

# THE CHRYSALIDS

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JOHN WYNDHAM



PENGUIN BOOKS  
IN ASSOCIATION WITH  
MICHAEL JOSEPH

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PENGUIN BOOKS

THE CHRYSALIDS

John Wyndham was born in 1903. Until 1911 he lived in Edgbaston, Birmingham, and then in many parts of England. After a wide experience of the English preparatory school he was at Bedales from 1918 till 1921. Careers which he tried included farming, law, commercial art, and advertising, and he first started writing short stories intended for sale in 1925. From 1930 till 1939 he wrote stories of various kinds under different names, almost exclusively for American publications. He also wrote detective novels. During the war he was in the Civil Service and afterwards in the Army. In 1946 he went back to writing stories for publication in the U.S.A. and decided to try a modified form of what is unhappily known as 'science fiction'. He wrote *The Day of the Triffids* and *The Kraken Wakes* (both of which have been translated into several languages), *The Chrysalids*, *The Midwich Cuckoos* (filmed as *The Village of the Damned*), *The Seeds of Time*, *The Outward Urge* (with Lucas Parkes), *Trouble with Lichen*, *Consider Her Ways and Others*, *Chocky* and *Web*, all of which have been published as Penguins. John Wyndham died in March 1969.

**PENGUIN BOOKS**

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Books Ltd, 27 Wrights Lane, London W8 5TZ, England

Penguin Putnam Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA

Penguin Books Australia Ltd, Ringwood, Victoria, Australia

Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 10 Alcorn Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4V 3B2

Penguin Books (NZ) Ltd, Private Bag 102902, NSMC, Auckland, New Zealand

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England

First published by Michael Joseph 1955

Published in Penguin Books 1958

65 67 69 70 68 66

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Printed in England by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Set in Monophoto Imprint

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WHEN I was quite small I would sometimes dream of a city – which was strange because it began before I even knew what a city was. But this city, clustered on the curve of a big blue bay, would come into my mind. I could see the streets, and the buildings that lined them, the waterfront, even boats in the harbour; yet, waking, I had never seen the sea, or a boat. . . .

And the buildings were quite unlike any I knew. The traffic in the streets was strange, carts running with no horses to pull them; and sometimes there were things in the sky, shiny fish-shaped things that certainly were not birds.

Most often I would see this wonderful place by daylight, but occasionally it was by night when the lights lay like strings of glow-worms along the shore, and a few of them seemed to be sparks drifting on the water, or in the air.

It was a beautiful, fascinating place, and once, when I was still young enough to know no better, I asked my eldest sister, Mary, where this lovely city could be.

She shook her head, and told me that there was no such place – not now. But, perhaps, she suggested, I could somehow be dreaming about times long ago. Dreams were funny things, and there was no accounting for them; so it might be that what I was seeing was a bit of the world as it had been once upon a time – the wonderful world that the Old People had lived in; as it had been before God sent Tribulation.

But after that she went on to warn me very seriously not to mention it to anyone else; other people, as far as she knew, did not have such pictures in their heads, either sleeping or waking, so it would be unwise to mention them.

That was good advice, and luckily I had the sense to take it. People in our district had a very sharp eye for the odd, or the unusual, so that even my left-handedness caused slight disapproval. So, at that time, and for some years afterwards, I did not mention it to anyone – indeed, I almost forgot about it, for as I grew older the dream came less frequently, and then very rarely.

But the advice stuck. Without it I might have mentioned the curious understanding I had with my cousin Rosalind, and that would certainly have led us both into very grave trouble – if anyone had happened to believe me. Neither I nor she, I think, paid much attention to it at that time: we simply had the habit of caution. I certainly did not feel unusual. I was a normal little boy, growing up in a normal way, taking the ways of the world about me for granted. And I kept on like that until the day I met Sophie. Even then, the difference was not immediate. It is hind-sight that enables me to fix that as *the* day when my first small doubts started to germinate.

That day I had gone off by myself, as I often did. I was, I suppose, nearly ten years old. My next sister, Sarah, was five years older, and the gap meant that I played a great deal alone. I had made my way down the cart-track to the south, along the borders of several fields until I came to the high bank, and then along the top of the bank for quite a way.

The bank was no puzzle to me then: it was far too big for me to think of as a thing that men could have built, nor had it ever occurred to me to connect it with the wondrous doings of the Old People whom I sometimes heard about. It was simply the bank, coming round in a wide curve, and then running straight as an arrow towards the distant hills; just a part of the world, and no more to be wondered at than the river, the sky, or the hills themselves.

I had often gone along the top of it, but seldom explored on the farther side. For some reason I regarded the country there as foreign – not so much hostile, as outside my territory. But there was a place I had discovered where the rain, in running down the far side of the bank, had worn a sandy gully. If one sat in the start of that and gave a good push off, one could go swishing down at a fine speed, and finally fly a few feet through the air to land in a pile of soft sand at the bottom.

I must have been there half a dozen times before, and there had never been anyone about, but on this occasion, when I was picking myself up after my third descent and preparing for a fourth, a voice said: 'Hullo!'

I looked round. At first I could not tell where it came from;

then a shaking of the top twigs in a bunch of bushes caught my eye. The branches parted, and a face looked out at me. It was a small face, sunburned, and clustered about by dark curls. The expression was somewhat serious, but the eyes sparkled. We regarded one another for a moment, then:

'Hallo,' I responded.

She hesitated, then pushed the bushes farther apart. I saw a girl a little shorter than I was, and perhaps a little younger. She wore reddish-brown dungarees with a yellow shirt. The cross stitched to the front of the dungarees was of a darker brown material. Her hair was tied on either side of her head with yellow ribbons. She stood still for a few seconds as though uncertain about leaving the security of the bushes, then curiosity got the better of her caution, and she stepped out.

I stared at her because she was completely a stranger. From time to time there were gatherings or parties which brought together all the children for miles around, so that it was astonishing to encounter one that I had never seen before.

'What's your name?' I asked her.

'Sophie,' she told me. 'What's yours?'

'David,' I said. 'Where's your home?'

'Over there,' she said, waving her hand vaguely towards the foreign country beyond the bank.

Her eyes left mine and went to the sandy runnel down which I had been sliding.

'Is that fun?' she inquired, with a wistful look.

I hesitated a moment before inviting her, then:

'Yes,' I told her. 'Come and try.'

She hung back, turning her attention to me again. She studied me with a serious expression for a second or two, then made up her mind quite suddenly. She scrambled to the top of the bank ahead of me.

She sped down the runnel with curls and ribbons flying. When I landed she had lost her serious look, and her eyes were dancing with excitement.

'Again,' she said, and panted back up the bank.

It was on her third descent that the misadventure occurred. She sat down and shoved off as before. I watched her swish

down and come to a stop in a flurry of sand. Somehow she had contrived to land a couple of feet to the left of the usual place. I made ready to follow, and waited for her to get clear. She did not.

'Go on,' I told her impatiently.

She tried to move, and then called up,

'I can't. It hurts.'

I risked pushing off, anyway, and landed close beside her.

'What's the matter?' I asked.

Her face was screwed up. Tears stood in her eyes.

'My foot's stuck,' she said.

Her left foot was buried. I scabbled the soft sand clear with my hands. Her shoe was jammed in a narrow space between two up-pointed stones. I tried to move it, but it would not budge.

'Can't you sort of twist it out?' I suggested.

She tried, lips valiantly compressed.

'It won't come.'

'I'll help pull,' I offered.

'No, no! It hurts,' she protested.

I did not know what to do next. Very clearly her predicament was painful. I considered the problem.

'We'd better cut the laces so you can pull your foot out of the shoe. I can't reach the knot,' I decided.

'No!' she said, alarmed. 'No, I mustn't.'

She was so emphatic that I was baffled. If she were to pull the foot out of the shoe, we might knock the shoe itself free with a stone, but if she would not, I didn't see what was to be done. She lay back on the sand, the knee of the trapped leg sticking up in the air.

'Oh, it is hurting so,' she said. She could not hold back the tears any longer. They ran down her face. But even then she didn't howl: she made small puppyish noises.

'You'll *have* to take it off,' I told her.

'No!' she protested again. 'No, I mustn't. Not ever. I mustn't.'

I sat down beside her, at a loss. Both her hands held on to one of mine, gripping it tightly while she cried. Clearly the

pain of her foot was increasing. For almost the first time in my life I found myself in charge of a situation which needed a decision. I made it.

'It's no good. You've *got* to get it off,' I told her. 'If you don't, you'll probably stay here and die, I expect.'

She did not give in at once, but at last she consented. She watched apprehensively while I cut the lace. Then she said:

'Go away! You mustn't look.'

I hesitated, but childhood is a time thickly beset with incomprehensible, though important, conventions, so I withdrew a few yards and turned my back. I heard her breathing hard. Then she was crying again. I turned round.

'I can't,' she said, looking at me fearfully through her tears, so I knelt down to see what I could do about it.

'You mustn't ever tell,' she said. 'Never, *never!* Promise?' I promised.

She was very brave. Nothing more than the puppy noises.

When I did succeed in getting the foot free, it looked queer: I mean, it was all twisted and puffy - I didn't even notice then that it had more than the usual number of toes. . . .

I managed to hammer the shoe out of the cleft, and handed it to her. But she found she could not put it on her swollen foot. Nor could she put the foot to the ground. I thought I might carry her on my back, but she was heavier than I expected, and it was clear that we should not get far like that.

'I'll have to go and fetch somebody to help,' I told her.

'No. I'll crawl,' she said.

I walked beside her, carrying the shoe, and feeling useless. She kept going gamely for a surprisingly long way, but she had to give it up. Her trousers were worn through at the knees, and the knees themselves were sore and bleeding. I had never known anyone, boy or girl, who would have kept on till that pitch; it awed me slightly. I helped her to stand up on her sound foot, and steadied her while she pointed out where her home was, and the trickle of smoke that marked it. When I looked back she was on all fours again, disappearing into the bushes.

I found the house without much difficulty, and knocked, a

little nervously. A tall woman answered. She had a fine, handsome face with large bright eyes. Her dress was russet and a little shorter than those most of the women at home wore, but it carried the conventional cross, from neck to hem and breast to breast, in a green that matched the scarf on her head.

'Are you Sophie's mother?' I asked.

She looked at me sharply and frowned. She said, with anxious abruptness:

'What is it?'

I told her.

'Oh!' she exclaimed. 'Her foot!'

She looked hard at me again for a moment, then she leant the broom she was holding against the wall, and asked briskly:

'Where is she?'

I led her by the way I had come. At the sound of her voice Sophie crawled out of the bushes.

Her mother looked at the swollen, misshapen foot and the bleeding knees.

'Oh, my poor darling!' she said, holding her and kissing her. Then she added: 'He's seen it?'

'Yes,' Sophie told her. 'I'm sorry, Mummy. I tried hard, but I couldn't do it myself, and it did hurt so.'

Her mother nodded slowly. She sighed.

'Oh, well, it can't be helped now. Up you get.'

Sophie climbed on to her mother's back, and we all went back to the house together.

The commandments and precepts one learns as a child can be remembered by rote, but they mean little until there is example - and, even then, the example needs to be recognized.

Thus, I was able to sit patiently and watch the hurt foot being washed, cold-poulticed, and bound up, and perceive no connexion between it and the affirmation which I had heard almost every Sunday of my life.

'And God created man in His own image. And God decreed that man should have one body, one head, two arms and two legs: that each arm should be jointed in two places and end in

one hand: that each hand should have four fingers and one thumb: that each finger should bear a flat finger-nail . . .'

And so on until:

'Then God created woman, also, and in the same image, but with these differences, according to her nature: her voice should be of higher pitch than man's: she should grow no beard: she should have two breasts . . .'

And so on again.

I knew it all, word for word - and yet the sight of Sophie's six toes stirred nothing in my memory. I saw the foot resting in her mother's lap. Watched her mother pause to look down at it for a still moment, lift it, bend to kiss it gently, and then look up with tears in her eyes. I felt sorry for her distress, and for Sophie, and for the hurt foot - but nothing more.

While the bandaging was finished I looked round the room curiously. The house was a great deal smaller than my home, a cottage, in fact, but I liked it better. It felt friendly. And although Sophie's mother was anxious and worried she did not give me the feeling that I was the one regrettable and unreliable factor in an otherwise orderly life, the way most people did at home. And the room itself seemed to me the better, too, for not having groups of words hanging on the wall for people to point to in disapproval. Instead, this room had several drawings of horses, which I thought very fine.

Presently, Sophie, tidied up now, and with the tear-marks washed away, hopped to a chair at the table. Quite restored, but for the foot, she inquired with grave hospitality whether I liked eggs.

Afterwards, Mrs Wender told me to wait where I was while she carried her upstairs. She returned in a few minutes, and sat down beside me. She took my hand in hers and looked at me seriously for some moments. I could feel her anxiety strongly; though quite why she should be so worried was not, at first, clear to me. I was surprised by her, for there had been no sign before that she could think in that way. I thought back to her, trying to reassure her and show her that she need not be anxious about me, but the thought didn't reach her. She went on looking at me with her eyes shining, much as Sophie's

had when she was trying not to cry. Her own thoughts were all worry and shapelessness as she kept looking at me. I tried again, but still couldn't reach them. Then she nodded slowly, and said in words:

'You're a good boy, David. You were very kind to Sophie. I want to thank you for that.'

I felt awkward, and looked at my shoes. I couldn't remember anyone saying before that I was a good boy. I knew no form of response designed to meet such an event.

'You like Sophie, don't you?' she went on, still looking at me.

'Yes,' I told her. And I added: 'I think she's awfully brave, too. It must have hurt a lot.'

'Will you keep a secret – an important secret – for her sake?' she asked.

'Yes – of course,' I agreed, but a little uncertain in my tone for not realizing what the secret was.

'You – you saw her foot?' she said, looking steadily into my face. 'Her – toes?'

I nodded. 'Yes,' I said again.

'Well, that is the secret, David. Nobody else must know about that. You are the only person who does, except her father and me. Nobody else must know. Nobody at all – not ever.'

'No,' I agreed, and nodded seriously again.

There was a pause – at least, her voice paused, but her thoughts went on, as if 'nobody' and 'not ever' were making desolate, unhappy echoes there. Then that changed, and she became tense and fierce and afraid inside. It was no good thinking back to her, so I tried clumsily to emphasize in words that I had meant what I said.

'Never – not anybody at all,' I assured her earnestly.

'It's very, very important,' she insisted. 'How can I explain to you?' But she didn't really need to explain. Her urgent, tight-strung feeling of the importance was very plain. Her words were far less potent. She said:

'If anyone were to find out, they'd – they'd be terribly unkind to her. We've got to see that that never happens.'

It was as if the anxious feeling had turned into something hard, like an iron rod.

'Because she has six toes?' I asked.

'Yes. That's what nobody but us must ever know. It must be a secret between us,' she repeated, driving it home. 'You'll promise, David?'

'I'll promise. I can swear, if you like,' I offered.

'The promise is enough,' she told me.

It was so heavy a promise that I was quite resolved to keep it completely – even from my cousin, Rosalind. Though, underneath, I was puzzled by its evident importance. It seemed a very small toe to cause such a degree of anxiety. But there was often a great deal of grown-up fuss that seemed disproportionate to causes. So I held on to the main point – the need for secrecy.

Sophie's mother kept on looking at me with a sad but unseeing expression until I became uncomfortable. She noticed when I fidgeted, and smiled. It was a kind smile.

'All right, then,' she said. 'We'll keep it secret, and never talk about it again?'

'Yes,' I agreed.

On the way down the path from the door, I turned round.

'May I come and see Sophie again soon?' I asked.

She hesitated, giving the question some thought, then she said:

'Very well – but only if you are sure you can come without anyone knowing,' she agreed.

Not until I had reached the bank and was making my homeward way along the top of it did the monotonous Sunday precepts join up with reality. Then they did it with a click that was almost audible. The Definition of Man recited itself in my head: '... and each leg shall be jointed twice and have one foot, and each foot five toes, and each toe shall end with a flat nail...' And so on, until finally: 'And any creature that shall seem to be human, but is not formed thus is not human. It is neither man nor woman. It is a blasphemy against the true Image of God, and hateful in the sight of God.'

I was abruptly perturbed - and considerably puzzled, too. A blasphemy was, as had been impressed upon me often enough, a frightful thing. Yet there was nothing frightful about Sophie. She was simply an ordinary little girl - if a great deal more sensible and braver than most. Yet, according to the Definition . . .

Clearly there must be a mistake somewhere. Surely having one very small toe extra - well, two very small toes, because I supposed there would be one to match on the other foot - surely that couldn't be enough to make her 'hateful in the sight of God . . .'?

The ways of the world were very puzzling. . . .

I REACHED home by my usual method. At a point where the woods had lapped up the side of the bank and grown across it I scrambled down on to a narrow, little-used track. From there on I was watchful, and kept my hand on my knife. I was supposed to keep out of the woods, for it did occasionally - though very rarely - happen that large creatures penetrated as far into civilized parts as Waknuk, and there was just a chance that one might encounter some kind of wild dog or cat. However, and as usual, the only creatures I heard were small ones, hurriedly making off.

After a mile or so I reached cultivated land, with the house in sight across three or four fields. I worked along the fringe of the woods, observing carefully from cover, then crossed all but the last field in the shadows of the hedges, and paused to prospect again. There was no one in sight but old Jacob slowly shovelling muck in the yard. When his back was safely turned I cut swiftly across the bit of open ground, climbed in through a window, and made my way cautiously to my own room.

Our house is not easy to describe. Since my grandfather, Elias Storm, built the first part of it, over fifty years earlier, it had grown new rooms and extensions at various times. By now it rambled off on one side into stock-sheds, stores, stables, and barns, and on the other into wash-houses, dairies, cheese-rooms, farm-hands' rooms, and so on until it three-quarters enclosed a large, beaten-earth yard which lay to leeward of the main house and had a midden for its central feature.

Like all the houses of the district, it was constructed on a frame of solid, roughly-dressed timbers, but, since it was the oldest house there, most of the spaces in the outer walls had been filled in with bricks and stones from the ruins of some of the Old People's buildings, and plastered wattle was used only for the internal walls.

My grandfather, in the aspect he wore when presented to me by my father, appeared to have been a man of somewhat



tediously unrelieved virtue. It was only later that I pieced together a portrait that was more credible, if less creditable.

Elias Storm came from the East, somewhere near the sea. Why he came is not quite clear. He himself maintained that it was the ungodly ways of the East which drove him to search for a less sophisticated, stancher-minded region; though I have heard it suggested that there came a point when his native parts refused to tolerate him any longer. Whatever the cause, it persuaded him to Waknuk - then undeveloped, almost frontier country - with all his worldly goods in a train of six wagons, at the age of forty-five. He was a husky man, a dominating man, and a man fierce for rectitude. He had eyes that could flash with evangelical fire beneath bushy brows. Respect for God was frequently on his lips, and fear of the devil constantly in his heart, and it seems to have been hard to say which inspired him the more.

Soon after he had started the house he went off on a journey and brought back a bride. She was shy, pretty in the pink and golden way, and twenty-five years younger than himself. She moved, I have been told, like a lovely colt when she thought herself unwatched; as timorously as a rabbit when she felt her husband's eye upon her.

All her answers, poor thing, were dusty. She did not find that a marriage service generated love; she did not enable her husband to recapture his youth through hers; nor could she compensate for that by running his home in the manner of an experienced housekeeper.

Elias was not a man to let shortcomings pass unremarked. In a few seasons he straitened the coltishness with admonitions, faded the pink and gold with preaching, and produced a sad, grey wraith of wifehood who died, unprotesting, a year after her second son was born.

Grandfather Elias had never a moment's doubt of the proper pattern for his heir. My father's faith was bred into his bones, his principles were his sinews, and both responded to a mind richly stored with examples from the Bible, and from Nicholson's *Repentances*. In faith father and son were at one; the difference between them was only in approach; the evangelical

flash did not appear in my father's eye; his virtue was more legalistic.

Joseph Storm, my father, did not marry until Elias was dead, and when he did he was not a man to repeat his father's mistake. My mother's views harmonized with his own. She had a strong sense of duty, and never doubted where it lay.

Our district, and, consequently, our house as the first there, was called Waknuk because of a tradition that there had been a place of that name there, or thereabouts, long, long ago, in the time of the Old People. The tradition was, as usual, vague, but certainly there had been some buildings of some kind, for the remnants and foundations had remained until they were taken for new buildings. There was also the long bank, running away until it reached the hills and the huge scar that must have been made by the Old People when, in their superhuman fashion, they had cut away half a mountain in order to find something or other that interested them. The place may have been called Waknuk then; anyway, Waknuk it had become; an orderly, law-abiding, God-respecting community of some hundred scattered holdings, large and small.

My father was a man of local consequence. When, at the age of sixteen, he had made his first public appearance by giving a Sunday address in the church his father had built, there had still been fewer than sixty families in the district. But as more land was cleared for farming and more people came to settle, he was not submerged by them. He was still the largest landowner, he still continued to preach frequently on Sundays and to explain with practical clarity the laws and views held in heaven upon a variety of matters and practices, and, upon the appointed days, he administered the laws temporal, as a magistrate. For the rest of the time he saw to it that he, and all within his control, continued to set a high example to the district.

Within the house, life centred, as was the local custom, upon the large living-room which was also the kitchen. As the house was the largest and best in Waknuk, so was the room. The great fireplace there was an object of pride - not vain pride, of course; more a matter of being conscious of having given

worthy treatment to the excellent materials that the Lord had provided: a kind of testament, really. The hearth was solid stone blocks. The whole chimney was built of bricks and had never been known to catch fire. The area about its point of emergence was covered with the only tiles in the district, so that the thatch which covered the rest of the roof had never caught fire, either.

My mother saw to it that the big room was kept very clean and tidy. The floor was composed of pieces of brick and stone and artificial stone cleverly fitted together. The furniture was whitely-scrubbed tables and stools, with a few chairs. The walls were whitewashed. Several burnished pans, too big to go in the cupboards, hung against them. The nearest approach to decoration was a number of wooden panels with sayings, mostly from *Repentances*, artistically burnt into them. The one on the left of the fireplace read: ONLY THE IMAGE OF GOD IS MAN. The one on the right: KEEP PURE THE STOCK OF THE LORD. On the opposite wall two more said: BLESSED IS THE NORM, and IN PURITY OUR SALVATION. The largest was the one on the back wall, hung to face the door which led to the yard. It reminded everyone who came in: WATCH THOU FOR THE MUTANT!

Frequent references to these texts had made me familiar with the words long before I was able to read, in fact I am not sure that they did not give me my first reading lessons. I knew them by heart, just as I knew others elsewhere in the house, which said things like: THE NORM IS THE WILL OF GOD, and, REPRODUCTION IS THE ONLY HOLY PRODUCTION and, THE DEVIL IS THE FATHER OF DEVIATION, and a number of others about Offences and Blasphemies.

Many of them were still obscure to me; others I had learnt something about. Offences, for instance. That was because the occurrence of an Offence was sometimes quite an impressive occasion. Usually the first sign that one had happened was that my father came into the house in a bad temper. Then, in the evening, he would call us all together, including everyone who worked on the farm. We would all kneel while he proclaimed our repentance and led prayers for forgiveness. The

next morning we would all be up before daylight and gather in the yard. As the sun rose we would sing a hymn while my father ceremonially slaughtered the two-headed calf, four-legged chicken, or whatever other kind of Offence it happened to be. Sometimes it would be a much queerer thing than those. . . .

Nor were Offences limited to the livestock. Sometimes there would be some stalks of corn, or some vegetables, that my father produced and cast on the kitchen table in anger and shame. If it were merely a matter of a few rows of vegetables, they just came out and were destroyed. But if a whole field had gone wrong we would wait for good weather, and then set fire to it, singing hymns while it burnt. I used to find that a very fine sight.

It was because my father was a careful and pious man with a keen eye for an Offence that we used to have more slaughterings and burnings than anyone else: but any suggestion that we were more afflicted with Offences than other people hurt and angered him. He had no wish at all to throw good money away, he pointed out. If our neighbours were as conscientious as ourselves, he had no doubt that their liquidations would far outnumber ours: unfortunately there were certain persons with elastic principles.

So I learnt quite early to know what Offences were. They were things which did not look *right* – that is to say, did not look like their parents, or parent-plants. Usually there was only some small thing wrong, but however much or little was wrong it was an Offence, and if it happened among people it was a Blasphemy – at least, that was the technical term, though commonly both kinds were called Deviations.

Nevertheless, the question of Offences was not always as simple as one might think, and when there was disagreement the district's inspector could be sent for. My father, however, seldom called in the inspector, he preferred to be on the safe side and liquidate anything doubtful. There were people who disapproved of his meticulousness, saying that the local Deviation-rate, which had shown a steady overall improvement and now stood at half what it had been in my grandfather's time,

would have been better still, but for my father. All the same, the Waknuk district had a great name for Purity.

Ours was no longer a frontier region. Hard work and sacrifice had produced a stability of stock and crops which could be envied even by some communities to the east of us. You could now go some thirty miles to the south or south-west before you came to Wild Country – that is to say parts where the chance of breeding true was less than fifty per cent. After that, everything grew more erratic across a belt which was ten miles wide in some places and up to twenty in others, until you came to the mysterious Fringes where nothing was dependable, and where, to quote my father, 'the Devil struts his wide estates, and the laws of God are mocked.' Fringes country, too, was said to be variable in depth, and beyond it lay the Badlands about which nobody knew anything. Usually anybody who went into the Badlands died there, and the one or two men who had come back from them did not last long.

It was not the Badlands, but the Fringes that gave us trouble from time to time. The people of the Fringes – at least, one calls them people, because although they were really Deviations they often looked quite like ordinary human people, if nothing had gone too much wrong with them – these people, then, had very little where they lived in their border country, so they came out into civilized parts to steal grain and livestock and clothes and tools and weapons, too, if they could; and sometimes they carried off children.

Occasional small raids used to happen two or three times a year, and nobody took much notice of them as a rule – except the people who got raided, of course. Usually they had time to get away and lost only their stock. Then everybody would contribute a little in kind, or in money, to help them set up again. But as time went on and the frontier was pushed back there were more Fringes people trying to live on less country. Some years they got very hungry, and after a time it was no longer just a matter of a dozen or so making a quick raid and then running back into Fringes country; they came instead in large, organized bands and did a lot of damage.

In my father's childhood mothers used to quieten and awe

troublesome infants by threatening: 'Be good now, or I'll fetch Old Maggie from the Fringes to you. She's got four eyes to watch you with, and four ears to hear you with, and four arms to smack you with. So you be careful.' Or Hairy Jack was another ominous figure who might be called in '... and he'll take you off to his cave in the Fringes where all his family lives. They're all hairy, too, with long tails; and they eat a little boy each for breakfast every morning, and a little girl each for supper every evening.' Nowadays, however, it was not only small children who lived in nervous awareness of the Fringes people not so far away. Their existence had become a dangerous nuisance and their depredations the cause of many representations to the Government in Rigo.

For all the good the petitions did, they might never have been sent. Indeed, with no one able to tell, over a stretch of five or six hundred miles, where the next attack would come, it is difficult to see what practical help could have been given. What the Government did do, from its comfortable situation far, far to the east, was to express sympathy in encouraging phrases, and suggest the formation of a local militia: a suggestion which, as all able-bodied males had as a matter of course been members of a kind of unofficial militia since frontier days, was felt to amount to disregard of the situation.

As far as the Waknuk district was concerned the threat from the Fringes was more of a nuisance than a menace. The deepest raid had come no nearer than ten miles, but every now and then there were emergencies, and seemingly more every year, which called the men away, and brought all the farm work to a stop. The interruptions were expensive and wasteful; moreover, they always brought anxiety if the trouble was near our sector: nobody could be sure that they might not come farther one time. . . .

Mostly, however, we led a comfortable, settled, industrious existence. Our household was extensive. There were my father and mother, my two sisters, and my Uncle Axel to make the family, but also there were the kitchen girls and dairymaids, some of whom were married to the farm men, and their children, and, of course, the men themselves, so when we were all

gathered for the meal at the end of the day's work there were over twenty of us; and when we assembled for prayers there were still more because the men from the adjoining cottages came in with their wives and children.

Uncle Axel was not a real relative. He had married one of my mother's sisters, Elizabeth. He was a sailor then, and she had gone East with him and died in Rigo while he was on the voyage that had left him a cripple. He was a useful all-round man, though slow in getting about because of his leg, so my father let him live with us: he was also my best friend.

My mother came of a family of five girls and two boys. Four of the girls were full sisters; the youngest girl and the two boys were half-sister and half-brothers to the rest. Hannah, the eldest, had been sent away by her husband, and nobody had heard of her since. Emily, my mother, was next in age. Then came Harriet who was married to a man with a big farm at Kentak, almost fifteen miles away. Then Elizabeth, who had married Uncle Axel. Where my half-aunt Lilian and my half-uncle Thomas were I did not know, but my half-uncle, Angus Morton, owned the farm next to us, and a mile or more of our boundaries ran together, which annoyed my father who could scarcely agree with half-uncle Angus about anything. His daughter, Rosalind, was, of course, my cousin.

Although Waknuk itself was the biggest farm in the district, most of them were organized along the same lines, and all of them growing larger, for with the improving stability-rate there was the incentive to extend; every year felling of trees and clearing went on to make new fields. The woods and spurs of forest were being nibbled away until the countryside was beginning to look like the old, long-cultivated land in the east.

It was said that nowadays even people in Rigo knew where Waknuk was without looking it up on the map.

I lived, in fact, on the most prosperous farm in a prospering district. At the age of ten, however, I had little appreciation of that. My impression was of an uncomfortably industrious place where there always seemed to be more jobs than people, unless one was careful, so on this particular evening I contrived to lie

low until routine sounds told me that it was near enough to the mealtime for me to show myself safely.

I hung about, watching the horses being unharnessed and turned out. Presently the bell on the gable-end tolled a couple of times. Doors opened, and people came into the yard, making for the kitchen. I went along with them. The warning: WATCH THOU FOR THE MUTANT! faced me as I went in, but it was much too familiar to stir a thought. What interested me exclusively at the moment was the smell of food.

I USUALLY went over to see Sophie once or twice a week after that. What schooling we had – which was a matter of half a dozen children being taught to read and write and do some sums by one or another of several old women – took place in the mornings. It was not difficult at the midday meal to slip away from the table early and disappear until everyone would think someone else had found a job for me.

When her ankle was quite recovered she was able to show me the favourite corners of her territory.

One day I took her over our side of the big bank to see the steam-engine. There wasn't another steam-engine within a hundred miles, and we were very proud of it. Corky, who looked after it, was not about, but the doors at the end of its shed were open, letting out the sound of a rhythmic groaning, creaking, and puffing. We ventured on to the threshold and peered into the gloom inside. It was fascinating to watch the big timbers moving up and down with wheezing noises while up in the shadows of the roof a huge cross-beam rocked slowly backwards and forwards, with a pause at the end of each tilt as though it were summoning up energy for the next effort. Fascinating – but, after a time, monotonous.

Ten minutes of it were enough, and we withdrew to climb to the top of the wood-pile beside the shed. We sat there with the whole heap quivering beneath us as the engine chugged ponderously on.

'My Uncle Axel says the Old People must have had much better engines than this,' I told her.

'My father says that if one-quarter of the things they say about the Old People are true, they must have been magicians: not real people, at all,' Sophie countered.

'But they *were* wonderful,' I insisted.

'Too wonderful to be true, he says,' she told me.

'Doesn't he think they were able to fly, like people say?' I asked.

'No. That's silly. If they could've, we'd be able to.'

'But there are lots of things they could do that we are learning to do again,' I protested.

'Not flying.' She shook her head. 'Things can either fly, or they can't, and we can't,' she said.

I thought of telling her about my dream of the city and the things flying over it, but after all, a dream isn't much evidence of anything, so I let it pass. Presently we climbed down, leaving the engine to its panting and creaking, and made our way over to her home.

John Wender, her father, was back from one of his trips. A sound of hammering came from the outside shed where he was stretching skins on frames, and the whole place smelt of his operations. Sophie rushed to him and flung her arms round his neck. He straightened up, holding her against him with one arm.

'Hullo, Chicky,' he said.

He greeted me more gravely. We had an unspoken understanding that we were on a man to man basis. It had always been like that. When he first saw me he had looked at me in a way that had scared me and made me afraid to speak in his presence. Gradually, however, that had changed. We became friends. He showed me and told me a lot of interesting things – all the same I would look up sometimes to find him watching me uneasily.

And no wonder. Only some years later could I appreciate how badly troubled he must have been when he came home to find Sophie had sprained her ankle, and that it had been David Storm, the son of Joseph Storm, of all people, who had seen her foot. He must, I think, have been greatly tempted by the thought that a dead boy could break no promise. . . . Perhaps Mrs Wender saved me. . . .

But I think he could have been reassured had he known of an incident at my home about a month after I met Sophie.

I had run a splinter into my hand and when I pulled it out it bled a lot. I went to the kitchen with it only to find everybody too busy getting supper to be bothered with me, so I rummaged a strip out of the rag-drawer for myself. I tried clumsily for a

minute or two to tie it, then my mother noticed. She made tchk-tchk noises of disapproval and insisted on it being washed. Then she wound the strip on neatly, grumbling that of course I had to go and do it just when she was busy. I said I was sorry, and added:

'I could have managed it all right by myself if I'd had another hand.'

My voice must have carried, for silence fell on the whole room like a clap.

My mother froze. I looked round the room at the sudden quiet. Mary, standing with a pie in her hands, two of the farm men waiting for their meal, my father about to take his seat at the head of the table, and the others; they were all staring at me. I caught my father's expression just as it was turning from amazement to anger. Alarmed, but uncomprehending, I watched his mouth tighten, his jaw come forward, his brows press together over his still incredulous eyes. He demanded:

'What was that you said, boy?'

I knew the tone. I tried to think in a desperate hurry how I had offended this time. I stumbled and stuttered.

'I - I s-aid I couldn't manage to tie this for myself,' I told him.

His eyes had become less incredulous, more accusing.

'And you wished you had a third hand!'

'No, father. I only said *if* I had another hand . . .'

' . . . you would be able to tie it. If that was not a wish, what was it?'

'I only meant *if*,' I protested. I was alarmed, and too confused to explain that I had only happened to use one way of expressing a difficulty which might have been put in several ways. I was aware that the rest had stopped gaping at me, and were now looking apprehensively at my father. His expression was grim.

'You - my own son - were calling upon the Devil to give you another hand!' he accused me.

'But I wasn't. I only -'

'Be quiet, boy. Everyone in this room heard you. You'll certainly make it no better by lying.'

'But -'

'Were you, or were you not, expressing dissatisfaction with the form of the body God gave you - the form in His own image?'

'I just said *if* I -'

'You blasphemed, boy. You found fault with the Norm. Everybody here heard you. What have you to say to that? You know what the Norm is?'

I gave up protesting. I knew well enough that my father in his present mood would not try to understand. I muttered, parrot-like:

'"The Norm is the Image of God".'

'You *do* know - and yet, knowing this, you deliberately wished yourself a Mutant. That is a terrible thing, an outrageous thing. You, my son, committing blasphemy, and before his parents!' In his sternest pulpit voice, he added: 'What is a Mutant?'

'"A thing accursed in the sight of God and man";' I mumbled.

'And *that* is what you wished to be! What have you to say?'

With a heart-sunk certainty that it would be useless to say anything, I kept my lips shut and my eyes lowered.

'Down on your knees!' he commanded. 'Kneel and pray!'

The others all knelt, too. My father's voice rose:

'Lord, we have sinned in omission. We beg Thy forgiveness that we have not better instructed this child in Thy laws . . .' The prayer seemed to go booming on for a long time. After the 'Amen' there was a pause, until my father said:

'Now go to your room, and pray. Pray, you wretched boy for a forgiveness you do not deserve, but which God, in His mercy, may yet grant you. I will come to you later.'

In the night, when the anguish which had followed my father's visit was somewhat abated, I lay awake, puzzling. I had had no idea of wishing for a third hand, but even if I had . . .? If it was such a terrible thing just to *think* of having three hands, what would happen if one really had them - or anything else wrong; such as, for instance, an extra toe -?

And when at last I fell asleep I had a dream.

We were all gathered in the yard, just as we had been at the last Purification. Then it had been a little hairless calf that stood waiting, blinking stupidly at the knife in my father's hand; this time it was a little girl, Sophie, standing barefooted and trying uselessly to hide the whole long row of toes that everyone could see on each foot. We all stood looking at her, and waiting. Presently she started to run from one person to another, imploring them to help her, but none of them moved, and none of their faces had any expression. My father started to walk towards her, the knife shining in his hand. Sophie grew frantic; she flitted from one unmoving person to another, tears running down her face. My father, stern, implacable, kept on coming nearer; still no one would move to help her. My father came closer still, with long arms outspread to prevent her bolting as he cornered her.

He caught her, and dragged her back to the middle of the yard. The sun's edge began to show above the horizon, and everyone started to sing a hymn. My father held Sophie with one arm just as he had held the struggling calf. He raised his other hand high, and as he swept it down the knife flashed in the light of the rising sun, just as it had flashed when he cut the calf's throat. . . .

If John and Mary Wender had been there when I woke up struggling and crying, and then lay in the dark trying to convince myself that the terrible picture was nothing more than a dream, they would, I think, have felt quite a lot easier in their minds.

THIS was a time when I passed out of a placid period into one where things kept on happening. There wasn't much reason about it; that is to say, only a few of the things were connected with one another: it was more as if an active cycle had set in, just as a spell of different weather might come along.

My meeting with Sophie was, I suppose, the first incident; the next was that Uncle Axel found out about me and my half-cousin, Rosalind Morton. He - and it was lucky it was he, and no one else - happened to come upon me when I was talking to her.

It must have been a self-preserving instinct which had made us keep the thing to ourselves, for we'd no active feeling of danger - I had so little, in fact, that when Uncle Axel found me sitting behind a rick chatting apparently to myself, I made very little effort to dissemble. He may have been there a minute or more before I became aware of somebody just round the corner of my eye, and turned to see who it was.

My Uncle Axel was a tall man, neither thin nor fat, but sturdy, and with a seasoned look to him. I used to think when I watched him at work that his weathered hands and forearms had some sort of kinship with the polished wood of the helves they used. He was standing in his customary way, with much of his weight upon the thick stick he used because his leg had been wrongly set when it was broken at sea. His bushy eyebrows, a little touched with grey, were drawn closer by a half-frown, but the lines on his tanned face were half-amused as he regarded me.

'Well, Davie boy, and who would you be chattering away so hard to? Is it fairies, or gnomes, or only the rabbits?' he asked.

I just shook my head. He limped closer, and sat down beside me, chewing on a stalk of grass from the rick.

'Feeling lonely?' he inquired.

'No,' I told him.

He frowned a bit again. 'Wouldn't it be more fun to do your chattering with some of the other kids?' he suggested. 'More interesting than just sitting and talking to yourself?'

I hesitated, and then because he was Uncle Axel and my best friend among the grown-ups, I said:

'But I was.'

'Was what?' he asked, puzzled.

'Talking to one of them,' I told him.

He frowned, and went on looking puzzled.

'Who?'

'Rosalind,' I told him.

He paused a bit, looking at me harder.

'H'm - I didn't see her around,' he remarked.

'Oh, she isn't here. She's at home - at least, she's near home, in a little secret tree-house her brothers built in the spinney,' I explained. 'It's a favourite place of hers.'

He was not able to understand what I meant at first. He kept on talking as though it were a make-believe game; but after I had tried for some time to explain he sat quiet, watching my face as I talked, and presently his expression became very serious. After I'd stopped he said nothing for a minute or two, then he asked:

'This isn't play-stuff - it's the real truth you're telling me, Davie boy?' And he looked at me hard and steadily as he spoke.

'Yes, Uncle Axel, of course,' I assured him.

'And you never told anyone else - nobody at all?'

'No. It's a secret,' I told him, and he looked relieved.

He threw away the remains of his grass-stalk, and pulled another out of the rick. After he had thoughtfully bitten a few pieces off that and spat them out he looked directly at me again.

'Davie,' he said, 'I want you to make me a promise.'

'Yes, Uncle Axel?'

'It's this,' he said, speaking very seriously. 'I want you to *keep* it secret. I want you to promise that you will never, never tell anyone else what you have just told me - *never*. It's very important: later on you'll understand better how important it is. You mustn't do anything that would even let anyone guess about it. Will you promise me that?'

His gravity impressed me greatly. I had never known him to speak with so much intensity. It made me aware, when I gave my promise, that I was vowing something more important than I could understand. He kept his eyes on mine as I spoke, and then nodded, satisfied that I meant it. We shook hands on the agreement. Then he said:

'It would be best if you could forget it altogether.'

I thought that over, and then shook my head.

'I don't think I could, Uncle Axel. Not really. I mean, it just *is*. It'd be like trying to forget -' I broke off, unable to express what I wanted to.

'Like trying to forget how to talk, or how to hear, perhaps?' he suggested.

'Rather like that - only different,' I admitted.

He nodded, and thought again.

'You hear the words inside your head?' he asked.

'Well, not exactly "hear", and not exactly "see",' I told him. 'There are - well, sort of shapes - and if you use words you make them clearer so that they're easier to understand.'

'But you don't *have* to use words - not say them out loud as you were doing just now?'

'Oh, no - it just helps to make it clearer sometimes.'

'It also helps to make things a lot more dangerous, for both of you. I want you to make another promise - that you'll never do it out loud any more.'

'All right, Uncle Axel,' I agreed again.

'You'll understand when you're older how important it is,' he told me, and then he went on to insist that I should get Rosalind to make the same promises. I did not tell him anything about the others because he seemed so worried already, but I decided I'd get them to promise, too. At the end he put out his hand again, and once more we swore secrecy very solemnly.

I put the matter to Rosalind and the others the same evening. It crystallized a feeling that was in all of us. I don't suppose that there was a single one of us who had not at some time made a slip or two and brought upon himself, or herself, an



odd, suspicious look. A few of these looks had been warnings enough to each; it was such looks, not comprehended, but clear enough as signs of disapproval just below the verge of suspicion, that had kept us out of trouble. There had been no acknowledged, co-operative policy among us. It was simply as individuals that we had all taken the same self-protective, secretive course. But now, out of Uncle Axel's anxious insistence on my promise, the feeling of a threat was strengthened. It was still shapeless to us, but it was more real. Furthermore, in trying to convey Uncle Axel's seriousness to them I must have stirred up an uneasiness that was in all their minds, for there was no dissent. They made the promise willingly; eagerly, in fact, as though it was a burden they were relieved to share. It was our first act as a group; it *made* us a group by its formal admission of our responsibilities towards one another. It changed our lives by marking our first step in corporate self-preservation, though we understood little of that at the time. What seemed most important just then was the feeling of sharing . . .

Then, almost on top of that personal event came another which was of general concern; an invasion in force from the Fringes.

As usual there was no detailed plan to deal with it. As near as anyone came to organization was the appointment of headquarters in the different sectors. Upon an alarm it was the duty of all able-bodied men in the district to rally at their local headquarters, when a course of action would be decided according to the location and extent of the trouble. As a method of dealing with small raids it had proved good enough, but that was all it was intended for. As a result, when the Fringes people found leaders who could promote an organized invasion there had been no adequately organized system of defence to delay them. They were able to push forward on a broad front, mopping up little bands of our militia here and there, and looting as they liked, and meeting nothing to delay them seriously until they were twenty-five miles or more into civilized parts.

By that time we had our forces in somewhat better order, and neighbouring districts had pulled themselves together to

head off a further widening, and harry the flanks. Our men were better armed, too. Quite a lot of them had guns, whereas the Fringes people had only a few that they had stolen, and depended chiefly on bows, knives, and spears. Nevertheless, the width of their advance made them difficult to deal with. They were better woodsmen and cleverer at hiding themselves than proper human beings, so that they were able to press on another fifteen miles before we could contain them and bring them to battle.

It was exciting for a boy. With the Fringes people little more than seven miles away, our yard at Waknuk had become one of the rallying points. My father, who had had an arrow through his arm early in the campaign, was helping to organize the new volunteers into squads. For several days there was a great bustling and coming and going as men were registered and sorted, and finally rode off with a fine air of determination, and the women of the household waving handkerchiefs at them.

When they had all departed, and our workers, too, the place seemed quite uncannily quiet for a day. Then there came a single rider, dashing back. He paused long enough to tell us that there had been a big battle and the Fringes people, with some of their leaders taken prisoner, were running away as fast as they could, then he galloped on with his good news.

That same afternoon a small troop of horsemen came riding into the yard, with two of the captured Fringes leaders in the middle of them.

I dropped what I was doing, and ran across to see. It was a bit disappointing at first sight. The tales about the Fringes had led me to expect creatures with two heads, or fur all over, or half a dozen arms and legs. Instead, they seemed at first glance to be just two ordinary men with beards – though unusually dirty, and with very ragged clothes. One of them was a short man with fair hair which was tufted as though he had trimmed it with a knife. But when I looked at the other I had a shock which brought me up dumbfounded, and staring at him. I was so jolted I just went on staring at him, for, put him in decent clothes, tidy up his beard, and he'd be the image of my father. . . .

As he sat his horse, looking round, he noticed me; casually at first, in passing, then his gaze switched back and he stared hard at me. A strange look that I did not understand at all came into his eyes. . . .

He opened his mouth as if to speak, but at that moment people came out of the house - my father, with his arm still in a sling, among them - to see what was going on.

I saw my father pause on the step and survey the group of horsemen, then he, too, noticed the man in the middle of them. For a moment he stood staring, just as I had done - then all his colour drained away, and his face went blotchy grey.

I looked quickly at the other man. He was sitting absolutely rigid on his horse. The expression on his face made something clutch suddenly in my chest. I had never seen hatred naked before, the lines cut deep, the eyes glittering, the teeth suddenly looking like a savage animal's. It struck me with a slap, a horrid revelation of something hitherto unknown, and hideous; it stamped itself on my mind so that I never forgot it. . . .

Then my father, still looking as though he were ill, put out his good hand to steady himself against the door-post, and turned back into the house.

One of the escort cut the rope which held the prisoner's arms. He dismounted, and I was able to see then what was wrong with him. He stood some eighteen inches taller than anyone else, but not because he was a big man. If his legs had been right, he would have stood no taller than my father's five-foot-ten; but they were not: they were monstrously long and thin, and his arms were long and thin, too. It made him look half-man, half-spider. . . .

His escort gave him food and a pot of beer. He sat down on a bench, and his bony knees stuck up to seem almost level with his shoulders. He looked round the yard, noticing everything as he munched his bread and cheese. In the course of his inspection he perceived me again. He beckoned. I hung back, pretending not to see. He beckoned again. I became ashamed of being afraid of him. I went closer, and then a little closer still, but keeping warily out of range, I judged, of those spidery arms.

'What's your name, boy?' he asked.

'David,' I told him. 'David Storm.'

He nodded, as if that were satisfactory.

'The man at the door, with his arm in a sling, that would be your father, Joseph Storm?'

'Yes,' I told him.

Again he nodded. He looked round the house and the out-buildings.

'This place, then, would be Waknuk?' he asked.

'Yes,' I said again.

I don't know whether he would have asked more, for at that point somebody told me to clear off. A little later they all remounted, and soon they moved away, the spidery man with his arms tied together once more. I watched them ride off in the Kentak direction, glad to see them go. My first encounter with someone from the Fringes had not, after all, been exciting; but it had been unpleasantly disturbing.

I heard later that both the captured Fringes men managed to escape that same night. I can't remember who told me, but I am perfectly certain it was not my father. I never once heard him refer to that day, and I never had the courage to ask him about it. . . .

Then scarcely, it seemed, had we settled down after the invasion and got the men back to catching up with the farm work, than my father was in the middle of a new row with my half-uncle, Angus Morton.

Differences of temperament and outlook had kept them intermittently at war with one another for years. My father had been heard to sum up his opinion by declaring that if Angus had any principles they were of such infinite width as to be a menace to the rectitude of the neighbourhood; to which Angus was reputed to have replied that Joseph Storm was a flinty-souled pedant, and bigoted well beyond reason. It was not, therefore, difficult for a row to blow up, and the latest one occurred over Angus' acquisition of a pair of great-horses.

Rumours of great-horses had reached our district though none had been seen there. My father was already uneasy in

his mind at what he had heard of them, nor was the fact that Angus was the importer of them a commendation; consequently, it may have been with some prejudice that he went to inspect them.

His doubts were confirmed at once. The moment he set eyes on the huge creatures standing twenty-six hands at the shoulder, he knew they were *wrong*. He turned his back on them with disgust, and went straight to the inspector's house with a demand that they should be destroyed as Offences.

'You're out of order this time,' the inspector told him cheerfully, glad that for once his position was incontestable. 'They're Government-approved, so they are beyond my jurisdiction, anyway.'

'I don't believe it,' my father told him. 'God never made horses the size of these. The Government *can't* have approved them.'

'But they have,' said the inspector. 'What's more,' he added with satisfaction, 'Angus tells me that knowing the neighbourhood so well he has got attested pedigrees for them.'

'Any government that could pass creatures like that is corrupt and immoral,' my father announced.

'Possibly,' admitted the inspector, 'but it's still the Government.'

My father glared at him.

'It's easy to see *why* some people would approve them,' he said. 'One of those brutes could do the work of two, maybe three, ordinary horses – and for less than double the feed of one. There's a good profit there, a good incentive to get them passed – but that doesn't mean that they're *right*. I say a horse like that is not one of God's creatures – and if it isn't His, then it's an Offence, and should be destroyed as such.'

'The official approval states that the breed was produced simply by mating for size, in the normal way. And I'd defy you to find any characteristic that's identifiably wrong with them, anyway,' the inspector told him.

'Somebody *would* say that when he saw how profitable they could be. There's a word for that kind of thinking,' my father replied.

The inspector shrugged.

'It does not follow that they are *right*,' my father persisted. 'A horse that size is *not* right – you know that unofficially, as well as I do, and there's no getting away from it. Once we allow things that we know are not right, there's no telling where it will end. A god-fearing community doesn't have to deny its faith just because there's been pressure brought to bear in a government licensing office. There are plenty of us here who know how God intended his creatures to be, even if the Government doesn't.'

The inspector smiled. 'As with the Dakers' cat?' he suggested.

My father glared at him again. The affair of the Dakers' cat rankled.

About a year previously it had somehow come to his knowledge that Ben Dakers' wife housed a tailless cat. He investigated, and when he had collected evidence that it had not simply lost its tail in some way, but had never possessed one, he condemned it, and, in his capacity as a magistrate, ordered the inspector to make out a warrant for its destruction as an Offence. The inspector had done so, with reluctance, whereupon Dakers promptly entered an appeal. Such shilly-shallying in an obvious case outraged my father's principles, and he personally attended to the demise of the Dakers' cat while the matter was still *sub judice*. His position, when a notification subsequently arrived stating that there was a recognized breed of tailless cats with a well-authenticated history, was awkward, and somewhat expensive. It had been with very bad grace that he had chosen to make a public apology rather than resign his magistracy.

'This,' he told the inspector sharply, 'is an altogether more important affair.'

'Listen,' said the inspector patiently. 'The type is approved. This particular pair has confirmatory sanction. If that's not good enough for you, go ahead and shoot them yourself – and see what happens to you.'

'It is your moral duty to issue an order against these so-called horses,' my father insisted.

The inspector was suddenly tired of it.

'It's part of my official duty to protect them from harm by fools and bigots,' he snapped.

My father did not actually hit the inspector, but it must have been a near thing. He went on boiling with rage for several days and the next Sunday we were treated to a searing address on the toleration of Mutants which sullied the Purity of our community. He called for a general boycott of the owner of the Offences, speculated upon immorality in high places, hinted that some there might be expected to have a fellow-feeling for Mutants, and wound up with a peroration in which a certain official was scathed as an unprincipled hireling of unprincipled masters and the local representative of the Forces of Evil.

Though the inspector had no such convenient pulpit for reply, certain trenchant remarks of his on persecution, contempt of authority, bigotry, religious mania, the law of slander, and the probable effects of direct action in opposition to Government sanction achieved a wide circulation.

It was very likely the last point that kept my father from doing more than talk. He had had plenty of trouble over the Dakers' cat which was of no value at all: but the great-horses were costly creatures, besides, Angus would not be one to waive any possible penalty. . . .

So there was a degree of frustration about that made home a good place to get away from as much as possible.

Now that the countryside had settled down again and was not full of unexpected people, Sophie's parents would let her go out on rambles once more, and I slipped away over there when I could get away unnoticed.

Sophie couldn't go to school, of course. She would have been found out very quickly, even with a false certificate; and her parents, though they taught her to read and write, did not have any books, so that it wasn't much good to her. That was why we talked - at least I talked - a lot on our expeditions, trying to tell her what I was learning from my own reading books.

The world, I was able to tell her, was generally thought to

be a pretty big place, and probably round. The civilized part of it - of which Waknuk was only a small district - was called Labrador. This was thought to be the Old People's name for it, though that was not very certain. Round most of Labrador there was a great deal of water called the sea, which was important on account of fish. Nobody that I knew, except Uncle Axel, had actually seen this sea because it was a long way off, but if you were to go three hundred miles or so east, north, or north-west you would come to it sooner or later. But south-west or south, you wouldn't; you'd get to the Fringes and then the Badlands, which would kill you.

It was said, too, though nobody was sure, that in the time of the Old People Labrador had been a cold land, so cold that no one could live there for long, so they had used it then only for growing trees and doing their mysterious mining in. But that had been a long, long time ago. A thousand years? - two thousand years? - even more, perhaps? People guessed, but nobody really knew. There was no telling how many generations of people had passed their lives like savages between the coming of Tribulation and the start of recorded history. Only Nicholson's *Repentances* had come out of the wilderness of barbarism, and that only because it had lain for, perhaps, several centuries sealed in a stone coffer before it was discovered. And only the Bible had survived from the time of the Old People themselves.

Except for what these two books told, the past, further back than three recorded centuries, was a long oblivion. Out of that blankness stretched a few strands of legend, badly frayed in their passage through successive minds. It was this long line of tongues that had given us the name Labrador, for it was unmentioned in either the Bible or *Repentances*, and they may have been right about the cold, although there were only two cold months in the year now - Tribulation could account for that, it could account for almost anything. . . .

For a long time it had been disputed whether any parts of the world other than Labrador and the big island of Newf were populated at all. They were thought to be all Badlands which had suffered the full weight of Tribulation, but it had

been found that there were some stretches of Fringes country in places. These were grossly deviational and quite godless, of course, and incapable of being civilized at present, but if the Badland borders there were withdrawing as ours were, it might one day be possible to colonize them.

Altogether, not much seemed to be known about the world, but at least it was a more interesting subject than Ethics which an old man taught to a class of us on Sunday afternoons. Ethics was why you should, and shouldn't, do things. Most of the don'ts were the same as my father's, but some of the reasons were different, so it was confusing.

According to Ethics, mankind - that was us, in civilized parts - was in the process of climbing back into grace; we were following a faint and difficult trail which led up to the peaks from which we had fallen. From the true trail branched many false trails that sometimes looked easier and more attractive; all these really led to the edges of precipices, beneath which lay the abyss of eternity. There was only one true trail, and by following it we should, with God's help and in His own good time, regain all that had been lost. But so faint was the trail, so set with traps and deceits, that every step must be taken with caution, and it was too dangerous for a man to rely on his own judgement. Only the authorities, ecclesiastical and lay, were in a position to judge whether the next step was a rediscovery, and so, safe to take; or whether it deviated from the true re-ascent, and so was sinful.

The penance of Tribulation that had been put upon the world must be worked out, the long climb faithfully retraced, and, at last, if the temptations by the way were resisted, there would be the reward of forgiveness - the restoration of the Golden Age. Such penances had been sent before: the expulsion from Eden, the Flood, pestilences, the destruction of the Cities of the Plain, the Captivity. Tribulation had been another such punishment, but the greatest of all: it must, when it struck, have been like a combination of all these disasters. Why it had been sent was as yet unrevealed, but, judging by precedent, there had very likely been a phase of irreligious arrogance prevailing at the time.

Most of the numerous precepts, arguments, and examples in Ethics were condensed for us into this: the duty and purpose of man in this world is to fight unceasingly against the evils that Tribulation loosed upon it. Above all, he must see that the human form is kept true to the divine pattern in order that one day it may be permitted to regain the high place in which, as the image of God, it was set.

However, I did not talk much about this part of Ethics to Sophie. Not, I think, because I ever actually classified her in my mind as a Deviation, but it had to be admitted that she did not quite qualify as a true image, so it seemed more tactful to avoid that aspect. And there were plenty of other things to talk about.

NOBODY at Waknuk seemed to trouble about me if I was out of sight. It was only when I hung about that they thought of jobs that needed doing.

The season was a good one, sunny, yet well watered so that even farmers had little to complain of other than the pressure to catch up with the work that the invasion had interrupted. Except among the sheep the average of Offences in the spring births had been quite unusually low. The impending crops were so orthodox that the inspector had posted only a single field, belonging to Angus Morton, for burning. Even among the vegetables there was little deviation; the *solonaceae* as usual provided most of what there was. All in all, the season looked like setting up a Purity record, and condemnations were so few that even my father was pleased enough to announce guardedly in one of his addresses that Waknuk would seem to be giving the forces of Evil quite a setback this year – and it was a matter for thanksgiving that retribution for the importation of the great-horses had been visited upon their owner himself, and not upon the whole community.

With everyone so busy I was able to get away early, and during those long summer days Sophie and I roamed more widely than before, though we did our adventuring with caution, and kept it to little-used ways in order to avoid encounters. Sophie's upbringing had given her a timidity towards strangers that was nearly an instinct. Almost before one was visible she vanished noiselessly. The only adult she had made friends with was Corky, who looked after the steam-engine. Everyone else was dangerous.

We discovered a place up the stream where there were banks of shingle. I liked to take off my shoes, roll up my trousers, and paddle there, examining the pools and crannies. Sophie used to sit on one of the large, flat stones that shelved into the water, and watch me wistfully. Later we went there armed with two small nets that Mrs Wender had made, and a jar for the catch.

I waded about fishing for the little shrimp-like creatures that lived there while Sophie tried to scoop them up by reaching from the bank. She did not do very well at it. After a time she gave up, and sat watching me enviously. Then, greatly daring, she pulled off a shoe, and looked at her naked foot reflectively. After a minute she pulled off the other. She rolled her cotton trousers above her knees, and stepped into the stream. She stood there for a thoughtful moment, looking down through the water at her foot on the washed pebbles. I called to her:

'Come over this way. There's lots of them here.'

She waded towards me, laughing and excited.

When we had had enough of it we sat on the flat rock, letting our feet dry in the sun.

'They're not really horrible, are they?' she said, regarding hers judicially.

'They're not horrible at all. They make mine look all knobbly,' I told her, honestly. She was pleased about that.

A few days later we went there again. We stood the jar on the flat stone beside our shoes while we fished, and industriously scampered back to it now and then with our catch, oblivious of all else until a voice said:

'Hullo, there, David!'

I looked up, aware of Sophie standing rigid behind me.

The boy who had called stood on the bank, just above the rock where our things lay. I knew him. Alan, the son of John Ervin, the blacksmith; about two years older than I was. I kept my head.

'Oh, hullo, Alan,' I said, unencouragingly.

I waded to the rock and picked up Sophie's shoes.

'Catch!' I called as I threw them to her.

One she caught, the other fell into the water, but she retrieved it.

'What are you doing?' Alan asked.

I told him we were catching the shrimp-things. As I said it I stepped casually out of the water on to the rock. I had never cared much for what I knew of Alan at the best of times, and he was by no means welcome now.

'They're no good. Fish are what you want to go after,' he said contemptuously.

He turned his attention to Sophie, who was wading to the bank, shoes in hand, some yards farther up.

'Who's *she*?' he inquired.

I delayed answering while I put on my shoes. Sophie had disappeared into the bushes now.

'Who is she?' he repeated. 'She's not one of the —' He broke off suddenly. I looked up and saw that he was staring down at something beside me. I turned quickly. On the flat rock was a footprint, still undried. Sophie had rested one foot there as she bent over to tip her catch into the jar. The mark was still damp enough to show the print of all six toes clearly. I kicked over the jar. A cascade of water and struggling shrimps poured down the rock, obliterating the footprint, but I knew, with a sickly feeling, that the harm had been done.

'Ho!' said Alan, and there was a gleam in his eye that I did not like. 'Who is she?' he demanded again.

'She's a friend of mine,' I told him.

'What's her name?'

I did not answer that.

'Huh, I'll soon find out, anyway,' he said with a grin.

'It's no business of yours,' I told him.

He took no notice of that; he had turned and was standing looking along the bank towards the point where Sophie had disappeared into the bushes.

I ran up the stone and flung myself on him. He was bigger than I was, but it took him by surprise, and we went down together in a whirl of arms and legs. All I knew of fighting was what I had learnt from a few sharp scuffles. I simply hit out, and did my furious best. My intention was to gain a few minutes for Sophie to put her shoes on and hide; if she had a little start, he would never be able to find her, as I knew from experience. Then he recovered from his first surprise and got in a couple of blows on my face which made me forget about Sophie and sent me at it, tooth and nail, on my own account.

We rolled back and forth on a patch of turf. I kept on hitting and struggling furiously, but his weight started to tell. He be-

gan to feel more sure of himself, and I, more futile. However, I had gained something: I'd stopped him going after Sophie straight away. Gradually he got the upper hand, presently he was sitting astride of me, pummelling me as I squirmed. I kicked out and struggled, but there wasn't much I could do but raise my arms to protect my head. Then, suddenly, there was a yelp of anguish, and the blows ceased. He flopped down on top of me. I heaved him off, and sat up to see Sophie standing there with a large rough stone in her hand.

'I hit him,' she said proudly, and with a touch of wonderment. 'Do you think he's dead?'

Hit him she certainly had. He lay white-faced and still, with the blood trickling down his cheek, but he was breathing all right, so he certainly wasn't dead.

'Oh, dear,' said Sophie in sudden reaction, and dropped the stone.

We looked at Alan, and then at one another. Both of us, I think, had the impulse to do something for him, but we were afraid.

'No one must ever know. *No one!*' Mrs Wender had said, so intensely. And now this boy *did* know. It frightened us.

I got up. I reached for Sophie's hand and pulled her away.

'Come along,' I told her urgently.

John Wender listened carefully and patiently while we told him about it.

'You're quite sure he saw? It wasn't simply that he was curious because Sophie was a stranger?' he asked at the end.

'No,' I said. 'He saw the footmark; that's why he wanted to catch her.'

He nodded slowly.

'I see,' he said, and I was surprised how calmly he said it.

He looked steadily at our faces. Sophie's eyes were big with a mixture of alarm and excitement. Mine must have been pink-rimmed, with dirty smears trailing from them. He turned his head and met his wife's gaze steadily.

'I'm afraid it's come, my dear. This is it,' he said.

'Oh, Johnny —' Mrs Wender's face was pale and distressed

'Sorry, Martie, but it is, you know. We knew it had to come sooner or later. Thank God it's happened while I'm here. How long will it take you to be ready?'

'Not long, Johnny. I've kept things nearly ready, always.'

'Good. Let's get busy, then.'

He got up and went round the table to her. He put his arms round her, bent down and kissed her. Tears stood in her eyes.

'Oh, Johnny dear. Why are you so sweet to me, when all I've brought you is - ?' He stopped that with another kiss.

They looked steadily into one another's eyes for a moment, then, without a word, they both turned to look at Sophie.

Mrs Wender became her usual self again. She went briskly to a cupboard, took out some food, and put it on the table.

'Wash first, you dirty things,' she told us. 'Then eat this up. Every bit of it.'

While I washed I put the question I had wanted to ask often before.

'Mrs Wender, if it's just Sophie's toes, couldn't you have cut them off when she was a little baby? I don't expect it would have hurt her much then, and nobody need have known.'

'There'd have been marks, David, and when people saw them they'd know why. Now hurry up and eat that supper,' she told me, and went busily off into the other room.

'We're going away,' Sophie confided to me presently, through a mouthful of pie.

'Going away?' I repeated blankly.

She nodded. 'Mummy said we'd have to go if anybody ever found out. We nearly did when you saw them.'

'But - you mean, right away? Never come back?' I asked in dismay.

'Yes, I think so.'

I had been hungry, but I suddenly lost my appetite. I sat fiddling with the food on my plate. The sounds of bustling and bumping elsewhere in the house took on an ominous quality. I looked across the table at Sophie. In my throat there was a lump that wouldn't be swallowed.

'Where?' I asked, unhappily.

'I don't know - a long way, though,' she told me.

We sat on. Sophie prattled between mouthfuls; I found it hard to swallow because of the lump. Everything was abruptly bleak to the horizon, and beyond. Nothing, I knew, was going to be quite the same ever again. The desolation of the prospect engulfed me. I had to struggle hard to keep back tears.

Mrs Wender brought in a series of satchels and packs. I watched glumly as she dumped them close to the door, and went away again. Mr Wender came in from outside and collected some of them. Mrs Wender reappeared and took Sophie away into the other room. The next time Mr Wender came for some more of the packs I followed him out.

The two horses, Spot and Sandy, were standing there patiently with some bundles already strapped on to them. I was surprised not to see the cart, and said so.

John Wender shook his head.

'A cart keeps you to the tracks; with pack-horses you go where you like,' he told me.

I watched him strapping more bundles on while I gathered courage.

'Mr Wender,' I said, 'please can't I come too?'

He stopped what he was doing, and turned to look at me. We faced one another for some moments, then slowly, regretfully, he shook his head. He must have seen that tears were close behind my eyes, for he put his hand on my shoulder and let it rest there.

'Come along inside, Davie,' he said, leading the way back to the house.

Mrs Wender was back in the living-room, standing in the middle of the floor, and looking round, as if for things forgotten:

'He wants to come with us, Martie,' said Mr Wender.

She sat down on a stool, and held her arms out to me. I went to her, unable to speak. Looking over my head, she said:

'Oh, Johnny. That awful father! I'm afraid for him.'

Close to her like that I could catch her thoughts. They came faster, but easier to understand, than words. I knew how she felt, how she genuinely wished I could go with them, how she



leapt on, without examining the reasons, to knowing that I could not and must not go with them. I had the complete answer before John Wender had put the first sentence of his reply into ordinary words.

'I know, Martie. But it's Sophie I'm afraid for - and you. If we were to be caught we'd be charged with kidnapping as well as concealment. . . .'

'If they take Sophie nothing could make things worse for me, Johnny.'

'But it's not just that, dear. Once they are satisfied that we are out of the district we'll be someone else's responsibility, and they'll not bother much more about us. But if Storm were to lose his boy there'd be hue and cry for miles around, and I doubt whether we'd have a chance of getting clear. They'd have posses out everywhere looking for us. We can't afford to increase the risk to Sophie, can we?'

Mrs Wender was silent for some moments. I could feel her fitting the reasons into what she had known already. Presently her arm tightened round me.

'You *do* understand that, don't you, David? Your father would be so angry if you came with us that we'd have much less chance of getting Sophie away safely. I want you to come, but for Sophie's sake we daren't do it. Please be brave about it, David. You're her only friend, and you can help her by being brave. You will, won't you?'

The words were like a clumsy repetition. Her thoughts had been much clearer, and I had already had to accept the inevitable decision. I could not trust myself to speak. I nodded dumbly, and let her hold me to her in a way my own mother never did.

The packing-up was finished a little before dusk. When everything was ready Mr Wender took me aside.

'Davie,' he said, man to man, 'I know how fond you are of Sophie. You've looked after her like a hero, but now there's one more thing you can do to help her. Will you?'

'Yes,' I told him. 'What is it, Mr Wender?'

'It's this. When we've gone don't go home at once. Will you

stay here till tomorrow morning? That'll give us more time to get her safely away. Will you do that?'

'Yes,' I said, reliably.

We shook hands on it. It made me feel stronger and more responsible - rather like I had on that first day when she twisted her ankle.

Sophie held out her hand with something concealed in it as we came back.

'This is for you, David,' she said, putting it into my hand.

I looked at it. A curling lock of brown hair, tied with a piece of yellow ribbon. I was still staring at it when she flung her arms round my neck and kissed me, with more determination than judgement. Her father picked her up and swung her high on top of the leading horse's load.

Mrs Wender bent to kiss me, too.

'Good-bye, David, dear.' She touched my bruised cheek with a gentle forefinger. 'We'll never forget,' she said, and her eyes were shiny.

They set off. John Wender led the horses, with his gun slung across his back, and his left arm linked in his wife's. At the edge of the woods they paused and turned to wave. I waved back. They went on. The last I saw of them was Sophie's arm waving as the dusk beneath the trees swallowed them up.

The sun was getting high and the men were long ago out in the fields when I reached home. There was no one in the yard, but the inspector's pony stood at the hitching-post near the door, so I guessed my father would be in the house.

I hoped that I had stayed away long enough. It had been a bad night. I had started with a determinedly stout heart, but in spite of my resolutions it weakened somewhat when darkness fell. I had never before spent a night anywhere but in my own room at home. There, everything was familiar, but the Wenders' empty house seemed full of queer sounds. I managed to find some candles and light them, and when I had blown up the fire and put some more wood on, that, too, helped to make the place less lonely - but only a little less. Odd noises kept on occurring inside and outside the house.

For a long time I sat on a stool, pressing my back against the wall so that nothing should approach me unaware. More than once my courage all but gave out. I wanted painfully to run away. I like to think it was my promise and the thought of Sophie's safety that kept me there; but I do remember also how black it looked outside, and how full of inexplicable sounds and movements the darkness seemed to be.

The night stretched out before me in a prospect of terrors, yet nothing actually happened. The sounds like creeping foot-steps never brought anything into view, the tapping was no prelude to anything at all, nor were the occasional dragging noises; they were beyond explanation, but also, luckily, apparently beyond manifestation, too, and at length, in spite of them all I found my eyes blinking as I swayed on my stool. I summoned up courage and dared to move, very cautiously, across to the bed. I scrambled across it, and very thankfully got my back to a wall again. For a time I lay watching the candles and the uneasy shadows they cast in the corners of the room, and wondering what I should do when they were gone, when, all of a sudden, they *were* gone – and the sun was shining in. . . .

I had found some bread for my breakfast in the Wenders' house, but I was hungry again by the time I reached home. That, however, could wait. My first intention was to get to my room unseen, with the very thin hope that my absence might not have been noticed, so that I would be able to pretend that I had merely overslept, but my luck was not running: Mary caught sight of me through the kitchen window as I was slipping across the yard. She called out:

'You come here at once. Everybody's been looking all over for you. Where've you been?' And then, without waiting for an answer, she added: 'Father's on the rampage. Better go to him before he gets worse.'

My father and the inspector were in the seldom-used, rather formal room at the front. I seemed to arrive at a crucial time. The inspector looked much as usual, but my father was thunderous.

'Come here!' he snapped, as soon as I appeared in the doorway.

I went nearer, reluctantly.

'Where've you been?' he demanded. 'You've been out all night. Where?'

I did not answer.

He fired half a dozen questions at me, looking fierier every second when I did not answer them.

'Come on now. Sullenness isn't going to help you. Who was this child – this Blasphemy – you were with yesterday?' he shouted.

I still did not reply. He glared at me. I had never seen him angrier. I felt sick with fright.

The inspector intervened then. In a quiet, ordinary voice he said to me:

'You know, David, concealment of a Blasphemy – not reporting a human deviation – is a very, very serious thing. People go to prison for it. It is everybody's duty to report any kind of Offence to me – even if they aren't sure – so that I can decide. It's always important, and very important indeed if it is a Blasphemy. And in this case there doesn't seem to be any doubt about it – unless young Ervin was mistaken. Now he says this child you were with has six toes. Is that true?'

'No,' I told him.

'He's lying,' said my father.

'I see,' said the inspector calmly. 'Well, then if it isn't true, it can't matter if we know who she is, can it?' he went on in a reasonable tone.

I made no reply to that. It seemed the safest way. We looked at one another.

'Surely, you see that's so? If it is *not* true –' he was going on persuasively, but my father cut him short.

'I'll deal with this. The boy's lying.' To me he added: 'Go to your room.'

I hesitated. I knew well enough what that meant, but I knew, too, that with my father in his present mood it would happen whether I told or not. I set my jaw, and turned to go. My father followed, picking up a whip from the table as he came.

'That,' said the inspector curtly, 'is my whip.'

My father seemed not to hear him. The inspector stood up. 'I said that is *my* whip,' he repeated, with a hard, ominous note in his voice.

My father checked his step. With an ill-tempered gesture he threw the whip back on the table. He glared at the inspector, and then turned to follow me.

I don't know where my mother was, perhaps she was afraid of my father. It was Mary who came, and made little comforting noises as she dressed my back. She wept a little as she helped me into bed, and then fed me some broth with a spoon. I did my best to put up a brave show in front of her, but when she had gone my tears soaked into my pillow. By now it was not so much the bodily hurts that brought them: it was bitterness, self-contempt, and abasement. In wretchedness and misery I clutched the yellow ribbon and the brown curl tight in my hand.

'I couldn't help it, Sophie,' I sobbed, 'I couldn't help it.'