

THE LAW OF THE TRIBE

(Written for "The Listener"
by LEN DU CHATEAU)

THE night before, Michael had arrived home from his holidays. He was twelve. He had gone to sleep, his brain filled with all the things he would do in the morning. Twisting away from his mother's good-night kiss, he thought of that chaffinch's nest in the big pine at the bottom of the section; there were four eggs splotched like blood alleys before he went away. Now there'd be young ones; he might even rear one. There was his fort too; he'd fill new sacks for a proper machine-gun nest and he must oil the cricket bat he'd got for Christmas; and the apples in the small orchard would be ready despite what Mum said. He had gone off to sleep thinking how he might pinch the wheels off the baby's pram for a trolley.

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... He turned. He saw she too had stopped and was looking at him ...

Now it was all over. He had found the chaffinch's nest empty; the residue of tiny white flakes at the bottom told him the young ones had fledged and feathered and gone. The Fort had changed too; it was half overgrown with cocksfoot and fennel and vicious scotch thistles, and in the lucid light of day his scheme about the baby's pram seemed strongly impracticable. The apples had proved green and so bitter that even his adventurous palate had objected.

THE sun beat down on his bleached fair hair, as dully he watched a slim, red wasp pull a spider across the path. He jabbed at the wasp with his fresh-oiled cricket bat. It lurched aside in a scrambling, awkward rage, wings up-lifted, the yellow of its thorax showing clearly; the boy turned the bat and ground the wasp into the path. The spider lay big, fat, and helplessly anaesthetised. Idly the boy put his sandalled foot on it. He did it gently, increasing the pressure, listening for and savouring the small sound of its belly bursting. Then with a detached and deadly intensity he ground the rest of it into the yellow clay of the path.

"Life," he muttered, "is H." He liked that phrase; his father used it often. Of course his father said "Hell," but Michael always used letters for swear words when he was alone. This was a sort of arrangement between Michael and God. God reckoned that it was all right to swear if you just used the first letter. Sometimes when he really wanted to astound and impress his friends, he actually used whole swear words, but he was always careful to apologise to God about that before he went to sleep. God, Michael felt, might be ignored by day, but after the light was out at night you needed Him on your side. Otherwise you had to creep into Mum's bed before you could get rid of the things that leered at you out of the darkness.

And so life was H. To-morrow some of the boys in the street would be home. But that was to-morrow. The whole sun-filled vista of to-day stretched ahead in an utter desolation of loneliness. He mooched up towards the house, trailing his cricket bat.

It was ten o'clock in the morning. A few cicadas were tuning up with sizzling

frying-pan noises. A yellow-banded bumblebee boomed among the dainty-throated gladioli. Michael saw a lizard flick from a brown grass patch into a hide-out under the pumpkin hill. He heard the crisp, quick, urgent "chip pit-pit-pit, chip pit-pit-pit" as the young grey-headed goldfinches pestered their crimson-faced parents. Yet, none of these—the sights and sounds of hot mid-summer—could pull the boy out of his queer detachment. He had nothing to do ... no one to play with. He shuffled miserably up the path ... and then he saw her.

SHE might have been eleven, this snub-nosed little girl in her red and white print dress. He noticed with a quick disgust that she was clean and carried a doll. She was in his place; trespassing; yet he passed her, not looking. "Girls," he thought, "girls" and his misery focused and centred; he hated 'em all. Girls; particularly this girl. He tried to think of something withering to say. He had it: "Fat Face."

That's right, he'd say "Scram, Fat Face." He turned. He saw she too had stopped and was looking at him with that set, impassive look that only little girls can achieve. And then somehow he didn't say "Fat Face." For, as he looked, something happened to Michael. He felt as though God had reached down and touched him. His blood whipped and sparkled. He looked away and an urge for action swept him. He reached for a stone and hurled it magnificently, far down the gully; he hurled another after it; he didn't look at the girl. Then with a great casualness he turned two cart-wheels. He flashed a glance at her; then, putting his hand on the handrail by the path, he vaulted over and back. If the little girl felt any surprise at such strange behaviour she gave no sign of it. She looked somehow as if she must have understood or sensed what this was all about. Then Michael whistled. He put two fingers in his mouth to do it, and dogs for a quarter mile around sat up in prick-eared admiration. The little girl smiled at Michael. There was some queer power in that smile; he turned from it and ran to the big pine trees. He climbed swifter

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