it. By the time Greg had cleaned the wound it was dribbling blood again; Julie sat over the girl tensely, swabbing so he could see what he was doing. Somewhere along the line Jill passed out like a light. I felt I should like to but I couldn't quite manage it. I remember Greg wincing every time he drove the needle, as if the thing was going through his own flesh. Before he tightened each stitch he squeezed in antiseptic cream from the first aid kit. With the cut closed he smeared the rest of the salve across it and taped a gauze pad lightly over the girl's cheek. When the wound was finally covered Len Dilks walked to his locker, came back with a half of whisky and handed it to Greg. He took a swig, shuddered; then he said heavily "She'll be dead by morning of course." He walked to his bed and sat looking at the wall.

Margaret and Julie finished the job, cutting the girl's filthy clothes away and washing her. She didn't regain consciousness. Her face was ashen, nearly as pale as the dressing. We left her where she was, I moved up to a spare bed at the other end of the hut. I hadn't much doubt that Greg was right, we'd get up in the morning and find her cold.

But for some reason she didn't die.

CHAPTER NINE

Dave told me next morning what had happened. He was still shaken. Apparently they'd driven out to Westrincham,

following the flying wasps as usual, only to find the place a charnel-house. There had been no evacuation, either by humans or insects. There had been a wholesale massacre though, the bodies were still piled in the streets. The wasps had forced the crew to go through the usual routine of loading the lorry; fortunately they'd managed to find a relatively unaffected part of the town for that. They'd been on the point of heading back when they heard a dog barking. The Furies had seemed unduly excited by the noise. One of them zoomed off to investigate and Len followed up with the diesel. Dave said they had had some vague idea of bringing the animal back to camp but by the time they reached it they were too late. They swung right following the direction the wasp had taken and saw the dog in the road a hundred yards or so ahead. It was already twitching from a sting wound; the Fury was grounded beside it watching with the usual disinterest. Nearby was a small tobacconist's shop. The window was smashed, the door stood ajar. It was possible the dog had run from there. Dave got down from the cab. He saw smudges of dried blood on the doorframe and the path. He went inside. There were several corpses lying around, some of them children. He didn't describe that part too closely. He thought he heard a noise from an inner room. That was how he found the girl.

He said she was conscious when he went in. At first he didn't see her; the place was dark after the sunlight in the street and she was huddled in a corner, crouched in a mess of blood and urine. His eyes hardened again at the memory. "What a ruddy way to go," he said bitterly. What a state to be in, I couldn't leave her like that. I'm no age," he added, inconsequentially. "Never seen anything like that before. I couldn't leave her like that . . ."

Outside in the road the Furies were booming impatiently. He'd tried to talk to the girl but he hadn't been able to make her understand. She was armed with a kitchen knife, he had to take it away from her before he could lift her. He carried her out, hardly knowing what he was doing. On his way back to the truck the wasps dived at him repeatedly, trying to make him drop her. "I just kept walking," he said. "I was sick of the whole bloody

business. I didn't expect to make it for a minute. I was hoping when they did me in it'd be quick." For some reason he'd got away with his defiance. After a time the Furies had seemed to accept the state of affairs and lose interest in it. He carried the girl back in the cab, assailed most of the way by the complaints of Harry West. "Peaceful co-existence is the motto," said Dave disgustedly, and spat on the ground. "Co-existence my arse . . ."

After that he changed his style of music. He used to play endlessly in the evenings, lying on his bed with the guitar; he worked up a thing he called the Fury Blues, a queer wild song about the girl lying in the death house and what the wasps had done to her, and the people, Harry West among them, who wanted to work under the insects for their crusts. Greg took him on one side and told him to pack it up, we'd got enough trouble without starting internal rifts. After that the words were no longer heard but the thing had an odd chord sequence and nothing would stop him playing that, over and over, working it into the fabric of other music until it became a symbol for all the foulness and misery we'd seen.

Julie and Maggie were good to the injured girl. Most times one or both of them would be by her, wiping her face or changing the dressing or just sitting waiting. She was half conscious on the second day and they pronounced her better. Then she relapsed into fever, moaned and tossed most of the night. The crisis lasted through most of the third day but by evening she seemed to be sleeping naturally. The amateur nurses took a break; Julie wandered out somewhere, Maggie just curled up and went to sleep herself. She hadn't had much rest for the past couple of nights. I was sitting by the girl when she came round. I didn't know she was awake until something touched my wrist. She had her arm out, fingers slack. It was a shock to see her eyes open. They were a pale, indefinable greeny grey, the sort of misty half-colour you see in sunlit water. Her face was delicately shaped, with a square jaw and small chiselled nose, and the eyes were tilted slightly and dark-rimmed. She looked like a sculptured cat.

Julie was still asleep. I called softly but she didn't move.

On the floor near the bed was a tray with glasses. I filled one with water and took it back to the girl. She tried to sit up, staring round the hut. I held her shoulders and pushed her back. "It's all right, keep still. You've been very ill . . ."

She whispered "Where is this place?"

"It's an Army camp. Here . . ." I raised her head as gently as I could and held the glass to her mouth. She drank half of it in sips then turned her face away. She said "You're one of the bastards that brought the wasps . . ."

"They didn't bring the wasps. They couldn't help it . . . They fetched you back here. How do you feel?"

She licked her lips and looked at the cigarette I'd left lodged on the chair. She said "Got a fag, mate?"

I suddenly recognised her accent. She was a Cockney. That was about the last thing I'd been expecting. I said "I don't think you ought to smoke, you've been very sick."

She said faintly "Gahn . . ." I picked the cigarette up and held it while she inhaled. She said "They got the old dog then. Ole dog . . ." Her eyes drifted shut. She lay still and when I spoke there was no answer, she was asleep again. I tucked her arm back under the blankets. Julie was sitting up a little vaguely ; I said "She was awake, just for a minute. I called you but you didn't hear. She was talking."

She said "Christ . . ." She rose and stood looking down at the bed with a queer half-awed expression on her face. She said "We never reckoned on this. You know, her gettin' better . . ."

By all the rules I suppose their patient should have died. Maybe what Greg said later was right, the maggots in the wound checked the sepsis. I've heard of such things but I'm no doctor, I just can't say. The girl mended rapidly. In time the cut healed. It left a branching scar that quirked up one corner of her mouth in a perpetual little half-smile, and a patch of hair over her temple turned pure white. From what Dave had said it was obvious her family had been wiped out by the Furies but she didn't talk of it and nobody felt like asking her. All she said about herself was

that her name was Janette Peterson, but she didn't like it. I got to know her like the rest simply as Pete.

Julie found her an old sweater and skirt from somewhere; the girls got her up and dressed about a week after Dave brought her in. The first thing she did was to go to the door of the hut. Maggie tried to help her but Pete shoved her off. Just outside our billet was a washroom set round with mirrors; she walked into it unsteadily, leaned on one of the sinks and ripped the dressing off her face. She stared for a time, turning her head so she could see the wound, then she laughed painfully. She said "I could allus get a job in a sideshow then. The original scarred lady. Make me bleedin' fortune . . ." She sagged suddenly and Julie caught her. Pete hung on, let her help her back to the bed.

Maggie said the stitches had to come out by about the tenth day or they'd grow into the wound. Pete wouldn't let anybody do the job but Greg. "You put 'em in mate . . ." she said pointedly. Julie held her while he was working. Pete made a little noise in her throat as each loop was cut and pulled clear. We were all sweating by the time the thing was finished. After that she left the dressing off and wandered about camp with the rest of us. She didn't mention her torn face again, and didn't talk about the Furies. But she watched them whenever they were near with a terrible intentness, those big eyes grey and cold as the sea. For a time I thought she was scared of the wasps. It would have been understandable. But it wasn't that; it was as if she had to study them, commit every tiny gesture and movement to memory. She couldn't see enough of them, of their ways.

Under the insects each day was like the one before, and the one that followed it. We'd wake up, eat, sleep, wake up again like machines. In the first week after we arrived half a dozen people tried to bolt. None of them reached the boundary fence. After that there were no more escape bids. There wasn't a chance of making it, it was just a picturesque form of suicide.

Our hut retained control of the cooking facilities. Nobody else seemed to care one way or another though as Greg pointed out they'd start to worry fast enough once

they ran hungry. He was more sullen than he had been; he'd taken to vanishing for long stretches, I'd find him in odd corners of the camp sitting brooding with his hands clasped round his knees. At least I assumed he was brooding. I couldn't guess the way his mind was working and he didn't take me into his confidence.

The wasps relaxed regulations sufficiently to allow us the use of the workshops. I spent a day with Len coaxing a generator set to work and after that there was power for the machine tools and a limited supply for the huts, one bulb per billet. It seemed hardly worth our bother but at least it was something to do. After that Greg spent a lot of time in the m/t section; he always seemed to be tinkering with one or other of the lorries. He could get away with things that the rest of us couldn't though, if I tried to get near the workshops the wasps invariably drove me off.

If we'd expected any relief we were disappointed. There were no planes, no sounds of the outside world at all. Once we did hear firing. It went on most of an afternoon but nothing came in sight and the wasps stayed quiet, watching us from the hut roofs. That night there was another earthquake; none of the camp buildings were badly damaged but it was nasty while it lasted.

The morning after, Greg came looking for me. He said "Got a job on with one of the trucks Bill, like to give us a hand?" I went along without asking any questions, anything was better than permanent inaction. We walked over to one of the shops and opened the front doors. Outside stood a three tonner, ornamented as usual by a Fury on the cab top. Greg walked over to it and the insect rose threateningly, ducking its body and booming with its wings. He put his hands on his hips and watched the display calmly. Then he said "I'm going to service this motor. Get out of the bloody way."

I watched disbelievingly. For a moment nothing happened. Then the Fury launched itself from its perch, roared past me and climbed off into the sky. It settled on one of the hut roofs. Greg turned back and shrugged. "Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't, but it's

always worth a try." He got into the lorry, started up and drove forward over the pit.

I said "Greg, don't tell me they know what you're on about."

He began to haul a jack across the garage. "No they don't, but sometimes you can hustle them. As you saw." He shoved the trolley under the back axle of the truck and started to pump the handle. "Get a couple of stands, will you? Set 'em under the body then let the jack down a bit."

I did what he asked. "What are you doing?"

"Taking the back spring down."

I frowned, trying to work one of the supports under the side of the chassis. "There's nothing wrong with it."

He said conversationally "Better get on with it anyhow, we're no longer alone." I squinted out between the back wheels. A Fury had appeared from somewhere; it was standing just inside the open doors, twisting its head like a puppy to watch us both in turn. Greg said softly "Just keep on working and you'll be all right. Don't worry if what you're doing doesn't make sense. The bastards have no mechanical knowledge at all. That in part is why we're being kept alive. It's their one big drawback."

"Who told you that?"

"Pete. And as it happens, she's right." He administered a few pointless taps on the wheelrim with a hammer. "Get the wheel off then come over to the bench, will you? Take it all nice and slow . . ."

I found a spider and slackened the nuts, pulled the wheel clear and leaned it against the side of the truck. Then I walked across to him. He had a replacement spring on the bench, he was touching it here and there with an oilcan. He started to talk again; he kept his voice soft, letting long pauses elapse between the sentences as if the words were of no moment. He said "I've had about enough of this, Bill. I'm getting out. Want to come along?"

My heart thudded; I tried to speak as casually as he had done. "Wouldn't mind. How do you aim to go about it?" The Fury clattered forward, sat behind us. I could sense it staring. I picked up a piece of metal from the bench, cramped it in a vice and started filing it. He said "That's

the idea, just keep the old façade going. Worries 'em to Hell."

"Night's obviously the best time. I shall want the lorry Len uses for the provision trips. If he can leave some stuff in it so much the better. If he won't drive it will you?"

"Why don't you take it?"

"Don't drive. Never been a thing I've been interested in."

I said "I'll have a go. But I don't think it'll come to that. He's as keen to get out as us. They all are."

He said "Contact him, will you? I shall want it faced toward the gates and not too far from our hut, if he can manage it. Tell him for God's sake to keep it to himself. When the time comes I'll talk to the rest. 'Till then I don't want it spread. Certainly not through camp."

I said "Do my best." The wasp on the floor seemed to have lost interest; it certainly wasn't paying us any particular attention. "What are you going to do about our little friends?"

He got his cigarettes out, lit up and tossed the packet over to me. "There's only one guard per hut now. I'm going to shoot the bastard."

The temptation to blurt out questions was very strong but it had to be resisted. I went back to the lorry and started dismantling the spring shackle. He came over to me in a while carrying the replacement spring and a shaped length of hardwood. He laid the wood along the side of the chassis as if checking its fit. I said "What do you shoot it with? There isn't a rifle on the camp. I know, I've looked."

He said "Ever made a crossbow, Bill? They're a nasty tool."

That time I didn't quite cover my reaction. The thing he was playing with had a roughly worked stock; I saw metal plates and brackets, a milled groove obviously intended to take the quarrel. I realized why he'd been so preoccupied with the workshops. He hadn't been wasting his time. A few minutes later he fetched the stave across. That was a piece of spring steel, drilled at each end to take the string. He fitted it to a mounting on the stock. The

Fury assigned to us came across and spent some time tapping the thing with its antennae. I was nervous about it but Greg just laughed. "They can't extrapolate" he said quietly. "They recognize guns, and from what you've said they'd know a flamethrower. This doesn't look like either; ergo, it's part of the lorry." He disengaged the weapon from the creature's claws and laid it up alongside the axle. "Get a pencil will you, and mark this end? I think we're a bit overlong . . ."

While we were wrestling with the phoney repair job he told me what he intended to do. "After we've fixed the guard we shall have about half a minute to get the truck moving, maybe less. With any sort of luck we should outrun them, Len says she's pretty fast."

I said easily "What about crevasses?"

"Aren't any. Not the way I'm going. Straight up through Westrincham; Len says it's a good road. After that it'll be anybody's guess. But at least we shall have a start."

"Where will you head?"

He said "Somerset. The Mendips. Used to do a lot of caving over there. I can fix us a bolthole the bastards'll never find. OK?"

"Negative. I'm for the coast. Isle of Wight."

"Why?"

I hesitated. "They won't get that far. Flight duration."

He said grimly "No, of course not. Wonder how they got to England?"

I was quiet, realizing the hopelessness of the whole thing. The front shackle finally came apart; we moved back and started on the other one. I said "That bow of yours finished?"

"Yep. Ironmongery's over on the bench in bits. I've had it together. Looks pretty good."

I said "I'm with you. Until we see what's happening at least."

He pulled the spring clear and dropped it on the ground. "Good man. I'll leave Len to you. But nothing to anybody else. I don't want a ruddy exodus."

I collared Len Dilks in the canteen at lunchtime. It was difficult getting him away from the rest of the gang but I managed it finally. I put the idea to him the same way

Greg had put it to me, quietly and casually; there were a lot of wasps present, perched on the roof ties over our heads. Len didn't stop eating; nor did he answer for a moment. Then he said "When do yer want me to fix t'truck?"

"Next time you go out. Today, if they send you."

He shoved his plate back and wiped his mouth on his sleeve. He said "Full tank and facin' hut. It'll be done." He got up and strolled away.

From time to time through the afternoon Greg passed oddments to me. I slid them into my trouser pockets. There were bolts, washers, cogwheels from the winding assembly; considering his limited resources he'd certainly done an efficient job. Last piece was the stirrup that fitted on the end of the stock. With that hidden we put the wheel back on the truck. I arranged a little incident, letting the jack down with a rush and staggering about as if I'd smashed my hand; it diverted the guard wasp while Greg shoved the stock down inside his trousers. It gave him a bulky outline but the insect didn't notice. I was just hoping I wouldn't clank. I'd got the bowstave inside my shirt, and a couple of steel shafts for quarrels. Greg said there had really been no point making more than one. If the first shot missed there wouldn't be time for another.

We drove the lorry back outside and closed the workshop. A thin rain was falling and from the look of the sky there was plenty more to come. I hoped Len had been sent out, it looked as if the night was going to be ideal. When we reached our billet I saw the lorry had in fact gone. The hut was empty; lately most of the camp inmates had got into the habit of congregating in one or other of the main buildings. There were a couple of games-rooms and bars, hardly luxurious but better than the barracks. We put the bow together. It was a complex affair. The string itself was a length of brake cable and there was a mechanism that wound it back against a ratchet. The stave could never have been flexed by hand. I primed the bow a couple of times and pulled the trigger. The cable fetched up against the stave with a hard, thudding crack. Greg took the weapon off me. "Better not play, Bill. It sounds like a ruddy two-two." He explained the Head of his school

had been keen on all forms of archery. They'd made up a crossbow as a curiosity; Greg's lads had done the initial research, the carpentry shop and a local garageman had weighed in helping build it. He'd been surprised by the deadliness of the weapon; on its first trials it had driven a quarrel through a two-inch oak plank. "That's how I knew about making one" he said. "Otherwise, I wouldn't have known where to start."

We pulled one of the lockers out from the wall and hid the bow behind it. A short time later the lorry came back, drove across to the cookhouse and unloaded. I watched tensely as Len got in again and drove toward us. He parked within twenty feet of the hut door.

By nine, when the wasps herded the stragglers into the dormitories, the rain had settled to a steady downpour, roaring on the roof. Greg sat quietly on his bunk for another half hour. I wished I had his nerves, I smoked half a pack of cigarettes while I was waiting. At nine-thirty he stood up and walked to the centre of the hut. He said softly "Bill, go to the door at the washroom end will you? Len, you take the other. The rest of you stay on your beds. I don't want any raised voices, and no arguing. I want you all to listen." He explained briefly that he intended making a break for it. He said that we were armed and stood a good chance of success. He admitted that the rest of the camp had not been told and asked how many of the present roomful were prepared to go with him.

There was silence after he'd finished speaking. Then Dave, lying on his back with his arms clasped behind his head, said quietly "You reckon you're armed, Greg. What with? I haven't seen any guns."

Greg nodded to me. I went to the locker, took the crossbow out, wound the cord back to the notch and slipped one of the bolts onto the stock. They were eighteen inches or more long, half an inch thick and pointed. I held the weapon up for the rest to see then rolled the quarrel off into my hand and laid the bow down again. Pete walked forward and picked it up curiously, hefting it for weight and balance. Then she looked round at us with her striking eyes. She said "I'm one, ducky. Any more for the Skylark?"

Julie got up instantly and went to her. She put her arm round her waist and gave her a little hug. She said softly "Two . . ."

"Three . . ." That from Maggie. She edged down as well toward the washroom end of the hut.

Greg said "And myself is four, Bill five . . . you coming, Len?"

His face was sallow in the lamplight, eyes shadowed under deep brow ridges. He said "That's why I parked t'truck outside. I've seen enough o' bastard insects ter last me."

"Six," said Greg quietly. "That the lot?"

Dave, still prone on the bed, stopped rotating his thumbs. "Just because I'm idle," he said, "doesn't mean I'm not thinking . . . I'm seven."

Greg looked at the others slowly, each in turn. He said "Hear the rain. Listen to it beat. The wasps can't fly through that. But it won't keep on for ever, we haven't got long. Owen?"

Jones Kitchen shrugged elaborately. "I r-reckon I'll have a try, like. Fed up with b-bloody mass caterin' . . ."

Freddy Mitchell said guardedly "Now there's a point I've been thinkin' on, Greg. What happens to the camp if we move out?" I mean, we're as good as runnin' it from this hut. And there's two hundred people here, over."

There was a buzz of talk at that. Pete stepped forward stiffly, still fondling the crossbow. Her eyes started to rove from face to face. Greg walked across to a locker and leaned back on it, resting his hands on the metal top. He said "I don't think some of you have understood even now what this . . . irruption has meant to us or society at large." He took a deep breath, eyes on the floor. Then he looked up again. "I'm not a bloody prophet and I don't like playing God. You all know me, you know what I am . . . But I've had time to think. As you all have. And I think that of the two hundred people here, most will shortly die.

"There are no medical supplies. Soon there'll be no sanitation. No mains water or food. We're eating together, sleeping together. Soon we'll be sickening together. From typhus, from dysentery, from the plague. Bubonic, pneu-

monic. The good old Black Death, tried and tested. That's the sort of prospect you can look forward to."

"If the wasps all died tomorrow this country has still suffered the biggest disaster in recorded history. To my way of thinking the rest of the world's in the same sort of mess. Even with full resources I doubt we'd check the epidemics that are going to start. Have probably started already, somewhere or another. There'll be a chance, I reckon, for small isolated communities to hang on until the worst of the trouble's passed. That's what I aim to try to do. So answering your question Freddy, I'm leaving this camp to die. As die it must, whether we go or stay."

There was an angry chatter, stilled almost at once as he lifted his hand and pointed to the door. "Out there are aliens. Monsters. Forms inimical to us that have taken us over body and soul for their own purposes. Think on that. I don't know what they are or how they came. I don't care. I can't *afford* to care. Neither can any of you . . ."

John Castleton was frowning, red face puzzled. He said slowly "I ain't much of a talker, like. Reckon I needs a bit o' time to think things through. But I says this. It might not be much of a life here. Likely we might take sick an' some of us die. But what you're talkin' about don't come to much neither, do it? Livin' in caves, scrounging for grub. They blamed things'll hunt you down; you won't know no peace till they have."

Greg turned swiftly. "Peace? How much peace do you know here? Or you, or you, any of you? Peace? The cows in the fields know peace, before they're taken out for slaughtering. Is this peace?"

Castleton started to mutter angrily. Greg raised his voice, riding him down. "What do you think you are, if it's not cattle for killing? Do you think you're the chosen few? Do you think the wasps have suddenly developed a sympathy for humanity?"

There was silence.

He said "Right, then. Before you crawl off on your bellies I'll plot out your life for you. Bill told you what he saw down on the coast. How the wasp colonies are expanding. Between now and autumn they'll increase their size a hundred times, a thousand. Next year they'll be bigger, the

year after that bigger again. Already the population must be taking a tremendous, sustained effort to feed. They need meat. That they've already got, by the hundred thousand pound. I'll leave you to work that one out for yourselves. But they'll need other things. Sugar for the grubs in the first week of their lives. Maybe fruit in season. Building materials. Don't fool yourselves, they're smart enough to adapt our techniques to suit them. All that means transport. Transport and labour. People to serve the trucks, help run the nests. People to work the land, process its crops. That's why we're here, I reckon; and that's what you'll be doing, those of you who live through the plagues. You'll work for them. You'll plant and reap and build. They'll use you, once they start. And when you're finished, when you're tired, when you're worn out, when you're no good for work . . . they'll still need meat. Meat to feed the racks of big, white pulsing maggots . . ."

Harry West was on his feet, narrow chest heaving, eyes blinking rapidly. He said "You're mad. All mad . . ." He stared round at a ring of hostile faces. "I'll tell you what he's tryin' to do. He wants to scare you. Yeah, that's it. Scare you so you'll run off with him. He don't care what happens to you, not him. He's already said so. He wants to run things an' be a b-big bloke. I knows his sort, that's all he wants. He don't care about none of us——"

Castleton said "Shut up, you bloody fool. I reckon he's right."

The little man's face was twitching. He said "Well I'm not havin' it, see? Not me. I'm not puttin' up with it——"

Len Dilks spoke from behind him. "Yer don't have to, whack. Just stop here an' be wet-nursed . . ."

"An' what happens to us?" demanded West. "Eh? You just tell me that. What happens to the ones as stays? What d'you think *they'll* do, them things out there? What'll they do to *us*, when you've all run off?"

Greg said wearily "Come with us then. You've got your choice."

He shook his head violently. "That's where you're wrong. I haven't got no choice. All right for you, all right for you

I say. You're young, all on you. You won't hurt, you can lead that sort o' life. I can't. Not no more. It'd kill me . . ."

Julie said faintly "Oh God spare us this . . ."

Greg was looking haggard. "There won't be reprisals. They're passionless, they're like machines. Revenge wouldn't be any good to 'em . . ."

West said desperately "That's fine. That's all very nice. Knows what's goin' to happen behind his back now, he does . . ."

Mitchell, the steel erector, moved suddenly. "Open the bloody door, I'm tired o' this. Miss with that thing o' yours, there's enough here to fix a bloody wasp. Been wanting to pull one of their damned heads off for weeks . . ."

Maggie laughed. "Better sit down Dad, where you won't get hurt. You can't stop us anyway . . ."

There was a general, surging movement toward the door. Harry West's voice rose triumphantly. "Can't I do anythin' then, you all too smart . . ."

Greg snapped "Dave, take him . . ."

Dave Kemp moved with startling speed. One moment he was lying on his back, the next he'd launched himself in a sort of rugger tackle. But he wasn't fast enough. The little man heeled away from his outstretched hands. He was already screaming to the wasps outside. Greg was hit in the chest; he fell back, caught off balance. West came down the hut dodging and weaving. I tried for him, Freddy Mitchell had the same idea at the same time. We collided, rolled on the floor. The rest was confused. Voices were yelling desperately; somebody stepped on my hand, I was kicked in the ribs. I had a glimpse of the little man nearly at the door, a sprawl of bodies in his wake. The only person in front of him was Pete. I saw her jaw sag; she jerked the crossbow up, there was a heavy 'chunk and a thud, I sat up grunting.

The whole hutfull of us were frozen in various attitudes of surprise. On the floor between the last pair of beds was Harry West. Pete was standing over him, her knuckles white where she was gripping the bow. The little man had half turned round, his hands were clenched across his chest. He made a queer noise like a sort of hoarse giggle, and

seemed to gesture to himself as if calling all of us to witness the enormity of what had happened. He grabbed the leg of one of the beds, half raised himself; then his arms and legs twitched together, a ribbon of blood ran from his mouth, he rolled over on his back and lay still. Protruding two inches from his body was the square head of the quarrel.

In the silence, Pete lifted the weapon until she was holding it out to Greg at arm's length. Her face was indescribable but when she spoke her voice held no expression at all. "It works, mate" she said.

There was a rapping at the door.

Greg moved fast. He yanked the mattress off his bed; a bayonet slithered across the floor and Freddy Mitchell grabbed it. Greg said "Up by the door, quick. If I miss, take him with that. Try and get the neck joint . . ." He snatched the crossbow from Pete, started cranking. "The rest of you, anybody who wants the lorry, move like Hell." He slapped the spare quarrel on the stock, knelt in front of the door. The noise came again, imperiously. I grabbed the handle and Greg shouted. "All right, open up . . ." I flung the door back and jumped out of the way.

It was nearly easy. The wasp hesitated when it saw Greg; he held the bow forward a bare yard from its mask and pulled the trigger. The bolt smashed its whole length through the chitin, tore into the thorax. The force of it rolled the insect back against the washroom wall. It lay kicking; Greg yelled again and ran for the lorry. I was hard on his heels. Something boomed at us in the rain, Greg batted it with the crossbow and it plunged away out of sight. The Fury on the cab top seemed half dazed. Freddy Mitchell jumped at it swinging the bayonet. The blade rang on steel; the wasp leaped convulsively, fell past the radiator and rolled between the wheels.

I grabbed Pete, opened the cab door and shoved her in. Len was already up on the other side. Greg followed us aboard, there was a bad moment as the starter yammered uselessly then the engine fired and we were careering toward the hut. There seemed to be people everywhere, tumbling over each other to get to us. Len gunned the truck away, looked back, swore and stamped on the

anchors. Dave was silhouetted against the hut door, running desperately, the guitar in one hand. I saw him hauled aboard and we didn't wait for any more. Len opened up heading for the road. The headlights snapped on, showed silvery curtains of rain. The gates swam up ahead, exploded in a white shower of fragments and there was a Fury, zooming to gain height for the windshield. Len swerved, the thing bounced off the door with a crash. The lorry clawed straight, accelerating; when I looked back the camp was lost in darkness. We were clear.

I shall never forget that drive. Len held the truck out wherever he could, we had a long way to go before daybreak. The rain lashed down, battering the glass between the arcs of the wipers. We hung on as well as we could, steadying ourselves against the swaying and bucking as the lorry leaped ridges in the road. We belted through Westrincham, crossed the Blackmoor Vale heading for Wincanton, Castle Carey. There were maps in the cab, we tried to navigate by the jazzing light of a torch while Len sweated and swore, wrestling with the wheel. Approaching the Mendips things got tougher. We swung off to avoid Shepton Mallet and Wells, then had to detour again to miss crevasses. Toward daybreak the rain eased; dawn found us high on the plateau, crossing a bleak landscape of undulating fields bounded by low drystone walls. Len knocked the lorry out of gear and coasted to a stop; we sat rubbing our eyes, trying to feel glad we were still alive. Then I heard a noise behind us. I wriggled round, stared through the back window. On board we had what seemed to be the entire contents of the hut. They were soaked to the skin and shivering, but they were singing like Hell.

CHAPTER TEN

The place Greg was headed for was located in a coomb running south-west away from the main plateau. He directed Len carefully, consulting the map and frowning from time to time. It was full daylight when we reached a crossroads and turned left. The road started to descend almost immediately. I was relieved; being off the tableland

gave an illusion of security at least. Soon the big diesel was rumbling along a steep-sided valley, the slopes thickly set with bushes and trees. The lushness was a sharp contrast to the barren area we'd left. Greg stared up anxiously, watching the hillside. A mile or so along he said sharply "Pull in Len, that's it." He pointed.

At first I couldn't see anything. Then, following the direction of his finger, I made out a recess under an overhanging slab of rock. It was almost completely screened by bushes and grass. I said incredulously "That? That's just a crevice." Greg shook his head. "That's the mouth of it, Bill. That's Chill Leer . . ."

We got down stiffly. The passengers in the back had suffered from the cold, some of them could barely move. They stood round for a while chafing ankles and wrists and flapping their arms to restore the circulation. Len took the lorry off a quarter of a mile or so down the road ; there was no point in advertising our presence by leaving it outside the cave. He hid it as well as he could behind a screen of bushes, draping a tarp over the cab to conceal the brightness of the paint. When he got back we started to climb.

Greg moved ahead, stepping easily across the hillside. I followed with Pete. We made slightly heavier going of it, in places we were both glad of each other's help. The rest of the party tailed along behind. The mouth of the cave was eighty or a hundred feet above the level of the road and the last few yards were almost sheer. The actual entrance was a bare three feet tall at its highest point. I ducked through after Pete and was surprised to find that once inside I could stand upright. The hole gave directly onto quite a respectable cavern. As my eyes got used to the half dark I saw it was nearly twenty feet long and proportionately wide. The floor sloped slightly into the hill and at the back were the entrances to three or four grim-looking tunnels. Greg told me all but one petered out within yards ; the largest of them led to what was called a pitch, a vertical descent impassable without ladders. The shaft opened into a second cave almost directly below the first. That in its turn gave access to the main series deep under the hill.

When we were all inside Greg took charge. "You're underground now," he said curtly, "and we shall be going deeper. Anybody done any potholing?"

No reply.

He said "Right then. Caving's got its own rules. You'll learn some of 'em as you go. The others I'll tell you right here. Don't forget 'em. Never move without at least one light and a spare. We'll fix up the gear later. Don't enter any passages you don't know. *Don't* wander off alone anywhere, for any reason. And if you're in doubt about anything, anything at all, *do nothing*. Ask. Now then, let's count heads. You're a sorry-looking bunch, I'll say that straight off . . ."

He was right there. Most of the elation had passed; the party sat about mournfully, shivering in their wet clothes. One or two, Jill Sanders among them, were already casting apprehensive glances at the black tunnel-throats behind us. We found we numbered fifteen; all the members of the Atlantic Eight who'd been with us in the hut, Freddy Mitchell, John Castleton, Owen Jones and three or four who'd decided to risk it at the last moment. The main thing was obviously to dry off before we had three or four pneumonia cases; Greg organised parties to scour the hillside, keeping out of sight as far as possible. They were to look for brushwood, fir cones, anything that would burn. I paired off with Len Dilks; we worked down as far as the lorry, brought back the lids of half a dozen packing crates that had been kicking around in the flatbed. By the time we got back a fire of sorts had been started in the cave and eight or nine people, all more or less naked, were holding out steaming clothes to the warmth. There was something decidedly primitive about the whole scene; Len regarded it sardonically, then turned to look up at the tunnel mouth arching behind him. "What did he reckon this place were called?"

"Dunno. Chill Leer, I thought he said."

He sniffed. "It's a right enough description, any road. But it'd be just the job for a ruddy jazz club, wouldn't it . . .?"

Greg took us on one side. The truck had been empty, it was imperative we find food and water. There was a spring

a few hundred yards down the valley, we could drink from that, but for food we'd have to wait till nightfall. The lorry would have to go foraging again. The hideout was ringed with towns, all within fairly easy reach; Wells to the south, Weston-super-Mare on the coast, Bristol and Bath to the north and north-east. Given a certain amount of luck we wouldn't run hungry. Greg called Jones Kitchen across from the fire. The ex-chef was enthusiastic. "Got a bit of f-freedom of action, see boy?" he said. "Night shuffles, that's the thing now. A couple o' lads, and that shootin'-contraption o' yours, an' we'll see what we can't pick up. Surprisin' what you can do with a nice quick sh-shuffle . . ." He flicked his pointed tongue across his lips and grinned as if he could already taste the results.

I volunteered to take the lorry but Greg shook his head. He said with surprising acuteness "You get a whiff of the old salt breeze and I wouldn't trust you, Billy boy. You've got something over the water that's worth more than we are. Good luck to you, but I want the truck back . . ." He chose Len instead, with John Castleton for mate. It was arranged they'd go off at nightfall, take the direction they thought best once they got on the road. We left them with Jones Kitchen, working out lists of foodstuffs and utensils; Greg had got another job for me.

Apparently about a mile away was a store where he hoped to find ladders, ropes and other gear needed for scaling the pitches. He rated the equipment high in the survival stakes. Our main camp was to be located at the foot of the first drop; he maintained that would provide the best possible obstacle should the wasps ever attack in force. The descent was narrow, enclosed by jagged rock-walls. The insects would find it nearly impossible to fly down; if they tried, they'd reach the bottom singly and be fairly easy to deal with. Greg wanted me to go along with him to help bring the stuff back; he said he'd take Dave and Freddy Mitchell as well.

We hung around but by mid-afternoon no wasps had come within sight. We'd had a couple of lookouts on the hillside most of the day but it seemed the insects weren't bothering with the area overmuch. The four of us started out, keeping well spaced and ready to dive for cover. The

day was cool, with a blustery wind and a low overcast of cloud. As Dave remarked, it was probably bad flying weather.

We reached the store without incident. It was a little place set well back from the road, windowless and with one heavily padlocked door. It took a while to break in but it was worth it. We headed back half an hour later loaded down with all sorts of junk, lifelines, helmets, torches and coils of ladder, lightweight stuff with spidery steel rungs and nylon sides. We got back to the cave and piled the stuff in a heap.

Greg announced his immediate intention of going down below, asked if we'd like to team up with him. Mitchell wasn't keen; I looked round and saw Pete sitting by herself in a corner, hands clasped across her knees. She'd hardly spoken since the killing the night before and even Julie and Maggie had been leaving her alone. It was difficult to know what to say . . . Most of the others were outside, lounging about within easy bolting distance of the cave mouth; I went across to her and asked if she'd like to come with us. She frowned at me for a moment, then shrugged. "Ta mate, might as well. Something to do, ain't it?" She got up and followed me into the tunnel.

Greg moved ahead, his torch beam flashing off the walls. We soon reached the pitch. The hole wasn't sharp-edged; the tunnel floor just steepened into a bulging lip. Beyond it was blackness. Pitons were already driven into the rock; Greg hitched one of the ladders to them and dropped it into the void. There was the briefest of pauses, then the 'thunk' of it striking bottom. He eased himself over the edge. I followed him.

The worst part was at the beginning, where the rungs lay against the rock. They barely afforded finger and toe holds. Even the vertical descent needed care, the ladder had a nasty habit of twitching away from underneath me. Greg helped, steadying the thing from below. Towards the bottom of the drop the tunnel narrowed until as I climbed my back rubbed against rock. I reached ground eventually some thirty feet down, my legs already aching from the unaccustomed exercise. I landed on a slope of loose

rubble ; while the others were negotiating the pitch I had a look round.

It was obvious at once the second cave was a far better proposition than the first. It was almost as large, and two or three holes connected it with the open air via short passages of rock. The largest of the swallets, just big enough to admit a man, was almost covered on the outside with fern ; the light filtering through was a pleasant green. Branching off from the main chamber was a veritable maze of side passages and tunnels. Some of them were shallow, with raised alcoves that would make handy sleeping quarters. Others stretched off into darkness. I listened just inside the largest of them and heard, very faint and far away, the splash and tinkle of water. Air moved against my face. It felt fresh and cold.

Greg came up behind me, shone his torch into the gloom. He said "While I'm here I'm going to set up the stuff on the main pitches. Anybody scared?"

No-one spoke. He said "If you are I'd prefer you to say. Go into a cave series frightened and you've got a good chance of not coming out again."

Pete laughed. She said in a brittle voice "We shan't meet anything worse than ourselves, ducks . . ." He didn't wait any longer, just stepped past us and started walking. I followed ; I was uneasy but there was something oddly fascinating about these tunnels winding into the deeps of the earth. I'd barely realized such things existed. On the way, Greg talked. He told us how the series had been discovered a couple of years back by a group of geology students from Bristol. 'Leer' apparently was a variant of liar. It was an old name ; there had always been rumours that a cave system opened off the coomb but the site of it had been forgotten for generations. The place was still incompletely mapped ; there was a chance it would turn out to be one of the deepest systems in the country, but so far the way had been barred by a water-filled section of tunnel that he said was called a syphon. That was why the dump of equipment had been established ; there had been plans for a full scale expedition later in the year.

We got to the second pitch. It was far more awe-inspiring than the first. For some distance the floor of the tunnel

had been shelving more and more steeply and the sides closing in; suddenly the rock fell away and there was space at our feet, like inky black water. Pete leaned out and dropped a stone. The missile raised clashing echoes; the landing impact sounded a mile down. Greg turned on her. "Right, that's once. Now don't ever do that again."

She said innocently "Sorry, dear heart. Somebody down there then?"

He snorted. "Next time there might be. Just don't throw stones down pitches."

Again there were pitons in the rock. He hooked a ladder length to them. A much bigger roll this time. Dave said "How deep is it, Greg?"

"About eighty feet. Take it slow, and try to keep relaxed. It's a long climb. Longer on the way back . . ." He swung down and disappeared.

It seemed an age before we heard his reassuring shout from the bottom. I looked over. The torch swam below like a glow worm. I had a moment of giddiness and fought it back. I think it would have been worse if I'd been able to see what I was doing. I started to climb after him.

We stood at the bottom of the pitch and swung the lamp beams slowly. We were in a wonderland. We'd climbed through the roof of a chamber a hundred feet long and nearly half as wide. All round us stalactite formations hung like monstrous spears, joined roof and floor with brilliant columns a yard or more thick. Above and between them the rock glittered with whorls and bosses, like fan vaulting sketched in glass. Pete broke silence first. Her voice was only a whisper but the strange place heard it, threw back a sibilant husk of echoes. "Christ," she said, awed. "It's like ruddy Westminster Abbey, ain't it . . .?"

We walked across the hall, treading softly; the sensation of being in the nave of a cathedral was uncannily strong. The water noise got louder; we passed through an ante-chamber, reached yet another pitch. Shorter this time, and more enclosed. A few yards away from the bottom of it we caught sight of the stream. It issued from a fissure in the rockwall twenty feet or so above our heads, splashed over a series of ledges to plunge into a deep-looking pool. From there the water moved swiftly out of sight under a

rock arch. We followed it, crossing a cavern lower and less impressive than the great hall, with fewer stalactite formations. Its floor was a sloping scree littered with slabs and chunks of stone, some of them a yard or more across. We had to climb over and among them; at the far end of the place the walls narrowed abruptly, the roof bulged down to touch the water. This then was the syphon, the current limit of exploration. We went back by easy stages the way we'd come, and reached the open air.

I spent the rest of the day on the hill, cutting bracken and spreading it to dry. Jones Kitchen and his party left at sunset, taking the crossbow with them; the lorry moved out soon afterwards. For the rest of us there was nothing to do but wait. The night was fine; I sat outside the cave mouth watching the moonrise, dozing from time to time and wondering about Castleton and Len. I badly wanted them to make it back; apart from anything else it was important to all of us that they did. The hunters returned just before dawn, gory but jubilant. They'd shot a sheep, using a battery bolt from the lorry as a quarrel, and Owen had bled the carcass and butchered it on the spot. They were loaded down with chunks of meat; that didn't do us any immediate good, we had no way of cooking it. The fire was out and we'd used all the fuel in the vicinity. There was nothing to be done unless we wanted to eat the flesh raw. Nobody was that keen; we were hungry, but not starving.

By midday there was still no sign of the lorry. I'd given it up for lost when I heard an engine. We sat staring at each other hopefully then Greg got up and ran to the cave entrance. I was standing on the hillside with him when the truck came in sight. Len had started out southwards, he was coming back from the north, the way we'd used the day before. I saw the red cab, the bulky load lashed under a tarpaulin, then Greg jumped at me and knocked me flat. Straddling the roof of the lorry was a Fury, mask staring stolidly ahead . . ."

We wormed our way back to the cave entrance. I was sweating, Greg was cursing under his breath. All sorts of ideas went through my mind; the main one, the shocking

one, was that somehow we'd been sold down the river, they'd brought the insects back to the hideout. The diesel stopped below us and I heard the driving door open and slam. There was shouting. I peered back cautiously; Len was standing in the road grinning up at us. I saw him reach up and slap the Fury affectionately. The insect didn't budge. I straightened slowly, wiping my face. Greg got up alongside me. Len said "You look a right set o' nits, jumpin' about up there. Come an' meet Charlie . . ." He yanked the wasp's head off, waved it at us and put it back on the body. "He's a right little Saint Christopher, in his way . . ."

We spilled out down the hill then, crowded round congratulating him. Up close I saw the Fury was little more than a shell; it only had four of its six legs and the thorax was almost completely shot away. The body was held together with wire and battens of wood, and lashed to the cab top so it couldn't slip. It had looked real enough at a distance though and apparently it had fooled the rest of the wasps.

We set to unloading the lorry. It was heavy work; they had everything imaginable on board, crates of food, cooking utensils, camp stoves, fuel for them, even bags of wood and coke. It all had to be humped up the path to the cave; there weren't enough of us to form an efficient chain or the job would have gone quicker. The essentials, the food, fuel and kitchen gear, were sent up first, and Greg released Owen and a couple of the girls to start fixing a meal. When the truck was offloaded Len drove it back down the valley. I went with him, filled half a dozen cans at the spring. We carried them back between us. Greg woudn't let any of us rest until the last of the mountain of junk had been shifted out of sight. It nearly filled the upper cave; we sprawled about among it and on top of it, half cooked by the heat of Jones Kitchen's improvised range. I think the stew he dished up was about the best thing I'd ever tasted; half the mutton had gone into it, and anything and everything else that had come to hand. Nobody said much until the whole lot was finished; then Len handed out canned lager and beer, and pack after pack of cigarettes. He'd certainly done us proud, he'd brought back everything

from full strength Capstan to Balkan Sobranie. While we smoked he told us about the trip.

It had gone badly at the start. Wells had been unapproachable ; some furious activity was going on there, despite the darkness the sky had been booming with wasps. The lorry had circled away toward Bristol, but they hadn't entered the city. "Yer could smell the stink ten miles off" said Len disgustedly. "There'll be nowt comin' from there fer a year or two, I'll tell yer that right now . . ." He'd been forced to use the smaller towns and villages toward the coast. They'd started loading the lorry but it had seemed everywhere they looked they saw fresh necessities. It had taken them till dawn to collect all they needed and rather than spend the day in hiding they'd decided, daringly, to travel back in the light. "I didn't think we'd come up against much," said Len. "Whole area were deserted like." He'd been wrong there, within minutes of starting they'd collected a Fury that had zoomed in to settle on the cab top. "We carried t'little chap a mile or two," said Len, grinning cadaverously, "then happen he rumbled summat were up. He come down at t'window like, buzzin' . . ." They'd been armed ; a well directed blast from a twelve-bore had shattered the brute before it had a chance to yell for help.

It was then that Len had had his great idea. "We picked up t'bits and chucked 'em on top o' t'load" he said. "We carried on a mile or two then pulled off and started buildin' t'dummy. It were a mucky job scrapin' him but I reckon it were worth it." The dodge worked perfectly ; they joined a column of traffic moving north under the control of the Furies. None of the insects had investigated when they dropped behind and turned off the road. They had snatched a well-deserved couple of hours sleep, then driven on across the plateau. They had seen a few high-flying Furies but they hadn't troubled them. I wondered what would have happened if any of the brutes had tried to call up their pal. Len shrugged. "I didn't think too much about it," he admitted. "All I know is, it worked. That was good enough for us."

The trick worked again the following day, and the day after. By that time we'd transferred part of the stores to

the lower level and brought in the heather for bedding. I spread my heap in one of the alcoves opening off the main chamber, covered it with a piece of tarpaulin. It might not have been luxurious but I've paid to sleep on worse. Greg fixed a gantry over the cave mouth and lashed a pulley to the end; after that the loads were hauled the last few yards on the end of a rope. It eased things a lot. We rigged a sort of portcullis that could be swung down to close the bottom of the first pitch; it wouldn't stop an all-out attack but it would hold the wasps long enough for us to get a shot at them. Greg didn't think the swallets were too important but all the same we closed the mouths of them with iron bars wedged into the rock. Pete seemed to have got over the killing; she helped a lot with the gate in the pitch. I was working mainly in the upper cave, helping stow the bulk stores; I heard her arguing with the assembly team. "Well hold the bleedin' thing straight, else how can I fix it . . .?" And again, "No, dear heart, I don't suppose it will bed down, it's on me ruddy thumb . . ."

We only had one bad incident. That was when we were coaxing Jill Sanders down the pitch into the lower cave. She stopped halfway and began to whimper. I was standing at the bottom of the ladder with Greg; he stuck his head into the shaft and called up. "What's the matter there?"

An urgent consultation at the top; then Julie's voice said calmly "She's claustrophobic . . ."

He was up the ladder instantly. He was very gentle; he talked the girl down all the way, one step at a time. It seemed an age before they reached bottom. They came down the last few rungs with a rush. I caught Jill; her face was chalk-white and running sweat. We got her over to the swallet, where she could see the sky. She was better there, but she never overcame her terror of Chill Leer. After that first experience she slept in the upper cave, close to the entrance. She vanished one night a week or two after we moved in. I often wondered where she went. She'd never been able to come to terms with the life either in the camp or the caves. Maybe she ran back to the wasps; or perhaps she just lost herself on the hills, wandered about and died someplace. Whatever happened, we never saw

her again. We missed her; she'd never had much to say for herself and as far as the colony was concerned she was more of a liability than an asset but all the same it was a familiar face gone, the first gap in the ranks.

Apart from that the colony shook down remarkably well. There was surprisingly little bickering; I think from the start we were all too busy to have any time for arguments. Greg insisted that we stock up as much as possible while we had the chance; the lorry didn't stop going out till both the upper cave and twenty or thirty yards of passages were stacked to the roof with food and fuel. Catering for the clan didn't turn out to be as difficult as I had supposed; there was still plenty of livestock on the hills, sheep and cattle running wild and a seemingly endless supply of hares. Jones Kitchen worked wonders. After the first week or so he rigged up a couple of contraptions he called trombone burners; he assured me they were very efficient though when they were working they always appeared to be on the point of explosion. Some of his culinary feats were memorable and there was no end to his ingenuity; I remember being startled once to find out I'd been eating cooked stinging nettles. They were very tender too. Without doubt though his best achievement was the acquisition of a dozen river trout. He skulked off with Len one night; they would never say afterwards how far they'd driven, though Len did tell me of a fearsome poaching method employing a torch and bayonet. He said it was the only time he'd ever felt grateful to the Celts for being thieves bred and born.

Julie and Maggie made a point of spending every other night with one of the men. Julie told me they'd worked out a rota; I've never been sure whether to believe that or not. She said she'd put me on it; there was something undeniably attractive about a night with a raw-boned, enthusiastic blonde but I turned the offer down. I don't exactly know why; I think it was to do with Jane.

I was thinking a lot about her. I knew I should carry on looking for her but I couldn't quite make the break. In the caves I was accepted as part of a unit, a team: if I moved out I would be on my own once more, nobody to back me. I don't know whether I was more afraid of

being killed by the wasps or of being shoved into one of their damned camps again. I talked things over with Greg. I told him one night, impulsively, the whole story about Jane and our trip to the coast. He listened carefully till I'd finished, then he shook his head. "You're your own boss, Bill, you'll do what you want. I'd hate to push you one way or the other on a thing like this. But I say you'd be a fool to leave right now. I don't think you'd make it; there's a lot of country to cross and if what Len says is right most of it's swarming with wasps. In your place I reckon I'd wait a week or two, let the autumn get settled in. We might all be moving out then anyway."

"Why?"

He said "Wasps die at the end of the summer . . ."

Up to then the elementary fact hadn't occurred to me. I sat frowning, turning it over in my mind. "Do you reckon these brutes will snuff it then? What happens if they live right through the winter?"

He said "Wasps never used to."

"They never used to be three feet long either."

He shrugged. "Well anyway, let me know if you decide to risk it. I'll get one of the girls to pack some stuff for you."

I made my decision. "I'll stick. For another week or two anyway. But it'll be rough just sitting waiting."

He looked at me through suddenly narrowed eyes. "Who'll be sitting waiting? I reckon the nests will die back but like you said it's a long chance. It isn't worth risking. I'm going after the bastards."

I was startled. "How the Hell are you going to do that?"

He ran his fingers through his long hair. "Not too sure. I've got one or two ideas and what you've said has given me some more. But I don't want to talk about it yet." Further than that, he wouldn't commit himself.

He might have been thinking about an offensive but it was Pete who brought things to a head. We were sitting round the cave a couple of evenings later; the meal finished, the portcullis strapped in place for the night and I don't think any of the rest of us were considering starting a war. One of our half dozen Tilly lamps had been lit at the back of the cavern; under it Dave sat with the guitar,

strumming softly, singing snatches here and there, some bawdy, others not. Julie was mending a tear in her shirt; she'd taken it off to do it but we were more or less used to that by now. Jones Kitchen sat by the swallets, newspaper spread to catch the last light of the setting sun. The brilliance burned on his wrists and cheekbone, haloed his dark hair. I leaned across to see what he was reading. A six month old copy of the *Financial Times*. I started to grin. "How're the investments going then, Owen?"

He shook his head sorrowfully, unsmiling. "P-pepper's down a farthin' a ton. I r-reckon I'll sell . . ."

Pete laughed with the rest of us; then she pulled a haversack toward her feet, opened it and tossed something into the centre of the cave. The head of a Fury, jaws gaping.

Maggie yipped and jumped back out of the way; Dave froze, fingers stifling the guitar strings. Suddenly the atmosphere was totally changed. I saw Jones Kitchen fold the paper quietly and set it down; Julie put her shirt on with consummate dignity and stared at the trophy that lay on the rock. "Thanks for the present darling" she said coldly. "But it isn't Christmas yet . . ."

Greg spoke angrily. "Throw that thing out . . . where the Hell d'you get it, anyway?"

Pete smiled at us all. "Found the little dear on the hills this afternoon, cuttin' the guts out of a sheep. He died happy . . ." She picked the head up and started playing with it, opening and closing the mandibles. "There's still a few of 'em about, actually. Just thought you'd like to know . . ."

Greg swore. "I said throw the bloody thing out . . ."

"No," said Pete gaily. "It's nice . . ." And she put the mask to her face, crooning and rocking it like a baby.

Greg was across the cave in two strides. He slapped at Pete and the mask together; the blow sent the thing spinning across the rock. Pete stayed still, head down, hands spread flat in front of her. She was trembling. Suddenly I wanted to go to her and hold her but you didn't do things like that with Pete, she wasn't exactly the blushing rose type. I think Greg was feeling the same; he said thickly "Why do you do this sort of thing to yourself . . ." Then he turned, faced a dozen pairs of eyes. He said

slowly "I suppose you all understand what she was getting at?"

No answer.

He took the silence for agreement. "Unfortunately, she's right." He reached down and shook Pete's shoulder. "Come on, you're not hurt."

She turned a bright face up to him. "I'm all right, dear heart," she said lightly. "What was you about to say . . .?"

He went on dourly. "Nobody else has done anything about the wasps as far as I can see. It's not enough to sit here and scratch each other's backs. We've got to hit the nests. The brutes have overrun enough of the bloody country already."

Dave laid the guitar aside. "I know this is where we came in, but what are you going to hit them *with*, Greg?"

The blond man walked out of the cave into a side passage. He was back in a moment carrying a bottle. It was filled with a colourless liquid and had a rough wick trailing from the neck. He set it down where we could all see it. He said "With these, mainly. The prototype contains water. The production jobs will be filled with petrol."

A sharp intake of breath from somewhere; then Len said tonelessly "Molotov cocktails . . ."

Pete edged forward until she could touch the bottle. She handled it curiously, the way she always did with something that interested her. She said "Can we get close enough?"

Greg squatted tailor-fashion on the floor of the cave. He felt in his pockets, produced a stick of chalk. "Anybody that wants out, can go. If none of you are interested the scheme's dead. But here it is anyway . . ."

I slept badly that night. For the first time I'd managed to see us in perspective as tiny expendable units caught up in a world-tide of events; for a while Chill Leer had provided the illusion of security but in nightmare even that left me. I seemed to see the rock floor splitting, the whole gang of us, Greg and myself, Pete, Len, Dave, Maggie and Julie, whirling down through chasms of dark to where the earth finally closed with a monstrous, silent gnashing. I woke up, sat sweating. Grey light was filtering through the rock chambers; it was just after dawn.

I felt I had to get out into the open air. I walked through the main cavern, empty now and dark. I could still see the faces as we'd sat in firelight and lamplight and listened to Greg talk. At the time there'd seemed some point in what he wanted to do. Now there was none.

I climbed the pitch. In the upper cave the light was stronger. I edged past the stacks of crates. Outside, the grass of the hillside was wet with dew. I leaned back against the rock and closed my eyes. There was singing.

I sat up sharply. Below me Pete came along the road, a water can in each hand. I stayed where I was while she climbed up to me, dumped the containers by the cave entrance. She said "What's the matter dearie, had a bad night?"

I nodded. She peered at me then laughed. "Looks as if you'd took a short course o' death . . ." A pause; then, "Comin' up the hill?"

"Why?"

She said impatiently "Oh come on, it's a ruddy smashin' morning." She got up and I followed her. We worked our way past the cave mouth, climbed across the slope above to the crest. At the top Pete stood with her hands on her hips, outlined against the sky. There was a slight mist; the sun was struggling with it, breaking through in pearly bursts of light. Somewhere far off a bird was singing; apart from that there was no sound. Just a breathing hush. Pete looked back at me. She said "S'funny, ain't it? Like there wasn't no people. Or no wasps. Wasn't ever goin' to be . . . I like it when it's like this."

I didn't answer. She said quizzically "What's up then, don't wanna beat the old nests up?"

I sat down on an outcrop of rock. "It looks like it's a thing we've got to do. But I reckon it's just a good way to get our throats cut."

She shook her head impatiently, flicked the short, tawny hair out of her eyes. "The bastards are as thick as two short planks. We can do 'em in. You just gotta know how to hit 'em right." She came and squatted at my feet, picked a blade of grass and started to nibble it. Then she looked up. "We shall be all right" she said perkily. "Be like takin' pennies off a blind man, you'll see."

"Pete . . ."

"What?"

I hesitated. Then, "Where did you get that thing, that head? Did you kill a wasp for it?"

She said shortly "It didn't give its bloody self up. I was out on the hill with a rifle, I sort of stalked it a bit. Got it first time. Double top, straight through the nut. Wasn't no trouble."

I said "It was a pretty good shot."

She looked at her hands. "Yeah. I'm good at killin' though . . ."

I swallowed. "Look, I'm sorry, I didn't mean——"

She cut me off. "Don't matter. It's done, ain't it? Won't change that. But I think about that little bloke a lot though. The look on his face. Like he couldn't hardly believe it. Poor little bastard . . ."

"It was an accident, you can't blame yourself . . ."

She said gently "It wasn't no accident, Bill. I aimed the ruddy thing. It was a good shot . . ." She finished the grass, spat and picked another blade. She leaned back on her elbow, looked round at the hills emerging from the mist. She said "It's funny, y'know. I used to miss the Smoke to start with. But I wouldn't go back to it now. Not if I had the chance."

I felt around for cigarettes but I'd left the packet down in the caves. "Had you been out of London long?"

"Couple o' years." She grinned. "Hell of a row there were, when the old man told us we were goin'. 'I've bought this shop' he says. 'We're all gettin' out in the country afore these 'ere bombs gets active. All you kids'll have horses', that's what he told us. 'An' we can go an' watch 'em makin' the cows sit on all them little bottles,' he says. 'Bit of all right, that'll be.' That were just like the old man. Never a word to nobody till it were all fixed up, the shop an' all that. He was doin' all right too. Nice little shop that was . . ."

She stopped speaking suddenly. She'd got onto forbidden ground; her face set, her fingers crept up to touch the scar on her cheek. She sat brooding; then she jerked herself out of the mood. She stretched and yawned. She was very neat and boyish; her breasts pushed softly against the thin

material of her shirt, her jean-clad legs were strong and slim. She watched me for a moment with a mask of innocence, then she rolled over and got to her feet. She said "Oh well, s'pose we'd better go and give them lazy baskets the wakey-wakey . . ."

Three nights later we moved out against the Furies.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Greg's plan was fairly simple. The target chosen lay north-east of us, in a coomb sloping from the hills toward the Bristol Channel some ten miles distant. A road ran up the valley passing close by the nest site; Len was to take the lorry out at nightfall, circle round and get in position on the road about a mile away from the wasp fortress. Meanwhile an attack party some half dozen strong would make its way across the hills on foot, edge in over the high ground and get as close as possible to the nests. That would need caution. Greg said there were sentry insects every few yards. The signal to attack would be given by the truck; Len would drive in flashing his lights, sounding his horn and generally kicking up as much din as possible. It seemed certain the guards and any other Furies that managed to get airborne would go for the lorry *en masse*. When that happened Len was to drive out like Hell, trusting to his speed to take him clear. He'd stand a pretty good chance; the glass had been taken out of the cab and the windows protected by grilles similar to the ones I'd built on the Ford. In addition he would be carrying a couple of passengers with twelve bores. In the confusion the real attackers would close in the rest of the way, light the wicks on a score of petrol bombs, throw them and make themselves scarce. We would wait for a wet night; Greg reckoned that hampered by darkness and rain there would be little chance of the wasps catching up with us.

The Furies were by this time in the third stage of their culture. The earliest nests, those from which they had mounted the attacks on Berryton and Yatley, had been built underground in the traditional way though of course on a vast scale. The comb layers and nest wall hung from

a central support, usually the root of a tree; as the nest enlarged so the globular space was made bigger and bigger to accommodate it. The construction method had severe limitations; the later huge nests could never have been made like that, the labour of excavation would have been enormous and anyway the structures could never have supported their own weight. The interim period was marked by 'shanty towns' like the one I saw, though as an emergency measure I'm inclined to think they were a failure. I doubt if many grubs reached maturity under those conditions. The nests ringing the Mendips were of a more successful type. Most of them were built round living trees; a comparatively slim sapling was good enough as it rapidly became strengthened and buttressed by the insects' own woodpulp. The branches were lopped off and the cell tiers slung round the trunk while a domed canopy of pulp layers reached to the ground all the way round. Usually too there was a three- or four-foot excavation inside the finished nest so the lowest, most massive brood racks were still below ground level and protected from frost and damp. The domes were joined by partially or wholly buried tunnels of woodpulp; the finished layouts looked like groups of igloos, or the trench systems of the First World War. One odd point was that despite the innovations they made in every other direction the Furies kept the habit of building their brood cells mouth downward, opening on the undersides of the combs. Why that configuration, with all its attendant hazards to the grubs, was maintained so stubbornly I can't imagine.

On the third morning after Greg announced his intentions I went out with him to have a look at the target. A thin drizzle was falling, interspersed with bouts of heavier rain. We were making a final reccy, it looked as if that night was going to be it. When we came in sight of the nest I was startled by the size of the domes. It seemed they'd swollen almost overnight; some of them must have been thirty yards across, and proportionately tall. They clustered thickly along the valley bottom, dark brown with the rain but still showing golden stripes and striations on their sides where the water hadn't soaked the pulp. Scattered amongst them were half-finished nests; on those the

bottom of the supporting trunk was visible under a ragged canopy of woodpulp. They looked like gigantic surrealist umbrellas. There were tunnels too, in all stages of construction, and despite the weather hundreds of Furies were booming overhead or scuttling between the domes. The noise of the place alone was impressive; it sounded like the roar of a busy city. Which in effect it was . . .

Our vantage point was above the nests and some half mile away. We peered through a screen of bushes, inspecting the place with field glasses. While we lay there Greg stiffened; then he gripped my arm and pointed. I trained my glasses round and saw what had startled him. Visible among the wasps were human figures. We were too far off to make out what they were doing but they were evidently working unmolested by the insects. It was the first evidence we'd seen that Greg's theories were right; these must be labour gangs from some neighbouring camp. Greg swore violently. "What a ruddy chance they've got. One box of matches and whoomph . . . they could flatten the whole place, save us the bother."

I wasn't so sure. Most of the slaves were nearly stripped; I said "Could be they search 'em. You know they don't take any chances . . ."

He snorted and wriggled back. Out of sight of the wasps he lit a cigarette. He said "Well that's it, Bill. How do you rate us?"

I said "Pretty good I should think. A few incendiaries among that lot, well spaced, and it'd all go up. Eggs, grubs, breeding queens, everything. But I'm still not happy about getting clear."

He said curtly "We'll make out. They'll be too panicky to know what they're looking for and anyway we shall be gone before they get organised. What few are left. Most of the bastards'll be chasing the lorry, the rest ought to be cooking quietly." He looked up at the sky. "Better get back I reckon. If this lot keeps on we're in business."

The raid went perfectly. I was in the main party with Greg, Dave, Freddy Mitchell and a couple of others. We closed in as soon as the lorry lights appeared below us. The bombs went down one after another, bursting among the nests. Flames licked up; in the light we saw dozens of

Furies milling aimlessly, uncertain whether to attack us or the truck, which was by then moving off at high speed. We didn't stay to let them decide. We separated and made the best speed we could back to Chill Leer. Dave was the only casualty ; he went down the pitch too fast, fell the last few feet and sprained his ankle.

I lost my way in the dark, I was the last one back. We waited anxiously for Len and his mates. It was another hour before they swung down the ladder. There was a lot of cheering and backslapping ; Jones Kitchen had heated a vast bowl of soup, everybody sat down to a meal. Len reckoned they must have driven halfway to Cornwall before they managed to shake off the wasps. They'd circled then, laid up for half an hour and joined a column of vehicles northward bound from Yeovil. Apparently the Furies now permitted traffic to move at night. The rogue lorry had driven through Wells then turned off to the caves. Len said to the south were nests by the hundred. The headlights had picked out a sea of roofs.

By three in the morning quite a lively party had started ; Greg broke it up at four and we got what sleep we could. We lay up for the following day and the day after that, feeling better than we had for months. We went out again later in the week, hit a nest complex to the east of us. Once more the decoy worked excellently. That time Pete came with the attack team. She stayed by the nests longer than the rest of us ; when she got back she described with relish how the roofs had collapsed, disclosing thousands of grubs writhing in a bed of flame. As far as she could see the destruction had been complete. We were jubilant ; our efforts might be a drop in the ocean but it was something to be hitting back at all.

We tried the trick again ten days later but we'd overplayed our hand, we were lucky to get away without losses. As soon as the lorry lights appeared the threatened nest erupted into life ; but the Furies didn't attack the decoy. They flew in the opposite direction to where our people were lying. I was one of the base party for that trip ; Greg told me later it had needed some pretty fast work to get clear. Only one bomb was thrown and that burst on the edge of the nest area and burned out without doing any

damage. Len said he had seen wasps hurling themselves on the flames, smothering them with their own bodies. The lorry had driven close enough to fire into the nurseries but the Furies ignored it. It was only on the way back the vehicle had run into concentrations of insects. There had been an anxious few minutes while it fought clear. Apparently by that time the wasps had given up searching for our infantry.

The retaliation was obvious. The following night Greg reversed his technique. The target was a huge nesting area straddling a minor road a few miles from Bath. One man was delegated to light a fire some half mile away from it. The rest of the group piled into the diesel, and it was the truck that did the real damage. It was a bold scheme, but it worked. When the lorry came in sight of the nests the usual exodus took place; the wasps boomed off in scores searching for the imaginary attackers. While they were keeping busy the truck drove right through the nests showering incendiaries to either side. Despite heavy rain the flames spread like lightning; some of the domes literally exploded as superheated air rushed into them from the linking tunnels. The glow lit the sky for miles.

That night the jug-up did go on till dawn. I'm sure if any Furies had passed within a mile they'd have heard the din. I got pretty merry myself; I didn't intend to, I'd been off drink ever since the Dorset episode, but I think somebody laced my beer. Toward morning things got really hectic; I can remember Maggie, high as a kite, swearing she'd dance the Seven Veils if only Dave could play Ravel's 'Bolero'. The party broke up at six. We'd rigged a trip system halfway down the pitch; a fine wire grid was suspended across the shaft, linked to contacts in such a way that if it was touched it started alarm bells ringing all over the complex. Jones Kitchen, going outside for purposes of his own, accidentally set the thing off; the resulting panic sobered even the worst cases and shortly afterwards we turned in. Greg had been intending to lie low for a time; he said it was a good thing, he doubted whether any of us would be fit for a month.

I awoke with a nagging headache sometime in the afternoon. I lay for a while but the caves were quiet as a

morgue. Most of the colony were either outside taking the fresh air cure or still sleeping off the jag. I got up and spent an hour clearing the main cavern of the evidence of orgy. Pete turned up when I was almost through and we got rid of the last of the debris together; then I helped her carry bundles of clothes through the corridor to the great pitch. She did most of the washing for the group; usually she humped it down to the water source rather than going outside to the spring. She said it was safer but I don't think that was the real reason. The caves fascinated her, she'd spend hours brooding in the silence under the stacked hills.

I lowered the bundles and followed her down the ladder. We crossed the hall of the stalactites, reached the third pitch and the cataract. Pete kept candles down there, we lit a couple to conserve the torches. She got busy lathering the clothes, rinsing them in the icy water of the pool and heaping them on the rock. Later she'd spread them on the hillside to dry. I helped her; when she'd finished I walked over to one of the rockfalls, climbed onto it and lit a cigarette. Pete called across to me. "By the way dearie, it's bath night. Don't mind, do yer?"

For a moment I didn't realize what she meant, then I saw she'd kicked her shoes off. She stripped quickly; apart from the shoes she was only wearing shirt and jeans. She slid into the pool, swam across and stood up knee-deep on the other side. She started to lather herself, panting with the cold. She said "You still plannin' on leavin'?"

"Don't know. Could be."

"Still the same place?"

I said "Still the same. Isle of Wight."

She chuckled, then swore as she got soap in her eyes. She flung her short hair back, sending water droplets sparkling in the candlelight. She said "You know, I reckon you've a got a bit o' spare over there."

I was startled. "I wouldn't put it quite like that . . ."

She laughed again. "I reckon you're deep, mate. Dead deep . . ." She finished scrubbing, ducked under water and came up spitting. She climbed out of the pool and stood towelling herself; in the uncertain light she looked like a frail sketch of a woman. When she was dressed she climbed

up to me. I lit another cigarette and gave it to her. She took it, watching me gravely. "Penny for 'em, ducks?"

I said a bit dryly "You've got a lovely body . . ."

She said indifferently "Ta . . ." She drew on the fag, eyes lowered. "That were a right little knees-up last night, wadn't it? Proper little do. Poor old Maggie really got goin' . . ."

"Did she ever do her Salome act?"

Pete shrugged. "Dunno. Don't think so, I reckon she passed out . . . It were a proper do though, while it lasted."

I said "I suppose they thought they'd got a lot to celebrate."

She shook her head, smiling lopsidedly. "It wadn't that. They're just cashing in afore the old luck runs out."

"Why should the luck run out? We've done all right so far."

She looked at me very straight. "Who're you kiddin', Bill? The bloody wasps'll do us. Bound to. Might be next trip, might be the one after. But they'll get us if we keeps on. Stands to reason, don't it?"

"I thought you reckoned burning nests was a pushover."

"It were, first time. But it's gettin' dodgy now . . ."

I was silent. She said suddenly "Why don't you get out while you've got the chance? You'd get to the coast all right, you did it before."

"What about you?"

She said lightly "I'll stick for a bit. It's a laugh, ain't it?"

Suddenly I was sick of the whole business. Killing the wasps was like trying to kill a principle ; we weren't achieving anything, she knew that as well as I did. She was just offering her throat to the knife . . . I said abruptly "Pete, when did you decide you were tired of living?"

She stood up and flung the half smoked cigarette into the pool. She said "I'm goin' back up. Some of 'em might come round in time for supper, you never can tell. Give us a hand, will you?"

Our luck did run out, a week later. Greg had decided to hit one of the big complexes southwards toward Wells. We recced the area as well as we could. The main road ran southwards through a gap in the hills ; we decided

we'd use our number two approach with the decoy fire. There were odd domes all over the flat country, getting into position to start the blaze was going to be the trickiest job. Greg said he'd fix that; Len would drive the truck as usual, his passengers would be chosen by lots. Pete drew a long twig, so did Owen and Julie, Freddy Mitchell went along, and John Castleton. Greg rode out with the lorry; it was to drop him a mile or so short of the target then wait an hour while he got into position. The truck moved off at sunset. If things went well it should be back soon after midnight. I sat up most of the night playing cards with Maggie and Dave. Waiting was always bad but this time it was worse. I had a hollow feeling of impending disaster. I just couldn't get rid of it.

By dawn there was no sign of the truck and we knew we'd got trouble. We talked it over; it was decided that if nothing had happened by mid-morning Dave and I would go out to try to find what was wrong. By nine o'clock we'd had enough of sitting round. We took a couple of shotguns, some water and a flask of brandy and edged down the hill, heading south the way the lorry had gone. It was a perfect morning, still and bright. For a time we saw no signs either of wasps or humans.

We met Greg an hour later, by sheer chance. He was as much in the dark as we were. He said the lorry had dropped him as arranged, a mile or so south of where we stood. He'd got into position ready to start his diversion but the truck had never arrived. Instead the whole area began to swarm with wasps. They'd kept him pinned most of the night, he'd only just managed to circle back. His clothes and legs had been ripped by briars and there were rings of tiredness under his eyes but he said he was game to go on. We started walking again.

We were still in the hills. About a mile ahead the road swept round to the right, descended through a wide valley to the flatland and the nests. We were a couple of hundred yards away from the bend when Dave gave an abrupt exclamation and pointed. We stopped dead; ahead of us, sharp-edged against the blue sky, a thick cloud of black smoke had appeared. It rose steadily, turned to a column that arced away sullenly toward the south.

I don't know why we all started to run. We could have been heading into any sort of trap but the idea didn't enter our heads. We rounded the corner and pulled up again, horrified. On our right the hill rose in a long curve, its face thickly dotted with clumps of bushes and gorse. The road ran away in front almost straight, bounded by dry-stone walls. About half a mile ahead the lorry lay on its side, thirty or forty yards off the carriageway. It was burning fiercely.

We reached it gasping for breath. There was nothing near it. The heat was intense; at twenty yards I could feel it wavering on my face. Apart from the crackle of the flames there was no sound. The smoke rose steadily, trailing its thick shadow across the grass.

There was something weird about the whole business. The hillside, the sunlight, the lorry burning itself away in the quiet morning. We walked round the wreck, trying helplessly to see into the bright inferno of the cab. While we were still undecided a voice spoke from just behind us. "Yer can save yer trouble," it said bitterly. "There's nobody t'help . . ."

I jumped round. Len Dilks was sitting some twenty feet away beside a clump of bushes. His face was ashy-grey, glistening with sweat; it looked more like a skull than ever. He was holding his left arm across his chest. Part of his shirt had been torn away and wrapped roughly round his hand. The dressing was soggy with blood.

We got him away, holed up in the bushes a couple of hundred yards from the wreck. The smoke should have attracted every Fury for miles but none had appeared. Greg poured half the brandy down his throat; it brought him round enough to tell us what had happened. The whole operation had gone wrong; somehow the wasps had known the lorry was coming. They hit it before it was even in sight of the nests, hit it in hundreds. They clung so thickly to the windscreen bars Len had been unable to see or steer. The truck had been moving fast; he'd braked, but not soon enough. The first impact had smashed the door open and he'd jumped. He could remember that but the rest was a blur.

Greg took his shoulders. His face looked haggard. "Len, try to think . . . How many were killed? *Try* . . ."

He shook his head helplessly, licking his mouth. Then the words came. "Two . . . in the cab . . ."

"Who, Len? Who?"

He said thickly "Castleton. Mitchell . . ."

I said "Why'd you burn her, Len? Why'd you set her on fire?"

He looked at me hollowly, eyes half defocused. He said "It were better . . ." Then his head sagged. He looked up again a moment later. The flames were dying back now, the smoke pall dispersing. He said "That's done then. That's all through . . ."

We laid him in the shade of the bushes and started searching. If he'd got clear there could have been others. We spread out in a line, working our way up the hill, calling their names over and over. We'd forgotten the Furies.

The day wore on and grief turned to weariness. The sun beat fiercely, striking back from the grass in waves of heat. My shirt became soaked with sweat, my head started to throb. When we lost hope we went on looking. There seemed nothing else to do.

I thought the first answer was an echo. I was over the crest of the hill, wading through a waist-high stand of heather and grass. I stopped and shouted. The noise came again. I plunged forward, nearly fell over the lip of an old mine working of some sort. Nothing left now but a weed-grown trench ten or fifteen feet deep. I threshed my way along the edge to where I'd heard the voices.

There were three of them. Jones Kitchen, Julie and Pete. Owen looked up when he saw me and tried to grin. He said faintly "Had a bit o' trouble, boy. Reckon I twisted my leg . . ."

Pete was lying across Julie, her arms twined round her. It took two of us to pull her off. I had to hold her down to stop her going back. There was nothing else she could do. Julie was dead.

We lifted Owen. His ankle was swollen alarmingly, it looked broken to me. He couldn't put his foot to the ground; he could only hobble slowly, arm round Greg's

shoulders. It was night before we got back to Chill Leer. We took turn and turn about helping the walking wounded. We saw no wasps though we heard them continually, droning in the sky. I never want another trip like that.

Or the trip we made later in the night. The burial party.

There were no more raids that season. Len's hand healed and Owen was soon up and about with a stick, messing round his ovens. Our numbers were made up by four farm labourers who came in over the hills, refugees from one of the wasp camps; but things were never the same. The old atmosphere had gone. For the time being we were licked.

Pete brooded worse than anybody. She took to vanishing into the cave complex. Sometimes she'd be gone a day or more. I went down after her a couple of times and so did Greg but we could never find out where she went, she wasn't in the great hall or at the syphon. I found her once sitting out on the hill half a mile or so from Chill Leer. It had been raining for hours, she was soaked through. I spoke to her, tried to get her inside, but it was no good. She didn't seem to hear me, she was in a strictly private Hell.

By October it seemed the number of Furies was less, and within a week it began to look as if Greg had been right. The nests were dying off. We stayed in the caves through the shortening days, living on the last of the stored food. Toward the end of the month Greg took off on his own. He came back with a stranger, a Hampshire man called Stokes. They were driving a Land Rover, we heard them sounding the horn a mile off. By the time they reached the caves we were all outside. Greg said the whole massif was empty of insects. He'd driven south-east, deeper into Somerset; the wasps had gone from there too, their cities were deserted.

I think we all went slightly mad. Len hi-jacked another truck, Dave brought in a second Rover. We got aboard. We took very little with us; most of the stuff we left piled round the caves. I for one never expected to see Chill Leer again.

We had a nasty shock. As a first measure we drove to the nearest of the labour camps, the one from which Stokes had escaped. It was situated a few miles north of Glastonbury; the main quarters were a range of converted farm

buildings. I was in the leading car with Greg and Pete. As we got in sight of the place I heard what sounded like a shot. A moment later I was left in no doubt. The settlers opened up with everything they had; and that was quite a lot.

I'd never been under fire before. I didn't find it funny. I stamped on the brakes, heard the lorry tyres squeal behind me, U-turned praying I wouldn't get rammed and headed back the way I'd come. The rest of the convoy got out somehow. It was a miracle no-one was hurt. Once out of range we stopped and tried to think what the Hell to do. Greg shook his head helplessly. "They must be crazy, clean round the bend. But we've got to talk to them somehow, try and make some sense out of this . . .

He was right, there was nothing to do but try and parley. They must have had the wrong idea about us, maybe they'd taken us for looters. In the end Greg and Dave went forward on foot, carrying of all things a white flag. The rest of us stood round the vehicles and waited. Greg was away half an hour or more; when he came back he was long-faced. There had been no mistake, they knew who we were and where we'd come from. But they wanted nothing to do with us. Apparently each raid we'd made had been followed by reprisals in the camps. Greg had tried to bargain for a safe conduct past the gates but they had refused even that. They promised they would shoot on sight, and to kill.

We had been outsmarted by the insects of course. It was true they were passionless, for them revenge had no meaning, but the killings had not been revenge. With the winter coming and a time of inactivity forced on them, the Furies had deliberately set out to split the human survivors into factions. They certainly succeeded. In all, we visited a dozen camps; the only one that tolerated us was one that had been unable to find guns. But the people wouldn't join us. Even the kids threw stones.

I don't suppose the full story of that period will ever get written. Many parts of the country were reduced virtually to civil war. The Collectives fought the hill people and each other. There was no central authority, no Government.

There were massacres, burnings, tiny battles among the winter wheat. Meanwhile the cities died.

That sounds glib. Maybe it is glib but it's the only way I can phrase it. Among the crowded urban populations and in many of the wasp camps the epidemics Greg had forecast had broken out and raged most of the summer. Bristol and Bath, Cardiff, Liverpool, Manchester and Birmingham, Portsmouth, Southampton, London, all fell to the twin and ancient terrors of plague and fire. Other scourges came in their wake; typhus, typhoid, dysentery, diphtheria, even. Other countries exhibited the same general pattern with local variations; France for instance saw a resurgence of the deadly dancing manias of the Middle Ages, while in the United States the bigest killer of all turned out to be *tularemia,* the so-called rabbit disease.

We withdrew to Chill Leer. We weren't the only guerrilla group in the south-west, but we had no contact with the others. We started restocking, working as much as possible by night. We soon learned which of the Collectives had succumbed, avoided the plague-spots in our foraging. With the storage areas full Greg set us another task. He explained the life-cycle of a wasp nest; how the hordes of workers and grubs die off in the autumn, leaving only a handful of hibernating queens capable of restarting colonies. We began an all-out search for the royal insects. We'd burned every wasp stronghold within reach but that wasn't enough. If the hibernators lived through the winter the cities would be as populous as ever within weeks; each queen unearthed meant a potential colony wiped out. Greg got hold of some large scale maps of the area, marked them off in squares and allocated them to each of half a dozen search teams. At the start I had no real idea of the size of the job. On paper it looked fairly easy but in practice every bush and cranny had to be investigated, every crevasse explored. An army couldn't have combed the massif effectively given a twelvemonth, but we did what we could. I knew I should leave, go look for Jane, but somehow I kept putting it off. Just another day, just one more . . . I wanted to catch one of the Furies and smash it, then I'd go. Greg said cynically that I was beginning to 'think wasp.'

It took two weeks to find the first queen. Pete's group

made the capture, on a barren hillside a few miles north of Chill Leer. Greg was away on a provision run and for some reason I'd been generally accepted as second in command. Dave brought me the news. He said they'd been smoking a crevasse, pouring petrol down and lighting it. It was a new technique they'd been trying out. The insect had crawled out minus her wings but otherwise unharmed. They'd been using a farmhouse nearby as temporary quarters, Pete had had the Fury taken there. She wouldn't let anybody else near ; she wanted to interrogate the thing.

I swore at that. The idea was to kill wasps, not fool about. I drove back up with Dave. It was middle January, and bitterly cold. The grass was rimed with frost, the sun breaking through chill and red above a pearly-vague horizon. The rest of the party were still working the crevasse ; we drove past to the farmhouse. When we reached it the place looked deserted. A thread of smoke was curling from one of the chimneys but when I shouted nobody answered. I asked Dave to watch the jeep, kicked the front door open and went in. I let the door swing closed behind me, stood chafing my hands. I heard a voice.

The lounge was straight ahead. I walked in, stood staring. A log fire crackled in the grate, nearby was a table with glasses and wine bottles. Very festive. Pete was standing in the middle of the room with a bayonet in her hand. She was still wearing her duffel, hood thrown back. Her hair was tangled and she looked flushed. In front of her was the Fury, roped to a heavy length of plank. The great queen was wide awake now, twitching her body in attempts to get free. She was hampered by the fact that she lacked legs. Her mask turned as I walked in. She stopped struggling, watched me incuriously. I looked at Pete, then back to the wasp. I said "What in Hell do you think you're doing?"

She pushed her hair back, grinning. She said "Hello, ducks, come for the p-party?" Her voice was slurred ; I realised suddenly she was more than a little drunk. I said "Pete, I asked a question. *What are you doing?*"

She said "Jus' having a li'l chat. Nice, wadn' it?" She crooned at the Fury, circling with the long blade in her hand. "Jus' a li'l chat . . ."

The head rotated, keeping her in sight. She said "An' now ole Bill's come to j-join the party . . ."

She crossed to me, took my wrist and pulled me forward unsteadily. "Come an' see, Bill. Come'n meet my li'l friend. Nice, ain't she?" She reached forward with the bayonet, tried to lift the wasp's mask with the tip of the blade. The queen twisted back, straining to get out of reach. "Oh, jus' look at that," said Pete softly. "Ain't that pretty? Look, at the li'l darling. Almost human, they are. But Auntie won' hurt you, sweet. Not jus' yet . . ."

"Pete, for God's sake——"

She said conspiratorially "Let you inna li'l secret, ole Bill. She's im-important. Real important. An' I'll tell you 'nother. She knows it. She knows all about it . . ." Then to the wasp, "Know what I'm sayin', don't you dearie? Every word . . . You're real important, you are. You're a col'ny. All on your own. Whole col'ny of big hairy black and yellow bloody bastard wasps. All in one li'l body . . ."

I said "Pete, just kill the damned thing if you're going to. This isn't helping anybody. We're not barbarians."

She started to laugh.

"And better give me that bayonet. You're three parts cut anyway, how much have you had?"

She spun round, eyes brilliant with hate. "Why'd you come here Bill, why didn't you stop away? What are you goin' to do, preach me a sermon? Is that what you come for, t'be a bloody preacher . . .?" She lunged forward, got my hand again and pushed it against her cheek. She said "Preach on that. What it feels to live behind that morning noon and bloody night. That's a little keepsake from these bastards to me. Jus' to remember 'em by. Nice, ain't it? Don't you tell me what I am, just preach on that . . ."

I snatched myself away. "For God's sake . . ." I tried to grab her but she spun out of reach. She was trembling now, and keeping the blade between me and her. She said "Don't get smart ducky, just don't get smart. I ain't that drunk . . ." She swayed; then, "You don't know all on it, Bill. Callin' me a b-barbarian. You don't know any of it, you don't even know the start . . ." She swallowed. "I never told you what happened that day the wasps come, did I? I ain't never told nobody . . ."

I said as steadily as I could "Will tormenting this brute bring your family back?"

She ignored me. Her hand was on her face, fingering the scar. She said "We were sittin' there. All nice an' cosy. Just 'ad tea. Mum and Dad and the kids. There was this droning, see? up in the sky. 'What's that?' says Dad. I can remember jus' what he said. 'Sounds like them bloody insecks they was on about,' he says. 'You lot better stop 'ere, I'll go an' have a butcher's . . .' An' he goes out inter the shop to see. And all the rest of us after him, crowdin' round the door. 'Don't you open up, Harry' says our Mum. 'Don't want none o' them things in 'ere . . .' Then they come through the winder. Pop were the first. They had him like a shot. They started on us then."

She was prowling again, circling the wasp. "The old lady were next" she said. "That's when I got this. When I was tryin' to get the thing orf her. I held it orf, see, when it come at me. It couldn't reach me throat. There it were snappin' and snappin', an' the blood all comin' . . . I couldn't hold it no more after that. It were too slippery. It were all the blood . . ."

She grinned at me. "It wadn't nothing like you think, Bill. Nothing. It were quiet, while we were being killed. Dead quiet. I could hear the old man puffin' and our Rita were crying. 'Yer face, Jan,' she kept saying. 'It's cut yer face . . .' 'It's all right, Ri,' I says. 'It'll be all right, I'll do it up in a minute . . .' I could still talk, see mister? Only I couldn't see her because o' the blood. I couldn't feel nothing . . ."

I said "Janice, if you won't stop this for me——"

She screamed "Don't call me that . . ." Then she started to laugh again. "Why not though, it don't make no odds now. Janice, that's a nice name. Yeah . . ."

"Jan . . ."

She said wildly "They all knew me, in Westrincham. You ask anybody, did they know Jan Peterson. You'd have got a real laugh. That's the biggest laugh of all. Din't I ever tell you what I was Bill, din't I say?"

"I'm more interested in what you are now. What you're doing to yourself . . ."

Her voice had developed a thin edge of hysteria. She said "I was a whore, Bill. Common muckin' prostitute. Best ride in town . . ." She wiped her forehead with the back of her hand. "Now look shocked. Now tell me I'm a bleedin' barbarian again . . ."

I didn't speak.

She said "I were the old black sheep. That's the laugh. I were the one that wadn't no good. Dad used to tell me. 'Never come to no good you won't, my gal,' that were what he used to say. 'Never come to no good . . .' But when *they* come, they took him orf instead. Him and Mum and the kids. That's the joke, they left me . . .

"I used to work three nights a week at the flicks. Used to get a lot o' trade from that. Rest o' the time I was on the streets. I used to do all right. I'd got this place I went to, this pub. They didn't care. Everybody knew about it. The old man knew. They all knew Jan Peterson. I was at it up in the smoke only Dad didn't know then. But you couldn't keep things quiet in Westrincham. It wadn't the same . . ."

I said "The past is done, Pete. Why the Hell rake it up like this?"

She didn't answer. She leaned over the wasp playing with the bayonet. She said "They were the ones that sent 'em, Bill. Jus' these few. The rest couldn' think. They were machines. But these could think. 'Go out'. That's what they said to 'em. 'Go out an' kill. Kill all the decent folk. Cut their bloody heads orf. Do it slow. But mind you leave all the rest. Leave the pros and the bags and the gutter scrapings, they're all right, you leave them alone.' That's what you told them, isn't it? *Isn't it . . .*?"

The Fury clicked its mandibles.

Pete drew back. She was panting, her knuckles were white-clenched on the bayonet. She said "It wants to fight. Look at that, it wants to have a little go. All right then, you've come to the right place dearie, we'll give you a fight. We'll give you all the fight you want . . ." the blade fizzed down. The stroke was nearly too quick to follow. One of the insect's great compound eyes opened in a leaf-shaped cut. Blood-flecked grey pulp welled up through the

wound. The Fury began to tremble, shaking the plank to which it was fastened.

I jumped at Pete. There was a bad moment when I thought she was going to use the bayonet on me. I hadn't realised how tough she was. I bent her wrist back, slammed her knuckles across the edge of the table. The blade landed on the floor. She pulled away, ran across the room. She hung onto the mantel over the fireplace, back to me and shaking. She said hoarsely "Kill the bleedin' thing Bill, kill it for Christ's sake . . ."

I towed the plank outside, took Dave's shotgun, put the barrels to the insect's thorax and fired. Armour rolled across the frozen ground. The shots echoed round the hills, clapped into silence. I went back inside, collected Pete and took her to the car.

I left her at Chill Leer. We didn't say much to each other. Greg was back. I made my goodbyes to him and Dave. It was as if Pete's flare-up had started a train of reactions outside my control, I couldn't stay around any more. We were all knocking ourselves apart; none of us had any future, there was only death, and blood, and killing Furies until they turned round and killed us right back. I tried to tell Greg but I couldn't get the proper words, it still looked as if I was just running.

We had a collection of cars by that time. I wanted one of the Champs but they couldn't be spared. I took an MG TF somebody had brought in. It wasn't good for what I needed but it was all we had. I started it up and headed south, toward Jane and the sea.

A mile or two from Chill Leer I ran into the army.

I rounded a bend and stared. For a moment I couldn't believe what I was seeing. In front was trouble. A dozen armoured vehicles, Saladins and scout cars, fanned out in a crescent, coming up the road and along to each side over the rough. They were moving fast, swaying over the whitened grass. I hit the brakes. It was just as well. A gun stammered somewhere, the rounds slapped in front of me. They had a loud hailer, I heard it clearly over the engine. 'The red car, halt . . . the red car, halt . . .'

I don't know what happened to me. I reckon I'd just

been pushed and shoved that little bit too long. I didn't know what they wanted and I didn't care. I was going to the coast, I was going to find Jane, I wasn't going to be pinned by anybody, not any more. I hauled the wheel, the TF screeched, slithered on an ice patch. Then I was round, heading back the way I'd come. I heard the loudhailer again behind me, the echoes crackling back from the hills. 'The red car . . . halt or we shall fire into you . . .'

And the Hell with that as well, I'd been shot at before. I kept going.

Crock-crock-crock . . .

A tiny noise, flat, miles away. Unassociated. Puffs of smoke crossed the road ahead. I started to swerve.

Crock-crock-crock-crock-*spang* . . .

The ricochet rang piercing, like a bell. Windscreen starred, fell clear, let in cold air-rush and the noise, louder . . .

CROCK-CROCK-CROCK . . .

I heard the tyre go, saw rubber flail outwards. The TF rammed her nose down, slewed. The wheel spun, I tried to hold it, it yanked skin off my hands, there was time for fear, I know I screamed. Then grass and bushes rushed past me, earth and sky changed places and I fell into brightness then dark and someone's body was being jolted and torn but I wasn't in it, it had nothing to do with me.

There was the darkness. The darkness, and the pain. In the void were sounds. Like the sea. And faces. They floated sickly, vague balloons, hovering, drawing away. They tried to speak to me but the syllables were welded together by the pain, turned into a tangled roaring. When the balloons were close the pain was worse. I tried to fight them, drive them away. I knew I was screaming again but I couldn't hear. The void turned in on itself and I dropped through it spinning, down to total blackness.

The blackness lasted a long time.

To be concluded

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