

# GREAT WESTERN

by Kim Newman

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Cleared paths were no good for Allie. She wasn't supposed to be after rabbits on Squire Maskell's land. Most of Alder Hill was wildwood, trees webbed together by a growth of bramble nastier than barbed wire. Thorns jabbed into skin and stayed, like bee-stingers.

Just after dawn, the air had a chilly bite but the sunlight was pure and strong. Later, it would get warm; now, her hands and knees were frozen from dew-damp grass and iron-hard ground.

The Reeve was making a show of being tough on poach-ing, handing down short, sharp sentences. She'd already got a stripe across her palm for setting snares. Everyone west of Bristol knew Reeve Draper was Maskell's creature. Serfdom might have been abolished, but the old squires clung to their pre-War position, through habit as much as tenacity.

Since taking her lash, administered under the village oak by Constable Erskine with a razor-strop, she'd grown craftier. Wiry enough to tunnel through bramble, she made and travelled her own secret, thorny paths. She'd take Maskell's rabbits, even if the Reeve's Constable striped her like a tiger.

She set a few snares in obvious spots, where Stan Budge would find and destroy them. Maskell's gamekeeper wouldn't be happy if he thought no one was even trying to poach. The trick was to set snares invisibly, in places Budge was too grown-up, too far off the ground, to look.

Even so, none of her nooses had caught anything.

All spring, she'd been hearing gunfire from Alder Hill, resonating across the moors like thunder. Maskell had the Gilpin brothers out with Browning rifles. They were supposed to be ratting, but the object of the exercise was to end poach-ing by killing off all the game.

There were rabbit and pigeon carcasses about, some crackly bone bundles in packets of dry skin, some recent enough to seem shocked to death. It was a sinful waste, what with hungry people queuing up for parish hand-outs. Quite a few trees had yellow-orange badges, where Terry or Teddy Gilpin had shot wide of the mark. Squire Maskell would not be heartbroken if one of those wild shots finished up in her.

Susan told her over and over to be mindful of men with guns. She had a quite reasonable horror of firearms. Too many people on Sedgmoor died with their gumboots on and a bullet in them. Allie's Dad and Susan's husband, for two. Susan wouldn't have a gun in the house.

For poaching, Allie didn't like guns anyway. Too loud. She had a catapult made from a garden fork, double-strength rubber stretched between steel tines. She could put a nail through a half-inch of plywood from twenty-five feet.

She wriggled out of her tunnel, pushing aside a circle of bramble she'd fixed to hinge like a lid, and emerged in a clearing of loose earth and shale. During the Civil War, a bomb had fallen here and fizzled. Eventually, the woods would close over the scar.

When she stood up, she could see across the moors, as far as Achelzoy. At night, the infernal lights of Bridgewater pinked the horizon, clawing a ragged red edge in the curtain of dark. Now, she could

make out the road winding through the wet-lands. The sun, still low, glinted and glimmered in sodden fields, mirror-fragments strewn in a carpet of grass. There were dangerous marshes out there. Cows were sucked under if they set a hoof wrong.

Something moved near the edge of the clearing.

Allie had her catapult primed, her eye fixed on the rabbit. Crouching, still as a statue, she concentrated. Jack Coney nib-bled on nothing, unconcerned. She pinched the nailhead, imagining a point between the ears where she would strike.

A noise sounded out on the moor road. The rabbit vanished, startled by the unfamiliar rasp of an engine.

"S'blood," she swore.

She stood up, easing off on her catapult. She looked out towards Achelzoy. A fast-moving shape was coming across the moor.

The rabbit was lost. Maskell's men would soon be about, making the woods dangerous. She chanced a maintained path and ran swiftly downhill. At the edge of Maskell's property, she came to a stile and vaulted it—wrenching her shoulder, but no matter—landing like a cat on safe territory. Without a look back at the "TRESPASSERS WILL BE VENTILATED" sign, she traipsed between two rows of trees, toward the road.

The path came out half a mile beyond the village, at a sharp kink in the moor road. She squatted with her back to a signpost, running fingers through her hair to rid herself of tan-gles and snaps of thorn.

The engine noise was nearer and louder. She considered putting a nail in the nuisance-maker's petrol tank to pay him back for the rabbit. That was silly. Whoever it was didn't know what he'd done.

She saw the stranger was straddling a Norton. He had slowed to cope with the winds of the moor road. Every month, someone piled up in one of the ditches because he took a bend too fast.

To Allie's surprise, the motorcyclist stopped by her. He shifted goggles up to the brim of his hat. He looked as if he had an extra set of eyes in his forehead.

There were care-lines about his eyes and mouth. She judged him a little older than Susan. His hair needed cutting. He wore leather trews, a padded waistcoat over a dusty khaki shirt, and gauntlets. A brace of pistols was bolstered at his hips, and he had a rifle slung on the Norton, within easy reach.

He reached into his waistcoat for a pouch and fixings.

Pulling the drawstring with his teeth, he tapped tobacco onto a paper and rolled himself a cigarette one-handed. It was a clever trick, and he knew it. He stuck the fag in his grin and fished for a box of Bryant and May.

"Alder," he said, reading from the signpost. "Is that a vil-lage?"

"Might be."

"Might it?"

He struck a light on his thumbnail and drew a lungful of smoke, held in for a moment like a hippie sucking a joint, and let it funnel out through his nostrils in dragon-plumes.

"Might it indeed?"

He didn't speak like a yokel. He sounded like a wireless announcer, maybe even more clipped and starched.

"If, hypothetically, Alder were a village, would there be a hostelry there where one might buy breakfast?"

"Valiant Soldier don't open till lunchtime."

The Valiant Soldier was Alder's pub, and another of Squire Maskell's businesses.

"Pity."

"How much you'm pay for breakfast?" she asked.

"That would depend on the breakfast."

"Ten bob?"

The stranger shrugged.

"Susan'll breakfast you for ten bob."

"Your mother."

"No."

"Where could one find this Susan?"

"Gosmore Farm. Other end of village."

"Why don't you get up behind me and show me where to go?"

She wasn't sure. The stranger shifted forward on his seat, making space.

"I'm Lytton," the stranger said.

"Allie," she replied, straddling the pillion.

"Hold on tight."

She took a grip on his waistcoat, wrists resting on the stocks of his guns.

Lytton pulled down his goggles and revved. The bike sped off. Allie's hair blew into her face and streamed behind her. She held tighter, pressing against his back to keep her face out of the wind.

When they arrived, Susan had finished milking. Allie saw her washing her hands under the pump by the back door.

Gosmore Farm was a tiny enclave circled by Maskell's land. He had once tried to get the farm by asking the newly widowed Susan to marry him. Allie couldn't believe he'd actually thought she might consent. Apparently, Maskell didn't consider Susan might hold a grudge after her husband's death. He now had a porcelain doll named Sue-Clare in the Manor House, and a pair of terrifying children.

Susan looked up when she heard the Norton. Her face was set hard. Strangers with guns were not her favorite type of folk.

Lytton halted the motorcycle. Allie, bones shaken, dis-mounted, showing herself.

"He'll pay for breakfast," she said. "Ten bob."

Susan looked at the stranger over, starting at his boots, stopping at his hips.

"He'll have to get rid of those filthy things."

Lytton, who had his goggles off again, was puzzled.

"Guns, she means," Allie explained.

"I know you feel naked without them," Susan said sharply. "Unmanned, even. *Magna Carta* rules that no Englishman shall be restrained from bearing arms. It's that fundamental right which keeps us free."

"That's certainly an argument," Lytton said.

"If you want breakfast, yield your fundamental right before you step inside my house."

"That's a stronger one," he said.

Lytton pulled off his gauntlets and dropped them into the pannier of the Norton. His fingers were stiff on the buckle of his gunbelt, as if he had been wearing it for many years until it had grown into him like a wedding ring. He loosened the belt and held it up.

Allie stepped forward to take the guns.

"Allison, no," Susan insisted.

Lytton laid the guns in the pannier and latched the lid.

"You have me defenseless," he told Susan, spreading his arms.

Susan squelched a smile and opened the back door. Kitchen smells wafted.

A good thing about Lytton's appearance at Gosmore Farm was that he stopped Susan giving Allie a hard time about being up and about before dawn. Susan had no illusions about what she did in the woods.

Susan let Lytton past her into the kitchen. Allie trotted up.

"Let me see your hands," Susan said.

Allie showed them palms down. Susan noted dirt under nails and a few new scratches. When Allie showed her palms, Susan drew a fingernail across the red strop-mark.

"Take care, Allie."

"Yes'm."

Susan hugged Allie briefly, and pulled her into the kitchen.

Lytton had taken a seat at the kitchen table and was loosening his heavy boots. Susan had the wireless on, tuned to the Light Program. Mark Radcliffe introduced the new song from Jarvis Cocker and His Wurzels, "The Streets of Stogumber." A frying pan was heating on the cooker, tiny trails rising from the fat.

"Allie, cut our guest some bacon."

"The name's Lytton."

"I'm Susan Ames. This is Allison Conway. To answer your unasked question, I'm a widow, she's an orphan. We run this farm ourselves."

"A hard row to plough."

"We're still above ground."

Allie carved slices off a cured hock that hung by the cooker. Susan took eggs from a basket, cracked them into the pan.

"Earl Gray or Darjeeling?" Susan asked Lytton.

"The Earl."

"Get the kettle on, girl," Susan told her. "And stop staring."

Allie couldn't remember Susan cooking for a man since Mr. Ames was killed. It was jarring to have this big male, whiffy from the road and petrol, invading their kitchen. But also a little exciting.

Susan flipped bacon rashers, busying herself at the cooker. Allie filled the kettle from the tap at the big basin.

"Soldier, were you?" Susan asked Lytton, indicating his shoulder. There was a lighter patch on his shirtsleeve where rank insignia had been cut away. He'd worn several pips.

The stranger shrugged.

"Which brand of idiot?"

"I fought for the southeast."

"I'd keep quiet about that if you intend to drink in The Valiant Soldier."

"I'd imagined Wessex was mostly neutral."

"Feudal order worked perfectly well for a thousand years. It wasn't just landed gentry who resisted London Reforms. There are plenty of jobless ex-serfs around, nostalgic for their shackles and three hot meals a day."

"Just because it lasted a long time doesn't mean it was a good thing."

"No argument from me there."

"Mr. Ames was a Reformist too," Allie said.

"Mr. Ames?"

"My late husband. He opened his mouth too much. Some loyal retainers shut it for him."

"I'm sorry."

"Not your problem."

Susan wasn't comfortable talking about her husband. Mr. Ames had been as much lawyer as farmer, enthusiastically heading the Sedgmoor District Committee during the Reconstruction. He didn't realize it took more than a decision made in London Parliament to change things in the West. London was a long way off.

Allie brought Susan plates. Susan slid bacon and eggs from the pan.

"Fetch the tomato chutney from the preserves shelf," she said.

Outside, someone clanged the bell by the gate. Lytton's hand slipped quietly to his hip, closing where the handle of a revolver would have been.

Susan looked at the hot food on the table, and frowned at the door.

"Not a convenient time to come visiting," she said.

Hanging back behind Susan, Allie still saw who was in the drive. Constable Erskine was by the bell, vigorously hammering with the butt of his police revolver. His blue knob-end helmet gave him extra

height. His gun-belt was in matching blue. Reeve Draper, arms folded, cringed at the racket his subordinate was making. Behind the officers stood Terry and Teddy Gilpin, Browning rifles casually in their hands, long coats brushing the ground.

"Goodwife Ames," shouted the Reeve. "This be a court order."

"Leave your guns."

"Come you now, Goodwife Ames. By right of law ..."

Erskine was still clanging. The bell came off its hook and thunked on the ground. The Constable shrugged a grin and didn't holster his pistol.

"I won't have guns on my property." "Then come and be served. This here paper pertains to your cattle. The decision been telegraphed from Taunton Magistrates. You'm to surrender all livestock within thirty days, for slaughter. It be a safety measure."

Susan had been expecting something like this. "There are no mad cows on Gosmore Farm." "Susan, don't be difficult." "It's Mrs. Ames, Mr. Reeve Draper." The Reeve held up a fawn envelope. "You'm know this has to be done." "Will you be slaughtering Maskell's stock?" "He took proper precautions, Susan. Can't be blamed. He'm been organic since 'fore the War."

Susan snorted a laugh. Everyone knew there'd been mad cow disease in the Squire's herd. He'd paid off the inspectors and rendered the affected animals into fertilizer. It was Susan who'd never used infected feed, never had a sick cow. This wasn't about British beef; this was about squeezing Gosmore Farm.

"Clear off," Allie shouted.

"Poacher girl," Erskine sneered. "Lookin' for a matchin' stripe on your left hand?"

Susan turned on the Constable. "Don't you threaten Allison. She's not a serf." "Once a serf, always a serf."

"What are they here for?" Susan nodded to the Gilpin brothers. "D'you need two extra guns to deliver a letter?"

Draper looked nervously at the brothers. Terry, heavier and nastier, curled his fingers about the trigger guard of his Browning.

"Why didn't Maskell come himself?" Draper carefully put the letter on the ground, laying a stone on top of it.

"I'll leave this here, Goodwife. You'm been served with this notice."

Susan strode towards the letter.

Terry hawked a stream of spit, which hit the stone and splattered the envelope. He showed off his missing front teeth in an idiot leer.

Draper was embarrassed and angered, Erskine delighted and itchy.

"My sentiments exactly, Goodman Gilpin," said Susan. She kicked the stone and let the letter skip away in the breeze.

"Mustn't show disrespect for the law," Erskine snarled. He was holding his gun rightway round, thumb on the cock-lever, finger on the trigger.

From the kitchen doorway, close behind Allie, Lytton said, "Whose law?"

Allie stepped aside and Lytton strode into the yard. The four unwelcome visitors looked at him.

"Widow Ames got a stay-over guest," Erskine said, nas-tily.

"B'ain't no business of yourn, Goodman," said the Reeve to Lytton.

"And what if I make it my business?"

"You'm rue it."

Lytton kept his gaze steady on the Reeve, who flinched and blinked.

"He hasn't got a gun," Susan said, voice betraying annoyance with Lytton as much as with Maskell's men. "So you can't have a fair fight."

Mr. Ames had been carrying a Webley when he was shot. The magistrate, Sue-Clare Maskell's father, ruled it a fair fight, exonerating on the grounds of self-defense the Maskell retainer who'd killed Susan's husband.

"He'm interfering with due process, Mr. Reeve," Erskine told Draper. "We could detain him for

questioning."

"I don't think that'll be necessary," Lytton said. "I just stopped at Gosmore Farm for bacon and eggs. I take it there's no local ordinance against that."

"Goodwife Ames don't have no bed and breakfast license," Draper said.

"Specially *bed*," Erskine added, leering.

Lytton strolled casually toward his Norton. And his guns.

"Maybe I should press on. I'd like to be in Dorset by lunchtime."

Terry's rifle was fixed on Lytton's belly, and swung in an arc as Lytton walked. Erskine thumb-cocked his revolver, ineptly covering the sound with a cough.

"Tell Maurice Maskell you've delivered your damned message," Susan said, trying to get between Lytton and the visitors' guns. "And tell him he'll have to come personally next time."

"You'm stay away from thic rifle, Goodman," the Reeve said to Lytton.

"Just getting my gloves," Lytton replied, moving his hands away from the holstered rifle toward the pannier where his pistols were.

Allie backed away toward the house, stomach knotted.

"What's she afraid of?" Erskine asked, nodding at her.

"Don't touch thic fuckin' bike," Terry shouted.

Allie heard the guns going off, louder than rook-scarers. An applesized chunk of stone exploded on the wall nearby, spitting chips in her face. The fireflashes were faint in the morning sun, but the reports were thunderclaps.

Erskine had shot, and Terry. Lytton had slipped down behind his motorcycle, which had fallen on him. There was a bright red splash of blood on the ground. Teddy was bringing up his rifle.

She scooped a stone and drew back the rubber of her cat-apult.

Susan screamed for everyone to stop.

Allie loosed the stone and raised a bloody welt on Erskine's cheek.

Susan slapped Allie hard and hugged her. Erskine, arm trembling with rage, blood dribbling on his face, took aim at them. Draper put a hand on the Constable's arm, and forced him to holster his gun. At a nod from the Reeve, Teddy Gilpin took a look at Lytton's wound and reported that it wasn't serious.

"This be bad, Goodwife Ames. It'd not tell well for you if'n it came up at magistrate's court. We'm be back on Saturday, with the vet. Have your animals together so they can be destroyed."

He walked to his police car, his men loping after him like dogs. Terry laughed a comment to Erskine about Lytton.

Allie impotently twanged her catapult at them.

"Help me get this off him," Susan said.

The Norton was a heavy machine, but between them they hefted it up. The pannier was still latched down. Lytton had not got to his guns. He lay face-up, a bright splash of red on his left upper arm. He was gritting his teeth against the hurt, shaking as if soaked to the skin in ice-water.

Allie didn't think he was badly shot. Compared to some.

"You stupid man," Susan said, kicking Lytton in the ribs. "You stupid, stupid man!"

Lytton gulped in pain and cried out.

It wasn't as if they had much livestock. Allie looked round at the eight cows, all with names and personalities, all free of the madness. Gosmore Farm had a chicken coop, a vegetable garden, a copse of apple trees and a wedge of hillside given over to grazing. It was a struggle to eke a living; without the milk quota, it would be hopeless.

It was wrong to kill the cows.

Despair lodged like a stone in Allie's heart. This was not what the West should be. When younger, she'd read Thomas Hardy's Wessex novels, *The Sheriff of Casterbridge* and

*Under the Hanging Tree*, and she still followed *The Archers*. In storybook Wessex, men like Squire Maskell always lost. Alder needed Dan Archer, the wireless hero, to stride into The Valiant

Soldier, six-guns blazing, and lay the vermin in the dirt.

There was no Dan Archer.

Susan held all her rage in, refusing to talk about the cows and Maskell. She always concentrated on what she called "the job at hand." Just now, she was nursing Lytton. Erskine's shot had gone right through his arm. Allie had looked for but not found the bullet, to give him as a souvenir. He'd lost blood, but he would live.

Allie hugged Pansy, her favorite, and brushed flies away from the cow's gummy eyes.

"I won't let them hurt you," she vowed.

But what could she do?

Depressed, she trudged down to the house.

Lytton was sitting up on the cot in the living room, with his shirt off and a clean white bandage tight around his arm. Allie saw he had older scars. This was not the first time he'd been shot. He was sipping a mug of hot tea. Susan, bustling furiously, tidied up around him. When he saw Allie, Lytton smiled.

"Susan's been telling me about this Maskell character. He seems to like to have things his way."

The door opened and Squire Maskell stepped in. "That I do, sir."

He was dressed for church, in a dark suit and kipper tie. He knew enough not to wear a gunbelt on Gosmore Farm, though Allie guessed he was carrying a small pistol in his armpit. He had shot Allie's Dad with such a gun, in a dispute over wages. Allie barely remembered her father, who had been indentured on Maskell's farm before the War and an NFU rep afterwards.

"I don't remember extending an invitation, Squire," Susan said evenly.

"Susan, Susan, things could be so much more pleasant between us. We are neighbors."

"In the same way a pack of dogs are neighbors to a fox gone to earth."

Maskell laughed without humor.

"I've come to extend an offer of help."

Susan snorted. Lytton said nothing but looked Maskell over with eyes that saw the gun under the hankie-pocket and the knife in the boot.

"I understand you have BSE problems? My condo-lences."

"There's no mad cow disease in my herd."

"It's hardly a herd, Susan. It's a gaggle. But without them, where would you be?"

Maskell spread empty hands.

"This place is hardly worth the upkeep, Susan. You're only sticking at it because you have a nasty case of Stubborn Fever. The land is worthless to anyone but me. Gosmore Farm is a wedge in my own holdings. It would be so convenient if I could take down your fences, if I could incorporate your few acres into the Maskell farm."

"Now tell me something I don't know."

"I can either buy from you now above the market value, or wait a while and buy from the bank at a knock-down price. I'm making an offer now purely out of neighborly charity. The old ways may have changed, but as Squire I still feel an obligation to all who live within my bailiwick."

"The only obligation your forefathers felt was to sweat the serfs into early graves and beget illegitimate cretins on terrorized girls. Have you noticed how the Maskell chin shows up on those Gilpin creatures?"

Maskell was angry now, but trying to keep calm. A vein throbbed by his eye.

"Susan, you're upset, I see that. But you must be realistic. Despite what you think, I don't want to see you on the mercy of the parish. Robert Ames was a good friend to me, and ..."

"You can fuck off, Maskell," Susan spat. "Fuck *right* off." The Squire's smile drained away. He was close to sputtering. His Maskell chin wobbled.

"Don't ever mention my husband again. And now leave."

"Susan," he pleaded.

"I think Goodwife Ames made herself understood," Lytton said.

Maskell looked at the wounded man. Lytton eased him-self gingerly off the cot, expanding his chest, and stood. He was tall enough to have to bow his head under the beamed ceiling.

"I don't believe I've had ..."

"Lytton," he introduced himself.

"And you would be ... ?"

"I would be grateful if you left the house as Goodwife Ames wishes. And fasten the gate on your way out. There's a Country Code, you know."

"Good day," Maskell said, not meaning it, and left.

There was a moment of silence.

"That's the second time you've taken it on yourself to act for me," Susan said, angrily. "Have I asked your help?"

Lytton smiled. His hard look faded and he seemed almost mischievous.

"I beg pardon, Goodwife."

"Don't do it again, Lytton."

By the next day, Lytton was well enough to walk. But he couldn't ride: if he tried to grip the Norton's left handlebar, it was as if a redhot poker were pressed to his bicep. They were stuck with him.

"You can do odd jobs for your keep," Susan allowed. "Allie will show you how."

"Can he come feed the chickens?" Allie asked, excited despite herself. "I can get the eggs."

"That'll be a start."

Susan walked across to the stone sheds where the cows spent the night, to do the milking. Allie took Lytton by the hand and led him round to the chicken coop.

"Maskell keeps his chickens in a gurt prison," Allie told him. "Clips their beaks with pliers, packs them in alive like sardines. If one dies, t'others eat her. They'm *cannibal* chick-ens ..."

They turned round the corner.

The chicken coop was silent. Tears pricked the backs of Allie's eyes. Lumps of feathery matter lay in the scarlet-stained straw.

Her first thought was that a fox had got in.

Lytton lifted up a flap of chicken wire. It had been cut cleanly.

The coop was a lean-to, a chickenwire frame built against the house. On the stone wall was daubed a sign in blood, an upside-down tricorn fork in a circle.

"Travelers," Allie spat.

There was a big Gypsy Site at Glastonbury. Since the War, Travelers were supposed to stay on the sites, living off the dole. But they were called Travelers because they didn't like to keep to one place. They were always escaping from sites and raiding farms and villages.

Lytton shook his head.

"Hippies are hungry. They'd never have killed and left the chickens. And smashed the eggs."

The eggs had been gathered and carefully stamped on.

"Some hippies be veggie."

The blood was still fresh. Allie didn't see how this could have been done while they were asleep. The killers must have struck fast, or the chickens would have squawked.

"Where's your vegetable garden?" Lytton asked. Allie's heart pounded like a fist.

She showed him the path to the garden, which was separated from the orchard by a thick hedge. Beanpoles had been wrenched from the earth and used to batter and gouge the rest of the crops. Cabbages were squashed, young carrots pulped by boot heels, marrows exploded. The greenhouse was a skeleton, every pane of glass broken, tomato plants strewn and flattened inside. Even the tiny herb patch Allie had been given for herself was dug up and scattered.

Allie sobbed. Liquid squirted from her eyes and nose. Hundreds of hours of work destroyed.

There was a twist of cloth on the frame of the green-house. Lytton examined it: a tie-dyed poncho, dotted with emblem badges of marijuana leaves, multi-colored swirls and cartoon cats.



"Hippies," Allie yelled. "Fuckin' hippies."

Susan appeared at the gate. She swayed, almost in a swoon, and held the gate to stay standing.

"Hippies didn't do this," Lytton said.

He lifted a broken tomato plant from the paved area by the greenhouse door and pointed at a splashed yellow stain.

"Allie, where've you seen something like this recently?"

It came to her.

"Terry Gilpin. When he spat at thic letter."

"He has better aim with his mouth than his gun," Lytton commented, wincing. "Thankfully."

Lytton stood by his Norton, lifting his gauntlets out of the pannier.

"Are you leaving?" Allie asked.

"No," Lytton said, taking his gunbelt, "I'm going down to the pub."

He settled the guns on his hips and fastened the buckle. The belt seemed to give him strength, to make him stand straighter.

Susan, still shocked, didn't protest.

"Are you'm going to shoot Squire Maskell?" Allie asked.

That snapped Susan out of it. She took Allie and shook her by the shoulders, keening wordlessly.

"I'm just going to have a lunchtime drink."

Allie hugged Susan fiercely. They were on the point of losing everything, but gave each other the last of their strength. There was something Maskell couldn't touch.

Lytton strolled towards the front gate.

Allie pulled away from Susan. For a moment, Susan wouldn't let her go. Then, without words, she gave her bless-ing. Allie knew she was to look after Lytton.

He was halfway down the street, passing the bus shelter, disused since the service was cut, when Allie caught up with him. At the fork in the road where the village oak stood was The Valiant Soldier.

They walked on.

"I hope you do shoot him," she said.

"I just want to find out why he's so obsessed with Gosmore Farm, Allie. Men like Maskell always have reasons. That's why they're pathetic. You should only be afraid of men without reasons."

Lytton pushed open the door, and stepped into the public bar. This early, there were few drinkers. Danny Keogh sat in his usual seat, wooden leg unslung on the floor beside him. Teddy Gilpin was swearing at the Trivial Pursuit machine, and his brother was nursing a half of scrumpy and a packet of crisps, ogling the Tiller Girl in UI.

Behind the bar, Janet Speke admired her piled-up hair in the long mirror. She saw Lytton and displayed immediate interest, squirming tightly in an odd way Allie almost under-stood.

Terry's mouth sagged open, giving an unprepossessing view of streaky-bacon-flavor mulch. The Triv machine fell silent, and Teddy's hands twitched away from the buttons to his gun-handle. Allie enjoyed the moment, knowing everyone in the pub was knotted inside, wondering what the stranger— her friend, she realized—would do next. Gary Chilcot, a weaselly little Maskell hand, slipped away, into the back bar where the Squire usually drank.

"How d'ye do, Goodman," said Janet, stretching thin red lips around dazzling teeth in a fox smile.

"What can I do you for?"

"Bells. And Tizer for Allie here." "She'm underage."

"Maskell won't mind. We're old friends." Janet fetched the whisky and the soft drink. Lytton looked at the exposed nape of her neck, where wisps of hair escaped, and caught the barmaid smiling in the mirror, eyes fixed on his even though he was standing behind her.

Lytton sipped his whisky, registering the sting in his eyes.

Janet went to the jukebox and put on Portishead. She walked back to the bar, almost dancing, hips in exaggerated motion. Music insinuated into the spaces between them all, blotting out their silent messages.

The door opened and Reeve Draper came in, out of breath. He had obviously been summoned.

"I've been meaning to call again on Goodwife Ames," he said to Lytton, not mentioning that when last he had seen Lytton the newcomer was on the ground with a bullethole in his shoulder put there by the Reeve's Constable. "Tony Jago, the Traveler Chieftain, has escaped from Glastonbury with a band of sheep-shaggin', drug-takin' gyppos. We'm expecting raids on farms. Susan should watch out for them. Bad lot, gyppos. No respect for property. They'm so stoned on dope they'm don't know what they'm doin'."

Lytton took a marijuana leaf badge from his pocket. One of the emblems pinned to the poncho left in the ravaged gar-den. He tossed it into Terry Gilpin's scrumpy.

"Oops, sorry," he said.

This time, Terry went for his gun and fumbled. Lytton kicked the stool from under him. Terry sprawled, choking on crisps, on the floor. With a boot-toe, Lytton pinned Terry's wrist. He nodded to Allie, and she took the gun away. Terry swore, brow dotted with ciderstinking sweat bullets.

Allie had held guns before, but not since Susan took her in. She had forgotten how heavy they were. The barrel drooped even though she held the gun two-handed, and acci-dentally happened to point at Terry's gut.

"If I made a complaint a'gainst this man, I don't suppose much would happen."

Draper said nothing. His face was as red as strawberry jam.

"I thought not."

Terry squirmed. Teddy gawped down at his brother.

Lytton took out his gun, pointed it at Teddy, said "pop," and put it back in its holster, all in one movement, between one heartbeat and the next. Teddy goggled, hand hovering inches away from his own gun.

"That was a fair fight," Lytton said. "Do you want to try it again?"

He let Terry go. Rubbing his reddened wrist, the Maskell man scurried away and stood up.

"If'n you gents got an argument, take it outside," Janet said. "I've got regulars who don't take to ruckus."

Lytton strolled across the room, toward the back bar. He pushed a door with frosted glass panels, and disclosed a small room with heavily-upholstered settees, horse-brasses on beams and faded hunt scenes on the wallpaper.

The Squire sat at a table with papers and maps spread out on it. A man Allie didn't know, who wore a collar and tie, sat with him. Erskine was there too, listening to Gary Chilcot, who had been talking since he left the bar.

The Squire was too annoyed to fake congeniality.

"We'd like privacy, if you please."

Lytton looked over the table. There was a large-scale sur-vey map of the area, with red lines dotted across it. The cor-ners were held down by ashtrays and empty glasses. The Squire had been illustrating some point by tapping the map, and his well-dressed guest was frozen in mid-nod.

Lytton, stepping back from the back bar, let the door swing closed in the face of Erskine, who was rushing out. A panel cracked and the Constable went down on his knees.

Allie felt excitement in her water.

Terry charged but Lytton stepped aside and lifted the Maskell man by the seat of his britches, heaving him up over the bar and barreling him into the long mirror. Glass shattered.

Janet Speke, incandescent with proprietary fury, brought out a shotgun, which Lytton pinned to the bar with his arm.

"My apologies, Goodwife. He'll make up the damage."

There was nothing in the barmaid's pale blue eyes but hate. Impulsively, Lytton craned across and kissed her full on the lips. Hot angry spots appeared on her cheeks as he let her go. He detached her

from the shotgun.

"You should be careful with these things," he said. "They're apt to discharge inconveniently if mishandled."

He fired both barrels at a framed photograph of Alder's victorious skittles team of '66. The noise was an astounding crash. Lytton broke the gun and dropped it. Erskine, nose bloody in his handkerchief, came out of the back bar with his Webley out and cocked.

This time, it was different. Lytton was armed.

Despite the hurt in his left shoulder, Lytton drew both his pistols in an instant and, at close range, shot off Erskine's ears. The Constable stood, appalled, blood pouring from fleshy nubs that would no longer hold his helmet up.

Erskine's shot went wild.

Lytton took cool aim and told the Constable to drop his Webley.

Erskine saw sense. The revolver clumped on the floor.

In an instant, Lytton holstered his pistols. The music came back, filling the quiet that followed the crashes and shots. Terry moaned in a heap behind the bar. Janet kicked him out. Erskine looked for his ears.

Lytton took another sip of Bells.

"Very fine," he commented.

Janet, lipstick smeared, touched her hair, deprived of her mirror, not knowing where free strands hung.

Lytton slipped a copper-colored ten shilling note onto the bar.

"A round of drinks, I think," he said.

Danny Keough smiled and shook an empty glass.

Outside, in the car park of The Valiant Soldier, Allie bubbled over. It was the most thrilling thing. To see Terry hit the mirror, Teddy staring at a draw he'd never beat, the Reeve helpless, Janet Speke and the Squire in impotent rage and, best of all, Barry Erskine with his helmet-brim on his nose and blood gushing onto his shoulders. For a moment, Alder was like *The Archers*, and the villains were seen off.

Lytton was somber, cold, bravado gone.

"It was just a moment, Allie. An early fluke goal for our side. They still have the referee in their back pocket and fifteen extra players."

He looked around the car park.

"Any of these vehicles unfamiliar?"

Maskell's ostentatious Range Rover was parked by Janet's pink Vauxhall Mustang. The Morris pick-up was the Gilpins'. The Reeve's panda car was on the street. That left an Austin Maverick Allie had never seen before. She pointed it out.

"Company car," he said, tapping the windshield.

The front passenger seat was piled with glossy folders that had "GREAT WESTERN RAILWAYS" embossed on their jackets.

"The clouds of mystery clear," he mused. "Do you have one of your nails?"

Puzzled, she took a nail from her purse and handed it over.

"Perfect," he said, crouching by the car door, working the nail into the lock. "This is a neat trick you shouldn't learn, Allie. There, my old sapper sergeant would be proud of me."

He got the door open, snatched one of the folders, and had the door shut again.

They left in a hurry, but slowed by the bus stop. The rust-ing shelter was fly-posted with car-boot sale announcements. Lytton sagged. His shirt-shoulder spotted where his wound had opened again. Still, he was better off than Earless Erskine.

"It's choo-choos, I'll be bound," he said. "The track they run on is always blooded."

There was activity at the pub as Maskell's party loped past the village oak into the car park. Maskell was in the cen-ter, paying embarrassed attention to his guest, who presumably hadn't expected

a bar brawl and an ear-shooting to go with his ploughman's lunch and a lecture on local geography.

The outsider got into his Maverick and Maskell waved him off. Then, he started shouting at his men. Allie smiled to hear him so angry, but Lytton looked grim.

That evening, after they had eaten, Lytton explained to Susan, showing her the maps and figures. Allie struggled to keep up.

"It's to do with Railway Privatization," he said. "The measures that came in after the War, that centralized and nationalized so many industries, are being dismantled by the Tories. And private companies are stepping in. With many a kickback and inside deal."

"There's not been a railway near Alder for fifty years," Susan said.

"When British Rail is broken up, the companies that have bits of the old network will be set against each other like fighting dogs. They'll shut down some lines and open up others, not because they need to but to get one over on the next fellow. GWR, who are chummying up with the Squire, would like it if all trains from Wessex to London went through Bristol. They can up the fares, and cut off the Southeastern company. To do that, they need to put a branch line here, across the Southern edge of Maskell's farm, right through your orchard."

Susan understood, and was furious.

"I don't want a railway through my farm."

"But Maskell sees how much money he'd make. Not just from selling land at inflated prices. There'd be a watering halt. Maybe even a station."

"He can't do the deal without Gosmore Farm?"

"No."

"Well, he can whistle 'Lillibulero.'"

"It may not be that easy."

The lights flickered and failed. The kitchen was lit only by the red glow of the wood fire.

"Allie, I told you to check the generator," Susan snapped.

Allie protested. She was careful about maintaining the generator. They'd once lost the refrigerator and had a week's milk quota spoil overnight.

Lytton signaled for quiet. He drew a gun from inside his waistcoat.

Allie listened for sounds outside.

"Are the upstairs windows shuttered?" Lytton asked.

"I asked you not to bring those things indoors," Susan said, evenly. "I won't have guns in the house."

"You soon won't have a choice. There'll be unwelcome visitors."

Susan caught on and went quiet. Allie saw fearful shadows. There was a shot and the window over the basin exploded inward. A fireball flew in and plopped onto the table, oily rags in flames. With determination, Susan took a flat breadboard and pressed out the fire.

Noise began. Loudspeakers were set up outside. Music hammered their ears. The Beatles' "Helter Skelter."

"Maskell's idea of hippie music," Lytton said.

In the din, gunshots spanged against stones, smashed through windows and shutters.

Lytton bundled Susan under the heavy kitchen table, and pushed Allie in after her.

"Stay here," he said, and was gone upstairs.

Allie tried putting her fingers in her ears and screwing her eyes shut. She was still in the middle of the attack.

"Is Maskell going to kill us?" she asked.

Susan was rigid. Allie hugged her.

There was a shot from upstairs. Lytton was returning fire.

"I'm going to help him," Allie said.

"No," shouted Susan, as Allie slipped out of her grasp. "Don't..."

She knew the house well enough to dart around in the dark without bumping into anything. Like Lytton, she headed upstairs.

From her bedroom window, which had already been shot out, she could see as far as the treeline. There was no moon. The Beatles still screamed. In the orchard, fires were set. Hooded figures danced between the trees, wearing pon-chos and beads. She wasn't fooled. These weren't Jago's Travelers but Maskell's men.

Allie had to draw the line here. She and Susan had been pushed too far. They'd lost men to Maskell, they wouldn't lose land.

A man carrying a fireball dashed toward the house, aiming to throw it through a window. Allie drew a bead with her catapult and put a nail in his knee. She heard him shriek above the music. He tumbled over, fire thumping onto his chest and spreading to his poncho. He twisted, yelling like a stuck pig, and wrestled his way out of the burning hood.

It was Teddy Gilpin.

He scrambled back, limping and smoldering. She could have put another nail in his skull.

But didn't.

Lytton was in the hallway, switching between windows, using bullets to keep the attackers back. One lay still, face-down, on the lawn. Allie hoped it was Maskell.

She scrambled out of her window, clung to the drainpipe, and squeezed into shadows under the eaves. Like a bat, she hung, catapult dangling from her mouth. She monkeyed up onto the roof, and crawled behind the chimney.

If she kept them off the roof, they couldn't get close enough to fire the house. She didn't waste nails, but was ready to put a spike into the head of anyone who trespassed. But someone had thought of that first. She saw the ladder-top protruding over the far edge of the roof.

An arm went around her neck, and the catapult was twisted from her hand. She smelled his strong cider-and-shit stink.

"It be the little poacher," a voice cooed.

It was Stan Budge, Maskell's gamekeeper.

"Who'm trespassin' now?" she said, and fixed her teeth into his wrist.

Though she knew this was not a game, she was surprised when Budge punched her in the head, rattling her teeth, blur-ring her vision. She let him go. And he hit her again. She lost her footing, thumped against tiles and slid toward the gutter, slates loosening under her.

Budge grabbed her hair.

The hard yank on her scalp was hot agony. Budge pulled her away from the edge. She screamed.

"Wouldn't want nothing to happen to you," he said. "Not yet."

Budge forced her to go down the ladder, and a couple of men gripped her. She struggled, trying to kick shins.

Shots came from house and hillside.

"Take her round to the Squire," Budge ordered.

Allie was glad it was dark. No one could see the shamed tears on her cheeks. She felt so stupid. She had let Susan down. And Lytton.

Budge took off his hood and shook his head.

"No more bleddy fancy dress," he said.

She had to be dragged to where Maskell sat, smoking a cigar, in a deckchair between the loudspeakers.

"Allison, dear," he said. "Think, if it weren't for the Civil War, I'd *own* you. Then again, at this point in time, I might as well own you."

He shut off the cassette player.

Terry Gilpin and Barry Erskine—out of uniform, with white lumps of bandage on his head—held her

between them. The Squire drew a long thin knife from his boot and let it catch the firelight.

Maskell plugged a karaoke microphone into the speaker.

"Susan," he said, booming. "You should come out now. We've driven off the gypos. But we have someone you'll want to see."

He pointed the microphone at her and Terry wrenched her hair. Despite herself, she screamed.

"It's dear little Allison."

There was a muffled oath from inside.

"And your protector, Captain Lytton. He should come out too. Yes, we know a bit about him. Impressive war record, if hardly calculated to make him popular in these parts. Or anywhere."

Allie had no idea what that meant.

"Throw your gun out, if you would, Captain. We don't want any more accidents."

The back door opened, and firelight spilled out. A dark figure stepped onto the verandah.

"The gun, Lytton."

A gun was tossed down.

Erskine fairly slobbered with excitement. Allie felt him pressing dose to her, writhing. Once he let her go, he would kill Lytton, she knew.

Lytton stood beside the door. Another figure joined him, shivering in a white shawl that was a streak in the dark.

"Ah, Susan," Maskell said, as if she had just arrived at his Christmas Feast. "Delighted you could join us."

Maskell's knifepoint played around Allie's throat, dim-pling the skin, pricking tinily.

In a rush, it came to her that this had very little to do with railways and land and money. When it came down to it, the hurt Maskell fancied he was avenging that he couldn't have Susan. Or Allie.

Knowing why didn't make things better.

Hand in hand, Lytton and Susan came across the lawn. Maskell's men gathered, jeering.

"Are you all right, Allison?" Susan asked.

"I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault, dear."

"I have papers with me," Maskell said, "if you'd care to sign. The terms are surprisingly generous, considering."

Lytton and Susan were close enough to see the knife.

"You sheep-shagging bastard," Susan said.

Lytton's other gun appeared from under her shawl. She raised her arm and fired. Allie felt wind as the bullet whistled past. Maskell's jaw came away in a gush of red-black. Susan shot him again, in the eye. He was thumped backward, knife ripped away from Allie's throat, and laid on the grass, heels kicking.

"I said I didn't like guns," Susan announced. "I never said I couldn't use one."

Lytton took hold of Susan's shoulders and pulled her out of the way of the fusillade unleashed in their direction by Budge and Terry Gilpin.

Allie twisted in Erskine's grasp and rammed a bony knee between his legs. Erskine yelped, and she clawed his ear-bandages, ripping the wounds open.

The Constable staggered away, and was peppered by his comrades' fire. He took one in the lungs and knelt over the Squire, coughing up thick pink foam.

In a flash of gunfire, Allie saw Lytton sitting up, shielding Susan with his body, arm outstretched. He had picked up a pistol. The flashes stopped. Budge lay flat dead, and Gilpin gurgled, incapacitated by several wounds. Lytton was shot again too, in the leg.

He had fired his gun dry, and was reloading, taking rounds from his belt.

Car-lights froze the scene. The blood on the grass was deepest black. Faces were white as skulls. Lytton still carefully shoved new bullets into chambers. Susan struggled to sit up.

Reeve Draper got out of the panda car and assessed the situation. He stood over Maskell's body. The Squire's face was gone.

"Looks like you'm had a bad gyppo attack," he said.

Lytton snapped his revolver shut and held it loosely, not aiming. The Reeve turned away from him.

"But it be over now."

Erskine coughed himself quiet.

Allie wasn't sorry any of them were dead. If she was crying, it was for her father, for the chickens, for the vegetable garden.

"I assume Goodwife Ames no longer has to worry about her cows being destroyed?" Lytton asked.

The Reeve nodded, tightly.

"I thought so."

Draper ordered Gary Chilcot to gather the wounded and get them off Gosmore Farm.

"Take the rubbish too," Susan insisted, meaning the dead.

Chilcot, face painted with purple butterflies, was about to protest but Lytton still had the gun.

"Squire Maskell bain't givin' out no more pay packets, Gary," the Reeve reminded him.

Chilcot thought about it and ordered the able-bodied to clear the farm of corpses.

Allie woke up well after dawn. It was a glorious spring day. The blood on the grass had soaked in and was invisible. But there were windows that needed mending.

She went outside and saw Lytton and Susan by the gen-erator. It was humming into life. Lytton had oil on his hands.

In the daylight, Susan seemed ghost-like.

Allie understood what it must be like. To kill a man. Even a man like Squire Maskell. It was as if Susan had killed a part of herself. Allie would have to be careful with Susan, try to coax her back.

"There," Lytton said. "Humming nicely."

"Thank you, Captain," said Susan.

Lytton's eyes narrowed minutely. Maskell had called him Captain.

"Thank you, Susan."

He touched her cheek.

"Thank you for everything."

Allie ran up and hugged Lytton. He held her too, not ferociously. She broke the embrace. Allie didn't want him to leave. But he would.

The Norton was propped in the driveway, wheeled out beyond the open gate. He walked stiffly away from them and straddled the motorcycle. His leg wound was just a scratch.

Allie and Susan followed him to the gate. Allie felt Susan's arm around her shoulders.

Lytton pulled on his gauntlets and curled his fingers around the handlebars. He didn't wince.

"You're Captain UI Lytton, aren't you?" Susan said.

There was a little hurt in his eyes. His frown-lines crin-kled.

"You've heard of me."

"Most people have. Most people don't know how you could do what you did in the War."

"Sometimes you have a choice. Sometimes you don't."

Susan left Allie and slipped around the gate. She kissed Lytton. Not the way Lytton had kissed Janet Speke, like a slap, but slowly, awkwardly.

Allie was half-embarrassed, half-heartbroken.

"Thank you, Captain Lytton," Susan said. "There will always be a breakfast for you at Gosmore Farm."

"I never did give you the ten shillings," he smiled.

Allie was crying again and didn't know why. Susan let her fingers trail through Lytton's hair and across his shoulder. She stood back.

He pulled down his goggles, then kicked the Norton into life and drove off.

Allie scrambled through the gate and ran after him. She kept up with him, lungs protesting, until the village oak, then sank, exhausted, by the curb. Lytton turned on his saddle and waved, then was gone

from her sight, headed out across the moors. She stayed, curled up under the oak, until she could no longer hear his engine.

-end-

About the author:

*Kim Newman* has emerged as one of the significant fantasy and horror writers in England in the last decade. His most recent book is a collection of linked stories, *Back In the USSA*, in collaboration with Eugene Byrne, and set in an alternate-universe twentieth century in which the Communist revolution happened in the USA, not Russia. His SF is usually some sort of hybrid (almost all of his fiction is some sort of hybrid of genres). As does Howard Waldrop or James P. Blaylock, Newman joyfully yokes pop culture images and historical figures and events in often unlikely but provocative juxtapositions. This piece is no exception, an alternate-present west-of-England western about the arrival of the railroads (in this case the Great Western Railway) and the social disruption of progress. It appeared in *New Worlds*, and a moment's comparison to the Gibson, above, and the Moorcock, below, will give some indication of the range of that impressive anthology. There is a tone and style in Newman's story perhaps reminiscent of the Pavane stories of Keith Roberts. It is also a retelling of a great Western genre novel and film.