
GREYBEARD

by

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With my love
to
CLIVE and WENDY
hoping that
one day they will understand
the story behind this story

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I. The River: Sparcot

Through broken reeds the creature moved. It was not alone; its mate followed, and behind her five youngsters, joining the hunt with eagerness.

The stoats had swum a brook. Now they climbed from the chill water, up the bank and through the reeds, bodies low to the ground, necks outstretched, the young ones in imitation of their father. Father looked out with an impersonal hunger at rabbits frisking for food not many feet away.

This had once been wheat land. Taking advantage of a period of neglect, weeds had risen up and had their day, choking the cereal. Later, a fire spread across the land, burning down the thistles and giant grasses. Rabbits, which prefer low growth, had moved in, nibbling the fresh green shoots that thrust through the ash. The shoots that survived this thinning process found themselves with plenty of space in which to grow, and were now fair-sized young trees. The number of rabbits had consequently declined, for rabbits like open land; so the grass had its chance to return. Now it, in its turn was being thinned beneath the continuing spread of the beeches. The few rabbits that hopped there were thin of flank.

They were also wary. One of them saw the beady eyes watching in the rushes. It leapt for shelter and the others followed. At once the adult stoats were covering ground, twin stretches of brown rippling across the open space. The rabbits bolted down into their warrens. Without pause, the stoats followed. They could go anywhere. The world - this tiny piece of the world - was theirs.

Not many miles away, under the same tattered winter sky and by the banks of the same river, the wilderness had been cleared. In the wilderness, a pattern was still discernible; it was no longer a valid pattern, and so it faded year by year. Large trees, to some of which a raddled leaf still clung, marked the position of ancient hedges. They enclosed tangles of vegetation covering what had once been fields: brambles, lacerating their way like rusty barbed wire towards the centre of the fields, and elders, and prickly briars, as well as a sturdy growth of saplings. Along the edge of the clearing, these unruly hedges had been used as a stockade against further growth in a wide and ragged arc, thus protecting an area of some few hundred acres which had its longer side against the river.

This rude stockade was patrolled by an old man in a coarse shirt of orange, green, red, and yellow stripes. The shirt furnished almost the only splash of colour in the entire bedraggled landscape; it had been made from the canvas of a deckchair.

At intervals, the barrier of vegetation was broken by paths trodden into the undergrowth. The paths were brief and ended in crude latrines, where holes had been dug and covered with tarpaulins or wooden battens. These were the sanitary arrangements of the village of Sparcot.

The village itself lay on the river in the middle of its clearing. It had been built, or rather it had accumulated in the course of centuries, in the shape of an H, with the cross bar leading to a stone bridge spanning the river. The bridge still spanned the river, but led only to a thicket from which the villagers gathered much of their firewood.

Of the two longer roads, the one nearest the river had been intended to serve only the needs of the village. This it still did; one leg of it led to an old water mill where lived Big Jim Mole, the boss of Sparcot. The other road had once been a main road. After the houses petered out, it led in each direction into the

stockaded wilderness of vegetation; there it was dragged down like a snake in a crocodile's throat and devoured under the weight of undergrowth.

All the houses of Sparcot showed signs of neglect. Some were ruined; some were uninhabited ruins. A hundred and twelve people lived here. None of them had been born in Sparcot.

Where two of the roads joined, there stood a stone building that had served as a post office. Its upper windows commanded a view both of the bridge in one direction and the cultivated land with wilderness beyond in the other. This was now the village guardroom and, since Jim Mole insisted that a guard was always kept, it was occupied now.

There were three people sitting or lying in the old barren room. An old woman, long past her eightieth year, sat by a wood stove, humming to herself and nodding her head. She held out her hands to the stove, on which she was warming up stew in a tin platter. Like the others, she was wrapped against a wintry chill that the stove did little to dispel.

Of the two men present, one was extremely ancient in appearance, although his eye was bright. He lay on a palliasse on the floor, restlessly looking about him, staring up at the ceiling as if to puzzle out the meaning of the cracks there, or at the walls as if to solve the riddle of their damp patches. His face, sharp as a stoat's beneath its stubble, wore an irritable look, for the old woman's humming jarred his nerves.

Only the third occupant of the guardroom was properly alert. He was a well-built man in his middle fifties, without a paunch, but not so starveling thin as his companions. He sat in a creaking chair by the window, a rifle by his side. Although he was reading a book, he looked up frequently, directing his gaze through the window. With one of these glances, he saw the patrol man with the colourful shirt approaching over the pastures.

"Sam's coming," he said.

He put his book down as he spoke. His name was Algy Timberlane. He had a thick grizzled beard that grew down almost to his navel, where it had been cut sharply across. Because of this beard, he was known as Greybeard, although he lived in a world of greybeards. But his high and almost bald head lent emphasis to the beard, and its texture, barred as it was with stripes of black hair sprouting thickly from the jawline and fading out lower down, made it particularly noticeable in a world no longer able to afford other forms of personal adornment.

When he spoke, the woman stopped her humming without giving any other sign she had heard. The man on the palliasse sat up and put a hand on the cudgel that lay beside him. He screwed his face up, sharpening his gaze to peer at the clock that ticked noisily on a shelf; then he squinted at his wristwatch. This battered old souvenir of another world was Towin Thomas's most cherished possession, although it had not worked in a decade.

"Sam's early coming off guard, twenty minutes early," he said. "Old sciver. Worked up an appetite for lunch, strolling round out there. You better watch that hash of yours, Betty - I'm the only one I'm wanting to get indigestion off that grub, girl."

Betty shook her head. It was as much a nervous tick as a negation of anything that the man with the cudgel might have said. She kept her hands to the fire, not looking round.

Towin Thomas picked up his cudgel and rose stiffly to his feet, helping himself up against the table. He joined Greybeard at the window, peering through the dirty pane and rubbing it with his sleeve.

"That's Sam Bulstow all right. You can't mistake that shirt."

Sam Bulstow walked down the littered street. Rubble, broken tiles and litter lay on the pavements; dock and fennel - mortified by winter - sprouted from shattered gratings. Sam Bulstow walked in the middle of the road. There had been no traffic but pedestrians for several years now. He turned in when he reached the post office, and the watchers heard his footsteps on the boards of the room below them.

Without excitement, they listened to the whole performance of his getting upstairs: the groans of the bare treads; the squeak of a horny palm on the hand rail as it helped tug its owner upwards; the rasp and heave of lungs challenged by every step.

Finally, Sam appeared in the guardroom. The gaudy stripes of his shirt threw up some of their colour on to the white stubble of his jaws. He stood for a while staring in at them, resting on the frame of the door to regain his breath.

"You're early if it's dinner you're after," Betty said, without bothering to turn her head. Nobody paid her any attention, and she nodded her old rats' tails to herself in disapproval.

Sam just stood where he was, showing his yellow and brown teeth in a pant. "The Scotsmen are getting near," he said.

Betty turned her neck stiffly to look at Greybeard. Towin Thomas arranged his crafty old wolf's visage over the top of his cudgel and looked at Sam with his eyes screwed up.

"Maybe they're after your job, Sammy, man," he said.

"Who gave you that bit of information, Sam?" Greybeard asked.

Sam came slowly into the room, sneaking a sharp look at the clock as he did so, and poured himself a drink of water from a battered can standing in a corner. He gulped the water and sank down on to a wooden stool, stretching his fibrous hands out to the fire and generally taking his time before replying.

"There was a packman skirting the northern barricade just now. Told me he was heading for Faringdon. Said the Scotsmen had reached Banbury."

"Where is this packman?" Greybeard asked, hardly raising his voice, and appearing to look out of the window.

"He's gone on now, Greybeard. Said he was going to Faringdon."

"Passed by Sparcot without calling here to sell us anything? Not very likely."

"I'm only telling you what he said. I'm not responsible for him. I just reckon old Boss Mole ought to know the Scotsmen are coming, that's all." Sam's voice relapsed into the irritable whine they all used at times.

Betty turned back to her stove. She said, "Everyone who comes here brings rumours. If it isn't the Scots, it's herds of savage animals. Rumours, rumours... It's as bad as the last war, when they kept telling us there was going to be an invasion. I reckoned at the time they only done it to scare us, but I was scared just the same."

Sam cut off her muttering. "Rumours or not, I'm telling you what the man said. I thought I ought to come up here and report it. Did I do right or didn't I?"

"Where had this fellow come from?" Greybeard asked.

"He hadn't come from anywhere. He was going to Faringdon." He smiled his sly doggy smile at his joke, and picked up a reflected smile from Towin.

"Did he say where he had been?" Greybeard asked patiently.

"He said he had been coming from up river. Said there was a lot of stoats heading this way."

"Eh, that's another rumour we've heard before," Betty said to herself, nodding her head.

"You keep your trap shut, you old cow," Sam said, without rancour.

Greybeard took hold of his rifle by the barrel and moved into the middle of the room until he stood looking down at Sam.

"Is that all you have to report, Sam?"

"Scotsmen, stoats - what more do you want from one patrol? I didn't see any elephants, if you were wondering." He cracked his grin again, looking again for Towin Thomas's approval.

"You aren't bright enough to know an elephant if you saw it, Sam, you old fleapit," Towin said.

Ignoring this exchange, Greybeard said, "Okay, Sam, back you go on patrol. There's another twenty minutes before you are relieved."

"What, go back out there just for another lousy twenty minutes? Not on your flaming nelly, Greybeard! I've had it for this afternoon and I'm sitting right here on this stool. Let it ride for twenty minutes. Nobody's going to run away with Sparcot, whatever Jim Mole may think."

"You know the dangers as well as I do."

"You know you'll never get any sense out of me, not while I've got this bad back. These blinking guard duties come round too often for my liking."

Betty and Towin kept silent. The latter cast a glance at his broken wrist watch. Both he and Betty, like everyone else in the village, had had the necessity for continuous guard drummed into them often enough, but they kept their eyes tracing the seamed lines on the board floor, knowing the effort involved in thrusting old legs an extra time up and down stairs and an extra time round the perimeter.

The advantage lay with Sam, as he sensed. Facing Greybeard more boldly, he said, "Why don't you take over for twenty minutes if you're so keen on defending the dump? You're a young man - it'll do you good to have a stretch."

Greybeard tucked the leather sling of the rifle over his left shoulder and turned to Towin, who stopped gnawing the top of his cudgel to look up.

"Strike the alarm gong if you want me in a hurry, and not otherwise. Remind old Betty it's not a dinner gong."

The woman cackled as he moved towards the door, buttoning his baggy jacket.

"Your grub's just on ready, Algy. Why not stay and eat it?" she asked.

Greybeard slammed the door without answering. They listened to his heavy tread descending the stairs.

"You don't reckon he took offence, do you? He wouldn't report me to old Mole, would he?" Sam asked anxiously. The others mumbled neutrally and hugged their lean ribs; they did not want to be involved in any trouble.

Greybeard walked slowly along the middle of the street, avoiding the puddles still left from a rainstorm two days ago. Most of Sparcot's drains and gutters were blocked; but the reluctance of the water to run away was due mainly to the marshiness of the land. Somewhere upstream, debris was blocking the river, causing it to overflow its banks. He must speak to Mole; they must get up an expedition to look into the trouble. But Mole was growing increasingly cantankerous, and his policy of isolationism would be against any move out of the village.

He chose to walk by the river, to continue round the perimeter of the stockade afterwards. He brushed through an encroaching elder's stark spikes, smelling as he did so a melancholy-sweet smell of the river and the things that mouldered by it.

Several of the houses that backed on to the river had been devoured by fire before he and his fellows came to live here. Vegetation grew sturdily inside and outside their shells. On a back gate lying crookedly in long grass, faded lettering proclaimed the name of the nearest shell: Thameside.

Farther on, the houses were undamaged by fire and inhabited. Greybeard's own house was here. He looked at the windows, but caught no sight of his wife, Martha; she would be sitting quietly by the fire with a blanket round her shoulders, staring into the grate and seeing - what? Suddenly an immense impatience

pierced Greybeard. These houses were a poor old huddle of buildings, nestling together like a bunch of ravens with broken wings. Most of them had chimneys or guttering missing; each year they hunched their shoulders higher as the roof-trees sagged. And in general the people fitted in well enough with this air of decay. He did not; nor did he want his Martha to do so.

Deliberately, he slowed his thoughts. Anger was useless. He made a virtue of not being angry. But he longed for a freedom beyond the fly-blown safety of Sparcot.

After the houses came Toby's trading post - a newer building that, and in better shape than most - and the barns, ungraceful structures that commemorated the lack of skill with which they had been built. Beyond the barns lay the fields, turned up in weals to greet the frosts of winter; shards of water glittered between furrows. Beyond the fields grew the thickets marking the eastern end of Sparcot. Beyond Sparcot lay the immense mysterious territory that was the Thames valley.

Just beyond the province of the village, an old brick bridge with a collapsed arch menaced the river, its remains suggesting the horns of a ram, growing together in old age. Greybeard contemplated it and the fierce little weir just beyond it - for that way lay whatever went by the name of freedom these days - and then turned away to patrol the living stockade.

With the rifle comfortably under one crooked arm, he made his promenade. He could see across to the other side of the clearing; it was deserted, apart from two men walking distantly among cattle, and a stooped figure in the cabbage patch. He had the world almost to himself: and year by year he would have it more to himself.

He snapped down the shutter of his mind on that thought, and began to concentrate on what Sam Bulstow had reported. It was probably an invention to gain him twenty minutes off patrol duty. The rumour about the Scots sounded unlikely - though no less likely than other tales that travellers had brought them, that a Chinese army was marching on London, or that gnomes and elves and men with badger faces had been seen dancing in the woods. Scope for error and ignorance seemed to grow season by season. It would be good to know what was really happening...

Less unlikely than the legend of marching Scots was Sam's tale of a strange packman. Densely though the thickets grew, there were ways through them, and men who travelled those ways, though the isolated village of Sparcot saw little but the traffic that moved painfully up and down the Thames. Well, they must maintain their watch. Even in these more peaceful days - "the apathy that bringeth perfect peace", thought Greybeard, wondering what he was quoting - villages that kept no guard could be raided and ruined for the sake of their food stocks, or just for madness. So they believed.

Now he walked among tethered cows, grazing individually round the ragged radius of their halters. They were the new strain, small, sturdy, plump, and full of peace. And young! Tender creatures, surveying Greybeard from moist eyes, creatures that belonged to man but had no share of his decrepitude, creatures that kept the grass short right up to the scrawny bramble bushes.

He saw that one of the animals near the brambles was pulling at its tether. It tossed its head, rolled its eyes, and lowed. Greybeard quickened his pace.

There seemed to be nothing to disturb the cow except a dead rabbit lying by the brambles. As he drew nearer, Greybeard surveyed the rabbit. It was freshly killed. And though it was completely dead, he thought it had moved. He stood almost over it, alert for something wrong, a faint prickle of unease creeping up his backbone.

Certainly the rabbit was dead, killed neatly by the back of the neck. Its neck and anus were bloody, its purple eye glazed.

Yet it moved. Its side heaved.

Shock - an involuntary superstitious dread - coursed through Greybeard. He took a step backwards, sliding the rifle down into his hands. At the same time, the rabbit heaved again and its killer exposed itself to view.

Backing swiftly out of the rabbit's carcass came a stoat, doubling up its body in its haste to be clear. Its brown coat was enriched with rabbit blood, the tiny savage muzzle it lifted to Greybeard smeared with crimson. He shot it dead before it could move.

The cows plunged and kicked. Like clockwork toys, the figures among the brussels sprout stumps straightened their backs. Birds wheeled up from the rooftops. The gong sounded from the guardroom, as Greybeard had instructed it should. A knot of people congregated outside the barns, hobbling together as if they might pool their rheumy eyesight.

"Blast their eyes, there's nothing to panic about," Greybeard growled. But he knew the involuntary shot had been a mistake; he should have clubbed the stoat to death with the butt of his rifle. The sound of firing always woke alarm.

A party of active sixty-year-olds were assembling, and began to march towards him, swinging cudgels of various descriptions. Through his irritation, he had to admit that it was a prompt stand-to. There was plenty of life about the place yet.

"It's all right!" he called, waving his arms above his head as he went to meet them. "All right! I was attacked by a solitary stoat, that's all. You can go back."

Charley Samuels was there, a big man with a sallow colour; he had his tame fox, Isaac, with him on a leash. Charley lived next door to the Timberlanes, and had been increasingly dependent on them since his wife died in the previous spring.

He came in front of the other men and aligned himself with Greybeard.

"Next spring, we'll have a drive to collect more fox cubs and tame them," he said. "They'll help keep down any stoats that venture on to our land. We're getting more rats, too, sheltered in the old buildings. I reckon the stoats are driving 'em to seek shelter in human habitation. The foxes will take care of the rats too, won't they, Isaac, boy?"

Still angry with himself, Greybeard made off along the perimeter again. Charley fell in beside him, sympathetically saying nothing. The fox walked between them, daintily with its brush held low.

The rest of the party stood about indecisively in mid-field. Some quieted the cattle or stared at the scattered pieces of stoat; some went back towards the houses, whence others came out to join them in gossip. Their dark figures with white polls stood out against the background of fractured brick.

"They're half-disappointed there was not some sort of excitement brewing," Charley said. A peak of his springy hair stood out over his forehead. Once it had been the colour of wheat; it had achieved whiteness so many seasons ago that its owner had come to look on white as its proper and predestined hue, and the wheaty tint had passed into his skin.

Charley's hair never dangled into his eyes, although it looked as if it would after a vigorous shake of the head. Vigorous shaking was not Charley's habit; his quality was of stone rather than fire; and in his bearing was evidence of how the years had tested his endurance. It was precisely this air of having withstood so much that these two sturdy elders - in superficial appearance so unlike - had in common.

"Though people don't like trouble, they enjoy a distraction," Charley said. "Funny - that shot you fired started my gums aching."

"It deafened me," Greybeard admitted. "I wonder if it roused the old men of the mill?"

He noticed that Charley glanced towards the mill to see if Mole or his henchman, "Major" Trout, was coming to investigate.

Catching Greybeard's glance, Charley grinned rather foolishly and said, by way of something to say, "Here comes old Jeff Pitt to see what all the fuss is."

They had reached a small stream that wound its way across the cleared land. On its banks stood the stumps of some beeches that the villagers had cut down. From among these, the shaggy old figure of Pitt came. Over one shoulder he carried a stick from which hung the body of an animal. Though several of the villagers ventured some distance afield, Pitt was the only one who roved the wilds on his own. Sparcot was no prison for him. He was a morose and solitary man; he had no friends; and even in the society of the slightly mad, his reputation was for being mad. Certainly his face, as full of whorls as willow bark, was no reassurance of sanity; and his little eyes moved restlessly about, like a pair of fish trapped inside his skull.

"Did someone get shot then?" he asked. When Greybeard told him what happened, Pitt grunted, as if convinced the truth was being concealed from him.

"With you firing away, you'll have the gnomes and wild things paying us attention," he said.

"I'll deal with them when they appear."

"The gnomes are coming, aren't they?" Pitt muttered; Greybeard's words had scarcely registered on him. He turned to gaze at the cold and leafless woods. "They'll be here before so long, to take the place of children, you mark my words."

"There are no gnomes round here, Jeff, or they'd have caught you long ago," Charley said. "What have you got on your stick?"

Eyeing Charley to judge his reaction, Pitt lowered the stick from his shoulder and displayed a fine dog otter, its body two feet long.

"He's a beauty, isn't he? Seen a lot of 'em about just lately. You can spot 'em more easily in the winter. Or perhaps they are just growing more plentiful in these parts."

"Everything that can still multiply is doing so," Greybeard said harshly.

"I'll sell you the next one I catch, Greybeard. I haven't forgotten what happened before we came to Sparcot. You can have the next one I catch. I've got my snares set along under the bank."

"You're a regular old poacher, Jeff," Charley said. "Unlike the rest of us, you've never had to change your job."

"What do you mean? Me never had to change my job? You're daft, Charley Samuels! I spent most of my life in a stinking machine tool factory before the revolution and all that. Not that I wasn't always keen on nature - but I never reckoned I'd get it at such close quarters, as you might say."

"You're a real old man of the woods now, anyhow."

"Think I don't know you're laughing at me? I'm no fool, Charley, whatever you may think to yourself. But I reckon it's terrible the way us town people have been turned into sort of half-baked country bumpkins, don't you? What's there left to life? All of us in rags and tatters, full of worms and the toothache! Where's it all going to end, eh, I'd like to know? Where's it all going to end?" He turned to scrutinize the woods again.

"We're doing okay," Greybeard said. It was his invariable answer to the invariable question. Charley also had his invariable answer.

"It's the Lord's plan, Jeff, and you don't do any good by worrying over it. We cannot say what he has in mind for us."

"After all he's done to us this last fifty years," Jeff said, "I'm surprised you're still on speaking terms with him."

"It will end according to His will," Charley said.

Pitt gathered up all the wrinkles of his face, spat, and passed on with his dead otter.

Where could it all end, Greybeard asked himself, except in humiliation and despair? He did not ask the question aloud. Though he liked Charley's optimism, he had no more patience than old Pitt with the too easy answers of the belief that nourished that optimism.

They walked on. Charley began to discuss the various accounts of people who claimed to have seen gnomes and little men, in the woods, or on roof tops, or licking the teats of the cows. Greybeard answered automatically; old Pitt's fruitless question remained with him. Where was it all going to end? The question, like a bit of gristle in the mouth, was difficult to get rid of; yet increasingly he found himself chewing on it.

When they had walked right round the perimeter, they came again to the Thames at the western boundary, where it entered their land. They stopped and stared at the water.

Tugging, fretting, it moved about a countless number of obstacles on its course - oh yes, that it took as it has ever done! - to the sea. Even the assuaging power of water could not silence Greybeard's mind.

"How old are you, Charley?" he asked.

"I've given up counting the years. Don't look so glum! What's suddenly worrying you? You're a cheerful man, Greybeard; don't start fretting about the future. Look at that water - it'll get where it wants to go, but it isn't worrying."

"I don't find any comfort in your analogy."

"Don't you, now? Well then, you should do."

Greybeard thought how tiresome and colourless Charley was, but he answered patiently.

"You are a sensible man, Charley. Surely we must think ahead? This is getting to be a pensioners' planet. You can see the danger signs as well as I can. There are no young men and women any more. The number of us capable of maintaining even the present low standard of living is declining year by year. We-"

"We can't do anything about it. Get that firmly into your mind and you'll feel better about the whole situation. The idea that man can do anything useful about his fate is an old idea - what do I mean? Yes, a fossil. It's something from another period... We can't do anything. We just get carried along, like the water in this river."

"You read a lot of things into the river," Greybeard said, half-laughing. He kicked a stone into the water. A scuttling and a plop followed, as some small creature - possibly a water rat, for they were on the increase again - dived for safety.

They stood silent, Charley's shoulders a little bent. When he spoke again, it was to quote poetry.

*"The woods decay, the woods decay and fall,
The vapours weep their burden to the ground,
Man comes and tills the fields and lies beneath -"*

Between the heavy prosaic man reciting Tennyson and the woods leaning across the river lay an incongruity. Laboriously, Greybeard said, "For a cheerful man, you know some depressing poetry."

"That was what my father brought me up on. I've told you about that mouldy little shop of his..." One of the characteristics of age was that all avenues of talk led backwards in time.

"I'll leave you to get on with your patrol," Charley said, but Greybeard clutched his arm. He had caught a noise upstream distinct from the sound of the water.

He moved forward to the water's edge and looked. Something was coming downstream, though overhanging foliage obscured details. Breaking into a trot, Greybeard made for the stone bridge, with Charley following at a fast walk behind him.

From the crown of the bridge, they had a clear view upstream. A cumbersome boat was dipping into view only some eighty yards away. By its curved bow, he guessed it had once been a powered craft. Now it was being rowed and poled along by a number of white-heads, while a sail hung slackly from the mast. Greybeard pulled his elder whistle from an inner pocket and blew on it two long blasts. He nodded to Charley and hurried over to the water mill where Big Jim Mole lived.

Mole was already opening the door as Greybeard arrived. The years had yet to drain off all his natural ferocity. He was a stocky man with a fierce piggy face and a tangle of grey hair protruding from his ears as well as his skull. He seemed to survey Greybeard with nostrils as well as eyes.

"What's the racket about, Greybeard?" he asked.

Greybeard told him. Mole came out smartly, buttoning his ancient army greatcoat. Behind him came Major Trout, a small man who limped badly and helped himself along with a stick. As he emerged into the grey daylight, he began to shout orders in his high squeaking voice. People were still hanging about after the false alarm. They began to fall in promptly if raggedly, women as well as men, into a pre-arranged pattern of defence.

The population of Sparcot was a many-coated beast. The individuals that comprised it had sewn themselves into a wide variety of clothes and rags that passed for clothes. Coats of carpet and skirts of curtain material were to be seen. Some of the men wore waistcoats cobbled from fox skins, clumsily cured; some of the women wore torn army greatcoats. Despite this variety, the general effect was colourless, and nobody stood out particularly against the neutral landscape. A universal distribution of sunken cheeks and grey hairs added to the impression of a sad uniformity.

Many an old mouth coughed out the winter's air. Many a back was bent, many a leg dragged. Sparcot was a citadel for the ailments: arthritis, lumbago, rheumatism, cataract, pneumonia, influenza, sciatica, dizziness. Chests, livers, backs, heads, caused much complaint, and the talk in an evening was mostly of the weather and toothache. For all that, the villagers responded spryly to the sound of the whistle.

Greybeard observed this with approval, even while wondering how necessary it was; he had helped Trout organize the defence system before an increasing estrangement with Mole and Trout had caused him to take a less prominent part in affairs.

The two long whistle blasts signified a threat by water. Though most travellers nowadays were peaceable (and paid toll before they passed under Sparcot bridge), few of the villagers had forgotten the day, five or six years ago, when they had been threatened by a solitary river pirate armed with a flamethrower. Flame-throwers seemed to be growing scarcer. Like petrol, machine-guns, and ammunition, they were the produce of another century, and the relics of a vanished world. But anything arriving by water was the subject for a general stand to.

Accordingly, a strongly armed party of villagers - many of them carried home-made bows and arrows - was gathered along the riverside by the time the strange boat came up. They crouched behind a low and broken wall, ready to attack or defend, a little extra excitement shaking through their veins.

The approaching boat travelled sideways to the stream. It was manned by as unruly a set of landlubbers as ever cast anchor. The oarsmen seemed as much concerned with keeping the boat from capsizing as with making progress forward; as it was, they appeared to be having little luck in either endeavour.

This lack of skill was due not only to the difficulty inherent in rowing a fifty-year-old, thirty-foot long cruiser with a rotten hull; nor to the presence aboard of fully a dozen people with their possessions. In the cockpit of the cruiser, struggling under the grip of four men, was a rebellious pack reindeer.

Although the beast had been pollarded - as the custom was since the animal was introduced into the country by one of the last authoritarian governments some twenty years ago - it was strong enough to cause considerable damage; and reindeer were more valuable than men. They could be used for milking and meat production when cattle were scarce, and they made good transport animals; whereas men could only grow older.

Despite this distraction, one of the navigators, acting as lookout and standing in the bow of the boat, sighted the massed forces of Sparcot and called out a warning. She was a tall dark woman, lean and hard, her dyed black hair knotted down under a scarf. When she called to the rowers, the promptness with which they rested on their oars showed how glad they were to do so. Someone squatting behind one of the baggages of clothing piled on deck passed the dark woman a white flag. She thrust it aloft and called out to the waiting villagers over the water.

"What's she yelling about?" John Meller asked. He was an old soldier who had once been a sort of batman to Mole, until the latter threw him out in exasperation as useless. Nearly ninety, Meller was as thin as a staff and as deaf as a stone, though his one remaining eye was still sharp.

The woman's voice came again, confident though it asked a favour. "Let us come by in peace. We have no wish to harm you and no need to stop. Let us by, villagers!"

Greybeard bawled her message into Meller's ear. The whitehead shook his scruffy skull and grinned to show he had not heard. "Kill the men and rape the women! I'll take the dark-haired hussy in the front."

Mole and Trouton came forward, shouting orders. They had evidently decided they were under no serious threat from the boat.

"We must stop them and inspect them," Mole said. "Get the pole out. Move there, you men! Let's have a parley with this shower and see who they are and what they want. They must have something we need."

During this activity, Towin Thomas had come up beside Greybeard and Charley Samuels. In his efforts to see the boat clearly, he knotted his face into a grimace. He dug Greybeard in the ribs with a patched elbow.

"Hey, Greybeard, that reindeer wouldn't come amiss for the heavy work, would it?" he said, sucking the end of his cudgel reflectively. "We could use it behind the plough, couldn't we?"

"We've no right to take it from them."

"You're not getting religious ideas about that reindeer, are you? You're letting old Charley's line of talk get you down."

"I never listen to a thing either Charley or you say," Greybeard said.

A long pole that had done duty carrying telephone wires in the days when a telephone system existed was slid out across the water, until its tip rested between two stones on the farther bank. The river narrowed here towards the ruined bridge farther downstream. This spot had afforded the villagers a useful revenue for years; their levies on river-going craft supplemented their less enthusiastic attempts at husbandry. It was the one inspired idea of Big Jim Mole's otherwise dull and oppressive reign. To reinforce the threat of the pole, the Sparcot men now showed themselves in strength along the bank. Mole ran forward brandishing a sword, calling for the strangers to heave to.

The tall dark woman on the boat waved her fists at them.

"Respect the white flag of peace, you mangy bastards!" she yelled. "Let us come by without spoiling. We're homeless as it is. We've nothing to spare for the likes of you."

Her crew had less spirit than she. They shipped their oars and punting sticks and let the boat drift under the stone bridge until it rested against the pole. Elated to find such a defenceless prize, the villagers dragged it against the near bank with grapnels. The reindeer lifted its heavy head and blared its defiance, the dark woman shrieked her disgust.

"Hey there, you with the butcher's snout," she cried, pointing at Mole, "You listen to me, we're your neighbours. We only come from Grafton Lock. Is this how you treat your neighbours, you fusty old pirate?"

A murmur ran through the crowd on the bank. Jeff Pitt was the first to recognize the woman. She was known as Gipsy Joan, and her name was something of a legend even among villagers who had never ventured into her territory.

Jim Mole and Troutner stepped forward and bawled at her to be silent, but again she shouted them down.

"Get your hooks out of our side! We've got wounded aboard."

"Shut your gab, woman, and come ashore! Then you won't get hurt," Mole said, holding his sword at a more business-like angle. With the major at his side, he stepped towards the boat.

Already some of the villagers had attempted to board without orders. Emboldened by the general lack of resistance and keen to get their share of the spoils, they dashed forward, led by two of the women. One of the oarsmen, a hoary old fellow with a sou'wester and a yellow beard, fell into a panic and brought his oar down on to the foremost boarder's head. The woman went sprawling. A scuffle broke out immediately, despite bellowings from both parties to desist.

The cruiser rocked. The men holding the reindeer moved to protect themselves. Taking advantage of this distraction, the animal broke free of its captors. It clattered across the cabin roof, paused for a moment, and leapt overboard into the Thames. Swimming strongly, it headed downstream. A howl of dismay rose from the boat.

Two of the men who had been looking after the animal jumped in too, crying to the beast to come back. Then they were forced to look after themselves; one of them struggled to the bank, where there were hands to help him out. Down by the horns of the broken bridge, the reindeer climbed ashore, its water-smooth coat heavy against its flanks. It stood on the far shore snorting and shaking its head from side to side, as if troubled by water in its ears. Then it turned and disappeared into a clump of willows.

The second man who jumped in was less successful. He could not reach either bank. The current caught him, sweeping him through the bridge, across its submerged remains, over the weir. His thin cry rose. An arm was flung up amid spray, then there was only the roar of green and white water.

This incident damped the struggles at the boat, so that Mole and Troutner were able to question the crew. The two of them, standing by the cruiser's rail, saw that Gipsy Joan had not been bluffing when she spoke of carrying wounded. Down in what was once the saloon were huddled nine men and women, some of them nonagenarians by their parched and sunken-eyed aspect. Their poor clothes were torn, their faces and hands bloody. One woman with half her face missing seemed on the point of death, while all maintained a stunned silence more terrible than screaming.

"What's happened to them?" Mole asked uneasily.

"Stoats," said Gipsy Joan. She and her companions were keen enough to tell their tale. The facts were simple enough. Her group was a small one, but they lived fairly well on a supply of fish from a flooded area next to Grafton Lock. They never kept guard, and had almost no defences. At sunset on the previous day, they had been attacked by a pack - or some said several packs - of stoats. In their fright, the community had taken to their boats and come away as quickly as possible. They predicted that unless deflected by some chance, the stoats would soon sweep into Sparcot.

"Why should they do that?" Troutner asked.

"Because they're hungry, man, why else?" Gipsy Joan said. "They're multiplying like rabbits and sweeping the country looking for food. Eat anything, them devils will, fish or flesh or carrion. You lot would do well to move out of here."

Mole looked round uneasily and said, "Don't start spreading rumours here, woman. We can look after ourselves. We're not a rabble, we're properly organized. Get a move on. We'll let you go through unharmed, seeing that you've got trouble on your hands. Get off our territory as fast as you can."

Joan looked prepared to argue the toss, but two of her leaders, fearful, pulled at her arm and urged that they move at once.

"We've another boat coming on behind," one of these men said. "It's full of our older unwounded people. We'd be obliged if you'd let them through without holding them up."

Mole and Trouton stepped back, waving their arms. The mention of stoats had turned them into anxious men.

"On your way!" they shouted, waving their arms, and to their own men, "Pull back the pole and let them get on their way."

The pole came back. Joan and her crew pushed off from the bank, their ancient cruiser wobbling dangerously. But the contagion of their news had already been caught by those ashore. The word "stoats" passed rapidly from mouth to mouth, and people began to run back to their houses, or towards the village boathouse.

Unlike their enemies the rats, stoats had not declined in numbers. During the last decade, they had greatly increased, both in numbers and daring. Earlier in the year, old Reggy Foster had been attacked by one in the pasture and had had his throat bitten out. The stoats had extended an old occasional habit of theirs and now often hunted in packs, as they did at Grafton. At such times they showed no fear of human beings.

Knowing this, the villagers began to trample about the bank, pushing each other and shouting incoherently.

Jim Mole drew a revolver and levelled it at one of the fleeing backs.

"You can't do that!" Greybeard exclaimed, stepping forward with raised hand.

Mole brought the revolver down and pointed it at Greybeard.

"You can't shoot your own people," Greybeard said firmly.

"Can't I?" Mole asked. His eyes were like blisters on his antique skin. Trouton said something, and he lifted his revolver again and fired it into the air. The villagers looked round in startlement; then most of them began running again. Mole laughed.

"Let 'em go," he said. "They'll only kill 'emselves."

"Use reason with them," Greybeard said, coming closer. "They're frightened. Firing on them's no use. Speak to them."

"Reason! Get out of my way, Greybeard. They're mad! They'll die. We're all going to die."

"Are you going to let them go, Jim?" Trouton asked.

"You know the trouble with stoats as well as I do," Mole said. "If they attack in force, we've not got enough ammunition to spare to shoot them. We haven't got good enough bowmen to stop them with arrows. So the sensible thing is to get across the river in our boat and stay there till the little vermin have gone."

"They can swim, you know," Trouton said.

"I know they can swim. But why should they? They're after food, not fighting. We'll be safe on the other side of the river." He was shivering. "Can you imagine what a stoat attack must be like? You saw those people in that boat. Do you want that to happen to you?"

He was pale now, and looking anxiously about him, as if fearing that the stoats might be arriving already.

"We can shut ourselves in the barns and houses if they come," Greybeard said. "We can defend ourselves without deserting the village. We're safer staying put."

Mole turned at him savagely, baring his teeth in a gaping snarl. "How many stoat-proof buildings have we got? You know they'll come after the cattle if they're really hungry, and then they'll be all over us at the same time. Who gives orders here anyhow? Not you, Greybeard! Come on, Trouton, what are you waiting for? Let's get our boat brought out!"

Trouton looked momentarily disposed to argue. Instead, he turned and began shouting orders in his high-pitched voice. He and Mole brushed past Greybeard and ran towards the boathouse, calling, "Keep calm, you bloody cripples, and we'll ferry you all across."

The place took on the aspect of a well-stirred anthill. Greybeard noticed that Charley had vanished. The cruiser with the fugitives from Grafton was well down the river now and had negotiated the little weir safely. As Greybeard stood by the bridge and watched the chaos, Martha came up to him.

His wife was a dignified woman, of medium height though she stooped a little as she clutched a blanket about her shoulders. Her face was slightly puddingy and pale, and wrinkled as if age had bound her skull tightly round the edges; yet because of her fine bone structure, she still retained something of the good looks of her youth, while the dark lashes that fringed her eyes still made them compelling.

She saw his far-away look.

"You can dream just as well at home," she said.

He took her arm.

"I was wondering what lay at the end of the river. I'd give anything to see what life was like on the coast. Look at us here - we're so undignified! We're just a rabble."

"Aren't you afraid of the stoats, Algy?"

"Of course I'm afraid of the stoats." Then he smiled back at her, a little wearily. "And I'm tired of being afraid. Cooped up in this village for eleven years, we've all caught Mole's sickness."

They turned back towards their house. For once, Sparcot was alive. They saw men small in the meadowland, with anxious gestures hurrying their few cows in to shelter. It was against just such emergencies, or in case of flood, that the barns had been built on stilts; when the cattle were driven into them and the doors shut, ramps could be removed, leaving the cattle safe above ground.

As they passed Annie Hunter's house, the desiccated figure of Willy Tallridge slipped from the side door. He was still buttoning his jacket, and paid them no attention as he hurried towards the river as fast as his eighty-year-old legs would take him. Annie's bright face, heavy with its usual complement of rouge and powder, appeared at her upper window. She waved a casual greeting to them.

"There's a stoat-warning out, Annie," Greybeard called. "They are getting ready to ferry people across the river."

"Thanks for the warning, darling, but I'll lock myself in here."

"You have to hand it to Annie, she's game," Greybeard said.

"Gamey too, I hear," Martha said drily. "Do you realize, Algy, that she's about twenty years older than I? Poor old Annie, what a fate - to be the oldest professional!"

He was searching the tousled meadow, looking despite himself for brown squibs of life riding through the grass, but he smiled at Martha's joke. Occasionally a remark of hers could bring back a whole world to him, the old world of brittle remarks made at parties where alcohol and nicotine had been ritually consumed. He loved her for the best of reasons, because she was herself.

"Funny thing," he said. "You're the only person left in Sparcot who still makes conversation for its own sake. Now go home like a good girl and pack a few essential belongings. Shut yourself in, and I'll be along in ten minutes. I ought to help the men with the cattle."

"Algy, I'm nervous. Do we have to pack just to go across the river. What's happening?"

Suddenly his face was hard. "Do what I ask you, Martha. We aren't going across the river; we're going down it. We're leaving Sparcot."

Before she could say more, he walked away. She also turned, walking deliberately down the hollow-cheeked street, and in at her door, into the dark little house. She did it as a positive act. The trepidation that had filled her on hearing her husband's words did not last; now, as she looked about her at walls from which the paper had peeled and ceilings showing their dirty bare ribs, she whispered a wish that he might mean what he had said.

But leave Sparcot? The world had dwindled until for her it was only Sparcot...

As Greybeard went towards the stilted barn, a fight broke out farther down the street. Two groups of people carting belongings down to the river's edge had collided; they had lapsed into the weak rages that were such a feature of life in the village. The result would be a broken bone, shock, confinement to bed, pneumonia, and another mound in the beggarly greedy graveyard under the fir trees, where the soil was sandy and yielded easily to the spade.

Greybeard had often acted as peacemaker in such disputes. Now he turned away, and made for the cattle. They were as valuable - it had to be faced - as the rabble. The cattle went protestingly up the ramp into the barn. George Swinton, a one-armed old heathen who had killed two men in the Westminster Marches of 2008, darted among them like a fury, hurting them all he could with voice and stick.

A noise like the falling of stricken timber stopped them. Two of the barn's wooden legs split to ground level. One of the knot of men present called a word of warning. Before it was through his lips, the barn began to settle. Splinters of wood showed like teeth as joists gave. The barn toppled. It slid sideways, rocked, and collapsed in a shower of ruptured planks. Cattle stampeded from the wreckage, or lay beneath it.

"To hell with this shoddy shower! Let's get ourselves in the boats," George Swinton said, pushing past Greybeard. And none of the others cared more than he. Flinging aside their sticks, they jostled after him. Greybeard stood where he was as they rushed past: the human race, he thought, sinned against as well as sinning.

Stooping, he helped a heifer free herself from under a fallen beam. She cantered away to the grazing land. She would have to take her chance when and if the stoats came.

As he turned back towards his house, a shot - it sounded like Mole's revolver - came from the direction of the stone bridge. It was echoed by another. Starlings clattered up from the roof-tops and soared for safety in the trees across the river. Greybeard quickened his pace, doubled through the straggling plot that was the garden of his house, and peered round the corner of it.

By the bridge, a group of villagers was struggling. A low afternoon mist tinted the scene, and the towering trees behind dwarfed it, but through a gap in a collapsing garden wall Greybeard had a clear enough view of what was going on.

The second boat from Grafton floated down the river just as the Sparcot boat was launching itself across stream. It was laden with a motley collection of white-heads, most of whom were now waving their arms with gestures that distance rendered puppet-like. The Sparcot boat was heavily overloaded with the more aggressive members of the community, who had insisted on being on the first ferry trip. Through incompetence and stupidity on both sides, the boats collided.

Jim Mole stood on the bridge, pointing his revolver down into the melee. Whether or not he had hit anyone with his first two shots it was impossible for Greybeard to see. As he strained his eyes, Martha came up beside him.

"Mole ever the bad leader!" Greybeard exclaimed. "He's brutal enough, but he has no sense of how to restore discipline - or if he had, he's in his dotage now and has forgotten. Firing at people in the boats can only make matters worse."

Someone was shouting hoarsely to get the boat to the bank. Nobody obeyed and, abandoning all discipline, the two crews fought each other. Senile anger had overwhelmed them again. The Grafton boat, a capacious old motor launch, tipped dangerously as the villagers piled in upon its unlucky occupants. To add to the clamour, others were running up and down the bank, crying advice or threats.

"We're all mad," Martha said, "and our bag is packed."

He flashed her a brief look of love.

With three overlapping splashes, three ancient Graftonites fell or were knocked overboard into the water. Evidently there was some half-formed scheme to appropriate their boat for use as a second ferry; but as the two craft drifted downstream, the motor launch capsized.

White heads bobbed amid white water. A great stupid outcry went up from the bank. Mole fired his revolver into the confusion.

"Damn them all to hell!" Greybeard said. "These moments of unreason - they overcome people so easily. You know that that packman who was through here last week claimed that the people of Stamford had set fire to their houses without cause. And the population of Burford cleared out overnight because they thought the place had been taken over by gnomes! Gnomes - old Jeff Pitt has gnomes on his brain! Then there are all these reports of mass suicides. Perhaps this will be the end - general madness. Perhaps we're witnessing the end!"

On the stage of the world it was rapidly growing darker. The average age of the population already stood high in the seventies. Each succeeding year saw it rise higher. In a few more years... An emotion not unlike exhilaration filled Greybeard, a sort of wonderment to think he might be present at the end of the world. No: at the end of humankind. The world would go on; man might die, but the earth still yielded up its abundance.

They went back into the house. A suitcase - incongruous item in pigskin that had made a journey down the years to a ruined world - stood on the dry side of the hall.

He looked round him, looked round the room at the furniture they had salvaged from other houses, at Martha's roughly drawn calendar on one wall, with its year, 2029, written in red, at the fern she grew in an old pot. Eleven years since they arrived here from Cowley with Pitt, eleven years of padding round the perimeter to keep the world out.

"Let's go," he said, adding as an afterthought, "Do you mind leaving, Martha?"

"I don't know what I'm letting myself in for, do I? You'd better just take me along."

"At least there's a measure of safety here. I don't know what I'm letting you in for."

"No weakness now, Mr. Greybeard." On impulse, she added, "May I get Charley Samuels if he is in? He'd miss us most. He ought to come with us."

He nodded, reluctant to have anyone share his plan, yet reluctant to say no to Martha. She was gone. He stood there, heavy, feeling the weight of the past. Yes, Charley ought to come with them, and not only because the two of them had fought side by side almost thirty years ago. That old battle brought back no emotion; because it belonged to a different age, it cauterized feeling. The young soldier involved in that conflict was a different being from the man standing in this destitute room; he even went by a different name.

A log of wood still smouldered in the grate; but in the hall and on the stairs, that creaked in the long nights as if gnomes were more reality than legend, the smell of damp was as thick as twilight. They would leave this dwelling, and soon it would all decompose like a man's body, into its separate glues and dusts.

Now he could understand why people set fire to their own homes. Fire was clean, cleanliness was a principle that man had otherwise lost. An angry pleasure roused in him at the thought of moving on, though as ever he showed little of what he felt.

He went briskly to the front door. Martha was stepping over the bricks that marked the old dividing line between their garden and the next. With her was Charley Samuels, his muffler of grey wool round his head and throat, his coat tied tight, a pack on his back, the fox Isaac straining at its leash. His face was the scaly yellow colour of a boiled fowl, but he looked resolute enough. He came up to Greybeard and gripped his hand. Frosty tears stood in his eyes.

Anxious to avoid an emotional scene, Greybeard said, "We need you with us, Charley, to deliver sermons at us."

But Charley only shook his hand the harder.

"I was just packing. I'm your man, Greybeard. I saw that criminal sinner Mole shoot poor old Betty from the bridge. His day will dawn - his day will dawn." The words came thickly. "I vowed on that instant that I'd dwell no more in the tents of the unrighteous."

Greybeard thought of old Betty, nodding over the guardroom fire so recently; by now her stew would be spoilt.

The fox whined and pranced with impatience.

"Isaac seems to agree with you," Greybeard said, with something of his wife's attempt at humour. "Let's go, then, while everyone's attention is distracted."

"It won't be the first time we've worked together," Charley said.

Nodding in agreement, Greybeard turned back into the hall; he did not particularly want any sentimentalizing from old Charley.

He picked up the suitcase his wife had packed. Deliberately, he left the front door of their house open. Martha shut it. She fell into step behind him, with Charley and the dog-fox. They walked down the relapsed road eastwards, and out into the fields. They marched parallel with the river bank, in the general direction of the horns of the old ruined bridge.

Greybeard took it at a good pace, deliberately not easing up for the older Charley's sake; Charley might as well see from the start that only in one aspect was this an escape; like every escape, it was also a new test. He drew up sharply when he saw two figures ahead, making for the same break in the thicket as he was.

The sighting was mutual. The figures were those of a man and a woman; the man knotted up his face, snaring his eyes between brow and cheek to see who followed him. Recognition too was mutual.

"Where are you off to, Towin, you old scrounger?" Greybeard asked, when his party had caught up. He looked at the wispy old man, cuddling his cudgel and wrapped in a monstrous garment composed of blanket, animal hide, and portions of half a dozen old coats, and then regarded Towin's wife, Becky. Becky Thomas, in her mid-seventies, was possibly some ten years younger than her husband. A plump birdlike woman, she carried two small sacks and was dressed in a garment as imposingly disorganized as her husband's. Her ascendancy over her husband was rarely disputed, and she spoke first now, her voice sharp. "We might ask you lot the same thing. Where are you going?"

"By the looks of things, we're off on the same errand as you," Towin said. "We're getting out of this mouldy concentration camp while we've still got legs on us."

"That's why we're wearing these things we've got on," Becky said. "We've been preparing to leave for some time. This seemed a good opportunity, with old Mole and the Major busy. But we'd never thought you might be hopping it, Greybeard. You're well in with the Major, unlike us folk."

Ignoring the jibe, Greybeard looked them over carefully.

"Towin's about right with his 'concentration camp'. But where are you thinking of going?"

"We thought we might sort of head south and pick up the old road towards the downs," Becky said.

"You'd better join us," Greybeard said curtly. "We don't know what conditions we may meet. I've got a boat provisioned and hidden below the weir. Let's get moving."

Hidden in the thicket, drawn up from the river's edge, sheltered in the remains of a small byre, lay a sixteen-foot clinker-built dinghy. Under Greybeard's instruction, they lifted it down into the water. Charley and Towin held it steady while he piled their few possessions into it. A previous owner had equipped the craft with a canopy, which they erected. The bows were decked in; the canopy covered most of the rest of the length. Three pairs of paddles lay on the planking of the boat, together with a rudder and tiller. These latter Greybeard fitted into place.

They wasted no time. Their nearness to the settlement was emphasized by the shouting they could still hear upstream.

Martha and Becky were helped into seats. The men climbed in; Greybeard let down the centreboard. Under his direction, Becky took the steering while the rest of them paddled - awkwardly and with a certain amount of guarded cursing from Towin, who took off his beloved wrist watch before getting down to work. They manoeuvred into midstream, the current took them, and they began to move.

Over against the farther bank, a patch of colour bobbed. A body was trapped between two chunks of masonry carried down from the broken bridge. Its head was submerged beneath an ever-breaking wave from the little weir; but the orange, green, red, and yellow stripes of the shirt left them in no doubt that it was Sam Bulstow.

An hour later, when they were well clear of Sparcot, Martha began to sing. The song came quietly at first, then she gave her notes words.

*"Here shall he see
No enemy
But winter and rough weather..."*

"Towin, you're right with your remark about concentration camps," she broke off to say. "Everything at Sparcot was getting so worn and - over-used, grimy and over-used. Here, it could never be like that." She indicated the growth drooping the bank of the river.

"Where are you planning that we should go?" Charley asked Greybeard.

That was something he had never thought of fully. The dinghy had represented no more than his store of hope. But without cogitation he said, "We will make our way down the Thames to the estuary. We can improvise ourselves a mast and a sail later, and get to the sea. Then we will see what the coast looks like."

"It would be good to see the sea again," Charley said soberly.

"I had a summer holiday at - what was the name of the place? It had a pier - Southend," Towin said, snugging down into his collar as he paddled. "I'd think it would be pretty sharpish cold at this time of the year - it was bad enough then. Do you think the pier could still be standing? Very pretty pier it was."

"You daft thing, it will be tumbled down years ago," his wife said.

The fox stood with its paws on the side of the boat, its sharp muzzle picking up scents from the bank. It looked ready for anything.

Nobody mentioned Scots or gnomes or stoats. Martha's brief song was still with them, and they dared be nothing but optimistic.

After half an hour, they were forced to rest. Towin was exhausted, and they all found the unaccustomed exercise tiring. Becky tried to take over the paddle from Martha, but she was too unskilled and impatient to wield it effectively. After a while, Charley and Greybeard shared the work between them. The sound of blade meeting water hung heavily between the bushes that fringed the river, the mist began to veil the way before them. The two women huddled together on the seat by the tiller.

"I'm still a townswoman at heart," Martha said. "The lure of the countryside is strongest when I'm away from it. Unfortunately the alternatives to the countryside are growing fewer. Where are we going to stop for the night, Algy?"

"We'll be pulling in as soon as we sight a good spot," Greybeard said. "We must get well away from Sparcot, but we don't want to overtake Gipsy Joan's crew from Grafton. Keep a good heart. I've some provisions stored in the boat, as well as what we've brought with us."

"You're a deep one," Towin said. "You ought to have shot Jim Mole and taken over Sparcot, man. The people would have backed you."

Greybeard did not reply.

The river unfolded itself with a series of bends, a cripple in a rack of sedges making its way eastwards to liberty. When a bridge loomed ahead, they ceased paddling and drifted towards it. It was a good Georgian structure with a high arch and sound parapet; they snuggled in to the bank on the upstream side of it. Greybeard took up his rifle.

"There should be habitation near a bridge," he said. "Stay here while I go and look around."

"I'll come with you," Charley said. "Isaac can stay in the boat."

He gave the anxious beast's leash to Martha, who fondled the fox to keep it quiet. The two men stepped out of the boat. They climbed up the bank and crouched among rotting plants.

Behind them, an overripe winter's sun blinked at them from among trees. Except for the sun, distorted by the bare trunks through which it shone, all else was told in tones of grey. A mist like a snowdrift hung low across the land. Before them, beyond the littered road that crossed the bridge, was a large building. It seemed to stand on top of the mist without touching the ground. Under a muddle of tall chimney-stacks, it lay ancient and wicked and without life; the sun was reflected from an upper window-pane, endowing it with one lustreless eye. When nothing moved but a scatter of rooks winging overhead, the men heaved themselves up on to the road, and crossed to the cover of a hedgerow.

"Looks like an old public house," Charley said. "No sign of life about it. Deserted, I should say."

As he spoke, they heard a cough from beyond the hedgerow.

They crouched, peering among the haws that hung there, scanning the field beyond. The field ran down to the river. Though it was drenched in mist, its freedom from weed and other growth indicated the presence of some sort of ruminative life. Their breath steamed in the brush as they scanned the place. The cough came again.

Greybeard pointed silently. In the corner of the field closest to the house, a shed stood. Clustered against one side of it were sheep, four or five of them.

"I thought sheep had died out long ago," Charley muttered.

"It means there's someone in the house."

"We don't want an argument with them. Let's pull farther upstream. We've an hour more daylight yet."

"No, let's look over this place. They're isolated here; they may be glad of company, if we can convince them we're friendly."

It was impossible to overcome the feeling that they might be covered by one or more guns from the silent building. Keeping their gaze on the vacant windows, they moved forward. In front of the house, with ample cover near by, stood a car of dejected appearance. It had long since slumped into a posture of defeat as its tyres sagged on to the ground. They ran to it, crouching behind it to observe the house. Still no sign of movement. They saw that most of the windows were boarded up.

"Is there anyone there?" Greybeard called.

No answer came.

As Charley had guessed, it was a public house. The old inn sign lay rotting near by, and a name board had curled away from over the front door and lay across the well-worn steps. On a downstairs window they read the word ALES engraved there. Greybeard took in the details before calling again. Still there was no answer.

"We'll try round the back," he said, rising.

"Don't you think we'd be all right in the boat for one night?"

"It will be cold later. Let's try the back."

At the rear of the building, a track led from the back door towards the sheep field. Standing against the damp brickwork, Greybeard with his rifle at the ready, they called again. Nobody replied. Greybeard leant forward and stared quickly into the nearest window. A man was sitting just inside, looking at him.

His heart gave a jerk. He fell back against Charley, his spine suddenly chill. When he had control of his nerves, he thrust his gun forward and rapped on a window-pane.

"We're friends," he called. Silence.

"We're friends, you bastard!" This time he shattered the pane. The glass fell, then silence again. The two men looked at each other, their faces close and drawn.

"He must be sick or dead or something," Charley said. Ducking past Greybeard and under the window, he reached the back door. With a shoulder against it, he turned the handle and charged in. Greybeard followed.

The face of the seated man was as grey as the daylight at which he stared with such fixity. His lips were ravaged and broken as if by a powerful poison. He sat upright in an old chair facing the sink. In his lap, still not entirely empty, lay a can of pesticide.

Charley crossed himself. "May he rest in peace. There's provocation enough for anyone taking their own life these days."

Greybeard took the can of pesticide and hurled it out into the bushes.

"Why did he kill himself? It can't have been for want of food, with his sheep still out there. We'll have to search the house, Charley. There may be someone else here."

Upstairs, in a room into which the dying sun still gleamed, they found her. She was wasted to nothing under the blankets. In a receptacle by her bedside was a pool of something that might have been clotted soup. She had died of an illness, that much was obvious; that she had been dead longer than the man downstairs was also apparent, for the room was thick with the odour of death.

"Probably cancer," Greybeard said. "Her husband had no reason to go on living once she'd gone." He had to break the silence, though breathing in the room was difficult. Pulling himself together, he said, "Let's get them both outside and hidden in the bushes. Then we can move in here for the night."

"We must give them burial, Algy."

"It takes too much energy. Let's get settled in and be thankful we found a safe place so easily."

"We may have been guided here to give these poor souls decent burial."

Greybeard looked slantingly at the brown object rotting on the pillow.

"Why should the Almighty want that back, Charley?"

"You might as well ask why he wants us here."

"By God, I often do ask it, Charley. Now don't argue; let's get the corpses hidden where the women won't see them, and perhaps in the morning we'll think about burial."

With as good a grace as he could muster, Charley helped in the dreary business. The best place of concealment turned out to be the shed in the field. They left the corpses there, with the sheep - there proved to be six of them - looking on. They saw to it that the sheep had water, wrenched open a couple of windows

to air the house, and went to get the rest of the party. When the boat was safely moored, they all moved into the house.

Down in the cellars where barrels of beer had once stood, they found a smoked joint of meat hanging on a hook to be out of the reach of rats - of those there was plenty of evidence. They found a lamp that contained sheep fat and smelt villainously, though it burnt well. And Towin found five bottles of gin in a crate hidden in an unused grate.

"Just what I need for my rheumatics, then!" he said, opening a bottle. Placing his sharp nose over the mouth, he inhaled eagerly and then took a swig.

The women piled wood into a range in the kitchen and prepared a meal, disguising the high taste of the mutton with some of the herbs that lay in jars in the larder. Their warmth came back to them. Something like the elderly brother of a party spirit revived between them, and when they had eaten they settled down for sleep in a cheerful frame of mind.

Martha and Greybeard bedded down in a small parlour on the ground floor. Since it was evident by many signs that the dead couple had not lived in a state of siege, Greybeard saw no reason for them to keep a guard; under Mole's regime they had grown obsessed with such precautions. After all, as every year went by, man should have less to fear from his fellow men, and this house seemed to be far from any other settlement...

All the same, he was not easy. He had said nothing to the others, but before leaving the boat he had felt in the lockers under the decking to get the two bayonets he had stored there; he wished to arm Towin and Charley with them; but the bayonets were missing, together with other things he had stowed there. The loss meant but one thing: somebody else had known of the whereabouts of his boat.

When Martha was asleep, he rose. The mutton-fat light still burned, though he had shielded its glow from the window. He stood, letting his mind become like a landscape into which strange thoughts could wander. He felt the frost gathering outside the house, and the silence, and turned away to close his mind again. The light stood on an old chest of drawers. He opened one of the drawers at random and looked in. It contained family trinkets, a broken clock, some pencil stubs, an ink bottle empty of ink. With a feeling of wrong-doing, he pocketed the two longest bits of pencil and opened the neighbouring drawer. Two photograph albums of an old-fashioned kind lay there. On top of them was the framed picture of a child.

The child was a boy of about six, a cheerful boy whose smile showed a gap in his teeth. He was holding a model railway engine and wore long tartan trousers. The print had faded somewhat. Probably it was a boyhood photograph of the man now stacked carelessly out in the sheep shed.

Sudden tears stood in Greybeard's eyes. Childhood itself lay in the rotting drawers of the world, a memory that could not stand permanently against time. Since that awful - accident, crime, disaster - in the last century, there were no more babies born. There were no more children, no more boys like this. Nor, by now, were there any more adolescents, no young men, no young women with their proud style, not even the middle-aged were left now. Of the seven ages of man, little but the last remained.

"The fifties group are still pretty youthful," Greybeard told himself, bracing his shoulders. And despite all the hardships, and the ghastliness that had gone before, there were plenty of spry sixty-year-olds about. Oh, it would take a few years yet before... But the fact remained that he was one of the youngest men on earth.

No, that wasn't quite true. Persistent rumour had it that an occasional couple was still bearing children; and in the past there had been cases... There had even been the pathetic instance of Eve, in the early days of Sparcot, who had borne a girl to Major Trout and then disappeared. A month later, both she and her baby were found dead by a wood-gathering expedition... But apart from that, you never saw anyone young. The accident had been thorough. The old had inherited the earth.

Mortal flesh now wore only the gothic shapes of age. Death stood impatiently over the land, waiting to count his last few pilgrims.

...And from all this, I do derive a terrible pleasure, Greybeard admitted, looking down at the impaled smile in the photograph. They could tear me apart before I'd confess, but somewhere it is there, a little stoaty thing that makes of a global disaster a personal triumph. Perhaps it's this fool attitude I've always taken that any experience can be of value. Perhaps it's the reassurance to be derived from knowing that even if you live to be a hundred, you'll never be an old fogey: you'll always be the younger generation.

He beat out the silly thought that had grown in him so often. Yet it remained smouldering. His life had been lucky, wonderfully lucky, for all mankind's ill luck.

Not that mankind suffered alone. All mammals were nearly as hard hit. Dogs had ceased to whelp. The fox had almost died out; its habit of rearing its young in earths had doubtless contributed to its ultimate recovery - that and the abundance of food that came its way as man's grip on the land slackened. The domestic pig had died out even before the dogs, though perhaps as much because it was everywhere killed and eaten recklessly as because it failed to litter. The domestic cat and the horse proved as sterile as man; only its comparatively large number of offspring per litter had allowed the cat to survive. It was said to be multiplying in some districts again; pedlars visiting Sparcot spoke of plagues of feral cats here and there.

Bigger members of the cat tribe had also suffered. All over the world, the story in the early nineteen-eighties had been the same: the creatures of the world were incapable of reproduction. The earth - such was the apocalyptic nature of the event that it was easy even for an agnostic to think of it in biblical terms - the earth failed to bring forth its increase. Only the smaller creatures that sheltered in the earth itself had escaped wholly unscathed from that period when man had fallen victim of his own inventions.

Oh, it was an old tale now, and nearly half a century separated the milk teeth smiling in the photograph from the corrupt grin that let in frost out in the sheep shed.

Greybeard shut the drawer with a slam.

Something had disturbed the sheep. They were bleating in fright.

He had a superstitious picture of the dead walking, and blocked it off. Some sort of animal predator would be a more likely explanation of the disturbance. He went into the kitchen and peered through the window. The sky was lighter than he had expected. A chip of moon shone, giving frail shape to the nearby trees. Putting an ear to the draught pouring through the broken pane, Greybeard could hear the sheep trotting in their field. Frost glittered on the pinched sedges outside the door; as he looked at its tiny lost reflections, he heard the creak-crunch of footsteps moving across a stretch of grass. He raised his rifle. It was impossible to get out without making a noise opening the back door.

The footsteps came nearer; a man, all shadow, passed the window.

"Halt or I fire!" Greybeard called. Though the man had disappeared from his line of sight, he reckoned on the shock of discovery freezing him still.

"Is that you, Greybeard?" The voice came hollow from outside. "Is that you, Greybeard? Keep your itchy finger off that trigger."

Even as he recognized the voice, Martha came to his side, clutching her coat about her. He thrust the rifle into her hands.

"Hold this and keep me covered," he whispered. Aloud, he said, "Come in front of the window with your hands up."

A man appeared in silhouette, his fingers stretched as if to rake the sky. He gave a cackling laugh. Martha swung the rifle to cover him. Greybeard flung open the door and motioned the man in, stepping back to let him pass. The old poacher, Jeff Pitt, walked into the kitchen and lowered his arms.

"You still want to buy that otter, Greybeard?" he asked, grinning his old canine grin.

Greybeard took his gun and put an arm round Martha's frail shoulders. He kicked the door shut and surveyed Pitt unsmilingly.

"It must be you who stole the provisions from my boat. Why did you follow us? Have you a boat of your own?"

"I didn't swim, you know!" Pitt's gaze ran restlessly about the room as he spoke. "I'm better at hiding my little canoe than you were! I've watched you for weeks, loading up your boat. There isn't much goes on at Sparcot I don't know about. So today, when you did your flit, I thought I'd chance running into the gnomes and come and see how you were all getting on."

"As you see, we survive, and you nearly got yourself shot. What are you planning to do now you're here, Jeff?"

The old man blew on his fingers and moved over to the range, where some heat still lingered. As his custom was, he looked neither of them straight in the face.

"I thought I might come with you as far as Reading, if you were going that far. And if your good lady wife would have my company."

"If you come with us, you must give any weapons you possess to my husband," Martha said sharply.

Cocking an eyebrow to see if he surprised them, Pitt drew an old service revolver from his coat pocket. Deftly, he removed the shells from it and handed it across to Greybeard.

"Since you're so mad keen on my company, the pair of you," he said, "I'll give you some of my knowledge as well as my gun. Before we all settle down to a cosy night's rest, let's be smart and drive them sheep in here, out of harm's way. Don't you know what a bit of luck you've chanced on? Them sheep are worth a fortune apiece. Further down river, at somewhere like Reading, we should be little kings on account of them - if we don't get knocked off, of course."

Greybeard slipped the revolver into his pocket. He looked a long time at the wizened face before him. Pitt gave him a wet-chinned grin of reassurance.

"You get back into bed, sweet," Greybeard said to Martha. "We'll get the sheep. I'm sure Jeff has a good idea."

She could see how much it went against the grain for him to acknowledge the worth of an idea he felt he should have thought of himself. She gave him a closed eye look and went through into the other room as the men left the house. The mutton fat spluttered in the lamp. Warily, as she lay down again on the improvised bed - it might have been midnight, but she guessed that in an hypothetical world of clocks it would be accounted not yet nine p.m. - the face of Jeff Pitt came before her.

His face had been moulded until it expressed age as much as personality; it had been undermined by the years, until with its wrinkled cheeks and ruined molars it became a common face, closely resembling, say, Towin Thomas's, and many another countenance that had survived the same storms. These old men, in a time bereft of proper medical and dental care, had taken on a facial resemblance to other forms of life, to wolves, to apes, or to the bark of trees. They seemed, Martha thought, to merge increasingly with the landscape they inhabited.

It was difficult to recall the less raggie-taggle Jeff Pitt she had known when their party first established itself at Sparcot. Perhaps he had been less cocky then, under the fever of events. His teeth had been better, and he wore his army uniform. He had been a gunman then, if an ineffectual one, not a poacher. Since then, how much he had changed!

But perhaps they had all changed in that period. It was eleven years, and the world had been a very different place.

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