

# THE INTRUDER

STEPHEN had a fright when he first saw the man. Just a sudden bolt of fright had jumped through him. Not that there was anything in the man's appearance or manner that was frightening. It was just that he was there and Stephen wasn't expecting to see anyone.

Nobody ever came there.

When you are ten and you have a little place of your own that you think nobody else knows about, it comes a shock to find an intruder there. Of course, you knew the shingle pit wasn't yours at all. Nobody ever used it now, except Mr Gribble and he only ran a few old cows on it. It was the ideal make-believe playground for a boy, an extensive and disused quarry bounded by a road on one side and a railway on the other. It was mostly overgrown with gorse and broom, but in the clearer parts were a few eucalyptus trees, slim, straight, and tall, while at the nether end stagnated a small lagoon whose placid surface was disturbed only by the plop of frogs when you approached. Stephen often lay awake on summer nights tuning into the croaking chorus from over the road while his mind concocted magnificent harmonies and peculiar counterpoint to their insistent rhythm. If you could hear silence, he thought, it would sound like this.

On a hot afternoon Stephen had sometimes stopped the frog chorus by tossing in a stone. After a minute of quiet one indignant bull-frog in the far corner would start again, soon to be answered by another. Thus encouraged a few more would give voice, until finally the whole lagoon was producing its song, the singers unseen.

Nobody ever came there.

The pit was like an oven on the hottest days of mid-summer and the boy had often tossed aside his cotton shirt and shorts to cool off in the murky water. He would dive groping along the bottom after the sleek frogs and occasionally manage to grasp one. After a minute he would let it go again. He never had any desire to keep them.

He liked to sit on the grass of the bank and watch the glistening droplets on his tanned body as they shrank and disappeared in the sunshine, and to wait for the frogs' choir to start again.

Nobody ever came there.

There was one tree he could climb, the others were too smooth. From its upper fork he could see the surrounding landscape with its straight hedgerows and distant shelterbelts. The paddocks, all vast, shimmered in the heat; the ploughed ones, rich, brown, and fresh last week, were now parched and grey, ready to blow into dust on the next nor'-wester day. On the horizon quivered the nearest hills, seemingly suspended between land and sky, colourless.

His secret place was a source of constant delight to Stephen, for secluded though the shingle pit was, this one spot was even more isolated from the world of reality. It was bordered by a high bank, higher than a house, the top of which was fringed with old man gorse bushes. Their roots, dusty and twisted, appeared from place to place through the shingly face below. On all other sides were thick growths of gorse and broom, but here was a clear place with a gently sloping grassy hummock at the foot of the cliff. You could only reach this spot, other than scaling down the cliff, by crawling along a path through a thicket



by Ralph Fairbrother

of bushes. This path played the part of secret tunnel, hidden cave, and underground passage in the boy's make believe.

The man was sitting on the grassy slope. With one leg stretched in front of him and the other with the knee bent up, he was cutting an apple with a black-handled knife, and slipping the slices off the shining blade straight into his mouth. At Stephen's approach he paused with the knife in front of his mouth, a piece of white apple impaled upon it.

"G'day, Snow," he said cordially, and his lips enveloped the apple.

Stephen eyed him with an open stare that missed not a single detail. He saw the dusty boots, the oil-spotted shapeless trousers help up by binder twine, the dirty brown coat with the side of one pocket torn open, the collarless shirt whose colour was indeterminate, the grimy sugar bag tied at the corners by another piece of twine which did for a shoulder strap. He saw the face, with several days' growth upon it, and noticed how the munching jaws were very like those of one of old Gribble's cows.

Rising indignation made Stephen's gaze of curiosity turn into one of dislike. To the boy's mind the man had no right there. It was his own little hide-out, and now all the romance of it was wiped away by the presence of this unromantic figure. It was bad enough that anyone should have discovered his secret place, but that a creature of this sort should take possession of it was disastrous. This, sanctuary of his boyish fantasies, as precious to him as his innermost heart, had been desecrated. Never again could he lie on his back gazing at the circling gulls aloft in the blue sky, a sky that was fringed by a perimeter of bushes; never again could he assemble his warriors for an onslaught on the cliff, or prospect for gold, or hunt tigers. He gazed around his domain as if with newly opened eyes. It all appeared hostile now, even the sky seemed to darken.

"Like a piece of apple?" The knife came towards him thrusting a slice of the fruit across.

Stephen jerked his head once and continued to look at the intruder.

"Oh, well . . ." began the man and stopped his own remark with the rejected slice. He jammed the blade of the knife into the turf and with both hands rummaged into his sack, head bent forward. The boy stepped back a pace but did not relax his stare as the man produced two tins of food and a chunk of bread.

"I don't suppose you'd stay to tea," he said with an attempt at humour. But Stephen was not amused.

"Td better be going," was all he said and turned at once and scampered out of the place through the bushy passage.

The sobs of bitter disappointment could not be held back as his hard little feet raced round the edge of the lagoon, and tears began to blind him as he ran through the tussocks, past the clumps of trees, and scrambled up the pit side to the gorse hedge that bordered the road. Along the road he slowed down to a jog, sobbing every few paces, and his toes puffed up little dust clouds as he went. Finally, reaching home, he took his sorrow down to the orchard until he heard his mother calling him for tea.

STEPHEN lay in the comforting darkness of his room listening to the reassuring sounds he knew so well. The radio was going softly in the front room, and he knew his parents were sitting, his mother sewing or writing a letter, his father reading the paper and smoking his pipe. He had seen them like this on occasions when he had come out, his unaccustomed eyes screwed up, to request a glass of water. He listened to the frogs in full voice as their song filled the stillness, and could hear in the distance the dogs on somebody's farm barking at night shapes. The moon, full and yellow, beamed at him through the open window, the curtains lifeless in the still air. A morepork squawked from a tree in the shingle pit.

It was as if nothing had changed. It was just another hot summer night like any other—but for Stephen the shape of the horrid interloper hovered about it and chased away sleep. He pushed off the stifling blanket and lay, big-eyed in the darkness, looking at the familiar shapes in the gloom of his room.

Then the night's incidental music changed its tone. Something was missing. Yes, the frogs. The lagoon was silent, and the night air felt empty. Something had disturbed them. Stephen knew what it was.

HE was prowling about the pit; HE was still there. Stephen could picture the clumsy, booted feet dislodging a stone into the water. No one could know the geography of the pit as Stephen knew it. He knew it even by night, for he had sneaked through it to the railway line at times to watch the late goods train clatter past. He must go now, to find out what HE was doing disturbing his friends the frogs.

Stephen slipped out the window with a silence that much practice had achieved. By the time he reached the gate the first bullfrog, full of bravado, had belched its staccato defiance. As he crossed the road a second had joined in, and when, a minute later, he scrambled silently through the gorse at the pit's entrance, the full-throated croaking of the whole assembly had been resumed.

Soundless, a pale shape in his pyjamas, the boy stalked to the edge of the pit. At once his night-schooled eyes picked up the tiny orange tip of a cigarette growing and waning, moving slowly round the other side of the pit. So HE was going back to the hide-out! Stephen could only guess where he had been—to the village perhaps, or to a farm, or looking for eels in the lagoon.

The white pyjamaed figure flitted soundlessly round the cliff-top until it reached the part overlooking the secret spot, just as the man emerged from the gorse passage. A fire was going in the centre of the space below, and as Stephen watched the figure squatted before it, almost facing him, and drew from his coat a newspaper wrapped parcel. Stephen saw the bottle being unwrapped,

heard the cork drawn, and watched as the bottle was upturned, the man tipping his head back, while the firelight tinged the figure with a hellish glow.

That was how Stephen last saw him, and the sight was seared into his impressionable mind, as he backed quietly away from the cliff, and swift-footed his way back to the road. The sight was still with him as he stole through the garden—observing the front room light still burning—and crept into his room. It was still with him as he huddled into bed, the blanket drawn up tight around his neck. For a long time he lay panting, and gradually the night sounds began to impinge on his consciousness again. It was just as it had been: the frogs, the distant farm dogs, the infrequent morepork, the front room radio—and the thumping of his heart.

THE next day had been, without a doubt, the hottest of the summer, unrelieved as it was by any suggestion of wind. The little village had drowsed, torpid, in the heat of the early afternoon. The only business which did anything like brisk trade was the local hostelry. Here the patrons excused their indulgence at such an early hour by telling one another how hot it was. Outside the dogs sought shade under the gigs and traps, or beneath a car, and found even the effort of snapping at flies too much. The horses whisked their tails with little effect, but rather as a matter of form, and kept their heads under the shade of the verandah.

In the little schoolroom it was if the children's receptor nerves had seized up with the heat. Mr Warburton's words of wisdom, dry of their own accord, hovered helplessly in the heavy atmosphere like bees, only to drift out the open window totally unheeded by the 30 scholars who, at the moment, resembled rows of vegetables—wilting rapidly.

Had Mr Warburton been more the humanitarian and less the pedagogue he would have realised that a swimming lesson would have been more effective than dates. But the time-table said history from two till three, so history it was. And had he taken a swimming lesson, of course, they would have noticed the fire sooner.

After it was all over, and the men who had come from surrounding farms had returned to their tractors or to the hotel, there was considerable conjecture about how it all started. Some maintained that a spark from a train had done it, others that a passing motorist had carelessly thrown out a cigarette end. All were agreed, however, that it wasn't a bad thing at all to have the old shingle pit cleaned out. Gorse was a weed, they said.

Stephen knew what had started the fire, but was unaware of the controversy. He, and some friends, were exploring the pit now, seeing it totally changed, a large blackened crater, still smoking as if from some recent eruption.

The frog lagoon end of the pit had come off fairly lightly, but the other end, where his hide-out had been, was just blackened soil and smouldering stumps of gorse. Without a word, Stephen wandered about his wrecked domain. He kicked aside two burnt out tins, and viciously stoned an empty green bottle.

"It's a shame your pit got burnt out, dear," said his mother at tea time. "You'll have to play in the back paddock now."

"Perhaps it's just as well," said Stephen as he sipped his cocoa.

"What do you mean?" asked his father.

But of course the boy couldn't explain.

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